

Advance Praise for  
THE WORDS WE CHOOSE

“I have spent much of my professional life refining communications in healthcare to advance safety, connection, collaboration, gratitude and valuing those we care for and work with. Terre’s work in *The Words We Choose* took me to a totally new level! It is an immensely practical guide for the day-to-day conversations that allow relationships to blossom, connections to deepen, and cultures to mature. Whether you are a clinician with a patient, a leader to a team, a parent to a child or communicating with a stranger, the words we choose can change everything in these moments. I am better for reading Terre’s work, and challenged with all of the blind spots she helped me see. As a constant student of communication, I am immensely grateful to have a whole new toolkit in *The Words We Choose*.” —**STEPHEN BEESON, M.D.** - Founder of the Clinician Experience Project, Author of *Practicing Excellence, A Physician Manual to Exceptional Healthcare* and *Engaging Physician, A Manual to Physician Partnership*

“This is an important book in our evolution to a more heart-centered world. Terre eloquently brings to life how words can cage us in or set us free. This book does a beautiful job of unlocking the reality we create through the power of our words - step by step. I love the simplicity - and importance - of the message she shares. Terre slows down our thinking so we can ‘hear’ the deeper meaning behind what we say. Truly profound - what a gift to the world! I cannot wait to recommend the book to clients across the globe.” —**KIMBERLY FAITH** - Award-Winning Author, Futurist, & Systems Thinking Expert

“*The Words We Choose* is a timely examination of how words mold our emotions and shape our relationships with the world.” —**KARL VANDEVENDER, M.D.**, Chief Physician, HCA Leadership Institute

“I learned by reading *The Words We Choose* that we typically speak 16,000 words a day, aside from what we type into emails and texts. That presents a lot of opportunities for our words to be disconnected from our values and intentions. This book explores how to ensure we choose our words wisely in a myriad of situations and in a way that benefits all. I found the chapter on words at work particularly valuable because it provided great insight and pragmatic advice on how to use words to unite ourselves and our teams together in our common purpose. It is filled with practical applications, reflections and stories that reinforce the concepts.” —**CHARLENE LI** - Author of 6 books, including recent bestseller, *The Disruption Mindset*, Senior Fellow at Altimeter, a Prophet Company

# THE WORDS WE CHOOSE

Your Guide to How and  
Why Words Matter

TERRE SHORT

Epigraph Books  
Rhinebeck, New York

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Epigraph Books

22 East Market Street, Suite 304

Rhinebeck, NY 12572

(845) 876-4861

epigraphps.com

*To all those I have learned from, and will learn from,  
along my evolutionary path.*



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## Prologue

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As I put the finishing touches on this book, I am learning how a global pandemic (COVID-19) affects communication while paying close attention to the word choices of world leaders and how these choices define them. I am witnessing global connections that fill my heart with hope alongside images so grim that words will never be able to fully capture the heartache. “At a loss for words” is an understatement that gives way to a silence that can become deafening. As communities embrace “lockdowns” and “physical distancing,” I believe we are learning just how much we rely on words to shape our world and feed our souls.

While navigating a global pandemic, America is at the same time confronting a much older and perhaps more dangerous affliction: Systemic racism. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd have become household names. The power of words is especially poignant, and painful, as the Black community implores Americans to recognize the deaths of these individuals, and so many more, as murders inextricably connected to the country’s long history of racism. George Floyd’s death at the hands of a policeman has inspired national civil rights protests and suddenly the voices of all races, ethnicities and ages are collectively calling for abolishing systemic racism in all its forms and at all levels.

Resources abound for educating individuals on our role in bridging the gaps between individual realities, social justice and true equality for all. Some of the people I reference in the racism section in Chapter Three have been at the forefront of this critical conversation. Sustained and meaningful change hinges on our ability to

reach beyond the words we choose into actions that serve the greater good of all. For those with inherent privilege due to race or identity in a majority group, this will require a deeper and perhaps different understanding of the history that brought a country like America to a place of inequality, and the related individual and collective reckoning being asked of us. My deep hope is that Mr. Floyd's final words, "I can't breathe!" have propelled the energy and commitment needed for the required paradigm shift.

“We’re creating the world by how we speak to each other.”

TOM KENYON

## Introduction

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The very first friend to read a chapter of this book returned the marked-up pages with a note that made me cry. She told me a story of how she had interacted with a stranger online and how she had paused long enough to consider her word choices. In the moment, she recalled what she had read about connecting words to values. She examined her intent as well as the impact to the recipient. It ends up this was a great move, as she then learned this person lives and works in her same small town. She was planning to meet her in person and engage in a heart-to-heart conversation.

Every time we express ourselves through words, we have an opportunity to connect our thoughts with what we feel in our hearts. Our words matter. As we see from the above anecdote from my friend, by pausing to consider her words, she was able to make a connection that now extends beyond that initial meeting. If I consider my emotional state first, I can contemplate how this thought feels and if it aligns with my values and my intention. Once aligned, my words will come from my heart with the intention of connecting with emotional sincerity to the other person. I do not suggest this in a “woo-woo” way. I suggest this as the only way — in business, with your family, online, with your neighbor, and when you connect to a higher power.

Have you ever felt misunderstood? Does saying the wrong thing frustrate you? Whether it is knowing what to say to someone who is grieving, someone from another culture, to a non-binary individual,

or responding in difficult work or family situations, you can speak in a way that truly represents you and impacts the other person as you intend.

Lifelong learners, life explorers, parents, tenured and developing leaders will all benefit from the suggestions, stories, activities and reflections in this book. You can transform your communication through the power of your words.

In these pages, I will explore how our most important word choices are those we tell ourselves. I dig into how to choose words wisely with loved ones, as some of these word choices may influence a lifetime. I examine how we communicate in the world at large, including having the last word, habitual words, words that represent belief-limiting isms (racism, sexism, ageism), identity-specific suggestions, slang, loss and grief, and with those struggling with alcoholism or substance abuse. The chapter on words we use at work spans effective recognition, being of service, communicating as a leader, clinical settings, and difficult conversations. I explore word use beyond speaking, such as text messages, emails, written notes, and when we engage in social media. The final chapter invites you to consider how you use words to connect to the universe. This could be through prayer, meditation, a spiritual practice, or religious tradition.

You will improve your self-awareness and build upon your emotional intelligence. Along the way, you will learn to fully contemplate your intention in each situation. You will develop keywords that align with your values and keep you connected to them. You will become an expert at owning the words you choose and routinely choosing them wisely.

I will not cover word use from a grammatical standpoint. There will be no admonishment for when you use “I” or “me” and whether you end a sentence with a preposition. If I offer words that are currently not in your vocabulary, I encourage you to consider if they benefit you. I have challenged myself to appeal to all generations and trust you to relate in a manner that works best for you. I also intend

for the content to apply to all people regardless of their gender. When I speak about individuals, I alternate between “him” and “her.”

I have coached communication for decades. Although my master’s degree is in business administration, not linguistics, I am a life-long learner who devours material on personal growth. I have always been in the people business and therefore compelled to learn how to communicate effectively. This serves my coaching/consulting/speaking business where I specialize in leadership development. I learn from my leadership experience, as well as from my clients whose businesses vary greatly. I have been a leader in hospitality and health-care. I have owned and overseen a wide range of start-ups including fitness, baby boomer marketing, fiber arts, internet marketing, luxury resort operations, and medical staffing.

I draw on world travels and have resided in six states and two countries, outside the United States. I have traveled to all fifty states and enjoy exploring cultural differences. Differences in values and beliefs drive variations on word choices. I have coached and consulted throughout the United States, as well as several foreign countries. As importantly, I am the mother of “twenty-somethings,” a son and a daughter, who teach me daily. My husband is a very enlightened man who happily explores the impact of word choices within family dynamics.

While this book is not a substitute for effective one-on-one coaching, it is filled with examples, exercises, and reflections that will grow your communication skills. Packed with research, this book endeavors to cover most common communication opportunities. However, some of the sections could be, and should be, standalone books. I note resources to serve your deeper exploration.

An individual speaks an average of 16,000 words each day (Mehl, 2007). This represents a lot of daily word choices. This does not include words typed into an email, text, or otherwise written. Our daily experiences are shaped by words spoken to and by us. What impact did your words have today? Did they serve you well? Did they

serve another? Yours is the voice of humankind. I hope my work will support you using your words for the good of all.

I invite you to continue reading to enhance your ability to consistently communicate intentionally. I hope you will engage in the reflections and activities that amplify the concepts. I challenge you to choose your words from your heart in order to connect to the heart of another in all situations.

Tips for navigating this book:



This icon indicates when to pause and engage your heart in a reflection.



This icon prompts you to dive into an activity to work through your own examples.



This icon signals a story to reinforce how words matter.



“It does indeed matter what we do, say, and even think.  
Everything counts, everything leaves an imprint in our minds.”

PEMA CHODRON

## Chapter ONE

---

### **WORDS THAT CONNECT US TO OURSELVES**

Lead with Values – Your WHY

“What do you know about writing a book? What will you write about?” my mother asks. Hmm, does she have a point? My first thought is how others in my professional life describe me as a good communicator, extremely organized and efficient, and noticeably confident. I value these characteristics. I wonder why these traits have abandoned me when the voice in my head sends doubtful messages at various times of the day and night about my ability to write a book. Where have my words of confidence gone?

The words I choose for myself lay the foundation for my communication with others. They also guide what I do daily, what is important to me, and how I contribute to the world. If I choose words of doubt and sabotage, I may not be able to get out of bed in the morning. If I surround myself with others who choose a negative perspective, this will challenge my daily activity as well. My internal heart-to-heart conversations must always revolve around my values in order to truly represent me.

Everything you do and say represents your values, what you believe in, and who you are. We become uncentered, or off-kilter,

when our words do not align with our values. When this happens, we find ourselves feeling misunderstood or unable to connect with others as intended. The words we choose reflect our values and intent. How often do we reflect on the impact our words have on others? How do we reconcile the impact of our words and our intent, and confirm that they align with our values? All of this typically occurs in the nano-second between a thought and the expression of that thought – verbally, texted, or written.

As mentioned in the introduction, the world would be a better place if all conversations were framed as heart to heart. When you do this, you align with your values – that which is in your heart. You will also be honoring the impact you have on the recipient of your words. Even what I refer to as “alleged difficult conversations” will be easier for you and well received by others. There will be more on these conversations in Chapter Four.

To assess how well words align with values, values need to be named and tested for relevance. In her book, *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown provides a chapter on how to clarify and name your values. She offers this definition, “A value is a way of being or believing that we hold most important.” (Brown, 2018). *Psychology Today* offers a six-step process online for determining your personal core values. The article provides prompts and reflection exercises to ensure the reader does not simply choose from an existing list (Selig, 2018). If you have not recently assessed your personal values, doing so will set you up for choosing words that will represent your values.

Most people have very vague senses of their personal values. There might be values they feel they *should* have, ones influenced by society and culture. A true discovery of personal values can be guided by a professional coach and includes honest reflection. The process includes reflection on experiences and beliefs, and an exploration of your basic needs and sense of fulfillment. Without clarity of your core values, it will be difficult to communicate in a way that represents who you are.



VALUES EXERCISE:

Steps	Example	Your Answers
1. Read your last two texts, your last two emails, and review your last two conversations (not just what you said, but the words you chose to say).	<i>Conversation reflection: I thanked my husband for making me lunch, or I said, "Thanks for lunch, honey."</i>	
2. Note all words that may reflect a value.	<i>Thanks, honey</i>	
3. Identify the value(s) you were communicating.	<i>Gratitude, family</i>	
4. Choose better words – ones that align perfectly with your values. Contemplate the impact of the change.	<i>"Thanks for lunch, I appreciate you." This equates to a stronger emphasis on my value of gratitude</i>	
5. Weave these words into your day and practice!		



## REFLECTION

Three of my values are honesty, clarity and efficiency. Occasionally, to be efficient, my communication lacks clarity. In my brevity, it is possible I omit something that keeps me from presenting an idea or thought honestly.

***Has this happened to you? Which of your values typically takes precedence?***

### “Have to” or “Get to”

A dad picks up one child from school and ends up late for the game of another child. He is likely to say to the second child (Sam), “I’m sorry Sam, I had to pick up Sally.” Who does this lay the blame on? How might this make Sally and Sam feel? What the dad believes he values is being there for his kids. What he is messaging is that it is hard to juggle their schedules and that doing something for one causes him to slight the other. It is unlikely this is his intent. If he wants to lead with his value of being there for his kids he might say, “Sam, I got to pick up Sally today and I am sorry that my timing was such that we are a bit late for your game. I love your games and watching you play.”

Commonly, we speak in terms of what we “have” to do instead of what we “get” to do. “Having” to do something implies a burden or obligation. So often what we are referring to “having” to do is quite far from a burden. Additionally, this impacts those we converse with, especially if they feel a part of the perceived burden of what you “have” to do.



## REFLECTION

Nurse says to a colleague, “I have to care for Mrs. Klein today.”

Reflections for you:

- When Mrs. Klein overhears this, how does she feel?
- What value does this represent on behalf of the nurse?
- What value do you think really represents the nurse?
- How would saying, “I get to care for Mrs. Klein today” change things? For Mrs. Klein and for the RN?

- How do facial expressions and body language influence the impact of the words?

I had the privilege of coaching Mike Baxter and his healthcare leaders. At the time, Mike was the CEO of Parkview Health Systems. One of Mike's values was being of service and he exemplified this in his leadership style. Most notably, he comfortably spoke in terms of what he and his team "got" to do on a daily basis, as opposed to what they "had" to do. I heard him many times, in addressing both leaders and staff, frame his message around what he and his leaders had the privilege to share. For example, he might say, "We get to review our discharge process in order to ensure it is beneficial to our patients and clinicians." He lived his values as CEO in how he expressed himself and always led with how he and his team got to be of service to others – patients, staff, clinicians, and the community. Mike took great care to set the context for his communication. He knew that feeling his audience was as important as how he made them feel with the words he chose.

When staff and leaders constantly hear what they "have" to do they are less likely to feel ownership in a process or plan. Speaking in these terms is directive and oftentimes does not include *why* you requested an action. It can also lead to a victim mentality, as one feels like the passive recipient of orders. It is counterintuitive to feel that having to do something aligns with one's values. "Getting" to do something because it aligns with values and typically comes with an explanation of *why*, however, is relatable. It is amazing how this simple change in words creates space for more positivity and commitment. Let us explore some examples.



## ACTIVITY

How do you feel when you hear the following statements? Here are some choices: Empowered/disempowered, positive/negative, inspired/unmotivated, included/excluded, excited/indifferent.

Value	Have to Statement	Feeling	Get to Statement	Feeling
Teamwork	You have to clock in no more than 10 minutes early.		You get to clock in up to 10 minutes early.	
Communication	You have to tell your team about the new dining hours.		You get to tell your team about the new dining hours.	
Service	We have to serve 10 customers an hour in order to meet our service goals.		We get to serve 10 customers an hour in order to meet our service goals.	
Honesty	We have to tell the parents why we are changing this policy.		We get to tell the parents why we are changing this policy and how it will impact them.	

Sometimes words do not align with one's values. Occasionally, saying anything at all is unnecessary. It is helpful to ask, *what purpose does this serve?* If the conversation you wish to have serves your purpose and values, then that is a great start. If it serves only you, a next step would be to consider the impact to the others. If it serves no purpose to share a comment, it is better left unsaid. For example:

When our elders are forgetful and we tell them something for a fourth time, we may be inclined to add, “This is the fourth time I told you this.” It may support my value of being efficient (and only doing things once) and my purpose of letting them know we have discussed this. However, chances are good there will be a fifth time; mentioning this being the fourth may serve to make them feel inadequate, troublesome, a burden, angry with themselves, or “D” – all of the above. It is unlikely this was your intent or that this outcome serves your values.

Let us consider when intent conflicts with values. Have you ever intended to hurt someone? Your immediate response is likely “no.” I assure you most of us occasionally choose words that intend to hurt or to make someone feel bad. This could be due to them hurting you, you wanting to make a point, or you feeling overwhelmed by a certain issue and are therefore lashing out – wanting the other to know what it feels like. There are a myriad of reasons why we choose words that hurt. Oftentimes, we only need to pause to reflect on values and intent and to check in on our heart’s message. Consider *why* this conversation is important. Contemplation can take a nano-second if you are aware of your values.

## Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem

Volumes exist on Emotional Intelligence (EI). The literature supports the correlation between high Emotional Intelligence and effective leadership. Emotional Intelligence also informs parenting styles and relationship patterns. There is no doubt that Emotional Intelligence affects the words chosen in various conversations. The five components of Emotional Intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

Here are the key definitions of Emotional Intelligence (Harvard Business Review, 2015):

- Self-awareness: The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others.
- Self-regulation: The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods. The propensity to suspend judgment – to think before acting.
- Motivation: A passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status. Propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence.
- Empathy: The ability to understand the emotional make-up of other people. Skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions.
- Social skill: Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks. And ability to find common ground and build rapport.

One critical component here is the understanding and control of emotion. How well you manage your own emotions and energy and how well you read the emotions and energy of others will have an impact on the words you choose. It is best to check in on emotional triggers and get your energy around a sensitive issue in check before choosing *any* words. Your next step would be a quick assessment of the person you are conversing with. You have probably heard the phrase “treat with kid gloves,” which means tread carefully in a conversation. This reflects a sense that the other person has some emotion or elevated energy around a topic or in general. This consideration (of treating with kid gloves) is Emotional Intelligence in action. The tricky part is when doing so compromises your values and therefore your sense of self. This directs us back to the self-awareness component of Emotional Intelligence.

Multiple studies in the last 20 years explore the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and self-esteem. Schutte et al’s work in “cognition and emotion” found that higher Emotional Intelligence is associated with higher self-esteem. Mixed models of Emotional Intelligence have emerged in addition to those outlined above. The



following competencies may also factor into Emotional Intelligence: Emotional literacy, self-regard, self-management, self-motivation, change resilience, interpersonal relations, and the integration of head and heart (Schutte, 2002) (Coetzee, 2006).

The literature supports that Emotional Intelligence develops over the course of one's life. The following books offer guidance on how to improve one's Emotional Intelligence (Harvard Business Review, 2018) (Greaves, 2009):

- Everyday Emotional Intelligence – Harvard Business Review
- Emotional Intelligence 2.0 – Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves

Many of the strategies outlined in these books boil down to either how you communicate with others or how you manage your internal communication. This all gets back to the words we choose. The good news is that Emotional Intelligence can improve at any age. All you need is the desire to take a closer look at yourself. After considerable research, I offer the following key strategies and illustrate how they relate to the words you choose.

**Self-Awareness:** The best way to reconcile how you *believe* people perceive you with how you are truly perceived is to ask. This includes asking others as well as yourself some important questions. Here are some sample questions:

**Self:**

- Why did I just do or say that?
- Have I had this reaction in the past? If so, how is it different this time?
- Why is that important to me?
- How do those words or actions relate to my values?
- Were my actions or words respectful?
- What would I call that emotion?
- What am I feeling right now?
- Why am I feeling this way?

- What might I have done differently or better?
- Would I use different words in a future similar situation? What would they be?
- Who can provide me with candid feedback?

**Others:**

- Did you perceive any emotion when I was speaking?
- What type of emotion did I exhibit?
- How did the words I used impact you?
- Did you perceive that my words aligned with my values?
- When I communicate, is it clear what my values are?
- Can you give me a specific example of how I act when I am sad? Happy? Frustrated? Excited?

**Self-regulation or self-management:** The key here is having control of your self-talk. There are many other important strategies such as getting plenty of rest, surrounding yourself with supportive people, continually appreciating lessons learned and a positive, confident perspective. Although there is an entire section in this book dedicated to the voice in your head, here are a few key words and phrases that relate to improving self-regulation.

- What sort of pause would serve me now? Count to 10, take a walk, return tomorrow?
- Check in with your internal voice and try these prompts: My emotional wellbeing is important. I value being in control of my emotions. Overreacting serves no purpose. I am enough, more than enough, smart enough, strong enough, capable of managing my emotions.
- Identify the difference between an emotional and a rational reaction and outline the value in each.

**Social skills and relationship management:** If this does not come easily for you, don't worry; there is much to read on this topic. The basis of this skill lies in the power of observation. Having great radar is key. Every day presents the opportunity to observe others. You can observe them in your work environment, at the movies, and in your home. As you observe, you can contemplate the following:

- What is body language telling me?
- What do I read in facial expressions and eye contact?
- What powerful words are used? What impact do these words have?
- What questions do I have prepared to share in a social setting?  
Here are a few examples:
  - What are you currently working on? What was the best part of this week for you?
  - What is your favorite outdoor activity?
  - What is the best book you have read this past year?
- Tap into your sympathy which is quite different from empathy. Sympathy is how you feel as a reflection of what another has shared with you. It is about you but may be helpful to the other. Tapping into your empathy is even better – see below.
- TLTHITN = The Last Thing They Hear is Their Name. I learned this from Stan Bromley, one of Four Season Hotel's greatest hoteliers. I used to coach this in hospitality, though it is relevant for most businesses and certainly in clinical settings. Using the name of the person you are speaking with is a simple effort and goes a long way in building and managing a relationship – even a brief one. Consider what not retaining a name you learned moments earlier says about your emotional investment in the conversation. If you know this is a personal challenge, you might consider reviewing some of the tips in *The Memory Book* by Harry Lorayne & Jerry Lucas (Lucas, 1975). This resource is a gem. Although published in 1975, I have used the tips for recalling names in my coaching for decades.

**Motivation:** In the context of Emotional Intelligence, this refers to your general motivation as an individual. Here are a few suggestions for keeping your level of motivation healthy.

- Make your goals public – use extremely specific words of commitment.
- Assess your challenges regularly – are there enough of them, too many?
- Consider your response to challenges – do you remain optimistic? Can you see the silver lining in adversity?
- Consider all change to be a form of continuous improvement – such as the work you do personally to improve a component of your Emotional Intelligence.

**Empathy:** Daniel Goleman offers three distinct kinds of empathy. Each of these will have an impact on the words you choose. Your level of empathy is circumstantial and is something to continually assess (Harvard Business Review, 2015).

- Cognitive empathy: The ability to understand another person's perspective.
- Emotional empathy: The ability to feel what someone else feels.
- Empathetic concern: Ability to sense what another person needs from you.

To gauge and strengthen your level of empathy, consider the following reflections:

- Having good self-awareness and social awareness to begin with helps further develop empathy. This includes the ability to place yourself firmly in the shoes of another and to use your powers of observation to take in the whole picture, including the emotions of others.
- Assess your listening skills. Are you hearing more than what is spoken? Do you hear a feeling?

- Speak in terms of what you hear, indicating that you understand what the person is going through.
- Show concern in practical ways by asking, “Have you thought about how you could...?” or “What would be most helpful now?”
- Pause and determine if you truly feel the impact of being in the other person’s shoes. Can you relate? If not, how can you support him? Be authentic about your willingness and desire to fully understand and be supportive.

Why does this self-reflection matter? Let us take a deeper look. Marshall Rosenberg, a prominent psychologist who speaks and writes on nonviolent communication, explains that there are basically two things that bring people joy. The first is to gain joy from the suffering of others, which leads to violent communication or simply violence. The second way an individual gains joy is by improving the wellbeing of others, which leads to compassionate communication. He has traced this back 8,000 years to when a domination society began. When there are levels of perceived superiority, a language of judgment and classification evolves. This language of domination serves to dehumanize others. Luckily, Rosenberg and some well-known paleontologists believe that this has been an evolutionary snap that we find ourselves stuck in. They also believe that we are moving towards a needs-based and therefore, more compassionate society. Rosenberg contends that communication is born out of needs. In the domination framework, communication focuses on justifying one’s position, and this is really an expression of unmet needs (Rosenberg, 2003).

In his work to bridge communication gaps, Rosenberg often asks the following questions: How did you enrich another person today? What needs were met? How did this make you feel? Do you know of anything more fulfilling?

It seems the tie to superiority is as ingrained as our fight or flight

response. Fortunately, as *homo sapiens*, we can contemplate and adjust our perceptions. This is the first step in recognizing bias and underlying beliefs that may influence the words we choose.

This also brings us to a deeper look at Emotional Intelligence. Many people feel that self-awareness, the ability to understand one's emotions, is the most important component of Emotional Intelligence. People with this strength continually assess their strengths and weaknesses and work on any areas in need of improvement. Self-awareness is the key to changing your story and therefore the voice in your head. Once you are aware of your strengths, it is much easier to lean on them when negativity presents.

Self-regulation, the ability to control emotions and impulses, is the next step. With self-regulation, feelings such as anger, jealousy, impulsiveness, and thoughtfulness are managed. The third component is motivation, which people with a high degree of Emotional Intelligence naturally exhibit. They are very productive, appreciate a good challenge, and are effective in their endeavors. Empathy is the fourth component and typically thought of as the second most important one. This strength leads to the ability to understand the viewpoints of others as well as their needs and wants. Empaths are not quick to judge and they communicate openly and honestly. Listening well is a part of being empathetic. Lastly, someone with high Emotional Intelligence has superior social skills. This enables her to build and maintain relationships by leveraging her excellent communication skills.

Understanding your level of Emotional Intelligence is as foundational as understanding your core values if you desire to communicate well. There are simple and quick online tests that provide reliable results. You can search online for "Emotional Intelligence tests." Once you know your score in the five areas, you can determine your strengths and weaknesses and therefore your areas of opportunity. As mentioned above, a good starting point would be self-awareness. Reading this book is a solid step in the direction of improving one's

self-awareness. Next, you can build a plan to improve on one or two areas over a few months, using some of the suggestions above. Most importantly, determine from your score where you are at risk of choosing words unwisely. This could be in social settings, or at work due to low motivation scores. One option is to engage a coach who can help you on your journey to improve your Emotional Intelligence over time. Doing so will impact both your internal and external voice and benefit you greatly.

In Christopher Mruk's second edition of *Self Esteem*, he outlines the construct of self-esteem as it relates to worthiness and competence. He refers to the development of self-esteem before ages four to five as pre-esteem and he refers to middle childhood as, "an unforgiving place by comparison. The child's sense of worthiness, growing confidence, and developing a sense of individuality all play important roles in shaping his or her perception and experience. Consequently, past experiences with being valued or competent (or, conversely, being rejected or incompetent) influence how the child perceives risk, evaluates chances, determines his or her level of motivation, and so on." (Mruk, 1999).

Additionally, all of John Gottman's work promotes a feedback ratio of 5:1, positive to negative. Gottman has been at this for decades and in 2002, he decoded key communication factors that lead to divorce in his study with Robert Levenson. They found the main factor to successful relationships to be a consistent use of positive over negative reinforcement, by a factor of five. (Gottman, 2002). This confirms the need to choose words wisely and with good intentions, as well as the frequency needed to truly provide positive reinforcement.

These important studies beg consideration of nature versus nurture, as well as who is involved in the nurture part. Most adults I know have childhood stories they believe have shaped them. Some of these stories take place in their families and some at school with friends. Some are positive and some are negative and have had a related impact to the person's psyche. Some people choose to hold

onto stories that negatively impact their self-esteem. Others change their narratives altogether and excel beyond expectations. The narratives show up as the voice in his or her head. And the voice is a choice.

### The Voice is a Choice

I would like to propose that collectively we start to replace judgment with witness. It is much more productive for each of us to show up fully present and ready to witness, as opposed to judge. This includes how we witness our own actions and reactions. If we are present as witnesses, how does that inform the narrative? I own the narrative playing in my head. I own the words that represent me inside and outside my head. It serves my values and intent better to continually bear witness to them, as opposed to judging them, which can create a vicious cycle of negativity. The same holds true for any judgment from others. This makes me think of one of my favorite Eleanor Roosevelt quotes, “What other people think of me is none of my business.”

Michael Singer does a fantastic job in *The Untethered Soul* of exploring the voice inside your head. He poses powerful questions to help you reduce the voice that proposes negativity and holds you back. His simple approach confirms the reality that we are each in control of the voices in our heads and supports how to equip the voices with what we need to hear. When “the voice” undermines our goals, does not support our dreams, or holds us back in any way, we need to challenge why this is the case. We must contemplate why we allow beliefs to form words that we hear over and over in our heads that do not align with our values (Singer, 2007).

Let us first explore the difference between values and beliefs. Beliefs influence values and values influence behaviors. Values guide day-to-day choices and support a sense of right versus wrong. Values can vary greatly from person to person and change for individuals over time. They are abstract guiding principles that shape how we experience the world. Beliefs are assumptions, not based on fact, but



oftentimes founded in past experiences. In psychology, beliefs are the foundation of our conscience. Very powerful beliefs exist in religion that have a direct impact on individual values. Beliefs may cause biases and at times beliefs or values may be in conflict. All of this affects the voice in your head and the words that voice chooses.

Let us pull this all together in an example. I have created a story based on some assumptions. This is not my story and it does not necessarily represent my values and beliefs.

#### ASSUMPTIONS

My religion professes that a lesbian relationship is wrong and I believe in my religion and all of its teachings.

1. I have two teenagers and I teach them about inclusivity and loving others. We speak often about our value of kindness and how this can combat bullying.
2. I pray daily to be strong in my values of authenticity, kindness, generosity, honesty, and family.
3. My friend tells me that the new Physical Education teacher is a lesbian.

The voice in my head goes crazy. I hear it say things like:

- *How could the school have allowed this?*
- *What if the children find out? What if they already know? How will this affect them?*
- *This is a Christian school!*
- *If we must have a lesbian teacher, wouldn't English be better, not a class where they are changing clothes?*
- *What will the church say about this?*

All along, the voice is coming from my **beliefs**; it has yet to tap in to my values. When, or if, it does, I hear things like:

- *I am still going to be kind to this person.*
- *I am going to be honest with the children about this; they need to know.*

- *I must protect the children; we will discuss this as a family.*
- *I will pray about this and know what to do next.*
- *I am just going to be myself and treat her like anyone else. I can do this.*
- *God is testing me.*

In this example, my beliefs and my values are in conflict. There are words the voice in my head has chosen that have an impact on how I am interpreting this conflict. Here is an **interpretation** of the impact some of the words may have:

- *How could the **school** have **allowed** this?* I am not responsible; I am blaming others.
- *What if the children **find out**? What if they already know? How will this **affect them**?* I am not owning my value of honesty and authenticity or I would not have such worries.
- *This is a **Christian school**!* I expect others to support my values and my beliefs.
- *If we **must have** a lesbian teacher, wouldn't English be better, not a class where they are changing clothes?* I have moved into assumptions supported by my beliefs and somehow think the new teacher will influence my children differently than other teachers based solely on their sexual orientation.
- *What will **the church** say about this?* This situation is beyond me and therefore I only have so much ownership in this conflict.
- *I am **still** going to be kind to this person.* This is the first step in establishing my bias – my kindness will require an effort, beyond what other individuals require of me.
- *I am going to be **honest** with the children about this; they need to know.* My honesty will be measured and not offered to the full depth of what my children deserve.
- *I must **protect** the children; we will discuss this as a family.* My value of family supports this discussion, but my beliefs may guide the conversation and enhance my bias.
- *I am just going to be myself and **treat her like anyone else**.* I can

*do this.* Another step in establishing my bias – I will need to make a conscious attempt to live by my value of kindness with this individual.

- *God is testing me.* Again, I only have partial ownership in this – it is beyond my capabilities.

How could my words serve me better in this scenario? I need to own the voice in my head and guide the voice with my values, and potentially reassess my beliefs. It all may sound like this (most impactful words highlighted) when I change my words TO:

- *How could the school have allowed this?* TO: **I am responsible** for **how I respond** to this information and to this new person.
- *What if the children find out? What if they already know? How will this affect them?* TO: I **own my value** of honesty and authenticity and I will help the kids understand this **from a place of kindness.** This will be a **valuable conversation for all of us.**
- *This is a Christian school!* TO: I **support and will live my values** and may need to assess my beliefs.
- *If we must have a lesbian teacher, wouldn't English be better, not a class where they are changing clothes?* TO: I **trust** that my children are not treated any differently based on the new teacher's sexual orientation, nor would we ever treat this teacher any differently than any others.
- *What will the church say about this?* TO: My values may conflict with the beliefs of the church and that is okay, I will find strength in prayer and **continue to connect with my values.**
- *I am still going to be kind to this person.* TO: I am unsure what difference this news makes and why it even matters. My **kindness extends to all** regardless if their beliefs or sexual orientation is different than mine.
- *I am going to be honest with the children about this; they need to know.* TO: I am looking forward to the opportunity to **discuss this openly and honestly** with the children.

- *I must **protect** the children; we will discuss this as a family.* TO: My family **value is strong** and has served me well; we will **all benefit** from this discussion.
- *I am just going to be myself and **treat her like anyone else**.* I can do this. TO: Living my value of kindness means I treat everyone with **equal kindness**; this would never require any different energy or effort.
- *God is testing me.* TO: **My values and beliefs** are frequently tested, which is why I have them – to **guide me**, even in conflict.

I encourage you to consider how your past might influence your perspective. People do not like to think that they are biased or that underlying beliefs control their subconscious. However, this is very difficult to dispute. I am a white woman of privilege and until the last few years, I did not fully understand how this might influence my subconscious. This affects the story that I tell myself — the voice in my head, as well as how I relate to others. I have recognized that my words and actions sometimes serve to overcompensate for my position of privilege. This includes how I relate to indigenous people, as well as people of color. If I listen closely, I can hear myself trying to make up for the wrongs of my ancestors. I believe this influences the words I choose, just as I believe it influences the words of those born into different circumstances.

The voice in your head has incredible power. We must continually be a witness to that power and consciously choose to change the narrative when appropriate. This following story has been shared by a dear friend, who was initially shaken by the narrative she witnessed her son believing.



#### STORY: A CONCERNED MOM

***Doubt. Overlooked. Unappreciated. Defeated. Conformed. Sad. Lonely.***

My mind grew numb as I heard these words from my sweet son after

his spring semester of his freshman year at college. As his mother, I was shocked. Shocked that someone so incredible could actually think this about himself. Shocked that the picture shown to everyone on the outside obviously was something very different than what was actually believed on the inside. Shocked and sad that I had, as his mother, missed it.

But the change we witnessed over the next months was even more amazing and miraculous. Yes, his dad and I were right there with him each step of the way, but we could not solve this for him. He had to do this one himself.

It has been said, *“When writing the story of your life, don’t let anyone else hold the pen.”*

And this is what he did. He recognized his weakness, asked for help, realized the narrative in his head was not true, grabbed the pen, and started writing his own story. He changed by changing the narrative that was continually playing over and over in his head.

The weeks that followed were not easy, but the steps were intentional. Instead of hiding, he was renewing and making new positive relationships. Instead of being a victim, he started to serve others less fortunate here in the States and abroad. He renewed his faith and belief in God and his purpose for Him. He changed his location and goals. He started writing and journaling positive experiences and thoughts.

And guess what happened? The words started to change in his head. As the words changed, so did his story. People started to notice the difference.

Just recently, he came home on break with a group of college friends. As we sat around the family dinner table, I sat back and listened as he and his friends laughed hysterically, told stories about each other and just enjoyed life together. As we were cleaning up the dishes, I said to him, “You really seem happy.” He looked at me and said, “No mom. I AM happy.”

I could not help but reflect on the radical change. Changed words and changed actions. He had the pen and was writing his story.

**Faith. Respected. Appreciated. Victorious. Transformed. Happy. Loved.**

Now those are words worth a replay.

“Live life as if everything is rigged in your favor.”

RUMI

## The Power of Positivity

There is no doubt that the voice we hear in our head is the combination of many experiences and underlying beliefs. That does not change the fact that we can choose the words that voice uses and thereby change the affect the voice has on us. Often, this is where the victim versus victor mentality or negativity versus positivity comes into play.

Martin E.P. Seligman is widely considered to be the father of positive psychology. He has written many books and *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* offers insight that is congruent with my assertion that the voice in your head is a choice. Through his ongoing projects at the University of Pennsylvania, Seligman has improved our understanding of self-esteem and the value of learned optimism. Seligman outlines the downside of the self-esteem movement that began in California in the 1960s. He provides an overview of the detrimental effects that teaching self-esteem might have in the United States. In the last 10 years, the literature suggests that teaching self-esteem is not the anecdote to depression or negativity. In fact, studies indicate that children with high self-esteem, when confronted with real world challenges, turn to aggression and violence. He reported that after extensive investigation, he found no evidence of causality of improved self-esteem and doing well at work, in school, and with the people you love. He asserts, “Self-esteem seems only to be a symptom, a correlate, of how well a person is doing in the world.” (Seligman, 2006)

Seligman’s focus has been how to improve optimism, which has proven to prevent depression and related symptoms. I highly recommend his book for a deeper look into the effects of optimism on

depression, achievement, sports, children, and school. I particularly like his exercise on identifying the ABCs – adversity, belief, and consequences – of things that happen in your daily life. These exercises drive home the value of contemplating how you think, which in turn drives the voice in your head. He easily illustrates the connection between the ways you think about adversity and how that makes you feel and potentially act. He provides concrete examples on how to manage your “negative dialogue.” His comment that, “One of the most significant findings in psychology in the past 20 years is that individuals can choose the way they think,” fully supports the necessity for us to consider the words we choose for the voice in our heads.

Another important book came out in 2020, Kimberly Faith’s *Your Lion Inside: Discover the Power Within and Live Your Fullest Life*. Her work is complementary to Seligman’s and takes a more specific look at the challenges women face. Her main message is that the time is now for women to break the glass ceilings in their worlds by first using them as mirrors and by changing the narrative. She introduces seven sisters of the sisterhood who each provide their mental model stages of awareness, choice, and freedom. Her seven sisters do a fantastic job showing the progression through the three mental model stages. These mental models equate to what I have been calling the voice in your head, which indeed is your narrative (Faith, 2020).

Taking a closer look at how a child processes information is helpful. How does the voice in her head develop? It reflects what she hears. As we become adults, we can choose to hold on to those same words and therefore our beliefs in what the words are saying to us, or we can change the story. Accepting the story formed by the words in your head is your choice and your choice only. Additionally, only you can change the story, which begins by reflecting on the words you currently choose.

Let us work through a simple example.



## ACTIVITY

Fill in the following blanks:

1. This weekend I have to \_\_\_\_\_
2. This weekend I should \_\_\_\_\_

I would assume that at least some of the readers answer “do the laundry” or “clean the house.” We will select “do the laundry” to further explore, but you can apply this exercise to whatever you answered.

**Fill in the following:**

1. The value in doing the laundry is...
2. And the value in that is...
3. How does this action (doing the laundry) get accomplished?
4. Is this action something I am grateful for? Why?
5. Based on this knowledge, how might I reframe what I will do this weekend?

## Potential Answers:

1. Clean clothes.
2. I enjoy having my clothes clean.
3. By using hot water in my washing machine.
4. Yes, because it would be much harder to have clean clothes without water and a washer (and dryer).
5. I want to do the laundry this weekend OR I get to do the laundry this weekend OR I am able to do the laundry this weekend.

This brings us to gratitude. People who maintain a positive outlook typically come from a place of strong gratitude, most of the time. Some people profess to be grateful for all they have. Yet, these same people listen to a voice that tells them what they “have” to or “should” do and they fail to recognize truly being grateful can change the story they find themselves in. Another way to contemplate this is to consider, “What’s the alternative?”

In my example above, what is the alternative to doing the laundry on the weekend? I would not have clean clothes. The alternative of



not being able to do the laundry on the weekend might be that I'm not healthy enough to do so or that I lack the proper resources such as clean water, a washing machine, even detergent. But if I have all these things then I can change the voice in my head to reflect how positive the situation is and how grateful I am. This might sound like, "I get to do the laundry this weekend" or "I'm able to do the laundry this weekend" or "I'm going to do the laundry this weekend." None of these statements reflect an imposition or a lack of gratitude for the resources I have. Nor do they reflect that I am doing the laundry out of any obligation.

If I was doing the laundry for someone else and the voice said, "I have to do the laundry for Mrs. Rank this weekend," I would need to contemplate whether this obligation was something that I chose. Is it an opportunity that I am grateful for or one born out of my value of kindness? If so, the only obligation I have is to honor that value. The voice might say, "I'm grateful to fulfill the kindness I wanted to show Mrs. Rank."

The voice is a choice. There are two choices. The first is whether to believe the voice. Is what you hear and the word choices representative of your values, beliefs, and your intent? Is what the voice says of true value to you? You may decide the voice is on point and only requires the refinement of some of your extensively used words. The second choice is how to change the voice. If you have concluded that the voice in your head does not align with your values, then your next step would be a commitment to changing the words you allow to be heard. The degree of difficulty in doing this varies from person to person, as does the desire.

There are many opportunities for working towards making better choices with the words in your head. Some of them include finding a good coach, allowing time and space for self-reflection, even attending a mindfulness retreat. Using words that are more consistently positive, grateful, and reflective of your values supports any work you may get to do in altering the words you use with others.

## Stifle the Shoulds

Often people ask me how I ended up in California and my response is, “because of the ‘shoulds’.” I grew up in Maryland and abiding by Emily Post-type manners and rules of civility was an expectation. Not all of you will recall that Emily Post was the go-to authority for manners and social standards. This included the rules around weddings, parties, and even the types of clothing, shoes, and purses that were appropriate at certain times of the year. No doubt you have heard, “You don’t wear white after Labor Day.” The people I met in my early twenties while living in San Francisco seemed to know nothing of these alleged rules. Mrs. Post wrote the original book on the words to choose for invitations, RSVPs, and correspondence. She directed what was socially correct well before politically correct became a thing.

This brings us back to values and bias. When I was firmly rooted in a society that abided by such rules, I was apt to judge others when they breached them. I developed an inherent bias towards what I understood to be socially correct. I chose words that supported this alleged correctness. This included speaking in terms of what one shouldn’t, or can’t, or mustn’t do. As I became more in touch with my personal values, I realized how misaligned I was with these alleged rules. I abandoned them. As you might imagine, such beliefs can be very deeply rooted. Occasionally, I still hear the voice in my head question my choice to wear an open-toed shoe in winter.

Now when I hear someone suggest that I “should” do something, I have trained the voice in my head, as well as my actual voice, to ask why. When I hear the voice in my head suggest judgment, based on an old bias, I ask why. I also ask, “What purpose does this serve?” This enables clarity that I “should” only do those things that align with my values.

Repeat after me: I choose my values, I set my intentions, I choose the words I hear in my head (my story), I choose the words I speak.

Still with me? How about: I choose to do the work to improve my Emotional Intelligence, which will positively influence my self-esteem. Here is a story of how this has worked out for someone else and the impact of the words of another.

## The Words Others Choose



### STORY — HOW WORDS AFFECTED SARAH HENRY

When I was looking for a story related to the impact of the words others choose for us, Sarah Margaret Henry's story appeared in my Facebook feed. Exactly what appeared is provided below with Sarah's permission. When I met Sarah, I learned that she is the owner of Still Poetry Photography, a multimedia production company. She is an author, photographer, filmmaker and she operates a YouTube channel. She writes passionately about all sorts of important topics, including women's rights and animal adoption. She uses her voice to tell underprivileged stories; stories we may not want to talk about. She makes them larger and more beautiful in order to give access to those who aren't living their true lives and to validate those who are. Although she was told that studying the arts and humanities would lead her nowhere, she has most certainly utilized her experiences and her education. In her book, *Intricacies Are Just Cracks in The Wall* (Henry, 2019), she uses her voice beautifully to advocate for others and make this world a better place. She exemplifies the power of words!

### **Sarah's Post – including her poem**

*In elementary school when grownups asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "I'm gonna be an author! Just like J.K. Rowling!"*

*Not "I want to be an author."*

*I am going to be an author.*

*Most people said, "Aw, that's cute!" They tousled my hair, maybe pinched my cheeks.*

*I wrote constantly. There are journals and notebooks and scraps of paper throughout my parent's house of my writing from kindergarten up through*

*high school, and my apartment now is covered with even more notebooks I've filled to the brim with thoughts, characters, poems, the dreams I cannot wake up from.*

*In high school, when people started asking what I was planning on pursuing in college, I said, "I'm double majoring in English and Communications."*

*No one tousled my hair.*

*I got, "Good luck with that. Hope you enjoy being unemployed. Sounds like a good major for a future housewife."*

*I didn't even dare tell them, "I'm going to be an author."*

*I didn't want them to laugh in my face.*

*I wasted a year and a half of my life with someone who told me that because he was pursuing a degree in science, it was more important than whatever degree I could get.*

*I struggled with depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder since I was eight: Things he told me were my fault and that I should just get over.*

*When he sexually assaulted me repeatedly, I added PTSD to the list.*

*I didn't seek medical help until I was 19.*

*I left him.*

*I started writing again.*

*I wrote the tears, the blood, the pains, the demons latched onto my spine. I wrote my heart away and bound it in a book, for any and all to see. I no longer care what people think of me.*

*And now I'm an author.*

*Just like I always told them I would be.*

----

*The final page of INTRICACIES ARE JUST CRACKS IN THE WALL:*

*I am*

*I want the light in my eyes  
to be contagious, want the  
sinew in my thighs to evoke  
another's self-forgiveness.*

*I want my toes to teach  
her that it was never a sin  
to dance. I want my neck to  
be held high enough to be a beacon,  
I want my ears to believe that  
listening is life changing. I want  
my heart to be an organ  
that belongs to itself, not donated  
at another's discretion. I want  
my fire to burn roses because  
I am a gift unto myself.*

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” Ah, but they may. They may keep you from realizing your full potential. They may keep you from being true to yourself and your values. They may inhibit your creativity or growth. They may impact your relationships. They may influence how you converse with others. Whether you hear such words spoken to you by another or as the voice in your head, they will affect your sense of self.

There are words that harm when heard as the voice in your head. There are words and phrases that cast doubt such as *can't*, *shouldn't*, *won't be able to*, *not capable*, or simply *no*. When we reflect on something, an action or intent, and the voice says “no,” doubt has been introduced. Negativity is offered in place of positivity and confidence. Curiosity is stifled. Can you recall an example in your life?



#### REFLECTION

1. What thought do you have that occasionally gets met with a negative thought, such as *no*, *not likely*, *don't think so*, *unlikely*, or *can't*?
2. What does that negative assignment (word choice) to the thought bring up for you?
3. What do you believe about the word choice?

4. What effect do your beliefs have on your actions?
5. How might you change the word choice?

## Self-Love

So many things impact self-love. So far, we have covered Emotional Intelligence, self-esteem, the voice in your head, judgment from others, judgment of yourself, and inherent biases. Most importantly, we have explored choice. It is your choice to further improve your Emotional Intelligence, which is reflected in your self-esteem. It is your choice to show up as a witness to your life and those around you, and not in judgment. Positivity is your choice. Owning the words in your head, as well as the ones that come out of your mouth, is your choice. Each of these choices impacts your self-love. Choose wisely.

## Just – A Form of Self-Sabotage

I have always appreciated the story of when President Kennedy visited NASA in 1961. He happened upon a janitor who was mopping a floor. He introduced himself and asked the janitor what he did for NASA. It may strike you that his answer would have been obvious to our esteemed leader. For 58 years, many people have shared his answer. It represents the impact our words have when they support our intention. He said, “I’m helping to put a man on the moon.” This janitor’s words impart that his contribution was of value and that he was a part of something greater. Leaders use this example routinely to connect how important it is for employees to be engaged in the vision and mission of an organization.

A more common response may have been, “I’m just the janitor.” Or “I just keep things clean around here.” The operative word choice here is “just.” As an adjective *just* typically means lawful, proper, fair, or righteous. As an adverb, it typically means exactly, precisely, or barely, only, simply. When we use *just* as a description of ourselves or

related to our actions or contributions, it is these last three words that come to mind. This denigrates our intention and serves no purpose.



#### STORY: WHAT “JUST A” SAYS

I was once visiting a patient when a dietitian entered the room. She had what looked like a lab coat on, as did many of the other people who entered that room. This patient was older, medicated, and having difficulty keeping things straight. The dietitian was double-checking the lunch order. When the patient asked who she was, she responded, “I’m just the dietitian.” She may have been thinking about her role in comparison to that of the nurse or the physician and signaling that she would not be causing any pain or doing anything complicated. She may have been thinking of her long-term career plans. She may have even been thinking of how her role fits into that of the entire organization. Either way, she missed several opportunities.

1. She missed an opportunity to connect what she does daily to the mission of the organization.
2. She missed an opportunity to impart to the patient the skills she brings to the patient’s care.
3. She missed an opportunity to support herself and enhance her inner voice.
4. She missed an opportunity to connect to her values and intent.

Here are some suggestions she might consider for greater impact:

- I am a registered dietitian, which means I am responsible for your nutrition.
- I am a registered dietitian on our fantastic culinary team.
- I am a registered dietitian and excited about my role in your care. I ensure we meet your dietary needs.

In the section on managing up (Chapter Four), the focus is on how the choice of words affects the listener. The choice also affects the speaker. Saying over time that you are just a \_\_\_\_\_ diminishes the value of your role, as well as your perception of yourself. Just as a qualifier signals a lack of confidence and low self-esteem.

If you listen closely, you will hear the use of the word “just” quite often. It is commonly used as a qualifier when giving instructions or providing information. And it is unnecessary.



#### REFLECTION

Reflect on the difference between the two expressions below. Which of the following words might you choose to represent how the statement made you feel?

Unsure, confident, undecided, aligned, uncertain, certain, clear, ambiguous. . .add your own words.

Which is better, the first sentence or the second sentence below? Why is it better? How has the impact changed? What feeling would you assign?

1. I am just going to show you how the results support our progress.
  2. I would like to show you how the results support our progress.
- 
1. I just want to provide you with some examples.
  2. Here are some examples.
- 
1. I just have to decide what to do next. (*Just AND have to*)
  2. I will decide what to do next.
- 
1. I am just one of the people you will speak with.
  2. I am one of several people you will speak with.

Choosing to eliminate the word *just* reframes the sentiment to one of sufficiency. In this same sense, I suggest the word *enough* be used sparingly when referring to one’s self. I have heard women use this word in support of another woman, even using it as encouragement. For example, “You are good enough” or “You have to tell yourself you have done enough.” I propose this word is *not* enough. Indeed there are more affirmative ways to support yourself or your



actions. Replace enough with perfect, fantastic, exactly right, spot on, or any word choice that does not minimize you or your effort.

“Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech  
you’ll ever regret.”

AMBROSE BIERCE

## Sarcasm and Defensiveness

I come from a lineage of sarcasm and married into another one. There is no doubt that sarcasm can provide humor, which is at its best when no one is a victim. However, this is rarely the case. The victim can be you (the speaker), your psyche (inner voice), someone spoken about, or someone spoken to – there are a plethora of potential victims. In my experience, sarcasm appears tied to defensiveness. A sarcastic response (choice of words) is often provided from a place of defensiveness. And other than humor, there is no value provided. The value of the humor must be extraordinarily strong to warrant the risk of utilizing sarcasm with your word choices. Sometimes, the humor presents as self-deprecating.

Think of it as a large popcorn at the theater. It is very satisfying for a while, until it is not. In this case, the self-depreciation may be endearing to your audience, but it takes its toll on your self-worth. This is true when you believe the words you choose to be true and not the case if you know them to be untrue.

Defensive responses can seem automatic for some people. The interesting thing about defensiveness is that it is often so obvious. I wonder why the speaker does not also realize the defensiveness in his words. This typically strikes me when someone leads with something he does not hold to be true. For example, “I don’t really care about that,” “that won’t bother me,” “it wasn’t my fault.” I am not saying that

in all cases the speaker will not believe these statements to be true, but often after deep consideration, this is not the case. What he is asserting establishes his potential defensiveness.

Here is an example that involves word choices. Suppose someone chooses a word that is either grammatically incorrect or its meaning does not apply to what she is trying to convey. If she is questioned for clarity and responds, “You know what I mean!” she is being defensive. She is not owning her mistake and instead is placing blame on the other person.

How can you prevent being defensive? Start with good self-awareness. When in a conversation, if you hear something that does not align with your values and potentially causes you conflict, pause and think about your response. If during your pause you suspect any defensive thoughts, consider owning them. This might play out with you saying, “I need to think about that. What you are suggesting conflicts with my values and it makes me want to defend them.” Or “I’m having a defensive reaction to what you just shared and I’d like some time to think about this before I respond.”

When you are the receiver of a defensive response, also pause. Contemplate what you just said and why it may have triggered the defense mechanisms of the other person. Then ask for clarification in a safe, non-judgmental way. This is the tricky part because your words have the potential of causing even more defensiveness. Ironically, I have rarely seen a person who is called out for being defensive not defend her position. Therefore, your first consideration before you bring your observation to her might be, “What purpose will this serve?” If her defensiveness will hold up whatever is being discussed (in other words, you do not truly have her buy in) or is perceived to be part of a larger issue or is a recurring pattern that you feel compelled to address, then you need to proceed and choose your words wisely. Here are some suggestions:

1. Your response surprises/confuses/interests me. May I ask you some questions to better understand your position?

2. Your response (perhaps body language) makes me think we should dig a little deeper into this topic. What are you feeling about this? What did this bring up for you?
3. What additional information can I provide?
4. How was your response related to your values? I would like to understand more fully.

## Chapter Wrap

I always want to use my voice for the good of all. I value courage and self-exploration. I consciously guided my internal voice toward a narrative that is supportive of my values and this led to the creation of this book. I hope that what I have written expands your courage and self-exploration as well. The exercises proposed will help you look at your words in a different light. Be true to them. Do not allow the words of others to overshadow your truth. Be specific with the voice in your head and connect it to what is in your heart.

Conversations with loved ones can pose individual and recurring challenges. Dissecting certain patterns and triggers can help establish boundaries. You can learn to respond differently. Adhering to your values will support word choices with loved ones. Let us take a deeper look at how to do so.