Caroline Garnet McGraw

You Don't Owe Anyone

You Don't Owe Anyone **the Good Child**

You Don't Owe Anyone **Your Spiritual Allegiance**

You Don't Owe Anyone **a Savior**

You Don't Owe Anyone**e a Brave Face**

You Don't Owe Anyone **Superhuman Strength**

You Don't Owe Anyone **Your Compliance**

You Don't Owe Anyone **an Explanation**

You Don't Owe Anyone**e Your Time and Energy**

You Don't Owe Anyone **an Interaction**

You Don't Owe Anyone, Period.

Free Yourself from the Weight of Expectations

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Disclaimer: This is a work of creative nonfiction. I've recounted events and conversations to the best of my memory, but memory is fallible. I do not claim to be objective, and of course others may have a different perspective. I have done my best to portray events in a gracious light, intending no harm. And while all the stories in this book are true, in some cases I have compressed events and altered their timing for the sake of narrative flow. Finally, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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Introduction

What If You Didn't Owe Anyone?

HAVE YOU EVER BEAT yourself up over not responding to every message you received in a day?

Me too. I know how it goes. On one hand, you're tired and overwhelmed. But on the other hand, there are emails! Texts! Calls! All demanding a response!

If we check in with ourselves, we can sense which messages require our attention. However, we have trouble heeding that inner knowing because it conflicts with what we've been taught:

- If someone writes, we must write back.
- If someone starts talking, we must converse.
- If someone moves in for a hug, we must embrace.

It doesn't matter if we feel uncomfortable, exhausted, or just plain unwilling. If we don't do these things, then we're unkind and rude. Right?

Maybe not.

Maybe there are more important questions for us to ask ourselves than, "But what if they get mad at me?"

Questions such as,

- How much time have I wasted in needing to be seen a certain way?
- What danger have I courted with my inability to say a direct no?
- What have I sacrificed on the altar of being too nice?

It isn't easy to answer these questions, I know. But years ago, I came face-to-face with them.

A male acquaintance who had made a drunken move on me a decade prior—and whom I hadn't spoken to since—sent me a series of messages on Facebook. There was no context to the messages, just "I miss you." "I miss you." "I really miss you."

Perhaps it's obvious to you that these messages did not require a response. But at the time, it wasn't clear to me. (Have you ever noticed that other people's problems seem simple to solve, whereas our own struggles feel much more complex?)

For me, the thought of not responding triggered feelings of guilt and insecurity. What if I hurt this guy's feelings? Was I not being compassionate enough? Should I be polite or listen to my intuition?

Eventually, I asked my husband, Jonathan, for his perspective. "You don't owe anyone an interaction," he said fiercely.

When Jonathan said those six words, something within me unlocked. For three decades I'd been held captive by my own mistaken beliefs, but in that moment, I understood that I could set myself free. Suddenly, it was obvious: I did not have to respond to the messages at all. I did not have to twist myself into knots just because a man said that he missed me. I did not have to protect him from his discomfort while ignoring my own. It was OK for him to miss me, but it wasn't OK for me to miss myself anymore. I did not owe him—or anyone else—an interaction. There was no debt to pay.

All I could say in response to Jonathan was "Wow. May I quote you on that?"

He said yes, so I published a post expanding on his core idea. I wrote about how many women feel compelled to respond to everyone who reaches out to them. I wrote about how we've been conditioned to believe that being kind means being available 24/7, but when we don't guard our time, our very ability to be kind erodes.

The topic touched a nerve. "You Don't Owe Anyone an Interaction" went viral on the *Huffington Post* and led to my subsequent TEDx talk, which was quoted in the *Harvard Business Review*. Clearly, this is a collective struggle.

WHERE DID IT BEGIN for you, dear one? When did you start believing that you owed the whole world? When did you shoulder the burden of being "good" and start keeping your real self hidden away? And when did you realize that it wasn't working, that it was taking you to a place you never wanted to go?

Those of us who strive for perfection yet feel surrounded by shame can trace these patterns back to our early lives. We remember pivotal moments, times when we made crucial decisions about our place in the world.

One of my big moments came at age five. That was the year that I went with my mom and three-year-old brother Willie to a diagnostic center. Mom and Willie went into an office while I played on the jungle gyms in the waiting area. The sunlight streamed through the windows, and it all seemed very peaceful.

By the time our mother came back through the doors, though, everything had changed. She knelt down to hold me tightly, almost desperately. There were tears on her face, tears running into her hair. I didn't understand why she was sad. But I did understand that my mother needed *me* to comfort *her*.

I found out later that the diagnostic center was called Eden Autism Services and that "Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified" was the reason why Willie wouldn't look me in the eye. And while I didn't know anything about autism, I did know that Willie loved me because he'd sit next to me when we watched TV and let me cuddle him longer than anyone else.

In 1990, there was little in the way of autism awareness; our family was in uncharted territory. After the day at the diagnostic center, our parents sat me down and told me that there was something different about Willie's mind, that he did things in his own way. They reassured me that I didn't need to worry because he would be OK and we would be OK. But I would need to be patient and kind, a good daughter, a good older sister.

Could I do that? they asked me. Could I be good?

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I will be good."

Those words were my solemn vow. Frankly, it was a relief to speak them aloud. I appreciated having a clear role, a purposeful way to help our family. Willie would be different, and I would be good, and we would all be OK. It became a simplistic equation in my psyche: one different boy plus one good girl equals a family in which everyone is OK. From that point forward, being "good" was my safe place. Sure, it was hard work, but at least it gave me a sense of control. It seemed like a small price to pay.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT it's like to hide your true self behind perfectionism and a keep-it-all-together facade? To try so hard not to disappoint others, to take on the "good girl" or "good boy" as your primary identity?

If so, then you know that this kind of behavior brings some big rewards. When you learn to overfunction and act like an adult from an early age, actual adults give you more and more responsibility. You receive awards and accolades, praise and promotions. People tell you that you're their shining star, and you smile and nod and pretend that your herculean workload is easy. Sure, no problem! It's all under control!

Or maybe you prefer to fly under the radar, to hide in a different way. Maybe your form of escape isn't perfectionism but people-pleasing. Maybe a long time ago you decided that the way to be safe was to be everyone's best friend, to be the person they could always count on to help. So now you say yes when you mean no, over and over again.

Either way, there's a disconnect. You show up one way—strong, brave, kind, or helpful—when your deeper truth is something different. Something messier and much less acceptable.

But before we continue, there's something that you should know about this book.

I understand that when you pick up a personal development book, you're probably looking for meaning in your struggle and answers to your own issues.

And though of course I'm here to help you have what you want, this book doesn't take the usual approach.

I'm not going to give you lists of how-tos and life hacks. I'm not going to tell you that this is the best or the only approach to personal growth. It's just one signpost on the lifelong walk toward wholeness. So if there's anything in these pages that doesn't resonate with your own deep sense of truth, then please let it go. Keep only what serves you. You are the expert on you!

Instead of giving you answers, I'm going to give you something better. I'm going to give you stories.

It's a more personal approach because, frankly, that's what has helped me the most on my own journey. The books I treasure and reread aren't the ones with lots of bullet-point lists. Rather, they're the ones where the authors risked telling real stories. Fiction or nonfiction, it doesn't matter—you can tell when an author is letting you into the truth of our shared humanity. You can feel it.

One such author, Philip Pullman, said it well:

"We don't need a list of rights and wrongs, tables of dos and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever."

Though the stories I share here are nonfiction, this is a "once upon a time" sort of book.

So here's where we begin. Once upon a time, I trusted a stranger more than myself.

Have you ever done that—ever gone with what an authority figure told you that you should do even though deep down you knew better? And have you ever had that decision put you in danger?

HERE'S WHAT I NEVER knew about car crashes before I was in one: when an airbag deploys, it releases dusty, chemical-scented clouds into the air. Those clouds were the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes after the accident, and they made the interior of the Chrysler Concorde look so strange and otherworldly that for a split second I thought that I was dead.

Once I realized that the mistiness around me came from the airbags and not the clouds of heaven, I knew that I'd made a massive mistake. The accident was all my fault.

Why, oh why did I make that stupid blind turn? I wondered. *Why did I value that stranger's hand waving me forward over my own hesitation? Why do I trust other people more than I trust myself?*

A high-school junior at the time, I was a high achiever, deeply invested in never making mistakes. But this was a big one. En route to school, I'd been preparing to make a left turn at a green light. When the large SUV coming the opposite way blocked my view of oncoming traffic, I'd paused, but the other driver had waved me forward with confidence. As I'd overrode my hesitation and turned the steering wheel, a minivan with the right of way drove through the intersection at full speed.

Why did I make that stupid blind turn? It was an important question. But it wasn't really the time to ponder, since I sat in a crunched-up car in the middle of a busy street. As soon as I could get my shaky legs to cooperate, I released the seat belt and launched myself out the door.

The car was totaled, but I had no visible injuries, so I made my way over to the side of the road in front of a Catholic church. When I saw that the minivan I'd hit was a transport van for adults with special medical needs, though, my knees buckled. I crumpled to the curb and cried. The sight of the adults' frightened faces was too much. Ashamed, I couldn't even look at the vulnerable men and women. Though thankfully they were not hurt, they'd been put at risk by my foolishness. My breath came in short gasps. I was hyperventilating, something I never did in public. Typically, I saved panic for the privacy and darkness of my walk-in closet at home.

As police cars pulled up, I thought, *Oh God, I'll have to tell my parents. They'll be so disappointed. They already have enough to worry about with Willie, and I had to go ahead and do this?*

That's when I heard her voice, slow and gentle: "May I sit with you?"

I looked up to see an older woman approaching. She was wearing church clothes; she had kind eyes and a gentle manner. I nodded, and she sat next to me on the curb.

"I was on my way to Mass and saw the accident. Are you OK?"

I couldn't speak.

"Oh, dear, of course you're not. How scary that must have been."

I nodded, swiping at the snot and tears on my face.

"May I stay for a few minutes and pray for you?" she asked.

"Yes," I choked out.

And so she put her arm around me and prayed. Her words blurred together, and an hour later I couldn't have repeated a thing that she said, but I had a deep impression of comfort and solace.

She stayed with me, sitting on the curb while I called home. She stayed with me until my parents' car pulled up. Then she gave my shoulder a final squeeze and disappeared.

OF COURSE, THE WISE and logical thing to do would have been to go home and rest, to give myself the kind of compassionate care that that stranger had offered me.

But that's not what we do when we're disconnected from ourselves and terrified of making mistakes. We don't go gently; instead, we drive ourselves mercilessly. So after the car crash, I insisted that my parents drive me to school so that I wouldn't miss my third-period science class.

Yes, that's right. After surviving a head-on collision and having an anxiety attack, I decided to carry on as though nothing had happened.

My mom and dad both tried to talk me out of it, but I didn't listen. To my way of thinking, I'd already screwed up by getting in the accident, so I couldn't let myself fail again by missing school. That would be one mistake too many.

How does a teenage girl get to the place where she believes she's not allowed to make mistakes?

In my case, it took years of perfectionism on my part and serious behavioral issues on Willie's. Then there was a cultic church, abuse, trauma, and relational dysfunction. By the time I crashed the car, pushing past my limits and ignoring my body's signals was normal;

I'd been doing it for years. Yet even as I insisted on heading to school that day, I sensed I was crossing an invisible line.

A small voice within me whispered, *Honey, you have a problem*.

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

We show up as problem-solvers, yet in our secret hearts, we fear that we *are* the problem. *What's wrong with you?* is the shaming mantra in our minds. Deep down we wish that we were allowed to be human—to make a mistake, to cry in public, to reschedule appointments when we're sick instead of pushing through the way we always do. But we believe that others' needs are more important than our own, so we show up for them even when we're exhausted.

We sense that there must be a better way, but we don't know how to break through our limiting beliefs to find it. We believe the lie that trying harder will save us, when in truth it keeps us stuck in the same patterns. And frankly, we do not want to look at the past pain that caused us to develop our favorite coping mechanisms. Our people-pleasing and perfectionistic patterns arose from old, emotional-level hurts, and who wants to feel those? So we seek out surface-level fixes. People tell us to make "simple" changes: *Just take it easy! Just give yourself grace! Just learn how to politely decline an invitation!* But it feels impossibly foreign. All of this good advice just doesn't translate to our felt experience.

We do our best to fix problems such as overwork and over-responsibility. But we never see lasting change by trying harder and working more. Here's why: we're not addressing our problem where it originated. We're caught in the impasse of wrapping our minds around emotional-level issues. We're trying to reason our way out of deep fear, and it simply doesn't work. Much like those who struggle with substance abuse, we're operating in response to unhealed trauma—we just pretty it up.

Perfectionism, people-pleasing, codependency, and constant striving to measure up—all of these patterns are rooted in fear and

angst, which are emotional-level issues. The challenge for us is to bring love to the parts of ourselves that are hurting and terrified. Our work is to bridge the gap between the head and the heart.

This book isn't about the quick fix. It's not about changing one unhealthy pattern on the surface, then seeing the unresolved pain show up in some other area of our lives. (Ever seen someone who stops overeating and then takes up smoking a hot second later?)

Let's go gently into our original pain instead. Our problematic patterns arose to protect us from that pain. But if we are willing to (gradually) venture into the hurt, then we will have the opportunity to heal it.

When we heal the hurt, we don't need the addictions anymore. We are free to let go of the need to fix and save others, the people-pleasing, and the perfectionism.

To do this work, we need a compassionate witness, someone who holds space for our suffering.

Rather than providing you more ways to "effort" and effect change—which you've tried before—this book offers you something different. It's a kind of compassionate witness, a series of stories and situations in which you can glimpse your own reflection. In this way, the book asks for your participation. It invites you to enter into your own questions, your own stories, at a deeper level.

Each person's story is different and unique, yet on a deeper level, our struggles are similar. We share the desire to belong, to be loved, to accept ourselves as we are. In the same way that the woman on her way to Mass comforted me and prayed for me after my car accident, I offer you a safe space here.

But safe spaces can also be rousing wake-up calls, and I hope this book sounds an alarm for you as well. Each chapter title begins with a challenge, a daring phrase that helped shock me awake. I hope these challenges help you too; I hope they jolt you out of your old, harmful patterns and encourage you to claim your freedom. As you read, I would love for you to raise your voice along with me, to see how it feels to say, "I don't owe anyone!"

In the book's opening stories, I examine what it looks like for us to stay stuck in the try-hard cycle. I give voice to the fear that underlies

perfectionistic striving, self-harm, and intense anxiety. I share tough stories from my own life, accounts of abuse and trauma. These dark times aren't about victimization, though; I share them to help you connect to your own resilience and appreciate all that you've already survived. These chapters also illumine the positive purpose of past pain (which is much clearer in hindsight). Then in later chapters, I share stories of overcoming dysfunctional patterns and learning new, healthier ways of being. Throughout each chapter, I unpack solutions for you. I show you what it looks like to refuse to overfunction in the old ways, and I invite you to make the same surprising choices that helped me get unstuck.

Every chapter concludes with an invitation to complete an exercise, a single suggested task to help you integrate what you've read. As a coach for recovering perfectionists, I've seen the power of these exercises firsthand. These tools have empowered me and clients to heal our hearts, allay our fears, and live with integrity. It's my hope that they will do the same for you.

THE NO-OWE INVITATION

Do Nothing, Every Single Day (Yes, Really)

In this first (and perhaps most challenging) coaching exercise, I welcome you—the Try-Hard Champion—to do nothing, daily. You will be tempted to dismiss and avoid this invitation. Don't. Instead, set a timer for fifteen minutes per day, and just be. Just sit still and be present.

Some people call this meditation, but I follow the lead of master coach Martha Beck and call it "doing nothing" because it helps me release into rest. Remember that you don't have to be good at meditation. You just need to do nothing daily for at least one month and see what shifts in you.

If you're not used to stillness, the first few sessions may feel just awful. You may have a twitchy, crawling-out-of-your-skin feeling; you may feel a strong compulsion to get back on your feet and do

something—anything! If you can, sit with the discomfort. Breathe through it.

That said, if it feels too intense to sit still, you may need to release stored energy first. One great way to do this is to simply let your body shake. Let your limbs tremble in whatever way they need to. (Personally, I find it easiest to shake my legs when I'm feeling too much charge, and I can do that even when I'm seated at my desk on a video call.) If you want more detailed instructions, there are some great free resources available; just look up "Trauma Release Exercises" or "TRE" online.

You may find that the first five minutes of "doing nothing" are the hardest and that it gets easier to be still after that. Or you may find that doing nothing feels like an uphill battle the entire time. Stick with it anyway. You are addicted to achieving, and you can go back to achieving when the fifteen minutes are up. But for now, you get to just be.

Often, clients will tell me that they don't have time to do this. I can relate to that. There have been long periods of my life when I've believed that I didn't have time to be still. But what I've found is that, in the end, none of us have time *not* to be still. If we don't slow down, we will invariably lose touch with who we are and drift off course from where we want to go.

When coaching clients come to me and say that they don't know what they want or that they feel lost, the first question I ask is, "How much time do you spend doing nothing?" Usually the answer is "None." Their frantic pace blocks access to their inner wisdom.

Many high achievers are scared to spend fifteen minutes in silence because they fear wasting time and losing productivity. In my experience, the opposite is true. If I take at least fifteen minutes to be still, I'm more focused, clear-headed, and present for the rest of the day.

So that's my charge to you: Spend daily time alone, doing nothing. Drop your efforts and your expectations. You're not doing this in order to get some grand spiritual epiphany. You're simply turning down the noise and tuning into the truth of your own life.

1

You Don't Owe Anyone the Good Child

> The secret sorrows—and future difficulties—of the good boy or girl begin with their inner need for excessive compliance. The good child isn't good because by a quirk of nature they simply have no inclination to be anything else. They are good because they have no other option. Their goodness is a necessity rather than a choice.
>
> —The School of Life,
> "The Dangers of the Good Child"

IF YOU WERE THE good child and you've kept up your "good" status into adulthood, the secret truth is that you're *tired*.

Not just tired in the physical sense, though often that's true too. It's more like a deep-down weariness; your heart and soul feel spent.

This is what readers write to me:

"I try so hard to do everything right and not screw up. Caroline, do you know how exhausting that is? I think you do; that's why I'm writing to you."

They're right; I do know. I know how exhausting it is to be the good child, and I also know how it feels like an imperative. As in

the epigraph to this chapter, I know what it's like when your goodness seems like "a necessity rather than a choice."

It's been your survival strategy for years, hasn't it? Just keep going, just keep fixing and saving. That's your job, isn't it? To help but not be helped?

To wit, another reader's message:

> All my life I've been good at offering help to others, but I don't want to ask for or accept help myself. If I am able to do it on my own, then I should, right?
>
> But I'm so tired. I can put on a fun-loving front some of the time, but lately it's getting harder. If I'm honest, I don't think I am worthy of love or companionship. Secretly, I think that I am a disappointment to my family and friends.

Getting honest about our fatigue is a first step. But however many self-help articles we read or commonsense solutions our friends offer, slowing down and resting feel wildly uncomfortable. We drive ourselves hard, it's true, but there's a familiar comfort in the fast pace. On some deep level, we believe that this is how life is supposed to be for us. And as a result, we keep going right up until the breaking point.

A reader at that critical juncture wrote to me: "I have had enough of living this way. I have a daughter who I hope does not turn into me. I want more for her than just going through the motions. I want her to live freely and without regrets. But how?"

When we want more for our children, it's time to take a closer look at our younger selves. It's time to look at their "secret sorrows" and hidden joys, to see life once more through their eyes.

WHEN I LOOK BACK at my first dance recital, I remember a shiny sequined costume and a belly full of butterflies. For a kindergarten girl, it was pretty much heaven.

I wore a bright-blue satin top trimmed with silver sequins and a stiff tutu. My ballet shoes, tights, and gloves were white. The sequined straps and choker made my chest and back itch, but they sparkled so much that I didn't care. The auditorium was dark, but the spotlights were bright. On stage I could see dust motes we kicked up and how the sequins from our costumes caught the light. I could hear the music and feel it in my body. Performing wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. In fact, it was fun!

At the end of the dance, I was in the front row, kneeling and then rising along with the other girls. But instead of pushing myself up from the floor with my hands like we'd practiced, I wrapped my hands around the microphone stand and used it to pull myself up. Then I sang the last words of the song right into the microphone. That improvisation came to me without thought; it just felt right. The audience clapped for us, and in that golden moment I felt like a real ballerina, like a star.

After the show, Mom and Dad found me in the front hall of the auditorium. Mom reached me first, and I felt the soft fabric of her floral dress against my cheek as she held me in a tight hug. She handed me a little bouquet of pale-pink plastic roses, saying, "For you, my beautiful daughter."

Flushed, I smiled up at her. In the packed hallway with the other dancers and their families, Mom smoothed my hair, tucking in a strand that had slipped from the hairspray-shellacked, heavily bobby-pinned bun she'd made hours before.

"My big girl! You were so confident up there! How did you get so grown up? Oh, we need to take a picture. Where's the camera?" She turned to my dad.

"Right here," he said, passing the camera to Mom and bending down to give me a quick side-hug. "Good job, Cari-Cat." He called me Cari-Cat because we liked the way it sounded and because my fondest dream was to have a cat of my own. At Dad's side, I felt both smaller and safer.

Since I'd learned about the solar system in school, I thought about our family members in celestial terms. If I was the earth, then Willie was the moon. He was the closest to me yet also quietly separate,

in his own world. Dad was gravity, constant and steady but invisible while he was at work. And Mom was the sun, the bright, volatile fire at the center of everything.

When Mom held up the camera and said, "C'mon, sweetie, smile!" I showed as many of my teeth as I could and fought not to blink for the flash.

As I squinted away the blind spots, Mom raised her eyebrows and said, "Now really, honey, I have to ask: What on earth were you doing with the microphone? You couldn't get up by yourself?" Her tone turned scolding, critical. "Do you want people to think you had to use the stand to help you? It was just so . . . *melodramatic*!" She shook her head in dismay, then softened a little. "Well, I guess you had to do it *your* way, huh?" Then she laughed, and Dad chuckled too.

My face burned. My stomach sank. I didn't know what *melodramatic* meant, but by the way Mom said it, I knew that it was not something that I was supposed to be. My teacher had not taught me to slide my hands on the microphone stand, but I had done it anyway, and I understood from Mom's words that it had been a bad decision.

Shame cast a pall over that bright evening; the excitement was gone and the fun was over. I had messed up, and the feeling inside of me was terrible.

DID YOU EVER HAVE a moment like that, when you thought you were OK—doing well, even—and then you felt a cold bucket of water thrown over the experience? Ever stood with your family and pretended to feel fine when inside, you were drenched in shame?

It's akin to playing a video game like *Super Mario Bros.* for the first time. Chances are, you start off feeling relaxed about the whole thing. *Oh, this is silly, but this is fun! Look how high I can jump!* You learn to operate the controls while your character stumbles and flails around, and you laugh at your own ineptitude.

But when you're a kid and you gain even a little bit of mastery—and get a few well-timed criticisms from the authority figures in your

life—then what happens? You stop goofing off. All at once, there are expectations. You have to *perform*. If you do well on one round and then flub the next, you're disappointed (and perhaps so are the people around you). The game becomes both more interesting and more intense because you are invested in it. It feels good to win and even better not to lose. You fight to gather up the gold coins; you do whatever you need to do to stay alive.

You love the thought of doing well, and you dedicate yourself to that pursuit. You work hard to avoid flubs and mistakes, and when they do happen, you try your best to hide them. Gradually, you forget how it was when you started. You forget that you were only ever playing a game.

Does that feel like the story of our lives or what? We start out fumbling around, just playing and having fun. That's our job as children. But then at some point, we get the message that life is very serious business. We are asked to be good, to say yes, to respond as the grown-ups expect. And some of us get the sense that making a mistake equals death.

We carry this attitude forward into our adult lives—we've got to keep going, keep hustling, make sure we never slip! Yet the irony is that while we're running scared, both the video game universe and the real world are more generous than we think. We believe that we must enact a perfect performance, but the truth is that if we miss a step, we can choose to restart and begin again.

Anne Lamott says that "perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting every stepping stone just right, you won't have to die." To some people, a statement like that sounds hyperbolic. Surely no one walks around feeling that kind of pressure! But you and I know better. We know what it's like to believe that we owe the world the Good Child.

Nobody gets through this life unscathed. All of us have had times of trouble; as the saying goes, everyone has a story that would break your heart. For some of us growing up, it was the struggle for financial survival. Some of us lived in communities so disadvantaged that perfectionism was our only way to order our worlds. I want to be clear, dear reader: from the moment I was born, I had a head start. Parents

who wanted children. A nice house on a quiet, suburban street. Good public schools. White privilege. Money for dance lessons for me and early intervention therapies for Willie.

I was fortunate—there is no question about it. But still, the soundtrack of deep fear accompanied me throughout childhood. Good fortune and fear are not mutually exclusive. It has taken me decades to understand that, but it's true. I was lucky, and I was afraid.

How can this be?

To answer that question, we need to talk about the true nature of trauma. Specifically, we need to talk about the difference between physical and psychological trauma. Physical trauma involves injury to the body, such as a broken bone. It's medical and mostly measurable. There's a fairly straightforward connection between cause and effect. (If you're cut, you bleed.) Psychological trauma, on the other hand, is entirely subjective. It's all about how a given circumstance registers for you personally. If an event was hurtful and shocking to you—if it led you to believe that it wasn't safe for you to be yourself—then it was traumatic for you. Period. No one else gets to judge. No one else gets to tell you that it doesn't count or that it wasn't real. If it was scary and shocking within you, then it counts as trauma.

Two people can encounter the same external event and have very different internal experiences. For example, another little girl might have heard her mother's words about being melodramatic during her dance recital and brushed them off or forgotten them. But I didn't. My mother was the sun around which I orbited. I took her every word to heart, and *melodramatic* hurt. Whenever my mom spoke critically, I made myself a rule: I would do whatever it took so that I'd never have to hear those words again. I'd do anything to avoid the darkness I felt when the sun turned her bright beams away.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT it's like to orient yourself around other people's approval, to seek it like sunshine? For those of us who were addicted to gold stars, elementary school could be a reassuring place.

All we needed to do was follow the rules, and we got our fix: positive reinforcement, validation, and a sense of safety, however temporary. Good grades meant that we were not about to fall off the face of the earth.

Small wonder, then, that I was a good student. By the time I was in first grade, my worksheets always came back with "Excellent!" on the top. For me, words of praise went into the same sweet category as cupcakes and shortbread jelly cookies. They were my favorite things, worth every effort to obtain.

But one fateful day, my first grade teacher, Mrs. Summers, returned my paper with "See Me" written in red ink. Getting a "See Me" meant lining up by Mrs. Summers's desk and waiting to talk to her privately, in front of everyone. For a girl like me, this meant adding the public shame of being corrected to the private awfulness of making a mistake.

At "See Me" time, I slunk to the back of the line. I stared down at my pink T-shirt, floral-print leggings, and Keds sneakers and tried very hard not to cry. Even the usual trick of running ribbons of my soft, brown hair around my fingers didn't help. (If you have ever fought tears in an elementary-school classroom, then you know just how desolate I felt.)

When my turn came, Mrs. Summers took one look at me and said, "Caroline, dear, what's wrong?"

Unable to speak, I handed her my paper and waited for the worst.

"Sweetie, listen. Do you know why I wrote 'See Me' on your paper?"

I shook my head woefully. "No!" I croaked. Tears ran down the sides of my face. I'd gone over and over it, and still I couldn't find the mistake.

"It's because you did a great job, and I just wanted to tell you that in person. That's all! Do you understand?"

I nodded, and she put her arm around my fragile, shaking shoulders.

"Caroline, it's OK. It's OK! I'm sorry I scared you. It's all right—you're doing a great job!"

Hearing those words felt like that moment in a video game when you think you're going to die, and then at the last second, you land on a mushroom or a coin and realize that you're saved.

From then on, I loved Mrs. Summers. I loved her the way I loved my water wings; I loved her for not letting me sink. And when she announced that our class would be making books, I couldn't believe my good fortune. Making books! I'd craved books before I'd known how to read them, chasing my mom around the house pleading, "Read! Read!" This was right up my alley.

Mrs. Summers told our class, "You'll each need to write about ten sentences and then do drawings. It will take time, but I'll help you, don't worry. When you're done, you'll have your pictures pasted on the inside covers too, just like real authors. Do you know what an author is? An author makes books as their job!"

An author. What could be better than that? Right then, I knew I wanted to be one.

What was your moment, dear reader, when you knew what direction you wanted to take, what path your soul wanted to pursue? Did you have a sense of awe and wonder? *Wow, there's actually a job description for the thing I think is the coolest thing in the world. And there's a possibility, however remote, that I could do it!*

Or perhaps you were simultaneously delighted by the dream and daunted by the work that lay ahead. If you were lucky, you had a teacher, coach, or mentor who helped you take the next small step and move through the overwhelm.

Mrs. Summers coached our class, "If you're not sure what to write about in your book, choose something that is important to you."

Something important to me—Willie! I'll write about Willie. On the book cover, I drew a stick-figure boy wearing a boxy red shirt and rectangular green pants. He had no hands or feet, just pencil-thin arms and legs and a dash of red crayon for a smile. Above my stick-figure brother I added a cotton-puff cloud and a sun with big yellow rays.

"My brother's name is Willie," my book began. "We do things together like jump on the bed and wake up at six o'clock and wake Mom and Dad up." Stick-figure Mom and Dad smiled; in my book, they seemed happy to see us so early.

In my book, I detailed Willie's love for dinosaurs, playing outside, and lining things up in rows. Repeating both what our parents had told me and what I'd observed, I wrote, "My brother likes to be alone

most of the time." With the bracing honesty of childhood, I added, "I love to play with him *sometimes*."

WHAT I DIDN'T WRITE in the book is that we called our favorite game "Run away." It involved running laps through the first floor of our house, shrieking and giggling as Mom or Dad pursued us, or we pursued each other. It was exhilarating to run and be chased, to play a game with Willie that he liked and understood just as I did.

Willie didn't need encouragement to run. He bolted so often that when we went out to crowded places, Mom would hook him up to a little rainbow leash like a puppy so that he wouldn't disappear into the crowd. Even when we were at home, Willie would slip out the door and escape periodically. He'd be halfway to the park before anyone realized he was gone.

When that happened, Mom would call me to our gray Volvo. As she pulled onto the road, she would coach me in her *I'm just barely holding it together* voice, "Keep your eyes open! Keep looking, and try to find him!"

I'd try hard not to blink so that I wouldn't miss a glimpse of Willie. When we finally discovered him, Mom would pick him up and strap him into the back seat with me, then talk with the police officers if they'd found him first. Once I had my brother seated next to me, I'd feel an ice-cream swirl of feelings: mad mixed with glad, with sprinkles of *I'm the good kid* superiority on top.

I couldn't spare my parents. I couldn't give them time off from caring for Willie. But what I could do was try to shine, to give them less to worry about where I was concerned. I thought that I owed them that much.

OFTEN OUR EARLY COPING mechanisms—the ones that feed into perfectionism—seem positive and altruistic. And in a way, they

are. They're our best attempts to help, to fix, to make things right with the world. We try so hard because we care so much. We care about our people; we want to make life better for those we love. That's not bad! The trouble comes when we chase perfection at the expense of our own humanity. We give our loved ones permission to make all kinds of mistakes, yet we deny ourselves that same freedom.

As I worked hard to do everything right, to get "Excellent" on all of my worksheets, I witnessed Willie's relative disinterest in acing his lessons. In my little book, I wrote, "He hates to do his speech lesson with my mom and dad. He hates to be yelled at." I drew a picture of Willie looking at a desk with wide, anxious eyes, and I sketched our mother with a "NO!" word bubble coming from her mouth. "My parents spend most of their time teaching him," I wrote. "I go to my friends' house while this is going on."

To be sure, I had fun at my friends' house; I lived next door to two girls about my age, and the three of us watched *Saved by the Bell* and daydreamed about going out to diners and wearing neon pants and crop tops. But on the occasional afternoons when I didn't go next door while Mom and Willie were doing speech therapy and Dad was out working, I had this empty feeling inside of me that I couldn't explain. It was as though I was on a raft by myself in the middle of the ocean with nothing on the horizon for hundreds of miles.

In my book, I was matter of fact about the truth of our life. Willie needed Mom and Dad more. That was the way things were. And even as I implied that it wasn't easy to have a younger brother with autism, I ended the book this way: "I love my brother so much I could run through the wall!" At six years old, I was able to express exactly how I felt about Willie: I loved him enough to do the impossible.

MY GUESS IS THAT this desire to do the impossible is familiar to you. I'm guessing that you decided to aim for it too. That's what we do, isn't it? We aim for the impossible—for perfection—and then castigate ourselves for failing.

For so many of us, this story became our anchor, our internal rule: *I owe them the Good Child. This is who I have to be, no matter how scared I feel inside*.

Then we carry this rule forward into our future lives. Even as our situations change, even as we grow up and move away from home, there's a part of us that believes we must be "better" and "stronger" than we actually are.

To be sure, this usually isn't a conscious choice. Consciously, we understand that we're human, that we're allowed to rest and relax our old hypervigilance. We love the idea that we're grown up, that we're free to make our own choices and go out to diners, finally! Subconsciously, however, we're still in survival mode.

DURING MY FIRST WEEK as a freshman at Vassar College, one of my hall mates caught me folding my dirty laundry. My hall mate was an athletic, popular, outgoing guy from Long Island. He walked into the room I shared with two other girls just in time to see me—a shy, introverted, Bible-toting girl from New Jersey—folding my duck-decal pajamas and placing them in the mesh hamper at the foot of my bed.

It was, in a word, embarrassing.

Of course, I didn't want anyone to know that I folded my dirty laundry. I didn't understand why I did it, why I had this impulse that drove me to tidy compulsively.

Much later, I learned that in the Enneagram personality framework, the Type 1 Perfectionist's knee-jerk response to stress is to bring order to the physical world as much as possible. Some people read Marie Kondo's book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* and thought that it was too intense. Personally, I found it soothing. Corralling all clothing items into one place before sorting them? Rolling up socks into tidy, sushi-style bundles? Yes, please!

As a college freshman, though, I didn't want my peers to know how neurotic I was. So I flushed with embarrassment when my hall

mate called me on it: "Hey, Caroline, did you *seriously* just fold those pajamas before you put them into your hamper?"

His tone was more amused than accusatory; he was a decent guy, not given to tormenting people. Even so, I felt the old, awful wave of shame crest over me. I felt like hiding under the bed.

"Oh, um, yeah," I choked out, aiming for insouciance and missing by a wide margin. "I did. You got me. I'm a total neat freak," I said, trying to laugh it off.

He smiled and let it go, turning to ask my roommate whether she'd made the lacrosse team. I swallowed hard and tried to push aside the critical voice inside my head that said, *You're so weird! Why can't you be normal? What's wrong with you?*

As a college freshman, I thought that if I could just get everything lined up exactly right, then I'd feel safe. Yet oddly enough, my hidden source of comfort that year was a so-called imperfection.

Long after I stopped folding dirty laundry and settled into life at school, I kept a different secret. Along the wall next to my single bed was a painted-over star sticker. It was affixed to the wall just above the wooden chair rail; it was a small imperfection, easily missed. Every night when I went to sleep, I reached out my hand and ran my fingers over that crooked little star. I felt along the raised edges with my fingertips, and it gave me a shot of strength every time.

That star wasn't supposed to be there. Some dorm inspector had overlooked it, and some painter had swished a haphazard brush over it. It was a mistake, something you'd think would bother a card-carrying perfectionist. My mind might have categorized it as a mistake, but my heart believed it was supposed to be there. My heart believed it was supposed to remind me of the painted-over stars on the ceiling of my childhood bedroom. The star was supposed to remind me that no matter how small and scared I felt, in some fundamental way, I was safe.

And somewhere between folding my dirty laundry and grazing my fingertips against that secret star at college, I encountered the poem "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver. The opening line—"You do not have to be good"—was like a cannon fired at close range. I felt it reverberate in my body; it thrilled and terrified me all at once. Shame was suffocating, and this was pure oxygen.

That line, that poem, that little star—these things were like the woman who stopped on her way to Mass and sat with me the morning of my car accident. They were touches of grace when I needed them most.

WHETHER YOU "PUT YOUR world in order" by folding your dirty laundry or reading books on organization or simply shoving clutter into a closet, it doesn't matter. What matters is learning how to be kind to yourself.

I know this isn't easy. I know what it's like to live steeped in self-judgment, to be so hard on yourself that it hurts. Even so, I invite us both to make the shift from self-judgment to self-compassion. This looks like putting down the dirty laundry and letting our fingers graze the star instead. It's about letting go of control and holding on to wonder.

Before we can do that, though, we need to comfort the frightened, vulnerable parts of ourselves. We need to come face-to-face with the aspects of our lives we've been covering up with hard work and fierce self-control.

Choosing compassion in adulthood means listening to that childhood self, bearing witness to her truths, and offering her kindness. It means looking at her with a gentler gaze, seeing that she's just a kid struggling with a world out of order.

Children's narratives are, by nature, incomplete and overly simplified interpretations of reality. (So are adults', for that matter.) When confusing things happen to us as children, we create stories to make sense of the inexplicable. But our brains aren't fully developed yet, and neither are our narratives. One of the most popular childhood stories is "If anything bad happens, then it is all my fault."

And of course, the close cousin of that story is "If I can just get it right, then it will all be OK."

Ergo, perfectionism.

If you're struggling with perfectionism, it doesn't mean that you're hopeless or bad. It means that you're human, and at some point you

were hurt. When that happened, the Good Child role became your refuge, your necessity. Given what you knew and believed at the time, it was the best that you could do.

It's tempting to skim over the hurts of the past. It's easy to sugarcoat or dismiss them with that classic line: "Oh, it doesn't matter anymore; it was a long time ago." But when we don't acknowledge or heal those hurts, they keep driving our actions and causing us pain in the present. And we miss the chance to look closely at the meaning we made from them.

Time alone doesn't heal all wounds. Only love can do that. And when we apply love and acceptance to the parts of ourselves that hurt, we heal.

SO HOW DO YOU move forward now as an adult?

It starts with treating yourself as your own beloved child.

For the woman who wrote to me, wanting a different future for her daughter, I said, "It starts with you. It starts with deciding that you're going to do the work of learning to accept yourself."

Usually, this means seeking help, which most of us only do when we are desperate. We ask for help when our usual coping strategies don't work, when we hit a wall of depression, anxiety, or panic. That's what happened to me in my early thirties, in the wake of a major crisis. I'd been to therapy before, but this was different; this time, I was willing to get more intensive support and go deep into inner work. With the support of compassionate counselors, I worked with the mental and emotional pain that fueled my perfectionism.

In the process, I took a closer look at that supposedly shameful dance recital. I began asking questions about the girl I was, questions I had never asked before: *Do you despise that little girl for doing what she did that night? Was she really being melodramatic, or just joyful? And if she was being dramatic—well, so what? She's only a little girl. Do you judge her for grabbing the microphone stand and daring to shine?*

As it turned out, I didn't.

Try this for yourself and see what happens. Go and find a picture of yourself when you were little. Really study it. Imagine that this child is your child. Imagine that you are her parent. Do you despise her for doing what she did, for making the choices that she made when she was scared and lonely?

I don't think so. I'm guessing there's at least a glimmer of compassion, a flicker of empathy.

If that's too much of a stretch, get a picture of your favorite animal. Maybe it's a dog that leaps with exuberance at the sight of you or a cat that curls up with you when you sleep. Allow yourself to feel all of the affection that you have for this being. Then try looking at your childhood self with this same fundamental respect, the same fierce tenderness. (When I first tried this experiment, I looked at my younger self the way I look at my cat Bootsie when she curls up next to me and purrs as I rub her ears.)

It's probably clear to you that this animal is good simply because it is itself.

Then ask yourself, *What if the same is true for me? What if I am whole even when I feel broken? What if my deepest reality is light, not darkness?*

It's so tiring to hate yourself, honey. Do you know why that is? Because it's exhausting to believe a lie. It's exhausting to believe the lie that you owe anyone the Good Child, because that isn't you. That isn't real.

Every loving thing that has ever happened to you was real. Everything else is just an illusion.

Go for the real thing.

THE NO-OWE INVITATION

Practice Opposite-Hand Writing

If you're in pain from hating yourself, it's time to send yourself some kindness. One way to do this is to practice opposite-hand writing, also known as nondominant-hand writing. It's a form of reparenting that empowers you to heal past hurts. When you use your nondominant hand to write, you engage your brain in a way that allows you to bypass the walls you put up around your emotions. I learned about this healing tool from the counseling team at The Clearing, when I worked for them as a freelance copywriter. But the opposite-hand writing practice actually originated with Lucia Capacchione, PhD, author of many books, including *The Power of Your Other Hand*.

Before you begin this practice, it's important to center yourself in loving energy. This will lay the energetic groundwork for every exercise that follows in this book. Center yourself by connecting to the energy of love within your body. As described earlier, one easy way to do this is to call to mind a beloved child or perhaps a pet that you love unconditionally. You may also picture a partner or a dear friend; choose any being for whom you feel free, untroubled affection. Imagine that being in your mind's eye and feel the love flowing between you.

Once you've established that energy to the best of your ability, set an intention to heal. Then take up a pen and paper to practice opposite-hand writing. Start writing with your dominant hand, which represents your adult self. Ask your inner-child self, "How are you?" Then switch to your nondominant hand and reply as the child within. Let whatever comes up come up. It will most likely surprise you, and that's OK. Continue the dialogue in the present tense for at least one page, and focus on providing the vulnerable child reassurance, praise, and love. Make sure to ask your inner child, "How do you feel now?" Connect to an actual feeling state such as fear, anger, grief, or happiness rather than to thoughts about the feeling state. (You can hear the difference between "I feel like I shouldn't be alone anymore" and

"I feel scared." The former is a mental-level judgment; the latter is a feeling.)

To sum up, prompts for your inner child include (but are not limited to) the following:

How do you feel now?
What's that like for you?
Tell me more about . . .
What would you like to do?
What do you want/need right now?

The role of the "parent" hand is to provide unconditional love in real time. With that in mind, write mostly in the present tense on both sides of the dialogue. (The child can talk/write about her own past if she wants, but the main idea is to connect with how that vulnerable part of you is feeling right now.) If the child expresses anger toward you, that's OK. Your job is to be a safe space, a container to hold all of that strong emotion. You might say, "I'm right here. I love you. You can feel as angry as you need to feel and it's OK. You have permission to feel all of the big feelings."

At the end of the dialogue, ask, "What do you need right now in order to feel loved and safe?" Most often, you'll find that the child needs to receive reassurance, comfort, and support. Follow through on the child's request and build trust. For example, if your inner child wants a hug, wrap your arms around yourself and imagine that you're holding her close, comforting her.

Sometimes children make requests that aren't realistic—that's normal! If your inner child wants a pony, for example, you don't necessarily need to acquire one today. However, listen to the child's desire and work with her to create a solution, such as going horseback riding soon. Keep the dialogue going until you find a way to honor and fulfill the need that's behind the request. Then have the adult make a clear plan—for example, "Let's take a drive and go see the horses this Saturday."

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