# My identity is a superpower -- not an obstacle

On the red tiles in my family's den I would dance and sing to the made-for-TV movie "Gypsy," starring Bette Midler.

(Singing) "I had a dream. A wonderful dream, papa."

I would sing it with the urgency and the burning desire of a nine-year-old who did, in fact, have a dream. My dream was to be an actress. And it's true that I never saw anyone who looked like me in television or in films, and sure, my family and friends and teachers all constantly warned me that people like me didn't make it in Hollywood. But I was an American. I had been taught to believe that anyone could achieve anything, regardless of the color of their skin, the fact that my parents immigrated from Honduras, the fact that I had no money. I didn't need my dream to be easy, I just needed it to be possible.

And when I was 15, I got my first professional audition. It was a commercial for cable subscriptions or bail bonds, I don't really remember.

What I do remember is that the casting director asked me, "Could you do that again, but just this time, sound more Latina."

"Um, OK. So you want me to do it in Spanish?" I asked.

"No, no, do it in English, just sound Latina."

"Well, I am a Latina, so isn't this what a Latina sounds like?"

There was a long and awkward silence, and then finally, "OK, sweetie, never mind, thank you for coming in, bye!"

It took me most of the car ride home to realize that by "sound more Latina" she was asking me to speak in broken English. And I couldn't figure out why the fact that I was an actual, real-life, authentic Latina didn't really seem to matter.

Anyway, I didn't get the job. I didn't get a lot of the jobs people were willing to see me for: the gang-banger's girlfriend, the sassy shoplifter, pregnant chola number two.

These were the kinds of roles that existed for someone like me. Someone they looked at and saw as too brown, too fat, too poor, too unsophisticated. These roles were stereotypes and couldn't have been further from my own reality or from the roles I dreamt of playing. I wanted to play people who were complex and multidimensional, people who existed in the center of their own lives. Not cardboard cutouts that stood in the background of someone else's.

But when I dared to say that to my manager -- that's the person I pay to help me find opportunity -- his response was, "Someone has to tell that girl she has unrealistic expectations." And he wasn't wrong. I mean, I fired him, but he wasn't wrong.

Because whenever I did try to get a role that wasn't a poorly written stereotype, I would hear, "We're not looking to cast this role diversely." Or, "We love her, but she's too specifically ethnic." Or, "Unfortunately, we already have one Latino in this movie." I kept receiving the same message again and again and again. That my identity was an obstacle I had to overcome. And so I thought, "Come at me, obstacle. I'm an American. My name is America. I trained my whole life for this, I'll just follow the playbook, I'll work harder." And so I did, I worked my hardest to overcome all the things that people said were wrong with me. I stayed out of the sun so that my skin wouldn't get too brown, I straightened my curls into submission. I constantly tried to lose weight, I bought fancier and more expensive clothes. All so that when people looked at me, they wouldn't see a too fat, too brown, too poor Latina. They would see what I was capable of. And maybe they would give me a chance.

And in an ironic twist of fate, when I finally did get a role that would make all my dreams come true, it was a role that required me to be exactly who I was. Ana in "Real Women Have Curves" was a brown, poor, fat Latina. I had never seen anyone like her, anyone like me, existing in the center of her own life story. I traveled throughout the US and to multiple countries with this film where people, regardless of their age, ethnicity, body type, saw themselves in Ana. A 17-year-old chubby Mexican American girl struggling against cultural norms to fulfill her unlikely dream.

In spite of what I had been told my whole life, I saw firsthand that people actually did want to see stories about people like me. And that my unrealistic expectations to see myself authentically represented in the culture were other people’s expectations, too. "Real Women Have Curves" was a critical, cultural and financial success. "Great," I thought, "We did it! We proved our stories have value. Things are going to change now."

But I watched as very little happened. There was no watershed. No one in the industry was rushing to tell more stories about the audience that was hungry and willing to pay to see them.

Four years later, when I got to play Ugly Betty, I saw the same phenomenon play out. "Ugly Betty" premiered in the US to 16 million viewers and was nominated for 11 Emmys in its first year.

But in spite of "Ugly Betty's" success, there would not be another television show led by a Latina actress on American television for eight years. It's been 12 years since I became the first and only Latina to ever win an Emmy in a lead category. That is not a point of pride. That is a point of deep frustration. Not because awards prove our worth, but because who we see thriving in the world teaches us how to see ourselves, how to think about our own value, how to dream about our futures.

And anytime I begin to doubt that, I remember that there was a little girl, living in the Swat Valley of Pakistan. And somehow, she got her hands on some DVDs of an American television show in which she saw her own dream of becoming a writer reflected. In her autobiography, Malala wrote, "I had become interested in journalism after seeing how my own words could make a difference and also from watching the "Ugly Betty" DVDs about life at an American magazine."

For 17 years of my career, I have witnessed the power our voices have when they can access presence in the culture. I've seen it. I've lived it, we've all seen it. In entertainment, in politics, in business, in social change. We cannot deny it -- presence creates possibility. But for the last 17 years, I've also heard the same excuses for why some of us can access presence in the culture and some of us can't. Our stories don't have an audience, our experiences won't resonate in the mainstream, our voices are too big a financial risk.

Just a few years ago, my agent called to explain to me why I wasn't getting a role in a movie. He said, "They loved you and they really, really do want to cast diversely, but the movie isn't financeable until they cast the white role first." He delivered the message with a broken heart and with a tone that communicated, "I understand how messed up this is." But nonetheless, just like hundreds of times before, I felt the tears roll down my face. And the pang of rejection rise up in me and then the voice of shame scolding me, "You are a grown woman, stop crying over a job." I went through this process for years of accepting the failure as my own and then feeling deep shame that I couldn't overcome the obstacles.

But this time, I heard a new voice. A voice that said, "I'm tired. I've had enough." A voice that understood my tears and my pain were not about losing a job. They were about what was actually being said about me. What had been said about me my whole life by executives and producers and directors and writers and agents and managers and teachers and friends and family. That I was a person of less value.

I thought sunscreen and straightening irons would bring about change in this deeply entrenched value system. But what I realized in that moment was that I was never actually asking the system to change. I was asking it to let me in, and those aren't the same thing. I couldn't change what a system believed about me, while I believed what the system believed about me. And I did. I, like everyone around me, believed that it wasn't possible for me to exist in my dream as I was. And I went about trying to make myself invisible. What this revealed to me was that it is possible to be the person who genuinely wants to see change while also being the person whose actions keep things the way they are. And what it's led me to believe is that change isn't going to come by identifying the good guys and the bad guys. That conversation lets us all off the hook. Because most of us are neither one of those.

Change will come when each of us has the courage to question our own fundamental values and beliefs. And then see to it that our actions lead to our best intentions. I am just one of millions of people who have been told that in order to fulfill my dreams, in order to contribute my talents to the world I have to resist the truth of who I am. I for one, am ready to stop resisting and to start existing as my full and authentic self.

If I could go back and say anything to that nine-year-old, dancing in the den, dreaming her dreams, I would say, my identity is not my obstacle. My identity is my superpower. Because the truth is, I am what the world looks like. You are what the world looks like. Collectively, we are what the world actually looks like. And in order for our systems to reflect that, they don't have to create a new reality. They just have to stop resisting the one we already live in.

Thank you.

Note

"But in spite of *Ugly Betty's* success, there would not be another television show led by a Latina actress on American television for eight years."  
  
The CW's *[Jane the Virgin](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3566726/)* started airing in 2014, eight years after the premiere of *Ugly Betty*. Another show, *[Devious Maids](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2226342/?ref_=tt_ov_inf)*, also focused on the lives of four Latinas and started airing 2013. However, in this section, I'm specifically referring to a US television show with a single Latina lead actress as opposed to multiple.

# A 3-step guide to believing in yourself

(Singing) I am an endangered species

But I sing no victim song.

I am a woman.

I am an artist.

And I know where my voice ... belongs.

Now, you might have heard me sing that song. It was September 12th, 2022, right after Amy Poehler and Seth Meyers said, "And the winner is, Sheryl Lee Ralph!" What!? I had just won the Emmy Award for Best Supporting Actress in a comedy for my role as Mrs. Barbara Howard on your favorite TV show, "Abbott Elementary."

Oh, yes. And I was shocked. As the children would say, shooketh into disbelief. Oh, my goodness, it was my first time at the Emmys and I won. Yes! And I got to tell you, in that moment, I was so stunned into disbelief that I don't know how I got up on the stage. There I was, just listening to that roar of applause. Mm mm mm. And my whole career flashed right there in front of me. Starting with 19-year-old Sheryl Lee in her first movie being directed by the great Sidney Poitier. Oh, yeah, you can clap that.

Followed by ten years of “no” after “no” after “no.” Before the next film role came about. But I filled in that time with TV and more "nos" and more rejection until I made it big on Broadway in what has become the iconic musical of the '80s, because I say so,

"Dreamgirls."

And boy, did I learn a lot of life lessons there. And I mean, after so many moments of doubt, disbelief, there I was, on that Emmy stage, with this huge sign in front of me flashing "Stop now," "Stop now," "Stop now." And I started to think, “My God, what if I had stopped after all of those ‘nos?’ What if I had stopped after all of those moments of feeling defeated? What if I had stopped?" I wouldn't be standing there for that golden moment.

But right now, many of us, we are feeling ... deeply challenged trying to hold on and believe in ourselves, and I do not mean in a toxic way. I am talking about a way that comes from confidence, the kind of confidence that can keep us moving forward when we are feeling like we are carrying the weight of the pandemic, trying to figure out all of this political division, fighting all of the mental, physical, social violence in our homes, in our communities, to climate change, social media. It's a lot. Making it hard to believe in the goodness in the world. And harder still to believe in the goodness of ourselves. This is a rough time, people, and our mental health is suffering. We all need a checkup from the neck up.

And I don't mean -- yeah, it's OK. You feel me, thank you.

And I don't mean just medicine. I actually mean reframing our thinking of our ability to believe in ourselves.

Now I know, you see me on TV, in magazines, on movie screens, and you might be thinking to yourself, "What does she know about struggling to believe in herself?" Well, let me tell you something. I do not look like my journey.

Oh, I've been through a few things. And the struggle is real. But I have learned something in my life. That there are three things that we all must do in order to believe in ourselves.

Number one. First, we need to see ourselves. I mean, really, truly, deeply see ourselves for who and what we are in order to believe in ourselves. I’m a child of the ’60s, and that was hard. Oh. In the third grade, I tested out of public school into a fancy private school where the only Black person I saw every day was the one who looked back at me in the mirror. I was by myself, and I was all alone. And the things that were said to me, and I'm not talking about just the kids, but the adults, too. And when I would come home from school crying the ugly cry, my immigrant Jamaican mother would sit me down in front of the mirror and ask me, "Do you see an N-word? Do you see a liar? Do you see a big-lip monkey? No! So dry your eyes. And when you go back to school, remember, you are rubber, they are glue. And every ignorant thing they say about you bounces off of you and sticks to them."

And I believed her. And it didn't hurt. So much. Because I believed.

Number two. We've got to think. Think about ourselves in order to believe in ourselves. Growing up, my dad had a sign on his desk. And it said, "Think." "Think." Oh, I did not know how valuable and powerful the simple act of thinking was until I came back to Hollywood from my triumphant run on Broadway, and I had this meeting with a big studio Hollywood casting director. Oh, I was so excited. I walked in and he looked at me and he said, "Hm. Everybody knows you're a beautiful, talented Black girl. But what do I do with a beautiful, talented Black girl? Do I put you in a movie with Tom Cruise? Does he kiss you? Ugh. Who goes to see that movie?"

I could not believe that that man had just said that to me, to my face. And he hurt me. He hurt me so deeply, I was actually thinking about quitting. Until ... I started to think. And I thought about what he said. He said that everybody knew that I was a beautiful, talented Black girl.

And that I deserve to be cast in movies with the likes of Tom Cruise, and he should kiss me.

So what was meant to break me did not break me, it built me up. I believed that man, I believed what he said. And I walked out of there giving myself permission to take up space in Hollywood, knowing that I belonged there no matter what anybody thought about me.

Thirdly. We've got to act like we believe in ourselves. Oh, yeah. Because when we believe in ourselves and act on it, we create possibilities that never would have been possible had we not just believed. OK, so I will tell you another story. I will never forget walking into one of those crowded Hollywood rooms, and I see Harry Thomason, producer Harry Thomason, who is married to Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, writer, creator of the series "Designing Women." I walk right up to Harry and I say, "How can it be, that after all of these years Anthony has not had a relationship with a Black woman? After all, the show takes place in Atlanta, Georgia."

He looked at me, took a step back and said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Sheryl Lee Ralph." And he said, "OK. Have your people call my people and we will see what we can do."

And guess what happened?

I got cast as Etienne Toussaint Bouvier, Las Vegas showgirl turned Anthony's wife for the final season of "Designing Women."

Oh, yeah.

Against all odds, once again, I gave myself permission to take up space, believing that I belonged. I believed that if Sheryl Lee did the work of honing her craft, building solid relationships and stayed ready so she didn't have to get ready, anything was possible. Heck, winning an Emmy. A Grammy. An Oscar. A Tony. EGOT it, baby.

So ... When you leave this room today, I challenge all of you to start a meaningful practice of looking in the mirror and loving what you see. Believe in what you see.

If you can't love it, then respect it. And if you can't respect it, then encourage it. If you can't encourage it, empower it. And if you can't empower it, please be kind to it.

The greatest relationship, the greatest one you will ever have is with yourself. Believe me. Have faith in yourself. Believing that faith can make broken wings fly. And we deserve to soar. Remember, maybe one of these days when you pass the mirror and you catch a glimpse of yourself, remember, I told you this. That is what believing looks like. And don't you ever, ever, ever give up on you.

I am Sheryl Lee Ralph, and I love you just the way you are.

(Singing) Believe in yourself

As I believe in you

Note

"I walk right up to Harry and I say, "How can it be, that after all of these years Anthony has not had a relationship with a Black woman? After all, the show takes place in Atlanta, Georgia." He looked at me, took a step back and said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Sheryl Lee Ralph." And he said, "OK. Have your people call my people and we will see what we can do." And guess what happened? I got cast as Etienne Toussaint Bouvier, Las Vegas showgirl turned Anthony's wife for the final season of "Designing Women.""  
  
Clarification: *Designing Women's* Anthony, played by actor Meshach Taylor, had two relationships with Black women on the show before Sheryl Lee Ralph had this conversation with Harry Thomason: Mariann Aalda, who played Lita Ford, and Olivia Brown, who played Vanessa Hargraves. For more about the episodes, see [here](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090418/fullcredits/) and [here](http://www.designingwomenonline.com/Episodes/Four.php).

# Why change is so scary -- and how to unlock its potential

When I was a kid, the violin was the center of my life. I'd run home from the bus stop after school and practice for hours. Every Saturday, my mom and I would wake up at four in the morning to catch a train to New York so I could study at Juliard. Here's a throwback to eight-year-old me performing the violin. Some questionable fashion choices from young Maya here, not going to lie.

But anyway, when I was a teenager, my musical idol, Itzhak Perlman, invited me to be his private student. And my big dream of becoming a concert violinist felt within reach. But then one morning when I was 15, I was practicing this tricky technical passage. I struggled to get it right, and I overextended my finger on a single note. I heard a popping sound. I’d permanently damaged the tendons in my hand, and my dream was over.

I share this story because unexpected change happens to all of us. An accident or an illness, a relationship that suddenly ends.

Today, I'm not a violinist, but I'm a cognitive scientist. And I'm interested in how we respond to exactly this kind of change. I spent the past two decades studying the science of human behavior. And today I host a podcast called "A Slight Change of Plans" --

glad you guys like it -- where I interview people from all over the world about their life-altering experiences.

I started this podcast because change is scary for a lot of us, am I right? For one, it is filled with uncertainty, and we hate uncertainty. Research shows that we're more stressed when we're told we have a 50 percent chance of getting an electric shock than when we're told we have a 100 percent chance. It's wild, right? I mean, we'd rather be sure that a bad thing is going to happen than to have to deal with any uncertainty. Change is also scary because it involves loss of some kind. By definition, we're departing from an old way of being and entering a new one. And when we experience a change that we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves, it's easy to feel that our lives are contracting, that were more limited than before.

But when we take this perspective, we fail to account for an important fact. That when an unexpected change happens to us, it can also inspire lasting change within us. We become different people on the other side of change. What we're capable of, what we value and how we define ourselves, these things can all shift. And if we can learn to pay close attention to these internal shifts, we may just find that rather than limiting us, change can actually expand us.

Alright, today I'm going to share with you three questions you can ask yourself the next time life throws you that dreaded curveball. In the moment, I know it's so easy to focus on what you've lost. And so I'm really hoping that you can use these questions as tools to discover all that you might gain.

Alright, let’s start with question number one. This is inspired by a conversation I had on my podcast with a woman named Christine Ha, and it's about our capabilities. Christine was 24 when a rare autoimmune disease left her permanently blind. At the time, she was learning to cook the Vietnamese dishes that she had loved in childhood. But now cooking even simple meals was tough. She told me that her frustration peaked one day when she was making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She struggled to align the two slices of bread and sticky jelly dripped all over her hands and onto the counter. She threw the sandwich into the trash, and she felt really defeated by the limited future that she imagined for herself. Since Christine lived alone though, she had no choice but to keep at it. She remembers her delight when she successfully cut an orange for the first time and when she scrambled an egg without burning it. As she spent more hours in the kitchen, she realized that cooking was far more multi-sensory than she had thought. While she couldn't see if the garlic had browned, she could rely on the smell and the sizzling sounds in the pan. But Christine also realized something bigger. Something new was emerging within her.

At the start of her vision loss she had cooked just to get by. I mean, it was really just a practical thing. But now she was thrilled by the challenge of it all. She tackled harder and harder recipes over the years and eventually became the first-ever blind contestant on the TV show "Master Chef." And guess what? She won the entire damn thing.

Christine's a rock star. She's an amazing, amazing person. This brings us to the first question that you can ask yourself the next time you face something unexpected. "How might this change change what you're capable of?" When we predict how we'll respond to any given change, we tend to imagine what our present-day selves will be like in that new situation. Research by the psychologist Dan Gilbert shows that we greatly underestimate how much we'll change in the future, even though we fully acknowledge we've changed considerably in the past. Our psychology continually tricks us into believing that who we are, right now, in this very moment, is the person that's here to stay. But the person meeting the challenges after an unexpected change will be different. You will be different. Today, Christine is a world-renowned chef. She goes by the nickname The Blind Cook, and she owns three restaurants in Texas. And importantly, she's really curious about what else she can achieve without vision. These days, you can find her snowboarding and rock climbing on the weekends.

Christine shared with me something that she could never have imagined thinking before all this. That if given the choice today, she would choose not to have her vision restored. Though she did tell me she'd like it back for a moment because she really wants to know what Justin Bieber looks like.

Alright, let's move on to the second question. This one is about our values, and it's inspired by a conversation I had with a science journalist named Florence Williams. One evening about five years ago, Florence and her husband were hosting a dinner party for their friends. As she was preparing the salad, her husband handed her his phone so that she could read an email from a relative. But he'd mistakenly pulled up the wrong email. What Florence saw instead was a lengthy note from her husband, confessing his love to another woman. I know. Florence’s 25-year marriage came to an end, and she told me that she was taken aback by the physical and emotional intensity of her heartbreak. She said it felt like she'd been plugged into a faulty electrical socket. Since Florence is a problem solver by nature, she instinctively saw her heartbreak as a problem to solve and develop a year-long, systematic plan to try and fix it. Florence tried a bunch of things. She took solo trips into the wilderness, she tried a range of experimental therapies, She even went to the Museum of Broken Relationships, which I promise is the thing. You name it, she tried it. But by the end of the year, none of these remedies had healed her broken heart. And so Florence had no choice but to entertain a new philosophy altogether. Maybe a broken heart was not a problem to solve. And maybe closure wasn't the answer. Research by the psychologist Dacher Keltner shows that when we reduce our need for what's called cognitive closure, the desire to arrive at clear and definitive answers, our capacity to feel joy and beauty expands. Florence told me that when she freed herself from this goal-oriented mindset, a mindset, by the way, that she had valued for so much of her life up until this point, she began to find unexpected delight in the unknown.

This leads us to the second question you can ask yourself the next time you face something unexpected. How might this change change what you value? The unexpected implosion of Florence's marriage has permanently shifted the way that she sees her life. From a puzzle in need of solutions to a more serendipitous path of discovery.

Now, when Florence goes hiking, she's just as likely to sit still, feeling the breeze, as she is to try and make the summit. She no longer makes five-year plans. And she's comfortable not knowing all the answers around her heartbreak. By the way, I was texting with Florence the other day, and she's currently in a very happy relationship. If her ex-husband is listening to this, I just want him to know she's doing great, buddy.

Alright, now on to question number three. This one is about how we define ourselves. It's about our self-identities. And it comes from my personal story of change with the violin. When my injury took the violin away from me, I found myself grieving not just the loss of the instrument, but also the loss of myself. For so long, the violin had defined me, that without it, I wasn't sure who I was or who I could be. I felt stuck. I'd later learned that this phenomenon is known as identity paralysis. It happens to a lot of us when we face the unexpected. Who we think we are and what we're about is suddenly called into question. But I since realized that there was something different, something more stable that I could have anchored my identity to.

And this brings us to that third and final question. How might this change change how you define yourself? When I re-examine my relationship with the violin, I discovered that what I really missed wasn't the instrument itself, but the fact that music had given me a vehicle for connecting emotionally with others. I remember as a little kid playing for people and feeling kind of awestruck that we might all feel something new together. What this means for me today is that I no longer anchor my identity to specific pursuits like being a violinist or a cognitive scientist or a podcaster. Instead, I anchor my identity to what lights me up about those pursuits, what really energizes me. And for me, it's a love of human connection and understanding. I now define myself not by what I do, but why I do it.

Look, unexpected change comes for us all, whether we like it or not. And when it does, it can really suck. But I'm hoping that if we can stay open to how we might internally change, how we might expand, it can help us weather the storm. Life recently threw me a new slight change of plans. I've always wanted to be a mom, but becoming one has been difficult and my husband and I have had to navigate pregnancy losses and other heartbreaks over the years. And now I'm not sure what will happen. But I'm using these three questions to help me during this tough time. I'm asking myself how this unexpected challenge might change what I'm capable of, what I value, and how I define myself. I'm still figuring things out.

But what I can tell you right now is that I'm imagining a future me who is expanding her definition of what it means to parent. Who's perhaps finding what she craved from motherhood in other places. At a minimum, this exploration has allowed me to loosen my grip on the identity of Mom just a bit. And I found it freeing. I'm beginning to see change with more possibility. And I'm hoping you can, too.

# How to shift your mindset and choose your future

I never thought that I would be giving my TED Talk somewhere like this. But, like half of humanity, I've spent the last four weeks under lockdown due to the global pandemic created by COVID-19. I am extremely fortunate that during this time I've been able to come here to these woods near my home in southern England. These woods have always inspired me, and as humanity now tries to think about how we can find the inspiration to retake control of our actions so that terrible things don't come down the road without us taking action to avert them, I thought this is a good place for us to talk. And I'd like to begin that story six years ago, when I had first joined the United Nations.

Now, I firmly believe that the UN is of unparalleled importance in the world right now to promote collaboration and cooperation. But what they don't tell you when you join is that this essential work is delivered mainly in the form of extremely boring meetings -- extremely long, boring meetings. Now, you may feel that you have attended some long, boring meetings in your life, and I'm sure you have. But these UN meetings are next-level, and everyone who works there approaches them with a level of calm normally only achieved by Zen masters. But myself, I wasn't ready for that. I joined expecting drama and tension and breakthrough. What I wasn't ready for was a process that seemed to move at the speed of a glacier, at the speed that a glacier used to move at.

Now, in the middle of one of these long meetings, I was handed a note. And it was handed to me by my friend and colleague and coauthor, Christiana Figueres. Christiana was the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and as such, had overall responsibility for the UN reaching what would become the Paris Agreement. I was running political strategy for her. So when she handed me this note, I assumed that it would contain detailed political instructions about how we were going to get out of this nightmare quagmire that we seemed to be trapped in. I took the note and looked at it. It said, "Painful. But let's approach with love!" Now, I love this note for lots of reasons. I love the way the little tendrils are coming out from the word "painful." It was a really good visual depiction of how I felt at that moment. But I particularly love it because as I looked at it, I realized that it was a political instruction, and that if we were going to be successful, this was how we were going to do it. So let me explain that.

What I'd been feeling in those meetings was actually about control. I had moved my life from Brooklyn in New York to Bonn in Germany with the extremely reluctant support of my wife. My children were now in a school where they couldn't speak the language, and I thought the deal for all this disruption to my world was that I would have some degree of control over what was going to happen. I felt for years that the climate crisis is the defining challenge of our generation, and here I was, ready to play my part and do something for humanity. But I put my hands on the levers of control that I'd been given and pulled them, and nothing happened. I realized the things I could control were menial day-to-day things. "Do I ride my bike to work?" and "Where do I have lunch?", whereas the things that were going to determine whether we were going to be successful were issues like, "Will Russia wreck the negotiations?" "Will China take responsibility for their emissions?" "Will the US help poorer countries deal with their burden of climate change?" The differential felt so huge, I could see no way I could bridge the two. It felt futile. I began to feel that I'd made a mistake. I began to get depressed.

But even in that moment, I realized that what I was feeling had a lot of similarities to what I'd felt when I first found out about the climate crisis years before. I'd spent many of my most formative years as a Buddhist monk in my early 20s, but I left the monastic life, because even then, 20 years ago, I felt that the climate crisis was already a quickly unfolding emergency and I wanted to do my part. But once I'd left and I rejoined the world, I looked at what I could control. It was the few tons of my own emissions and that of my immediate family, which political party I voted for every few years, whether I went on a march or two. And then I looked at the issues that would determine the outcome, and they were big geopolitical negotiations, massive infrastructure spending plans, what everybody else did. The differential again felt so huge that I couldn't see any way that I could bridge it. I kept trying to take action, but it didn't really stick. It felt futile.

Now, we know that this can be a common experience for many people, and maybe you have had this experience. When faced with an enormous challenge that we don't feel we have any agency or control over, our mind can do a little trick to protect us. We don't like to feel like we're out of control facing big forces, so our mind will tell us, "Maybe it's not that important. Maybe it's not happening in the way that people say, anyway." Or, it plays down our own role. "There's nothing that you individually can do, so why try?"

But there's something odd going on here. Is it really true that humans will only take sustained and dedicated action on an issue of paramount importance when they feel they have a high degree of control? Look at these pictures. These people are caregivers and nurses who have been helping humanity face the coronavirus COVID-19 as it has swept around the world as a pandemic in the last few months. Are these people able to prevent the spread of the disease? No. Are they able to prevent their patients from dying? Some, they will have been able to prevent, but others, it will have been beyond their control. Does that make their contribution futile and meaningless? Actually, it's offensive even to suggest that. What they are doing is caring for their fellow human beings at their moment of greatest vulnerability. And that work has huge meaning, to the point where I only have to show you those pictures for it to become evident that the courage and humanity those people are demonstrating makes their work some of the most meaningful things that can be done as human beings, even though they can't control the outcome.

Now, that's interesting, because it shows us that humans are capable of taking dedicated and sustained action, even when they can't control the outcome. But it leaves us with another challenge. With the climate crisis, the action that we take is separated from the impact of it, whereas what is happening with these images is these nurses are being sustained not by the lofty goal of changing the world but by the day-to-day satisfaction of caring for another human being through their moments of weakness. With the climate crisis, we have this huge separation. It used to be that we were separated by time. The impacts of the climate crisis were supposed to be way off in the future. But right now, the future has come to meet us. Continents are on fire. Cities are going underwater. Countries are going underwater. Hundreds of thousands of people are on the move as a result of climate change. But even if those impacts are no longer separated from us by time, they're still separated from us in a way that makes it difficult to feel that direct connection. They happen somewhere else to somebody else or to us in a different way than we're used to experiencing it. So even though that story of the nurse demonstrates something to us about human nature, we're going to have find a different way of dealing with the climate crisis in a sustained manner.

There is a way that we can do this, a powerful combination of a deep and supporting attitude that when combined with consistent action can enable whole societies to take dedicated action in a sustained way towards a shared goal. It's been used to great effect throughout history. So let me give you a historical story to explain it.

Right now, I am standing in the woods near my home in southern England. And these particular woods are not far from London. Eighty years ago, that city was under attack. In the late 1930s, the people of Britain would do anything to avoid facing the reality that Hitler would stop at nothing to conquer Europe. Fresh with memories from the First World War, they were terrified of Nazi aggression and would do anything to avoid facing that reality. In the end, the reality broke through. Churchill is remembered for many things, and not all of them positive, but what he did in those early days of the war was he changed the story the people of Britain told themselves about what they were doing and what was to come. Where previously there had been trepidation and nervousness and fear, there came a calm resolve, an island alone, a greatest hour, a greatest generation, a country that would fight them on the beaches and in the hills and in the streets, a country that would never surrender.

That change from fear and trepidation to facing the reality, whatever it was and however dark it was, had nothing to do with the likelihood of winning the war. There was no news from the front that battles were going better or even at that point that a powerful new ally had joined the fight and changed the odds in their favor. It was simply a choice. A deep, determined, stubborn form of optimism emerged, not avoiding or denying the darkness that was pressing in but refusing to be cowed by it. That stubborn optimism is powerful. It is not dependent on assuming that the outcome is going to be good or having a form of wishful thinking about the future. However, what it does is it animates action and infuses it with meaning. We know that from that time, despite the risk and despite the challenge, it was a meaningful time full of purpose, and multiple accounts have confirmed that actions that ranged from pilots in the Battle of Britain to the simple act of pulling potatoes from the soil became infused with meaning. They were animated towards a shared purpose and a shared outcome.

We have seen that throughout history. This coupling of a deep and determined stubborn optimism with action, when the optimism leads to a determined action, then they can become self-sustaining: without the stubborn optimism, the action doesn't sustain itself; without the action, the stubborn optimism is just an attitude. The two together can transform an entire issue and change the world.

We saw this at multiple other times. We saw it when Rosa Parks refused to get up from the bus. We saw it in Gandhi's long salt marches to the beach. We saw it when the suffragettes said that "Courage calls to courage everywhere." And we saw it when Kennedy said that within 10 years, he would put a man on the moon. That electrified a generation and focused them on a shared goal against a dark and frightening adversary, even though they didn't know how they would achieve it. In each of these cases, a realistic and gritty but determined, stubborn optimism was not the result of success. It was the cause of it.

That is also how the transformation happened on the road to the Paris Agreement. Those challenging, difficult, pessimistic meetings transformed as more and more people decided that this was our moment to dig in and determine that we would not drop the ball on our watch, and we would deliver the outcome that we knew was possible. More and more people transformed themselves to that perspective and began to work, and in the end, that worked its way up into a wave of momentum that crashed over us and delivered many of those challenging issues with a better outcome than we could possibly have imagined. And even now, years later and with a climate denier in the White House, much that was put in motion in those days is still unfolding, and we have everything to play for in the coming months and years on dealing with the climate crisis.

So right now, we are coming through one of the most challenging periods in the lives of most of us. The global pandemic has been frightening, whether personal tragedy has been involved or not. But it has also shaken our belief that we are powerless in the face of great change. In the space of a few weeks, we mobilized to the point where half of humanity took drastic action to protect the most vulnerable. If we're capable of that, maybe we have not yet tested the limits of what humanity can do when it rises to meet a shared challenge.

We now need to move beyond this narrative of powerlessness, because make no mistake -- the climate crisis will be orders of magnitude worse than the pandemic if we do not take the action that we can still take to avert the tragedy that we see coming towards us. We can no longer afford the luxury of feeling powerless. The truth is that future generations will look back at this precise moment with awe as we stand at the crossroads between a regenerative future and one where we have thrown it all away. And the truth is that a lot is going pretty well for us in this transition. Costs for clean energy are coming down. Cities are transforming. Land is being regenerated. People are on the streets calling for change with a verve and tenacity we have not seen for a generation. Genuine success is possible in this transition, and genuine failure is possible, too, which makes this the most exciting time to be alive. We can take a decision right now that we will approach this challenge with a stubborn form of gritty, realistic and determined optimism and do everything within our power to ensure that we shape the path as we come out of this pandemic towards a regenerative future. We can all decide that we will be hopeful beacons for humanity even if there are dark days ahead, and we can decide that we will be responsible, we will reduce our own emissions by at least 50 percent in the next 10 years, and we will take action to engage with governments and corporations to ensure they do what is necessary coming out of the pandemic to rebuild the world that we want them to. Right now, all of these things are possible.

So let's go back to that boring meeting room where I'm looking at that note from Christiana. And looking at it took me back to some of the most transformative experiences of my life. One of the many things I learned as a monk is that a bright mind and a joyful heart is both the path and the goal in life. This stubborn optimism is a form of applied love. It is both the world we want to create and the way in which we can create that world. And it is a choice for all of us. Choosing to face this moment with stubborn optimism can fill our lives with meaning and purpose, and in doing so, we can put a hand on the arc of history and bend it towards the future that we choose.

Yes, living now feels out of control. It feels frightening and scary and new. But let's not falter at this most crucial of transitions that is coming at us right now. Let's face it with stubborn and determined optimism.

Yes, seeing the changes in the world right now can be painful. But let's approach it with love.

Note

"Hundreds of thousands of people are on the move as a result of climate change."  
  
For more on climate change displacement due to sudden onset natural disaster events, see [here](https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/) and [here](http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/06/GPI-2019-web003.pdf).

Note

"We saw it when the suffragettes said that 'Courage calls to courage everywhere.'"  
  
This quote comes from the writings of Millicent Fawcett, another British suffragist. For more, see [here](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/apr/25/misgivings-over-new-statue-and-old-portrait-of-millicent-fawcett).

Note

"... and we can decide that we will be responsible, we will reduce our own emissions by at least 50 percent in the next 10 years ..."  
  
This section refers to the degree to which emissions must reduce at a national level in order to reach net-zero by 2050. For more on this estimate, see [here](https://earth.stanford.edu/news/roadmap-reducing-greenhouse-gas-emissions-50-percent-2030" \l "gs.43ad1i).

Note

"... and in doing so, we can put a hand on the arc of history and bend it towards the future that we choose."  
  
This section comes from 19th century texts and was made famous by Martin Luther King Jr. For more on the history of this language, see [here](https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/).

# The healing power of reading

I want to talk today about how reading can change our lives and about the limits of that change. I want to talk to you about how reading can give us a shareable world of powerful human connection. But also about how that connection is always partial. How reading is ultimately a lonely, idiosyncratic undertaking.

The writer who changed my life was the great African American novelist James Baldwin. When I was growing up in Western Michigan in the 1980s, there weren't many Asian American writers interested in social change. And so I think I turned to James Baldwin as a way to fill this void, as a way to feel racially conscious. But perhaps because I knew I wasn't myself African American, I also felt challenged and indicted by his words. Especially these words: "There are liberals who have all the proper attitudes, but no real convictions. When the chips are down and you somehow expect them to deliver, they are somehow not there." They are somehow not there. I took those words very literally. Where should I put myself?

I went to the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest regions in the United States. This is a place shaped by a powerful history. In the 1960s, African Americans risked their lives to fight for education, to fight for the right to vote. I wanted to be a part of that change, to help young teenagers graduate and go to college. When I got to the Mississippi Delta, it was a place that was still poor, still segregated, still dramatically in need of change.

My school, where I was placed, had no library, no guidance counselor, but it did have a police officer. Half the teachers were substitutes and when students got into fights, the school would send them to the local county jail.

This is the school where I met Patrick. He was 15 and held back twice, he was in the eighth grade. He was quiet, introspective, like he was always in deep thought. And he hated seeing other people fight. I saw him once jump between two girls when they got into a fight and he got himself knocked to the ground. Patrick had just one problem. He wouldn't come to school. He said that sometimes school was just too depressing because people were always fighting and teachers were quitting. And also, his mother worked two jobs and was just too tired to make him come. So I made it my job to get him to come to school. And because I was crazy and 22 and zealously optimistic, my strategy was just to show up at his house and say, "Hey, why don't you come to school?" And this strategy actually worked, he started to come to school every day. And he started to flourish in my class. He was writing poetry, he was reading books. He was coming to school every day.

Around the same time that I had figured out how to connect to Patrick, I got into law school at Harvard. I once again faced this question, where should I put myself, where do I put my body? And I thought to myself that the Mississippi Delta was a place where people with money, people with opportunity, those people leave. And the people who stay behind are the people who don't have the chance to leave. I didn't want to be a person who left. I wanted to be a person who stayed. On the other hand, I was lonely and tired. And so I convinced myself that I could do more change on a larger scale if I had a prestigious law degree. So I left.

Three years later, when I was about to graduate from law school, my friend called me and told me that Patrick had got into a fight and killed someone. I was devastated. Part of me didn't believe it, but part of me also knew that it was true. I flew down to see Patrick. I visited him in jail. And he told me that it was true. That he had killed someone. And he didn't want to talk more about it. I asked him what had happened with school and he said that he had dropped out the year after I left. And then he wanted to tell me something else. He looked down and he said that he had had a baby daughter who was just born. And he felt like he had let her down. That was it, our conversation was rushed and awkward.

When I stepped outside the jail, a voice inside me said, "Come back. If you don't come back now, you'll never come back." So I graduated from law school and I went back. I went back to see Patrick, I went back to see if I could help him with his legal case. And this time, when I saw him a second time, I thought I had this great idea, I said, "Hey, Patrick, why don't you write a letter to your daughter, so that you can keep her on your mind?" And I handed him a pen and a piece of paper, and he started to write.

But when I saw the paper that he handed back to me, I was shocked. I didn't recognize his handwriting, he had made simple spelling mistakes. And I thought to myself that as a teacher, I knew that a student could dramatically improve in a very quick amount of time, but I never thought that a student could dramatically regress. What even pained me more, was seeing what he had written to his daughter. He had written, "I'm sorry for my mistakes, I'm sorry for not being there for you." And this was all he felt he had to say to her. And I asked myself how can I convince him that he has more to say, parts of himself that he doesn't need to apologize for. I wanted him to feel that he had something worthwhile to share with his daughter.

For every day the next seven months, I visited him and brought books. My tote bag became a little library. I brought James Baldwin, I brought Walt Whitman, C.S. Lewis. I brought guidebooks to trees, to birds, and what would become his favorite book, the dictionary. On some days, we would sit for hours in silence, both of us reading. And on other days, we would read together, we would read poetry.

We started by reading haikus, hundreds of haikus, a deceptively simple masterpiece. And I would ask him, "Share with me your favorite haikus." And some of them are quite funny. So there's this by Issa: "Don't worry, spiders, I keep house casually." And this: "Napped half the day, no one punished me!" And this gorgeous one, which is about the first day of snow falling, "Deer licking first frost from each other's coats." There's something mysterious and gorgeous just about the way a poem looks. The empty space is as important as the words themselves.

We read this poem by W.S. Merwin, which he wrote after he saw his wife working in the garden and realized that they would spend the rest of their lives together. "Let me imagine that we will come again when we want to and it will be spring We will be no older than we ever were The worn griefs will have eased like the early cloud through which morning slowly comes to itself" I asked Patrick what his favorite line was, and he said, "We will be no older than we ever were." He said it reminded him of a place where time just stops, where time doesn't matter anymore. And I asked him if he had a place like that, where time lasts forever. And he said, "My mother." When you read a poem alongside someone else, the poem changes in meaning. Because it becomes personal to that person, becomes personal to you.

We then read books, we read so many books, we read the memoir of Frederick Douglass, an American slave who taught himself to read and write and who escaped to freedom because of his literacy. I had grown up thinking of Frederick Douglass as a hero and I thought of this story as one of uplift and hope. But this book put Patrick in a kind of panic. He fixated on a story Douglass told of how, over Christmas, masters give slaves gin as a way to prove to them that they can't handle freedom. Because slaves would be stumbling on the fields. Patrick said he related to this. He said that there are people in jail who, like slaves, don't want to think about their condition, because it's too painful. Too painful to think about the past, too painful to think about how far we have to go.

His favorite line was this line: "Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me." Patrick said that Douglass was brave to write, to keep thinking. But Patrick would never know how much he seemed like Douglass to me. How he kept reading, even though it put him in a panic. He finished the book before I did, reading it in a concrete stairway with no light.

And then we went on to read one of my favorite books, Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead," which is an extended letter from a father to his son. He loved this line: "I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life ... you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle."

Something about this language, its love, its longing, its voice, rekindled Patrick's desire to write. And he would fill notebooks upon notebooks with letters to his daughter. In these beautiful, intricate letters, he would imagine him and his daughter going canoeing down the Mississippi river. He would imagine them finding a mountain stream with perfectly clear water. As I watched Patrick write, I thought to myself, and I now ask all of you, how many of you have written a letter to somebody you feel you have let down? It is just much easier to put those people out of your mind. But Patrick showed up every day, facing his daughter, holding himself accountable to her, word by word with intense concentration.

I wanted in my own life to put myself at risk in that way. Because that risk reveals the strength of one's heart. Let me take a step back and just ask an uncomfortable question. Who am I to tell this story, as in this Patrick story? Patrick's the one who lived with this pain and I have never been hungry a day in my life. I thought about this question a lot, but what I want to say is that this story is not just about Patrick. It's about us, it's about the inequality between us. The world of plenty that Patrick and his parents and his grandparents have been shut out of. In this story, I represent that world of plenty. And in telling this story, I didn't want to hide myself. Hide the power that I do have.

In telling this story, I wanted to expose that power and then to ask, how do we diminish the distance between us? Reading is one way to close that distance. It gives us a quiet universe that we can share together, that we can share in equally.

You're probably wondering now what happened to Patrick. Did reading save his life? It did and it didn't. When Patrick got out of prison, his journey was excruciating. Employers turned him away because of his record, his best friend, his mother, died at age 43 from heart disease and diabetes. He's been homeless, he's been hungry.

So people say a lot of things about reading that feel exaggerated to me. Being literate didn't stop him form being discriminated against. It didn't stop his mother from dying. So what can reading do? I have a few answers to end with today.

Reading charged his inner life with mystery, with imagination, with beauty. Reading gave him images that gave him joy: mountain, ocean, deer, frost. Words that taste of a free, natural world. Reading gave him a language for what he had lost. How precious are these lines from the poet Derek Walcott? Patrick memorized this poem. "Days that I have held, days that I have lost, days that outgrow, like daughters, my harboring arms."

Reading taught him his own courage. Remember that he kept reading Frederick Douglass, even though it was painful. He kept being conscious, even though being conscious hurts. Reading is a form of thinking, that's why it's difficult to read because we have to think. And Patrick chose to think, rather than to not think. And last, reading gave him a language to speak to his daughter. Reading inspired him to want to write. The link between reading and writing is so powerful. When we begin to read, we begin to find the words. And he found the words to imagine the two of them together. He found the words to tell her how much he loved her.

Reading also changed our relationship with each other. It gave us an occasion for intimacy, to see beyond our points of view. And reading took an unequal relationship and gave us a momentary equality. When you meet somebody as a reader, you meet him for the first time, newly, freshly. There is no way you can know what his favorite line will be. What memories and private griefs he has. And you face the ultimate privacy of his inner life. And then you start to wonder, "Well, what is my inner life made of? What do I have that's worthwhile to share with another?"

I want to close on some of my favorite lines from Patrick's letters to his daughter. "The river is shadowy in some places but the light shines through the cracks of trees ... On some branches hang plenty of mulberries. You stretch your arm straight out to grab some." And this lovely letter, where he writes, "Close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the words. I know this poem by heart and I would like you to know it, too."

Thank you so much everyone.

Note

"I also felt challenged and indicted by his words, especially these words: 'There are liberals […](https://www.ted.com/talks/michelle_kuo_the_healing_power_of_reading/undefined) who have all the proper attitudes, but no real convictions. When the chips are down and you somehow expect them to deliver, they're somehow not there.'"  
  
This quote comes from [a 1963 interview with James Baldwin at the Florida Forum](https://www.rimaregas.com/2017/02/05/james-baldwin-interview-at-florida-forum-wckt-miami-june-28-1963-blog42/).

Note

"He fixated on a story Douglass told of how over Christmas, masters give slaves gin as a way to 'prove' to them that they can't handle freedom because slaves would be stumbling on the fields."  
  
Correction: According to *[Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave](https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbcb.25385/?sp=93&st=text)*, slaveholders would give their slaves whiskey, not gin, so they would become inebriated, and thus "prove" they could not handle their freedom.