

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of

THE WAY OF INTEGRITY

Martha Beck

B E Y O N D
A N X I E T Y

Curiosity, Creativity,
and Finding Your
Life's Purpose

PRAISE FOR *THE WAY OF INTEGRITY*

"This is a book I will read over and over again. The journey within is a pilgrimage that can help to heal the soul and make a world whole."

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"The perfect guide for anyone who wants greater happiness and clarity of purpose. As always, Martha Beck's writing is beautiful and perceptive, and the insights and exercises...will certainly lead you to a better place."

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BEYOND ANXIETY

*Curiosity, Creativity, and
Finding Your Life's Purpose*

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THE OPEN FIELD • PENGUIN LIFE



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CONTENTS

A Note to the Reader

Dedication

Introduction

Part One

THE CREATURE

1. The Nuts and Bolts of Why You Go Nuts and Want to Bolt

2. Anxious Creatures in an Anxious Culture

3. When Anxiety Creatures Get Stuck

4. The Creature, United

Part Two

THE CREATIVE

5. Activating Your Creative Side

6. Curiosity: The Secret Doorway

7. Making Your Sanity Quilt of a Life

8. Mastery: Freeing the Magician

Part Three
THE CREATION

9. Breaking Your Role Rules, Minding Your Mission

10. Constellating an Ecosystem

11. Don't-Know Mind

12. Deep Green Self, Deep Green Earth

Acknowledgments

About the Author



MARIA SHRIVER

PRESENTS

THE OPEN FIELD

A PUBLISHING IMPRINT

BOOKS THAT RISE ABOVE THE NOISE AND MOVE
HUMANITY FORWARD

Dear Reader,

Years ago, these words attributed to Rumi found a place in my heart:

*Out beyond ideas of
wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.*

Ever since, I've cultivated an image of what I call the "Open Field"—a place out beyond fear and shame, beyond judgment, loneliness, and expectation. A place that hosts the reunion of all creation. It's the hope of my soul to find my way there—and whenever I hear an insight or a practice that helps me on the path, I love nothing more than to share it with others.

That's why I've created The Open Field. My hope is to publish books that honor the most unifying truth in human life: We are all seeking the same things. We're all seeking dignity. We're all seeking joy. We're all seeking love and acceptance, seeking to be seen, to be

safe. And there is no competition for these things we seek—because they are not material goods; they are spiritual gifts!

We can all give each other these gifts if we share what we know—what has lifted us up and moved us forward. That is our duty to one another—to help each other toward acceptance, toward peace, toward happiness—and my promise to you is that the books published under this imprint will be maps to the Open Field, written by guides who know the path and want to share it.

Each title will offer insights, inspiration, and guidance for moving beyond the fears, the judgments, and the masks we all wear. And when we take off the masks, guess what? We will see that we are the opposite of what we thought—we are each other.

We are all on our way to the Open Field. We are all helping one another along the path. I'll meet you there.

Love,
Maria Shriver

For my wild, creative global family. If I knew every word of every language, there still wouldn't be enough to say how much I love you.

INTRODUCTION

As the year 2020 began, Bo Burnham finally felt ready for his return to the stage. Burnham had been an up-and-coming comedian until 2016, when he began experiencing panic attacks onstage and had to step back from his career. Three long years later, he was ready to start performing again.

Then someone in China came down with a dry cough.

Bo Burnham's plans changed, along with yours, mine, and everyone's. But instead of giving up on his dream of being a performer, Burnham began creating—with a vengeance. Locked down in his home, he single-handedly wrote, performed, filmed, and edited a comedy and music routine he called *Inside*. The show was digitally released in June of 2021 to rave reviews.

Inside captures the experience of living in the twenty-first century with unnerving accuracy. “There it is again, that funny feeling,” Burnham sings at one point, sitting alone in his apartment, cameras rolling.

*A gift shop at the gun range, a mass shooting at the mall...
The quiet comprehending of the ending of it all.*

Burnham calls our reaction to the perils of our time—rising temperatures, violence in the news and in video games, avalanches of data, disassociation—“that funny feeling.” But of course, the feeling is anything but amusing. Burnham's work conjures the strange, slow terror of belonging to the most technologically

advanced, well-informed population in history...and watching human activity destroy the conditions we need for our own survival.

As we doomscroll our way through horrible news, swap jokes about environmental collapse, shake our heads in disbelief at political chaos, and watch news stories about the multiple ways our species may be flirting with apocalyptic catastrophes, most of us feel at least a dark shadow of “that funny feeling.” Another name for it, as Bo Burnham knew all too well, is anxiety.

THE AGE OF UNBELIEVABLE ANXIETY

In 1948, W. H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for his long poem *The Age of Anxiety*. With all due respect, Mr. Auden, if you thought your age was anxious, you should give ours a try. In 2022, *The New York Times* labeled anxiety among adolescents “the inner pandemic.” The phrase is based on not only the prevalence of anxiety but also the rapidity with which it’s zooming upward.

Back in 2017, *Forbes Health* reported that over 284 million people worldwide had been diagnosed with some kind of anxiety disorder—and unreported cases almost certainly outnumber the recorded ones. When the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* set out to document rates of anxiety in the United States, it concluded that the condition was rising rapidly due to “direct and indirect...exposure to anxiety-provoking world events.”

When was that study published? you may ask.

In the year of our Lord two thousand and eighteen.

Hahahahaha!

Remember the olden days, back in 2018? Remember how we all thought we’d been exposed to “anxiety-provoking world events” back *then*?

In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global prevalence of anxiety disorders skyrocketed by a full 25 percent. According to

Forbes Health, the number of people affected by anxiety disorders grew from about 298 million to 374 million. By 2020, nearly half (47 percent) of human beings surveyed said they experienced regular bouts of this life-draining, health-destroying, torturous condition. By 2023, even with fears about the pandemic easing off for some people, a full 50 percent of young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four reported symptoms of anxiety. All of this gives anxiety disorder the dubious distinction of being the most common mental illness in the world.

They say that statistics are people with the tears washed off. Well, I, for one, can feel the pain of those afflicted by high anxiety. I'm one of them.

MY OWN FUNNY FEELING

I've been studying anxiety all my life, because I have it. Have had it. Have had it in white-hot volcanic eruptions and foul, sky-darkening billows. Have had it for years on end, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health. I remember being knotted up with anxiety on the eve of one birthday, worried sick because time was passing so fast and I had yet to accomplish anything significant. I was turning four.

Things only got worse once I started school. The first time I was assigned to write a poem, my fear of inadequacy kept me awake for five consecutive hallucinatory days and nights, until my pediatrician—my pediatrician!—put me on a short, blessed course of Valium. In high school, when I joined the debate team and stood up to speak in front of a judge, I passed out cold.

The only reason I even tried public speaking was that sometime around puberty, I realized I had a choice: I could do things that caused me horrific anxiety, or I could live in a box under my bed. Luckily, inactivity made me just as anxious as everything else. So I

charged forward into life, not so much bravely as frenetically, like someone running from a swarm of bees.

Filled with dread, I applied to college, then graduate school, then various jobs. In stark terror, I married, traveled, and had some children, then set about raising them. I went places and did things—more than some people, fewer than others. But wherever I went and whatever I did, I was always, always, always anxious.

God, that sucked.

All this anxiety was one of the reasons I gravitated toward the social sciences. If I could understand the mind, my own mind, then—maybe? someday?—I could free myself from constant unease. At first, this yielded a lot of discouraging information. For several years, from many books, I learned that every human brain is fully formed by the age of five. Fixed and finished. Done and dusted. I remember staring glumly at page after page, devastated that my horribly anxious brain would always remain horribly anxious.

Luckily, I kept reading.

As the years went by, new technologies allowed neurologists to examine the brain with more accuracy. It turns out that the idea of an unchanging brain is pure fiction. Our gray matter is a wonder of self-revision. It can and does constantly reshape itself, depending on how we use it, throughout our lives.

This discovery made my heart soar like the Goodyear Blimp. I began devouring everything I could find on *neuroplasticity*, a term that describes the malleability of our brains. Each new study I read gave me more hope, especially a study where neurologists peered into the brains of Tibetan monks who had spent years in meditation. These men, it was found, had unusually dense tissue in the brain regions associated with happiness, compassion, and calm.

In one specific monk, this effect was so pronounced that the scientists measuring his brain activity thought their equipment must be malfunctioning. This guy was a veritable superhero of tranquility.

But he hadn't always been so relaxed. In fact, he had spent his whole childhood battling crippling anxiety and panic attacks.

YES!

I mean, not YES! A CHILD HAD PANIC ATTACKS! but YES! HE GOT OVER IT!

By the time I learned about the amazing plasticity of our brains, I'd finished graduate school, taught college for a while, and left academia to write books and work as a life coach. In the end, my career was based less on my intellectual training than on my near-pathological conviction that every one of us can fulfill our deepest longing and make the world a better place. After I read the Tibetan monk study, this conviction grew roots so deep nothing could shake it. I was convinced I could fix my brain, maybe without even moving to the Himalayas or training as a monk. I believed that the way to peace was already inside me. I just had to find it.

DISCOVERING THE ART OF CALM

In 2021, as Bo Burnham put the finishing touches on his darkly brilliant *Inside*, several things converged to make me more obsessed with overcoming anxiety than I'd ever been before. They included these factors:

- Many of my clients (now consulting me on Zoom) were climbing the walls with anxiety—and who could blame them? They worried about the pandemic, their financial futures, political upheaval, the steadily weirding weather, and myriad other problems. In order to help them, I began researching anxiety more intensely than ever before.
- During lockdown, I spent several months developing and teaching an online course about creativity. The goal was to help

people come up with innovative ways to navigate a world that had become overwhelmingly uncertain. As part of my preparation, I learned everything I could about the way creativity works in the brain.

- I began having regular conversations with different scientists and psychologists, including Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist whose time at Harvard had overlapped with mine. Jill once had a massive stroke that shut down much of her brain's left hemisphere. Her experience, as both a scientist and a stroke survivor, contains powerful lessons about how our brains produce anxiety, and how we might let it go.

These experiences gave me new ideas for dealing with my own unquiet mind. I became fascinated with the neurological dynamics of anxiety—how it works in our brains and also in our behaviors and social interactions. I was particularly intrigued by the evidence that shows a kind of toggle effect between anxiety and creativity: when one is up and running, the other seems to go silent. I began to play with something I called “the art of calm,” because it was all about using creativity to calm my anxiety.

The results of this experimentation astonished me. At a time of worldwide crisis, when I fully expected to be feeling extremely uneasy, my anxiety dropped to near zero. Events that once would have triggered anxiety attacks—physical pain and disability, financial uncertainty, potential critical illness and loss of loved ones—no longer caused me to panic. As I developed and practiced this “art of calm,” I found myself caring more than ever about other people and the world but simultaneously experiencing far less anxiety.

Since the lockdown had moved pretty much every social interaction besides diapering babies onto the internet, I also found myself doing a lot of group coaching, including free online meetings that drew hundreds of participants. My sociology-nerd mind thrilled at the opportunity to test my new anxiety-calming methods. I

walked thousands of people through these strategies, and thanks to the wonders of technology, those people could give me real-time feedback about how the techniques worked for them. The overwhelming majority of every group reported that the methods I'd developed helped lower their anxiety immediately and consistently. That's when I decided to write this book.

THE BASICS OF GOING BEYOND ANXIETY

Stacked on the desk where I'm writing these words are many wonderful books on how to reduce the chronic worries of the reading public. They all contain terrific advice. I've read them carefully and repeatedly. I've used their advice in my own quest to feel less anxious. I've taught many of the methods I've learned from them (always with attribution!) when working with clients. A lot of the information I've gleaned from them has really helped.

But until recently, this felt like shoveling out the Augean stable. After years of diligent mental hygiene and thousands of hours of meditation, something many of those books advise, I'd learned how to drill down through my anxiety and connect with a state of inner peace. For a while. On most days. But then something worrying would come up—a work deadline, an alarming news report, a weird pain in my belly—and my brain would start producing anxiety like all of King Augeas's cows and horses on Ex-Lax. I could stabilize myself enough to smile during the day and sleep at night, but it took constant effort.

Then, researching away from a number of different disciplines, I realized Three Important Things that would change my life. They helped me see how anxiety was always scratching its way into my mind, and how to turn it from something vicious into something downright gentle. As I experimented with new calming strategies, my anxiety dropped to nearly nonexistent and stayed there almost

all the time. Here are the Three Important Things, which I hope will form the foundation for your own path beyond anxiety.

IMPORTANT THING NO. 1: We're all taught to unconsciously activate an "anxiety spiral" in our brains. We keep this spiral spinning and accelerating without any awareness that we're doing so.

From early childhood, you have been constantly rewarded for thinking in a certain way: verbally, analytically, in organized lines of logic. You're doing this right now as you decode symbols on a page, turn them into language, follow my reasoning. This kind of focus has built up (is building up) a certain part of your brain, the way weight lifting might build your muscles. The part of your brain that you're strengthening is located largely in your left hemisphere, though your entire brain is active almost all the time. While there are huge advantages to focusing on this kind of thought, at least one major *disadvantage* exists: inside everyone's buffed-up left hemisphere is a neurological mechanism I call the "anxiety spiral."

The anxiety spiral works like one of those tire rippers you may have driven over while leaving a parking lot: it allows the brain to go forward into higher anxiety but not to drop back into relaxation. All animals have fear responses when they're in danger. But because of our fancy powers of speech and imagination, we humans can keep that fear response elevated indefinitely, whether we're in danger or not. In fact, the more left-brain dominant our society becomes, the more we as individuals receive messages to keep our angst spiraling up and up and up and *up* into ever-higher levels of anxiety.

IMPORTANT THING NO. 2: As society makes us more anxious, we make it more anxious.

Anxiety is contagious. Even if we learn techniques that bring down our personal anxiety, engaging with a culture that's full of anxiety can put us right back into the dread zone. Our brains and emotions are shaped by the cultural influences we experience every day: the pressure to perform in schools that rank students against each other; the need to secure some form of income; the constant barrage of alarming news from all over the globe; encounters with family members, friends, and strangers who may be flailing around in their own difficult life situations. Staying calm in a society of uneasy people is like walking down the up escalator.

As society makes us anxious, we make it anxious. Our uneasy feelings, thoughts, and actions bleed into the world around us, making others more anxious still. Then those people increase the social pressure that makes *us* even more anxious, and we pump that increased anxiety back to other people...You see where this is going. The anxiety spiral inside our heads—the one that keeps our anxiety climbing—replicates itself in a bigger circle, then whirls between individual minds and society.

The social influences pushing us toward anxiety are infinite, subtle, and powerful. The mirror cells in our brains shift to automatically reflect whatever the people around us are feeling. Images of danger and horror are being communicated more rapidly and universally, so we constantly hear and see reports of terrible things happening all over the world. The structures of our work lives often push us to stay nervous and make us continually fear that we'll lose our competitive edge or our way of making a living.

To counteract all this, we need more than a few relaxation techniques. We need a culture-wide transformation in the way we approach our lives.

IMPORTANT THING NO. 3: Anxiety can't just be ended. It must be *replaced*.

Nature abhors a vacuum, so even if we can relax our highly developed anxiety circuits, they collide with many forces (inside and outside our brains) that rev them right back up—unless we fill the space where the anxiety used to be.

To live with joy and optimism instead of constant worry, we don't just need to subtract our troubles; we need to use our brains differently. We need practices that guide our thinking into new habitual pathways, new modes of perceiving and relating to the world. Though some psychologists and neurologists are beginning to articulate this idea, modern Western culture doesn't teach us any major skills for rerouting anxious energy into more peaceful ways of thinking. But other cultures (think Tibetan monastic orders) do teach such skills.

Here's what the people who developed early antianxiety practices knew: The human mind is endlessly, unstoppably generative. It's always making something. Always. The part of our brains that we've been taught to use is constantly creating concepts, stories, theories, competitive strategies, a sense of lack—and, of course, anxiety.

To stop doing this, we can shift our neural activity to a different set of brain structures and functions—the ones that generate curiosity, wonder, connection, compassion, and awe. Learning to use our brains in this way relies on science, but as I've said, it's ultimately an art. The strategies I'll teach you in this book won't merely make you a less anxious person; they'll turn you into an artist of calm, a creative genius.

This doesn't mean you'll start painting portraits or composing symphonies (though you may). It means you'll begin bringing the full power of your infinitely resourceful human mind to bear on anything you make or do. We all have favorite forms of creative expression: cooking, poetry, engineering, animal husbandry,

whatever. But no matter where our individual interests lie, we all share one form of creative expression: the shaping of our life experiences. Anything you happen to do can become a creative medium, and as you leave anxiety behind and free up your innate creativity, your magnum opus will be the most thrilling, fulfilling life you can imagine.

This way of living beyond anxiety is radically liberating. It sets us free in more ways than we can count: Free to sustain an ongoing inner state of peace and self-compassion. Free to interact with others with confidence and wisdom rather than insecurity and tension. Free to engage with the pressures of society as powerful navigators and pathbuilders rather than as hapless wanderers. Free to create our own futures and approach them not as random avalanches of frightening events but as unfolding beneficent miracles. The capacity for all this freedom is your birthright; it's been in you since the day you were born. As you leave anxiety behind, you'll see that for yourself.

WHERE WE'RE HEADED: THE CREATURE, THE CREATIVE, AND THE CREATION

Like any other art, living beyond anxiety takes practice. I like to approach it in three phases, so this book has three parts. In part 1, you'll learn about how to handle your biological and psychological tendency to get anxious. I call this process "calming the creature."

In part 2, you'll begin utilizing parts of your brain that pull you out of anxiety and into curiosity, fascination, and inventiveness. Since this process makes you your most creative self, I call it activating the "creative" or "creator" self. Again, this side of yourself may be interested in what society calls "art" (music, painting, poetry, etc.), but its biggest role will be discovering or inventing creative problem-solving approaches to *any aspect of your life*. Your creative self sees

“problems” not as anxiety-driving terrors but as opportunities to design original responses to any situation whatsoever.

In part 3, you will move so far away from anxiety and into creativity that you may begin experiencing something I call “commingling with creation.” This phrase sounds odd to the typical Western ear, since our culture doesn’t teach us much about it. In fact, “commingling with creation” may sound silly or nonsensical to you, especially since words can’t really describe it. The closest I can come here is to tell you that this union with creation is a state of effortless flow in which you completely forget your anxiety—and even the part of yourself that felt anxious. In fact, your whole sense of self may dissolve. But this kind of dissolution—the dissolving of all anxiety—unleashes your full potential for joy, just as the dissolution of dragonfly larvae ultimately gives earthbound creatures the ability to fly.

This progression beyond anxiety and into your inborn creative genius is a continuing process. As long as you have a normal human brain, you’ll also have the capacity to slip back into anxiety. But as you learn the concepts and skills laid out in this book, it will get easier and easier to calm the frightened creature in your brain and liberate your creative side. Every time you do this, you’ll move into greater heights of inventiveness, adventure, and exhilaration.

All of this may generate a brand-new “funny feeling” that you will carry with you everywhere. Even when confronting a world of chaos, destruction, anger, and threat, you’ll feel a bloom of calm that ripples outward into creativity, connection, and joy. You’ll learn to work with your own mind and heart the way a sculptor works with clay, the way a musician composes songs. Everything you do will contribute to your most important artistic creation: your own life. And as you construct your own best life, you may just change the world.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

As you learn to use the ideas and processes suggested in this book, swapping your anxiety for joyful creativity, you may start to seem peculiar to the (anxious) folks around you. These people may watch you with furrowed brows, blank stares, and the occasional critical comment. Learning to live beyond anxiety is one of the best things you'll ever do for yourself, your loved ones, and the world, but it may not be the easiest.

Here are some questions I'd like you to consider right now. If the answer to any of them is a flat no, it's okay. Read through the book—or maybe just lie down for a while—and see if the answers change as your anxiety goes up. When you're really, truly sick of feeling anxious, you may decide that the challenge is worth taking.

- Are you prepared to question the conventional wisdom of our culture so deeply that you physically shift the gray matter in your head—in other words, develop a brain that doesn't quite fit in with society?
- Can you accept that abandoning anxiety may cause you to think and act in ways that are compassionate and creative but unusual, ways that the people around you might find incomprehensible?
- Do you have the will and courage to shape all your actions according to what emerges from your inherent originality rather than from anything you've ever been taught?

Think carefully about these questions. Living beyond anxiety is a gentle art—in fact, it will teach you the paradoxical truth that gentleness is extraordinarily powerful. But in this world, being gentle can require a lot of grit. I don't want to scare you—you've spent enough time being scared. I just want you to know that living

beyond anxiety, like any radical art, is countercultural. It will definitely take you out beyond the conventional wisdom of our society. No one can predict what you may do then. I can't promise you that it will look "normal"; I can only tell you that it will take you to the unimaginable joy of your best destiny.

Still in?

Let's do this.