

The Other Side of Change

Who We Become When Life Makes Other Plans

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BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

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PREFACE

After years spent navigating challenges and setbacks on the road to becoming parents, Maya Shankar and her husband were, at last, cruising toward starting a family via surrogacy. “As we received one piece of good news after another, we allowed ourselves to conjure up cozy images of life with our future child: snuggling in bed and reading *Calvin and Hobbes* together or breaking out into a silly dance in our kitchen,” she writes.

With one phone call, that dream was abruptly put on hold: Their surrogate had miscarried. The world around Shankar carried on as usual, but she suddenly felt very alone, disoriented by what seemed like a total loss of control. In an effort to process her feelings, she began reaching out to other people who had experienced major life disruptions, and, in 2021, these conversations evolved into *A Slight Change of Plans*, a podcast about life-altering change.

Through her show, Shankar realized that people in vastly different circumstances often experience similar challenges when confronted with change—and they use similar strategies to move forward with their lives. She also learned that when major changes happen to us, they can lead to big changes *within* us. “This is an empowering realization: when we’re daunted at the outset of a change, there is some comfort in knowing that the person who will undergo the full experience will be different from the person we are in this very moment,” Shankar writes.

The following stories explore the crushing losses and horizon-expanding transformations that can arise from life disruptions. As Shankar asks: “What if we saw the hardest moments in our lives as a chance to reimagine ourselves, rather than something to just endure? What potential could change unlock within us?”

CHAPTER 1

LOCKED IN

One afternoon in the fall of 2018, Olivia Lewis left the library to go fetch lunch. She was a senior at Virginia Commonwealth University, a communications major with plans to attend graduate school for copywriting. While unlocking her bike, she felt “a sharp twinge” in her neck. She brushed it off, even though her head hurt, and gray and black specks had appeared in her field of vision.

That night, just after 4:00 a.m., Olivia awoke as a bolt of pain surged up her spine and into her skull. Her body seized, and she tumbled to the floor. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t scream. She lay there, motionless, until morning, when her aggravated roommate barged in to see why Olivia’s alarm kept going off.

In the hospital, doctors found that Olivia had suffered a massive brain-stem stroke, robbing her of nearly all voluntary muscular movement and resulting in a condition called locked-in syndrome. “Unable to voluntarily move, speak, make facial expressions, chew, or swallow, people with locked-in syndrome can mistakenly be thought to lack consciousness altogether. They do, however, retain their full cognitive abilities and personality traits; they are able to think, reason, and feel the same emotions as before,” Shankar explains. Olivia could still blink, enabling her to communicate with her family and doctors—slowly and determinedly—through the use of a board with the alphabet written on it.

Although Olivia understood what had happened to her, she couldn’t internalize it. But, when her boyfriend and his family visited, she finally broke down. For years, she had struggled with feeling accepted socially, and she craved the approval of her boyfriend’s sophisticated, wealthy parents. Now, she was powerless to show them just how put-together and accomplished she really was. Weeks passed, and that powerlessness did not subside. “Olivia could not shake her

self-consciousness—this deep, instinctual feeling that everyone else’s opinion mattered so much, even more than her own suffering.”

After Olivia’s grandfather read her a memoir by a woman who had recovered from locked-in syndrome—a condition from which few patients ultimately recover—Olivia threw herself into her rehabilitation program. Progress was slow: Two months after her stroke, she was breathing on her own but could only move her neck, left arm, and left index finger by a small degree. Her grandfather encouraged her to celebrate even the smallest gains, but, “[i]n order to go on, she denied the possibility of anything less than a full and speedy recovery.” She yearned to become her old self as quickly as possible.

When Olivia was given the chance to relocate to a top rehab center in Boston, Massachusetts, she seized the opportunity. At first, she was preoccupied with how her therapists and caregivers would see her, since many of them were close to her age. But, she quickly realized that they were unfazed by the drool that dripped from her open mouth and the diapers she had to wear. “For the past several months, she’d revealed sides of herself that she had long been determined to hide, yet her team of therapists had accepted her,” writes Shankar. “Reflecting on this left her with a radical idea: maybe *she* should accept who she was in this very moment.” Maybe she could finally let go of her anxiety about what other people thought of her.

Today, Olivia’s recovery has been nothing short of miraculous. She lives with her parents but is largely independent. She can walk, albeit with a limp, and she is able to speak clearly. “It took my getting stripped of everything to realize I was disappointed in who I was becoming, and I saw this as my chance to start over,” Olivia told Shankar. “It can take decades for people to reach the self-assured place I’m in. My stroke forced me to get there so much sooner than I would’ve otherwise, assuming I ever got there at all.”

TAKEAWAYS

Olivia's experience points to a profound lesson. "Even if our self-identity is not as tethered to external validation as Olivia's once was, each of us has an identity that is *contingent*: it might depend, for example, on some combination of the roles you play, the activities or jobs you do, or the communities to which you belong," writes Shankar. "But anchoring your identity too strongly to any given thing also carries risks: when a change threatens that very thing, it can be destabilizing and cause you to enter a state of denial."

Denial is a logical reaction to life-altering change. It's a protective mechanism that allows us to hold painful feelings at a distance. For Olivia, it meant clinging to an old version of herself—the put-together college student with a boyfriend and a busy social life. Denial has its limits, though. It was only when Olivia finally accepted her circumstances and gave herself the grace to recover on her own timeline that she began to imagine a new future for herself.

A useful exercise is to consider whether your identity is tied to something "relatively precarious" or uncontrollable: your job title, your physical strength, your mental power, or your children's success in life. Then, try to reframe your identity in terms of your more durable underlying qualities—your creativity, dedication to your community, or love of learning, for example. This approach is called *self-affirmation*: "Self-affirmation involves actively shifting your mental spotlight toward aspects of yourself that you value, but that, importantly, are not threatened by the change you're going through."

As a young woman, Shankar tethered her identity to her talent as a violinist. When an injury forced her to give up the instrument at age 15, she felt as though she had lost herself. In adulthood, she repeated this cycle over and over: "Every time I took on a new pursuit, I once again anchored my value to it, precisely as I had done with the violin. When my circumstances

inevitably changed and I could no longer do that thing, I became unmoored.” Now, she tries to define herself by the personal characteristics that transcend any one pursuit, creating an identity that can more easily weather change.

CHAPTER 2

POSSIBLE SELVES

Growing up in Suitland, Maryland, where poverty and violence were part of daily life, Dwayne Betts imagined a different path for himself. At age 16, in 1996, he was an honors student and class treasurer who hoped to study engineering at Georgia Tech. Dwayne never got into fights, but one evening, while hanging out with a friend and some guys he didn't know well, he decided to impress his companions: Armed with a borrowed pistol, Dwayne and his friend stole a car from a man who had been sleeping in his vehicle. The next day, they were arrested.

Even though he was still a minor, Dwayne was sent to adult criminal court because the charges included carjacking. After a few weeks in county jail, he was sentenced to nine years in an adult prison.

Dwayne was a skinny kid with braces on his teeth, and he was terrified. He feared the other inmates, who were older and bigger than him. He mourned the youthful experiences he'd never have, like going to prom and waving goodbye to his mom on the first day of college. He dreaded the person he might become. "If you're Black in America and go to prison, in one moment, with one guilty plea, the list of possibilities has been reduced to no possibilities," Dwayne told Shankar.

In prison, Dwayne met a man named Bilal who changed the course of his life. While Dwayne tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible, Bilal stood out for his dignified carriage, with his freshly pressed clothes and clean-shaven face. In the prison yard, he taught younger men to box—to protect themselves. "He had this honorable willingness to go to bat for someone he didn't even know—to stand at the scratch line for them—in a place where vulnerability got you ruined," Dwayne recalled. If Bilal could embody such generosity and loveliness, Dwayne realized, he didn't have to let his identity be defined by prison, either.

When Dwayne was sent to solitary confinement for trying to stop a guard from closing his cell door, he and Bilal struck up a correspondence—and he discovered that his fellow inmates were running “a vibrant underground library,” sliding books under each other’s doors. Among the books he received was *The Black Poets*, an anthology published in 1971. Dwayne was struck by one poem in particular, “For Freckle-Faced Gerald,” by Etheridge Knight, about a young man who was raped in prison. Reading it, he realized that Knight, acting as a witness, was going to bat for Gerald just like Bilal did for the younger men.

“Bilal had shown Dwayne a landscape of possibility. Now Knight helped Dwayne pinpoint where on that landscape he could try to place himself.” Dwayne began writing poetry every day. After he was transferred to a lower-security prison at 21, he signed up for a writing class and began submitting his poems to magazines. His fellow inmates cheered when he received his first acceptance letter. Dwayne was released from prison at 24, and he attended community college before earning his BA from the University of Maryland, his MFA from Warren Wilson College, and his law degree from Yale.

Now a poet, lawyer for incarcerated clients, and the founder of a nonprofit that builds libraries in prisons, Dwayne was awarded a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2021. Bilal is never far from his mind.

TAKEAWAYS

All of us regularly imagine *possible selves*—versions of us who become parents, get promotions, or lose loved ones, for instance. Our *hoped-for* selves represent our aspirations, our *feared* selves represent our worries, and our *expected* selves represent what we believe to be the most likely outcome. “As we navigate a change, our set of possible selves can shift dramatically in response to our new circumstances, but sometimes our minds constrain us beyond what is necessary,” writes Shankar. When Dwayne first arrived in prison, he couldn’t imagine a bright future for himself anymore.

In moments where your possible selves seem limited, look for other people's moral beauty. When you witness someone's kindness or courage—as Dwayne did with Bilal—it creates a feeling of *moral elevation*, a vantage point that can help you reimagine a wider range of possibilities. To help your brain start generating new possible selves, seek out new perspectives by reading fiction, introducing yourself to unfamiliar disciplines, or meditating on how your existing skills might transfer into another domain. “A good question you can ask yourself during a period of transition is: who else can this person be?”

After a major change, it can be hard to enact a new identity. “Indeed, as you navigate a change, it can seem as if there's a chasm between you and your aspirational self.” It's helpful to break your journey into smaller steps—and to be aware of the *middle problem*, where motivation drops off at the mid-point of a project. Capitalize on the *fresh-start effect* by starting your pursuit at a time that feels like a new beginning: a birthday, the new year, etc. You can also practice *temptation bundling* by pairing a long-term task with another behavior that is immediately rewarding, but be sure to *only* engage in that rewarding behavior while working on the long-term task.

To help yourself follow through on your goals, it also helps to be aware of the *peak-end rule*, which shows that you tend to give greatest weight to the emotional peak of an experience and the end of that same experience. By pairing especially challenging moments with a fun activity, or celebrating the end of a project, you can rewrite how you remember it.

Finally, find community with people who support the aspirational self you're pursuing. “When you're part of a group that believes in your new identity, their shared vision can lift you when you're unsure of yourself, or reinforce your identity when you do succeed, as when Dwayne's fellow inmates celebrated his identity as a published author.”

CHAPTER 3

MENTAL SPIRALS

In his 20-year career as a broadcast journalist, Matt Gutman had grown accustomed to experiencing panic attacks before he went live on air—heart racing, chest tightening, hands shaking. To cope, he meditated, did pushups, or smoked a cigarette, and more often than not, he found that his intense nerves weren't visible to viewers.

On a Sunday morning in January 2020, his boss called: Kobe Bryant and eight other people had died in a helicopter crash in Calabasas, California, just 15 miles from Matt's home. When Matt arrived on-site, he noticed the familiar signs of a panic attack. This time, though, he had trouble getting his nerves under control; his heart was still hammering when the broadcast began. In this state of mental and physical tumult, he misreported the details, stating on camera that Bryant's four daughters were with him onboard the aircraft. In reality, only one was.

Matt received a one-month suspension for the error, which he accepted unquestioningly. "As he saw it, his suspension had been inevitable, even long overdue. For years, he'd been walking a tightrope, and now, at last, he'd fallen off." He spiraled out, constantly ruminating about his deficiencies. His brain was clearly broken. *He* was broken.

Wondering why people like him even existed, Matt decided to interview some psychology experts, who corrected his assumptions. Panic attacks aren't the product of a glitch in the genetic code; they make sense from an evolutionary perspective, rushing oxygen into our bloodstream and helping us mobilize when danger is nearby. "[I]t is more adaptive for our brains to respond to a thousand false alarms than to miss a single real one."

Suddenly, Matt stopped resenting his mind. “[H]e *wasn’t* broken. It was clear, though, that his system needed a serious recalibration.” This recalibration involved cognitive-behavioral therapy, breathwork, medication, and guided psychedelic trips. “He also now sees an upside to his anxiety. The fact that he is hyperaware of what other people may be thinking has enabled him to be a more compassionate, perceptive listener.”

TAKEAWAYS

After his on-air mistake, Matt fell prey to something many of us have experienced: *rumination*. “It can involve obsessively rehashing something in the past, grappling with perceived problems in the present, or catastrophizing an imagined future.” The trouble with rumination is that it can *feel* productive, as though it will lead us to a breakthrough or allow us to gain control over our situation. Even if we’ve experienced rumination in the past, each new scenario can seem uniquely pressing.

Unfortunately, we’re usually not making progress when we ruminate. The good news is that there are a number of techniques that can help us break out of our negative thought loops.

Psychological distancing involves “creating space between yourself and the thoughts that have taken hold.” This is what Matt did when he sought the opinion of psychology experts: By bringing in new points of view and more context, he was able to zoom out of his own situation, thereby enabling himself to find a more constructive approach to his panic attacks.

Mental time travel is another way of creating psychological distance. After a woman named Kylie Yorke witnessed the devastation of a California wildfire up close, she found herself in a doom spiral about climate change. She snapped out of it when she read Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens* and learned that, throughout the history of humankind, people have overcome existential threats by engaging in collective action. Traveling back in time gave Kylie wider context in which to consider our

current problems. “You can also travel into the past of your own life story, revisiting moments in which you displayed resilience or overcame adversity, to encourage you in the present,” writes Shankar. “Alternatively, you can mentally travel to the future by imagining how you will feel about your current problem in, say, a month, a year, or decades from now.”

The experience of awe can also help us zoom out and detach ourselves from rumination. One expert defines awe as “the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends our current understanding of the world.” This could come from a sweeping panorama while on a hike, a moving piece of music, or a great film.

Another zooming out technique is *visual self-distancing*. By trying to view a situation as a neutral observer, you can decrease your emotional reactivity and minimize intrusive thoughts. Similarly, you can create space from your thoughts through *distanced self-talk*: Try coaching yourself the same way you’d talk to a good friend—including using “you” instead of “I.” *Affect labeling*—or identifying the negative emotions that are coming up for you, for instance frustration, sadness, hurt, etc.—can also help you gain some distance.

Don’t underestimate the power of a distraction, either. As Shankar writes, “[E]ngaging in activities that distract you from your negative emotions is not only okay but can be beneficial.”

CHAPTER 4

A HOLE IN THE HEART

As a child, Tara Sharp idolized her father, Felix, an artist who was an active and generous member of their community in Northern California. He was also a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD, which occasionally transformed his kind demeanor into an angry whirlwind. “Felix’s response after every flare-up was the same: his cheeks would turn beet red with embarrassment, and then he’d apologize profusely and retreat to his bedroom.” Not long after Tara left for college, her mother called: Felix had killed himself.

In an effort to avoid her overwhelming grief, Tara became emotionally closed-off. She took extra classes and filled the rest of her time with shifts at the local winery. She also broke up with her boyfriend: “It was no longer safe to love anyone, at least not in the profound way she had loved her father.” When she was 26, Tara met Ben. He was handsome and charismatic, and he loved to travel, just like she did. He also shared her tendency to avoid emotional intimacy, which made Tara feel safe; in this relationship, she could keep her walls up.

But, when Tara gave birth to their first child in her early 30s, she was shocked by the intensity of her attachment to her baby. “Tara knew that she was giving in to the very thing she’d promised herself she would resist: to love someone wholly, without guardrails.”

During her second pregnancy, however, Tara received news that caused her walls to come crashing back down: A scan revealed that her baby had a hole in her heart. Unbeknownst to Tara, numerous members of her family had suffered from a potentially fatal heart disorder called Tetralogy of Fallot. Her baby, Ellie, would need a major heart surgery six months after birth—and it had only a 30% chance of success.

This terrifying waiting period sent Tara and Ben's emotional avoidance into overdrive: Tara, who was also suffering from postpartum depression, couldn't bring herself to connect with Ellie, and Ben retreated completely from his wife and children. Three months after Ellie's birth, Tara reached a breaking point. "Suddenly, it just became so clear to me that I had to accept that I had absolutely no control over whether or not my baby lived ... and the fear of my loving her was draining all my energy," she told Shankar. In that moment, she decided to surrender to her love of her daughter.

Ellie's surgery was successful, as was a follow-up surgery at age seven. Tara found herself continuing to grow and thrive, too: After holding loved ones at an arm's distance for so long, she began investing in her friendships. She found that when she shared her fears out loud, those fears diminished. Tamping down her feelings was never the answer.

TAKEAWAYS

Tara instinctively dealt with change by narrowing her world and limiting her bonds with other people. Her story offers a helpful view into *attachment theory*, which was developed in the 1950s and '60s to understand how we form and maintain bonds with other people.

The three attachment styles are *securely attached*, *anxiously attached*, and *avoidantly attached*. Someone who is securely attached is comfortable with emotional intimacy and feels safe in their relationships. Someone who is anxiously attached wants emotional intimacy but doesn't feel secure in their relationships, leading them to seek reassurance, attention, and affection. Tara is an example of someone who is avoidantly attached: "They find it difficult to express their emotional needs or to trust others, which often causes them to be overly self-reliant."

Recent research shows these modes to be malleable, though, and a major life change can cause us to shift attachment styles. Losing her father caused Tara to move toward an

avoidant attachment style, but choosing to open herself up to Ellie and her friends helped her become more securely attached. “You don’t even have to seek out new experiences if you want to initiate a shift to a more secure attachment style: research shows that it is effective to simply mine your past for examples of times when people in your life showed up for you, cared for you, or protected you.”

CHAPTER 5

THE BLANK SLATE

Growing up in Bogotá, Colombia, Ingrid Rojas Contreras understood that certain aspects of her family history had to be kept secret. Ingrid's grandfather had been a *curandero*, "a traditional healer who used herbal medicines and spiritual rituals passed down through generations to treat physical and psychological ailments." His daughter, Ingrid's mother, Sojaila, was a *curandera*, too, assisting people in her community with their problems.

Indigenous beliefs were not welcome in Bogotá in the early 1990s. "City dwellers saw curanderos as uncivilized and ignorant," writes Shankar. "They hurled insults at Sojaila, spat in her face, and harassed her. Others took out their anger on Ingrid's family by excluding them from social gatherings and conspiring to get Ingrid's dad fired from his job." Fearing social repercussions and violence, Sojaila warned Ingrid never to tell anyone about their family's beliefs and background.

Ingrid moved to the United States to attend college in Chicago, Illinois, where she planned to study journalism and creative writing. She made friends easily, but she maintained a hard boundary where her past was concerned: "Even the smallest thing about my family, I just wouldn't be able to share it. I was a small percentage of myself," she said. In English and Spanish, Ingrid felt like two completely different people—and nobody knew her whole self.

A few years after graduating college, Ingrid got hit by a car while riding her bicycle and was knocked unconscious. She walked away from the accident, but she soon realized that she didn't know where she was or who she was. Later, she would learn that she had retrograde amnesia. Her old memories were gone, but she could still form new ones; her skills, personality, and intelligence were fully intact.

Oddly, Ingrid found this new state euphoric. “You kind of become old to yourself, and now I was alive to the world in a way that was different than before. There was this feeling of infinite possibility, that I could create my world from scratch,” she told Shankar. Eager to remain in this blissful bubble as long as possible, Ingrid concealed her memory loss from her friends and boyfriend. But, the memories did start coming back, and for the first time ever, she found herself sharing stories about her grandfather and mother with her friends, who were delighted by her tales.

One night, at a dinner party, Ingrid remembered why she hadn’t opened up about her family before. She remembered feeling ashamed of her mother’s and grandfather’s secrets, but somehow, now, the shame was only an idea—not a feeling. “Maybe that’s why she had felt so free after her accident: the burden of her shame had been lifted,” writes Shankar. Ingrid realized that her mother had never told her to feel ashamed, but that she herself had added that layer of meaning: “If you’re told you can’t share things with other people because they’ll judge you, ... you can start to believe there is something inherently wrong with the thing that you’re hiding,” Ingrid said.

Ingrid finally shared her stories with the world, first in a 2018 novel and, in 2022, in a memoir titled *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She realized that while her shame might have served an important purpose earlier in life, she no longer needed it. She feels, now, that she has control over her own narrative.

TAKEAWAYS

In the same way that change offers an opportunity to rethink our relationships with others—as Tara did when Ellie was born—it also gives us a chance to question our own beliefs. “As we grow up, our brains absorb information and then work to identify patterns, draw inferences, weave together stories, and make sense of our environment,” writes Shankar. “We might come to believe that expressing sadness is a sign of

weakness, or that we're good at some things but not others, or that success is defined in a specific way." Even without an amnesia diagnosis, any major life change loosens the grip that our beliefs have on us.

We're naturally reluctant to change our beliefs, especially about ourselves. We all have a *narrative identity*—the stories we maintain about ourselves—which “helps us make sense of the messy and complicated world around us, and allows us to find purpose and direction within it.” Altering even a single belief embedded in that narrative identity can call into question our entire existence.

Doing so can be scary, but it can also be freeing. As an improvised-explosive-device (IED) ordnance officer in the U.S. Navy, Brad Snyder was proud of being a hero to his younger sister; when he stepped on an IED in Afghanistan, leaving him wounded and blind, he felt like he had failed her. It turned out that Brad's military service had nothing to do with his sister's admiration for him—it was their shared jokes and stories that mattered to her. Brad was the one who had absorbed the lesson that his military accomplishments defined him. Suddenly, he felt like he could let his guard down with his family, sharing his vulnerabilities and challenges.

Often, our beliefs are not the product of careful consideration—they come from ideas we absorbed as children, “which can be bound up with our desire for love and belonging.” Change, particularly in adulthood, gives us the opportunity to question certain beliefs that may be outdated. “When reexamining your beliefs, it is helpful to cultivate what is known as *metacognitive awareness*, which is when you think *about* your thinking. By reflecting on and turning a critical eye toward how exactly you've arrived at a belief, you might detect problems in your thought process.”

To do this, you might ask yourself a few questions: “How did I get from point A to point B in my thinking? Based on what existing beliefs did I form this new one? Would this belief hold

up against the scrutiny of the people I trust? In theory, what evidence *would* persuade me to change my mind?" Approaching this exercise with curiosity, humility, and an open mind may help reveal stories about yourself that are no longer needed.

CHAPTER 6

A CITY OF REFUGE

In 1977, at age 22, Maryann Gray was embarking on a new chapter in her life. She had recently dropped out of a master's program that was making her desperately unhappy—a surprise coming from a perfectionist who had always tried to appease her parents—and was joining a commune full of other young idealists, with the hope of living more authentically. While driving through a residential area one day, “a young boy with blond hair materialized on the road, darting out from behind a row of mailboxes.” Maryann tried to swerve, but she heard a “sickening thud.”

The boy, Brian, was dead. After the police had arrived and interviewed neighbors who had witnessed the accident, they determined that Maryann hadn't done anything wrong. Decades later, Maryann would learn that this stretch of road was notorious for fatal accidents. Even so, she was consumed by grief and guilt, paralyzed by the fear that she would hurt someone else. She stopped driving, leaving the house, or even speaking with other people.

Rationally, Maryann understood that it had been an accident—everyone she had talked to agreed with that. “But this notion was intolerable to Maryann. For so much of her life, she had tried to be good and do good. And yet she'd caused this terrible thing to happen.” She began to believe that she harbored some deep, awful, dangerous darkness in her soul. Even as she put her life back together, Maryann felt that she must remain vigilant, lest that darkness win again.

Maryann advanced in her career, becoming a research scientist and a faculty member at the University of Southern California, but she continued to punish herself for Brian's death, believing that she deserved to suffer for the pain she had caused. She got into dysfunctional relationships, avoided

friendships, and, when she did finally marry, decided not to have children. “To enjoy life was a kindness she could not grant herself.”

In 2003, Maryann heard about an accident at a nearby farmers market: An 86-year-old driver named George Weller had mistaken the gas pedal for the brake and plowed into a crowd, killing several people. While others immediately began to villainize him, Maryann felt empathy. She wrote a letter to NPR, sharing her own experience and offering forgiveness to Weller. The network immediately reached out, telling her they wanted to air her letter.

When the piece went live, Maryann expected a wave of criticism and judgment to crash over her. “Instead, Maryann received an outpouring of kindness, from people she knew and didn’t know alike.” She thought she was doomed to suffer in isolation, but she started to realize that she wasn’t alone—and that no amount of self-punishment would bring Brian back. Determined to look outside herself, she began an organization called Accidental Impacts, now called the Hyacinth Fellowship, that offers resources and support to other people who had inadvertently killed someone. Maryann’s greatest source of shame, once brought to light, offered her a way to help other people.

TAKEAWAYS

The way Maryann processed the accident has a lot to do with a concept called the *just-world hypothesis*, which leads us to believe that “people get what they deserve.” Maryann’s parents espoused this ethos, telling her that if she studied hard, followed the rules, and pursued a respectable career, good things would happen to her. Many people are taught this way of thinking: “There’s an understanding, especially in Western culture, that we are the masters of our fate—that our success relies far more on our choices than it does on our luck.”

When we buy into the just-world hypothesis, we are more likely to blame ourselves when things go wrong. “Self-blame can be comforting, giving us the false sense that we are in control and are righting some wrong.” We’re also more likely to blame others when bad luck befalls them: It’s easier to believe that someone deserves their ill fortune than to accept that, on any other day, we could be in their shoes.

As Maryann’s story shows, it can be hard to break free from self-blame. Practicing self-compassion can help: “[S]elf-compassion involves recognizing your suffering, mindfully engaging with your emotions, and understanding that the pain you’re experiencing is part of a shared human experience,” writes Shankar. “[I]f you can contextualize an awful event in your life as something that can happen to other people, too, you’re more likely to depersonalize it and shift toward a more external locus of control—to interpret it as something that’s happened to you, as opposed to something that’s happened *because of you.*”

Helping others, as Maryann did, can also boost self-compassion. “Research shows that people regularly underestimate the positive impact they’re able to have on others; shame-prone people are especially likely to think that they can’t be of value.” An act of service as simple as helping your neighbor carry their groceries inside can affirm the value that you bring to the world.

CHAPTER 7

THE MISSING PIECE

Maya Shankar met her husband, Jimmy, at a dinner with friends in Washington, D.C., in 2014. She found herself captivated by his enthusiasm for life and the generous way he drew people into conversation. As soon as they professed their feelings for each other, their relationship felt serious. “We immediately developed a closeness that neither of us had felt with someone else before,” she writes.

Shankar had wanted a big family ever since she was a small child. The summer before college started, though, she happened to catch a news program about a gay college student who had been murdered—and all of a sudden, she considered what it would be like to be the parent of that child. The idea that no parent can guarantee their child’s safety shook her deeply, and in the months that followed, Shankar was consumed by spiraling thoughts and overwhelming anxiety. “Now that I was viewing the world through the eyes of a prospective mother, every bad thing I heard or read about suddenly felt personal and threatening.”

By the time she met Jimmy, Shankar had a better handle on her anxiety. He helped allay her continuing fears about not having “the right emotional constitution” for raising children, and eventually they began pursuing parenthood together. Because Shankar has a rare set of antibodies that affect the womb and disrupt fetal heart development, they froze embryos and began exploring surrogacy with a kind woman, Haylee, who lived in Arkansas.

The first embryo transfer went well, until it didn’t. Not long after the first fetal heartbeat ultrasound, Haylee miscarried. Shankar was left reeling, but the trio—Shankar, Jimmy, and Haylee—were all determined to try again. Once again, the pregnancy took, and once again, it ended in miscarriage. They

were told it was likely due to an incompatibility between Haylee's immune system and the embryos.

In between the two pregnancies, Shankar had begun hosting *A Slight Change of Plans*, her podcast about life-altering change. After the second miscarriage, Shankar asked Haylee if she would join her on the podcast to share their story, and she agreed. After the episode aired, Shankar writes, "Heartfelt messages began pouring in from around the world—from places like Greece, Mozambique, New Zealand, India, and Sweden. I was taken by how many of us, everywhere, have common stories—of feeling helpless, of questioning our decisions, of being swallowed up by grief, of struggling with our self-worth, of railing against life's cruelty."

In the aftermath of the second miscarriage, Shankar and Jimmy realized that they had spent the past six years consumed by thoughts of parenthood, and they decided to take a step back from that pursuit to reflect. For the first time ever, they considered the option of not having children at all. "In contemplating the possibility, I no longer felt like my identity was under threat or that my life would be sapped of all its color and meaning," Shankar writes. "I still felt intact."

Shankar found that her conversations with people like Olivia and Wayne had taught her to create a self-identity that is more resilient when change happens, and to envision a more expansive future for herself. She learned to accept the unknowability of the universe—and the unknowability of who *she* will be on the other side of change.

"Unexpectedly, I'm more hopeful than I've ever been. I am slowly learning to hold my identity more loosely, with an open hand rather than a closed fist," Shankar writes. "Among the most valuable lessons I've learned from the people I've spoken with over the years is to stay curious when life makes other plans. Change can transform us in unexpected ways. We simply don't know how until we get there."

APPENDIX

GETTING TO THE OTHER SIDE OF CHANGE: YOUR CHANGE SURVIVAL KIT

Whenever you next encounter a major life change, reach for this tool kit to help you along the way, with concepts and ideas distilled from each chapter in this book. Not every tool will apply to every situation, so you should feel free to use the ones that seem most relevant and actionable.

Chapter 1: Revisiting our self-identity

What the science says:

- / Denial is a common reaction to change, and it works as a “psychological immune response that can protect us from negative emotions like grief, guilt, fear, and helplessness.” It has downsides in the long term, however.

What you can do:

- / Is your denial rooted in a threat to your self-identity? Consider whether your identity is tied to factors outside your control—and whether you can instead tether your identity to innate qualities in yourself that you value, which transfer across life circumstances.

Chapter 2: Revisiting what is possible in our future

What the science says:

- / Change can shift how we think of our possible selves, including our hoped-for selves, our feared selves, and our expected selves.

What you can do:

- / Tap into moral elevation, which happens when we witness someone else’s moral beauty. Look toward other people’s stories or think back on acts of moral beauty you’ve witnessed in the past.

- / Think about how your skills might apply to another area. Is there another version of you that could exist?
- / Seek out community with people who believe in and will reinforce your new identity.

Chapter 3: Revisiting our mental patterns

What the science says:

- / Change can prompt rumination, or getting caught in the same negative mental loop. It might seem like you're making progress on the issue, but that's not usually the case.

What you can do:

- / To end the cycle of rumination, engage in **psychological distancing**—or zooming out. There are a variety of ways to do that:
 - Cognitive reappraisal: Reinterpret your situation to diminish its emotional effect.
 - Mental time travel: See your problem from a new vantage point, in the past or future.
 - Awe: Experiencing wonder widens our perspective beyond ourselves.
 - Affect labeling: Gain distance from your emotions by labeling them.
 - Visual self-distancing and distanced self-talk: Looking at yourself in the third person can create some space from your problems.
 - Distraction: It's OK—and actually healthy—to spend some time away from your problems with a favorite activity.
- / Rumination makes us feel lonely. Engaging with other people can help end the cycle.

Chapter 4: Revisiting how we relate to others

What the science says:

- / Attachment theory helps us understand how we relate to people in moments of change. The three main attachment styles are secure, anxious, and avoidant. They can shift over time.

What you can do:

- / Past experiences may have pushed you toward insecure attachments, but new experiences can help you develop more secure attachments. Take deliberate steps to welcome those relationships into your life, and consider moments in the past when people have shown up and cared for you.

Chapter 5: Revisiting the beliefs we grew up with

What the science says:

- / Moments of change can be an opportunity to revisit old beliefs that may be in need of revision.

What you can do:

- / Cultivate **metacognitive awareness**, or an awareness of your own thinking. Treat your thoughts the way a scientist would: How did you get from point A to point B in your thinking? What might have caused you to form that belief? Would you feel that way if you had been born in another time, family, or place?

Chapter 6: Revisiting our beliefs about fairness

What the science says:

- / The **just-world hypothesis** leads us to believe that people get what they deserve. This is comforting, as it creates a false feeling of control in a world full of randomness.
- / If someone thinks they can control their fate, they have a strong **internal locus of control**. This is connected to greater well-being, but it can lead to self-blame and shame when things go wrong.

What you can do:

- / Consider how your response to events has been shaped by a belief in a just world.
- / Reduce feelings of shame by cultivating **self-compassion**: Reframe unlucky events as something that can happen to other people, too. Consider them as something that happened *to* you, and not *because* of you.

Chapter 7: Becoming someone new on the other side of change

What the science says:

- / Humans are bad **affective forecasters**, meaning we don't typically make accurate predictions about how we'll feel when a specific event happens.
- / We underestimate how much we will change in the future; this is evident in the **end-of-history illusion**. In fact, the person on the other side of a change may very well be different than the one who first encounters it.

What you can do:

- / Maintain a hopeful attitude: If you feel daunted by change, you may be underestimating your ability to adapt with that very same change. Many people who have gone through big changes are grateful for the person they are on the other side.
- / Connect with others about their experiences of change, widening your frame of reference.

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