

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.”

—Bishop Michael Curry

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# BEYOND ANXIETY

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

Martha Beck

THE OPEN FIELD • PENGUIN LIFE



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MARIA SHRIVER

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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