

Happiness First!



THE FORMULA THAT'S CHANGING THE
WORLD OF CHANGE

Dave & Larry

Poor Maya has been researching for three days straight, and every article says the same as the last one.

Change is hard. Transformation requires discipline and determination. Growth demands sacrifice. No pain, no gain.

She sits at her kitchen table at 2am. on a recent Sunday morning, her laptop glowing in the dark. She can't sleep again, as she scrolls mindlessly through yet another self-help blog, aching for at least one solution that doesn't demand a self-sacrifice to the discomforts of the process.

She's seen it all before.

So why is she still here looking for more?

Must be the hopium. So-called experts' high-level promises hiding behind low-level accountability. Rise-and-shine early, take cold showers, journal, meditate, fight through the resistance, sit with the pain, visualize your success, lean into the human condition, follow our 10-Step To-Do List, stay strong, don't stop...

Become a fucking Buddhist?

Maya groans and closes her laptop a little too aggressively as she flops her weary head into her hands.

She is exhausted, and not just physically, either.

She's tired of pretending. Smiling at work like everything's fine, while her anxiety burns in the background like an out-of-control electrical fire that water won't extinguish. She can't continue pretending Yes when she means No. She's tired of the critical voices in her head that catalogue her every mistake, relentlessly bringing each one to her conscious attention. Every inadequacy, every way she's failed to measure up. Every way in which she still isn't enough.

She knows in her soul that something's gotta' give. She just doesn't know from her past experience whether her mind and her body will ever have what it takes to change. To endure the gruesome struggle-and-suffer part, for some distant Promised-Land reward.

Things are looking hopeless and helpless for Maya's return to happiness.

Later that afternoon, she drags herself to a coffee shop near her apartment. She orders something with too much caffeine in it and sits absent-mindedly by the window, staring out at nothing in particular.

"You look like you're carrying the weight of the world."

She glances up, glumly. An attractive woman about her age is standing nearby, holding a cup of tea and smiling in a way that doesn't feel intrusive. Just... present. Non-threatening.

"Something like that," Maya mumbles in reply.

"Mind if I sit?" the woman asks, flashing a warm and relaxing smile.

Maya shrugs. "Sure, okay." Intuition calling, she barely hears her heart whisper.

The woman sits down easily and introduces herself. "I'm Claire," she offers.

"Maya."

They sit in silence for an extended moment. Not awkward. Just quiet. Claire goes first.

"Can I ask you something?" she begins pleasantly. "What do you think has to happen before you'll give yourself permission to stop hurting and start feeling better?"

Maya blinks. "Huh?"

"Just curious," Claire continues, stirring her drink, still smiling. "Most people have the same answer, you know. They think they need to earn their happiness by healing something painful first. Strive and achieve. Prove yourself and kick some happiness butt. Something that's rarely inside their self-improvement toolbox. So I'm just wondering what your solution is."

Maya feels something familiar and uncomfortable settle in her chest. And it has nothing to do with the lovely stranger who has just invaded her sadness.

"I don't know, really. I guess I just need to get my shit together first, before I can make self-help work. Why," she asks, "what are you thinking?"

Claire ignores the question. "And then you'll be able to, what, make yourself happy, right? Is that the answer?"

"I mean... yeah. That's how it works, isn't it?"

Claire tilts her head. "Is it?"

Maya spends the next twenty minutes anxiously describing to this patient and curiously appealing stranger why she desperately needs to change.

The anxiety. The stress. The grief. The patterns. The sense that something is fundamentally wrong with her. With the way she's living her life. Since apparently she can't create lasting happiness with it.

Claire listens while sipping her tea and without interrupting; without offering advice, without trying to correct anything.

When Maya finally runs out of words, Claire asks her another question.

"Have you noticed that every positive outcome you're reaching for is on the other side of some level of gloom and doom?"

Maya frowns. "Of course I have – that's just how change works, right? You have to push through the pain. Discipline. Discomfort. Willpower. You have to pay for your play. All that crap," she almost snarls.

"What if you didn't?" Claire asks simply.

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't have to suffer to change."

Maya laughs, but it comes out angrily. "That's not real. Every book, every article, every video, every guru says the same thing. Change is hard! Growth is agony! You have to do the work! Head down, keep going. Eyes on the prize!"

"They do seem to repeat the same boring homilies, don't they?" Claire agrees, and then smiles that warm but suspicious smile. "But what if they've got it wrong?"

Maya stares at her. Bewildered, yet entranced: "How could they all be mistaken?"

"Because," Claire explains patiently, "when you correlate change with pain, you have a healthy but misguided market that moves in the direction of pain avoidance, first. Quick relief, right? Have you ever noticed that?"

Maya shifts uncomfortably in her chair, nodding in agreement.

Claire continues. "You try, and then you relapse. You feel worse. You need a reboot. Another book. Another seminar. Another course. Another fix. And nothing changes. It's highly-profitable propaganda, don't you think?"

It is not a question. Her words land hard.

Maya has never thought about it this way before. But now that Claire has said it, she can't unhear it. Every guru she's followed. Every program she's considered. They all promise endless transformation if she will just silently endure the resistance, anguish and disappointment built into the activity.

But what if that was the trap? What if they needed her to stay focused on her pain, so she'd keep coming back for another rescue, rather than work on genuine, positive improvement?

"Ughh," she can only groan.

Claire doesn't pitch anything as they continue chatting. She doesn't hand Maya a business card. She doesn't invite her to a meet-up. But she sure as heck knows what she's talking about.

All she asks for is permission to continue asking questions.

"Why do you think unhappiness is required, in order to be happier?"

"Because that's what everyone says, you know? To get what you want, you gotta' plow through what you don't."

"But why do you think it's true?"

Maya hesitates. It's a good question. She's never really doubted it before. It just seems obvious. Self-sacrifice seems self-evident. You don't get anywhere in this world without suffering and 'paying the price'.

"I don't know," Maya admits. "It's just... what I've always heard, and I guess now I believe it."

"Okay," Claire offers fairly. "That's certainly honest. So let me ask you something else. When was the last time you felt genuinely good? Not relieved. Not distracted. Not intoxicated," she adds smiling.

"Just... good."

Maya considers it. She definitely cannot remember a time.

"That's the problem," Claire proceeds gently. "You've been taught that feeling good is something you earn after you fix something else. But what if happiness is the origin of all the change you want?"

Maya stares at her. "Get the fuck out of here," she blurts without thinking. Recovering quickly, she adds, "Sorry, wait - does that even make sense?"

"What do you think, Maya?" Claire asks, her eyes soft and bright with love and purpose.

"Consider this for a moment. When you're miserable, stressed, anxious - how much energy do you have left for something as vast and transformative as rearranging your life to make yourself happy? How optimistic can you be for the future under those conditions? For the creativity that'll get you there? How open are you at that point to even just the possibility of change?"

"Not very," Maya admits, shrugging her shoulders.

"That's right. Because your entire nervous system is locked in survival-mode prison, not open to abundance-mode freedom. Your pain is protecting you, Maya. It's keeping you stuck in the familiar because the unfamiliar feels too dangerous. Too risky. A threat to your survival. That's what hurt does. It strangles and suffocates even the best and strongest parts of you."

Maya feels something move. Not dramatically. A small crack has appeared in the uncertainty she's been preserving.

"But if you begin by wanting to feel good from the exercise in front of you," Claire continues, "if you specifically give yourself permission to feel as good as you can first - not as a reward, but as a starting point - then that same nervous system relaxes and unfolds into your other desires for change and improvement."

You have energy, space, and grace. Curiosity about new opportunities, even.”

With a sparkle in her eyes, Claire finishes: “That's when all manner of transformation becomes especially possible. Not through force, but through attracting what you want with what you already have.”



Predictably, Maya wants to meet Claire again. Two days later and she's free. Same coffee shop. Same quiet presence.

This time, Claire explains the methodology she's been referring to – something she learned from these two guys who, coincidentally, meet regularly with a group of their friends at this same coffee shop, where they pick their way through all this stuff. She doesn't deliver a sales pitch. Just more information. Clarification. A different way of thinking about transformation.

"These two fellows, they have this idea," Claire shares with her new friend, "that you absolutely do not have to hit rock bottom before you're challenged to change. Pain is not the only motivator strong enough to move you. Sure, yeah," she rolls her eyes for dramatic effect, "for a lot of people, that's true. They don't start looking for a way out until staying where they are becomes intolerable: the fear of change is finally overwhelmed by the pain of staying stuck. And that's true; it can work."

Maya smirks her understanding. That's exactly where she used to be, but couldn't find the push to resolve it.

"But here's the thing," Claire continues. "Pain can get you moving. Just like terror can, but it doesn't sustain you. It's like running away from a fire. You move fast, but you're panicked. You make decisions out of desperation. And as soon as the pain lessens, you stop. You go back to the familiar. It's an absolutely normal response to the pleasure/pain cycle; comfort trumps work. That's why most self-help doesn't stick. Because it's built on avoidance, not desire."

Maya pauses and looks away, asking the room around her, "So what's the alternative?"

"Happiness," Claire says simply, causing Maya to look back and laugh.

"That sounds like a fucking bumper sticker."

"I know," Claire admits with a huge smile. "Isn't it wild? But check this out...." She leans closer to Maya and almost whispers.

"Changing because you hate where you are, doesn't contain the positive energy you need to feel better. It's the exact opposite side of the same coin. Think of it this way," she places a faux furl on her brow as she offers Maya the keys to the kingdom.

"What if happiness isn't the destination for your successful life as much as your desire for it is rocket fuel for getting you there. There'll be lots more of it when you arrive, but you can start with it, too."

"How the fuck could that happen?" Maya has to ask, becoming edgy as her frustration deepens. "How can you just decide one day to feel fucking good when everything's a fucking mess?"

"Ahhh," Claire sits back and grins again, before taking their chat to the next level.

"You make the whole process into a Game."

Over the next hour, Claire gladly walks Maya through the basics. Not the full curriculum, but enough to pique her thirst for more.

The first Game, she explains, is about noticing.

Not fixing. Not resisting. Just seeing the patterns running in the background. The critical voices that have always said that she's not enough. The damned catastrophizing. The people-pleasing.

Claire suggests that Maya try reducing the chaos in her head to active characters in an awful story about herself that she's been telling herself for years. No judgment, just an image. Give those voices names, Claire laughs, and even weird, dastardly forms. Like aliens who've invaded your brain and stolen your mind, she suggests, smiling. Make them real, visible, funny if possible, and relevant to your new beginning.

"Once you see them," she emphasizes, "they automatically lose their grip. They become more like actors on a stage. In a play you're not enjoying watching, but now they're authentic, alive and real. At which point you realize you're not the show. You're the one watching it. And that separation, as funny as it sounds, means everything to your capacity for change and personal improvement.

That smile again, and then, "You make the monsters in your mind your opponents in the Game."

Maya allows the tiniest smile to dimple the corners of her mouth. Her wall of defense against the previously invisible competition for her happiness begins ever so slightly to crack, while Claire continues.

“Think of the Game as negotiating your way past the competition in your head, to substitute an old and largely false story about you, for a new-and-improved version that is factually and provably true. Which you will happily adopt as your own, now that it’s all about how good you’re starting to make yourself feel.”

Maya is unconsciously sitting a little taller in her seat.

“Not to mention how much fun you’re about to start having....”

Claire moves along.

If the first Game is supposed to be silly and fun, the second one is all about upping the quality of your ordinary intention to feel good. Beginning with better. Not because you've earned it. Not because everything's fixed. Just because you can. Make tea. Or coffee, if you like. Sit in the sun. Draw yourself a warm bath. Listen to real music. Let yourself enjoy something you love, without needing it to cure anything.

"That sounds too easy," Maya says, her skepticism momentarily derailing her recovering optimism.

"It is easy," Claire confirms, flashing that irritatingly gorgeous smile again. "That's why it works. You don't need willpower. You just need permission to start feeling better."

Maya went home that night and set time aside to try her hand at the 'second' Game, even if she didn't know the Rules. She was going to play with the idea, beginning with a glass of wine, to help get her head right.

Then she crawled into some comfortable clothes and sat by the window, setting her mind free to wander through her options for more happiness. She let herself feel good for five entire minutes without needing a reason. She did the bath thing, too, and went all-in for almost half-an-hour.

She was so pleased with herself.

And something definitely did happen. Not a breakthrough. Not enlightenment. Just a small, undeniable, positive pulse. A heartbeat sense that maybe - just maybe - her love of happiness could be rekindled and if Claire is right, it could then be channeled into creating the changes that she knows would keep the flames of desire for more of that happiness burning bright.

Why? Because she can. And Claire did. And the women in her group have, too.

Over the next few weeks, Maya kept showing up. Not to Claire's group yet. Just to tea-and-coffee. To conversations with her new friend. To the gradual realization that everything she believed about change was built on a lie and a do-over was in order.

The lie was simple: You have to earn your happiness through suffering and loss.

The truth was even simpler: Your hunger for happiness is what makes the changes you want possible.

Not because it contains some magic antidote to pain. Not because it bypasses the hard stuff. But because when you want to feel good, your mind, heart and soul, they all collaborate and open up in unison. You discover new connections. Renewed energies. Space to try something crazy and bold.

You start to feel invincible, as you become unstoppable.

Maya wasn't running from her pain. She didn't need to anymore; she was playing a new Game with it. She was seeing hard stuff and dancing her way around it, over it, and through it. She was finally, strangely, sometimes begrudgingly, moving towards something she actually liked. And wanted.

That was her favourite vision for what was happening to her, as what she wanted soon became what she needed.

Claire eventually invited Maya to look at the Course which formed the basis of the group she belonged to and which was overseen weekly by the two weird dudes who sat by the fireplace at the edge of the coffee-shop room. Not as a pitch. Just as an offer.

"It's not about fixing what's broken," Claire reminded her. "It's about remembering what's already there and working fine. It's the silver bullet: your ordinary and inextinguishable desire for happiness fuels the changes that will create it. You may have to pump it up a bit after years of neglect," she chuckles, "But once the fire is refreshed, everything follows from there."

Maya says yes, she wants to look further into the Course. Not because she was convinced it would change her life. But because for the first time in years, something very real felt really possible. Not forced. Not urgent. Just possible. On its happy way to achievable.

She wasn't going to let the flame go out on this one.



Five weeks later, Maya is sitting in the same coffee shop where she'd first met Claire. She has her laptop open, but she isn't researching how to change anymore. She's typing. Not because she has to. But because she loves to.

She's composing her New Story and she's totally immersed in her handiwork.

Her phone buzzes. A text from a friend, asking how she's doing.

A few weeks ago, Maya would have said "fine" and meant "barely holding on." But not this time.

Now she types: "Good. Actually great. I believe I might even be having fun again."

And she means it.

The coffee shop door opens. A woman walks in, looking exhausted. Deflated. Lost. Searching for something she can't possibly name.

Maya recognizes the look. She wore it herself not long ago.

She catches the woman's eye and genuinely, without thinking about it, smiles at her. Not intrusive. Just warm presence.

"You look like you're carrying the weight of the world," she says as the woman instinctively draws closer.

The woman pauses. "Tell me about it," she grieves, her shoulders bunched up so high they threaten to swallow her head.

"Hey, would you like to talk about it?"