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# Personal Voice Workbook

A toolkit to unlock your voice



**This workbook  
belongs to:**

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#### About Culture Kits

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The Personal Voice Workbook, like all Dropbox Design Culture Kits, is free, adaptable, and designed for anyone who wants to make work better. We're sharing our tools to empower and equip you to shape your own work culture. Visit [dropbox.design](https://dropbox.design) for more.

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Finding your voice can be a very difficult thing to do. Many of us have been trained from a young age to take a seat, to raise our hands, to ask for permission to speak.

Even the most accomplished, most outspoken, most self-aware among us can still end up silencing themselves, often without even realizing what they're doing. We're unsure of how or when or where to speak up. Do we even have anything to say? Does anyone want to hear it?

Breaking through that silence and lifting up your voice is a process that requires you to be vulnerable and even uncomfortable along the way. Finding your true voice is a journey that begins with taking a deep look at who you are—the entirety of your identity. You have to be brave enough to crack yourself open and see what's inside. You might be surprised by the beauty and power you uncover.

This workbook will walk you through exercises designed to help you claim your voice; identify the things, people, and/or situations that silence it; and envision how and when and where you can use it.

Your voice matters. It's time to make it heard, to stand up and say your piece, to share your story. Or sit down and write it. Draw it. Paint it. Design it. Sing it. Dance it. Code it. Own it.

Let's get started...



Suggested use → Find a safe, quiet place where you feel most yourself. → Turn on music if that helps, and → pour yourself a cup of tea / coffee / fill-in-the-cup. → Take this workbook at your own pace. → Remember that you're not being graded. → There are no wrong answers. → This is something that is entirely for you, and about you. → Listen to yourself with care, and openness, and compassion. → What seedlings of hope, fear, fascination have set down roots in your heart of hearts?



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# Permission to Speak

LaDonna Witmer Willems

The epiphany began with a phone call. Or, rather, with the lack of a phone call.

My appointment was with a VP of marketing. He was also a friend of sorts, which is why I waited so long for him to call, and why I forgave the unanswered texts, the unreturned emails.

The carrot he dangled in front of me was the promise of a job as a creative director. “I’m building a team of mavericks and creatives, and I want you to lead the team,” he said.

Didn’t hurt that the job was in Vancouver, B.C., so it would tick two boxes on my wish list: level up in my career, and live as an expat. So I kept checking my phone and checking my phone and checking my phone until more than one of my friends said, “ENOUGH!”

“Why,” they asked, “are you letting this guy string you along? This is ridiculous! If anybody else tried ghosting you like this, you’d shut it down right away. So why are you waiting?”

With the answer came the epiphany: I was waiting for permission.

I was waiting because that is what I had done my entire life, what I had been taught to do since I was small. But until that precise moment, I hadn’t realized it wasn’t a phone call I was waiting for.

## **Seen but not heard**

I grew up in Illinois, in a small farming town where everyone votes Republican, eats bushels of sweet corn, and warms church pews on Sundays, both morning and night. And church had a LOT to say about what I could and couldn’t say. And do. And wear. And think.

In this world of fundamentalists, women were meant to be submissive and pliant. Men ran the entire show—heads of households, preachers in pulpits, leaders of choirs (the women sat off to the side and played the piano). I was told that the only honorable options for my future were: wife and mother, missionary to the heathens, or schoolteacher. Scratch that. Christian school teacher.

When I was 15 years old, the principal of my own Christian school called me out in front of the class to ask if I was a witch. Apparently



I had demonstrated an unacceptable tendency to question him, which he perceived as rebellion. “And the Bible says that rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft,” he lectured.

Decades later, that story is almost funny. Now, I’d gladly embrace the witchcraft. But as a naive and doubt-ridden teenager, that label was frightening and confusing. And so, as I had many times before, I internalized the real message my principal had for me: There is definitely something wrong with you.

I am still learning all the ways in which those lessons of silence and submission are buried within me. When I look back at my career, I now see that I paused at every rung of the ladder, waiting for the nod from someone above me, someone in a position of power. Sometimes they even had to nod twice and give me a push before I would make a move.

While all along, I already had the confidence and skills to climb that ladder on my own.

### **Descriptors and dude walls**

No matter where you grew up, no matter what your religion—or lack thereof—no matter how free-spirited or repressed your childhood might have been, you have been told over and over again when and where and how much you can express yourself.

Maybe you haven’t been called a witch. (But if you have, let’s get together and call some corners.) Maybe you’ve just been told you’re too much. Too loud. Too pushy. Bossy. Emotional. Difficult. Shrill.

After the recent televised Democratic debates, a man took to Twitter with what he assumed was a helpful critique of Elizabeth Warren’s speaking style. She would benefit, he said, from a voice coach, because when making an impassioned point, her voice cracks and “goes shrill.” (Search *Elizabeth Warren plus shrill* and Google will serve up a library of similar entries.)

In 2018, the *Harvard Business Review* analyzed 81,000 performance reviews, and tallied words used to describe men and the words used to describe women. Men who received negative reviews were penalized with only two adjectives: *arrogant* and *irresponsible*.

Women, however, were *inept, selfish, frivolous, passive, scattered, opportunistic, gossipy, excitable, vain, panicky, temperamental, and indecisive*.

This type of sexist terminology doesn’t just diminish the particular woman on the receiving end—it sends a message to society as a whole, and especially to girls who will someday be women. It says, “Because of your very nature, you do not measure up to the acceptable standard by which everything is judged. There is something wrong with you.”

Is it any wonder, then, that men apply for a job when they meet just 60% of the qualifications and women apply only if they meet 100% of them?

If, on the other hand, you’re taught from birth that you are entitled to power and a platform, just because of the body and skin you were born into, then you will act accordingly. Like Beto O’Rourke on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, explaining that he’s qualified to be the next president of the United States because: “Man, I’m just born to be in it.”

A few years ago, Rachel Maddow visited Rockefeller University to hand out a prize that’s given each year to a female scientist. When she walked into the auditorium, she saw a wall graced with large portraits of scientists at the university who have won either a Nobel Prize or the Lasker Award, a major medical prize. The subject of every single last one of those portraits was a man.

“What’s up with the dude wall?” she asked.

There are dude walls in so many conference rooms, waiting rooms, hallways, lobbies, and lecture halls. So many still lifes of imposing white men, sending such a loud message.

Of course, we women aren’t the only ones who get this message. If you’ve ever been shut down, sidelined, spoken over, silenced simply because you don’t look, sound, or act like the people in power—you know exactly what it means to be told that your voice is not welcome.

But you can refuse to go quietly.

### Safety isn't salvation

Silence can be an incredibly comfortable place. It feels safer to stay there, where nobody knows who you are or what you hold dear. You don't have to worry about how you might be received.

For some, the risk of using their voice is not only real but physical. Author and activist Ijeoma Oluo has been harassed, doxxed, and sent “fairly regular death threats” ever since she started writing about race in 2012. After a recent threat, law enforcement told her it would be in her best interest to stay quiet for a while. But Ijeoma said, “Nah.”

In a Medium post titled “The Thing About Safety,” she said: *I started writing because every single day I was living a half-life. I started writing because I was tired of taking in every racist joke, every insult, every assumption. I was tired of hearing the locks on people's cars click down as I walked past theirs in a grocery store parking lot. ...I was tired of worrying that I might die at each traffic stop. I was tired of seeing Black body after Black body lying in the street like so much garbage after an encounter with police. And I was so very tired of being silent through it all. Silence was not helping me. It was killing me. ...These last years, since I started writing—I've been as free as I can imagine a Black woman to be in this country. I have been able to speak openly, without reservation, about my lived experience and the experiences of my community. ...I am not going anywhere. I'm not going to disappear. No matter what comes my way.*

It takes bravery to own your voice. But with it comes a sense of freedom, a sense of rightness and purpose and pride. THIS, you can say to the world. This is who I am. This is what I've seen. And this is what I know to be true.

Your voice belongs to you, and you alone. You don't need permission from anybody to use it.

So what do you have to say?

I just finished reading Casey Gerald's memoir *There Will Be No Miracles Here*. (It's a mesmerizing book that you should read too.) He chronicles all the ways he remodeled himself to become the kind of person he thought other people wanted him to be.

And the man he built was truly impressive. Accomplished. Prominent, even. But that man was, he writes, a dead man.

I hadn't heard of Casey prior to finding his book, so when I finished it, I googled the hell out of him and came across a TED Talk in which he dropped this eloquent gem: *Repression is a bitter pill that's offered to us all. We're taught to hide so many parts of who we are and what we've been through: our love, our pain, and for some, our faith. So while coming out to the world can be hard, coming in to the raw, strange magic of ourselves can be much harder.*

We have all learned to package ourselves appropriately, to gloss on a smile, and to curate a pleasant facade. We waste an inordinate amount of time and sanity trying to crush ourselves into some shape of “normal.” As if anyone actually knows what “normal” is.

But often it is the very imperfections we try to hide—our flaws, our obsessions, our struggles, our mistakes, our fears—that connect us with other real human people. Think about it and you might realize that those are the very reasons you love some of your favorite music or art or books. Not because they are shrink-wrapped and mass-produced, but because they make you feel less alone. Like you are not the only oddity in the universe.

So peel away all those cultural expectations and polite party tricks. Embrace the wreckage of your heart. Revel in your own special brand of weird.

We are defined by the stories we tell each other. How lovely, how amazing if we allow ourselves to tell the truth.

### No more waiting

That phone call I waited for so anxiously did materialize, eventually. But I didn't answer it. By then I'd realized I didn't even want that job (although I'm still cool with moving to Vancouver).

No, this is what I want to do—raise my voice, tell my story, and help others unlock their own. So I've created this kit in the hope of helping you realize the power of your own voice, so you can lift it up and set it free.



More than anything else—love or logic or power or internet rants—**LaDonna Witmer Willems** believes that stories are the things that change the world. When humans get real enough and vulnerable enough to use their true voices and share their real stories with one another, hearts are won and minds are changed.

As one of the editorial gurus on the Dropbox Brand Studio team, LaDonna helps create and facilitate the best and most powerful expression of the Dropbox voice in all its forms. Along the personal journey to own her voice, LaDonna has been a journalist, copywriter, copy director, and poet.

This project began as a personal epiphany, blossomed into a talk, and then grew to become an interactive workshop. This workbook is an evolution that does its best to put the power and potential of your voice into your hands. The hope is that you will embark on this journey to find your voice at your own speed, in your own way. When you are ready to speak, your story will be there.



# The Real, True You

↓  
Exercise 1 2 3 4 5  
—



Imagine yourself as a fruit—with all of your imperfections, bruises, nuanced flavors, and unique details. Slice yourself open, or peel back that protective outer rind, and glimpse the luscious goodness inside: the sour and the sweet, the seedy and the soft.

**Purpose** To help create a portrait of your whole self, within and without, as you see yourself and as you are seen by others. If you like, use the stickers on the following pages to create a fruit-and-nature collage of yourself. Or choose separate elements from the sticker sheet that represent different aspects of your identity and personality.

**Instruction** Fruit serves as a helpful metaphor—the shape, the texture, the color, the seeds, the flavor. So enter Metaphor Land to become a fruit—actual or make-believe. Describe your fruitself with words, images, colors, or all three.

Imagine Yourself as a fruit

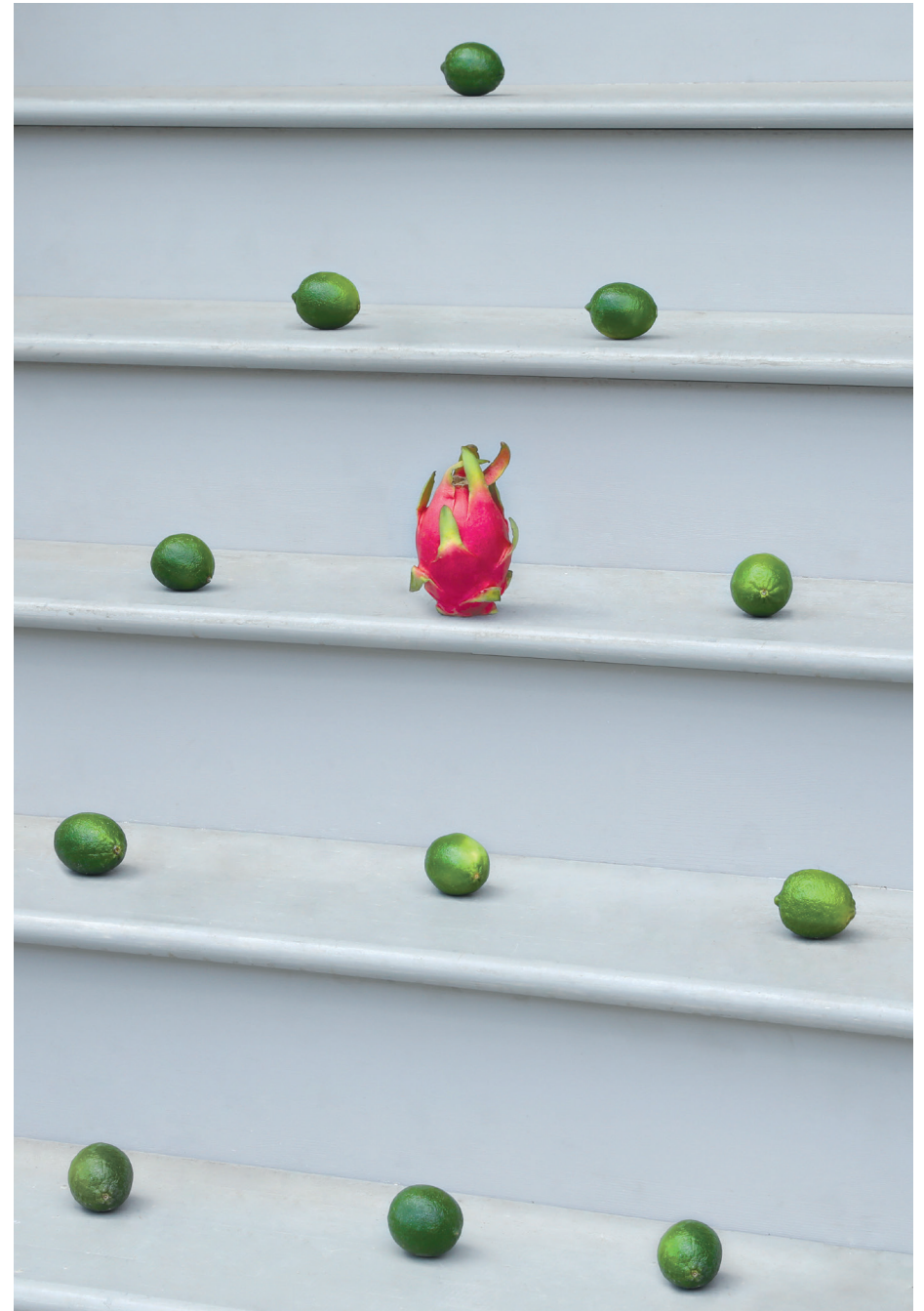
→ What do you look like? → What persona do you project to the world? → Are you protected by a hard shell like a coconut? → Are you spiked and prickly like a horned cucumber? → Are you soft and fuzzy like a kiwi, smooth as a nectarine, flamboyant as a dragon fruit? → Are you easily damaged, requiring careful handling like berries, or more resilient and thick-skinned like a lime? → Are you slow to ripen? → Do you thrive in certain climates? → Do you grow solo or in a bunch? → Do you bloom best in the jungle, the orchard, the greenhouse, the backyard? → Have you traveled far to get where you are right now? → Are you an heirloom variety or a hybrid, like a pluot or apriplum? → What about when you slice yourself open? → Are you hiding something surprisingly different beneath your skin? → Are you sour, sweet, or a bit of both? → What type of texture do you reveal when you lay yourself bare? → Do you shelter a multitude of seeds, like a watermelon or pomegranate? → What shape are they? → How big? → How many?

## My self-portrait

**Reflection:** What are the biggest differences between your exterior skin (how people see you at first glance) and your inner world (the soft, vulnerable parts that you reveal only to a chosen few, or to no one at all)? Does the description of your fruitself surprise you in any way?

# You Have More Power Than You Know

↓  
Exercise 1 2 3 4 5  
—



The things that make you who you are  
also give you power

Each of us is our own harshest critic, most of the time. We don't always see ourselves as we are. We instinctively try to hide many things about ourselves—our failures, our mistakes, our weaknesses, our obsessions.

But these imperfections are actually the things that connect us with other real human people. In fact, you might realize that the very reason you love certain movies or songs or books is because of the flawed characters, the fantastical storylines, the raw lyrics—things that make you feel less alone, less weird.

The things that make you *you* also give you power.

Purpose	To reveal the strength, beauty, and power that already live inside you.
Instruction	Look back at your self-portrait. On the following pages, find some powerful words and titles that match. Circle, underline, or even say the phrases out loud: “I am passionate. I am lyrical. I have within me a Guardian of Hope.” Select one (or more) of these phrases, write it down, and tape it to your bathroom mirror or carry it in your wallet to remind yourself of the power you hold within you, every day.



# I am...

Strong	Passionate	Enthusiastic	Witty
Exuberant	Kind	Bright	Sophisticated
Wild	Nurturing	Methodical	Magnetic
Peaceful	Organized	Articulate	Wise
Brave	Comforting	Erudite	Lyrical
Energetic	Joyful	Extraordinary	Well-spoken
Confident	Colorful	Artistic	Fiery
Persistent	Level-headed	Inspiring	Thoughtful
Calm	Distinctive	Responsible	Compassionate
Capable	Clever	Logical	Fierce
Dependable	Determined	Adventurous	Courageous
Warm	Hilarious	Empathetic	Wonder-filled

# I have within me a...

Blazer of Forgotten Trails	Tireless Wisdom Hunter
Spellbinding Poet	Swashbuckling Peacemaker
Queen of Shadows	Natural-Born Empath
Intrepid Cliff Jumper	Lionhearted Listener
Master Risk Taker	Dauntless Truth Seeker
Nurturer of Dreams	Father of Hearts
Fearless Fire Starter	Guardian of Hope
Magic-making Maestro	Paragon of Kindness
Pathfinding Prodigy	Vision-casting Virtuoso
Mother of Dragons	Warrior of Love

# The Story You Tell Yourself

Exercise 1 2 3 4 5  
↓  
-





**Part One:**

Ask yourself these self-audit questions. And remember: There are no right or wrong answers. Don't overthink it. Write the first answer that comes to mind.

What did you inherit? What are things you can't change about yourself (such as place of birth, aspects of your body, birth family)?

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What have you chosen? What have you made happen for yourself (things that are true because you changed them / chose them)?

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What have you become as a result of something that happened to you?

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What brings you deep joy? What do you love to do?

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What do you feel confident about?

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What do you want to be or do?

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What do you want to stop being or doing?

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**Part Two:**

Not everything in this portrait of yourself is of equal importance. There are going to be certain things that stand out. The things that you value most will be outlined in neon in your head. They will be the things you care about deeply and have experience with. So when you use your voice to speak about them, you will have both credibility and profound knowledge.

Take a look at your answers and see what leaps out. Use a highlighter or pen with a different color of ink to circle the things that catch your eye.

**Reflection**

Remember that your voice is your power, and it's most powerful when it's honest—not when you're saying what you think other people want to hear. So get real. Speak from the core of who you are, about what is in your heart of hearts.

Here's how you'll know that you're using your true voice to speak about what matters most:

- It won't go away.  
You can't get it out of your mind.  
It's an idea you keep returning to.
- It feels right.  
You feel it in your bones: this is good, it's right, it's meant to happen.
- It makes sense.  
You can see yourself doing it / saying it / writing it / drawing it / wearing it / painting it / singing it / making it.
- It doesn't hurt.  
At least not in a bad way. It might hurt in a good way, because it's going to require you to do some work. But if it is damaging or draining or demeaning, it's not for you.
- It lights you up.  
It gives you energy. You're passionate about it. When you talk about it, you lean forward, gesticulating wildly.

# Fear Won't Set You Free

Exercise 1 2 3 4 5  
↓  
-



Your story is yours to tell, whenever you're ready to share it

This journey to find and use your own true voice is quite often hard and uncomfortable.

For some it is much more difficult and scary than for others. It can even incur real physical and emotional risks. So maybe you've let fear silence you. It would be completely understandable.

The fear of how people might respond to you. Or how they won't. The fear of what happens next. The fear of making yourself vulnerable.

Call out those fears. And know that fear itself is often a signal that an issue, topic, or piece of your puzzle is important. When you feel afraid, sometimes that means it's the right moment to lift up your voice in a meaningful way.

**Purpose** To name your fears so you can find a way around, through, under, and over them.

**Instruction** Circle any of the fears on the next page that resonate with you. Add your own fears in the empty space below.

**Reflection** Your truth is valid, no matter what happens next. No matter how your voice might falter. No matter how many tone police or gaslighters show up in the comments section. There is no one else who can say what you have to say, who can tell the story you have to tell. Your story is yours to tell, whenever you're ready to share it.

→ I'm afraid of looking stupid.  
 → I'm afraid of failure. → I'm afraid of rejection. → I feel like I shouldn't take up this much space. → I'm afraid no one will listen. → I'm afraid of public speaking. → I'm scared that I'm not smart enough. → I'm afraid of what others will think.  
 → I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. → I'm afraid my mom will find out. → I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.  
 → I'm scared that people won't take me seriously. → What if I don't have anything of value to contribute to the world?  
 → This is too risky.



# Give Yourself Permission

Exercise 1 2 3 4 5  
↓  
-



Your voice is yours. You don't need to ask for permission to be who you are. The only person who needs to give you permission to share your story is you.

Purpose	To set some realistic goals that will move you along this journey of giving yourself permission to use your voice.
Instruction	<p>Now that you've identified some things you want to put out into the world (your values), complete the thoughts on the next two pages to help clarify your message, medium, audience, and real-life plan.</p> <p>When you've completed this exercise, you can pin up the enclosed poster to remind yourself of what you've accomplished.</p>
Reflection	<p>You might ask: How do I give myself permission to speak? The reality is that it's a bit of a mind game. It's something you have to keep reminding yourself to do when you feel that you're sitting things out or shutting yourself down.</p> <p>Sometimes you might have to remind yourself several times a day (or an hour) that you have given yourself permission to use your voice. If it helps, create a mantra for when you need it: <i>I have given myself permission to speak. My voice matters. The only one who needs to give me permission is me.</i></p>

The only person who needs to give you permission to share your story is you.

→ What

I want to use my voice to...

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→ How

My voice can be any form of expression.  
I communicate most effectively through...

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→ Who

My audience is...

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→ When

Within the next month, I will...

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→ When

By this time next year, I will have...

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**Accountability:** Want to make sure you keep it real? Set a reminder on your calendar to look back at this page in a month, in three months, in a year.

# Your Voice Matters

Finding your voice is a journey, and you are well on your way down that road.

But, remember, your voice is not fixed. It's fluid. The questions of who you are and what you care about are ones that you will have to revisit time and again. Because your identity is not carved in stone. Living, if you're doing it right, changes you.

You're going to travel to foreign lands and meet new people and read powerful words, and these things will change you. You're going to love people and lose people and hurt people and be hurt by people, and these things will change you. Parenthood will change you. Getting older will change you.

So you'll have to recalibrate from time to time—open up and ask yourself again: *Who am I, here at this point in my life? What's going on inside of me now? And does that change anything about how I'm expressing my identity or my values to the world?*

You will always have a story to tell. And there will always be someone who needs to hear it. If you are brave enough to use your voice, you can give someone else the courage to find their own. You can inspire someone or awaken someone or make them uncomfortable enough that they begin to question their own fears and prejudices. Your story can, quite literally, change the world.



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**PERMISSION TO SPEAK**