

# UNBOUND RECLAIMING WHO YOU ARE BEYOND IDENTITY



Emily  
Maroutian

© 2025 by Emily Maroutian

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, reprinted, or sold without the prior written permission of Emily Maroutian, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in articles or reviews.

Paperback ISBN-13: 9798293678846

DISCLAIMER: This free PDF copy of *Unbound* is authorized by Emily Maroutian for public use. You are welcome to read it and share it freely in its original, unaltered form. Reprinting, modifying, or selling this file or any portion of it is strictly prohibited without written permission from the author.



Maroutian Entertainment  
Los Angeles, California  
[www.maroutian.com](http://www.maroutian.com)

Other Books by [Emily Maroutian](#)

Manifesting Me: Unlock the Power of Your Future Self Today

Forty: A Collection of 300 Personal Insights

Your Empowered Self: Activities, Exercises, and Steps for  
Living an Empowered Life

In Case Nobody Told You: Passages of Wisdom and  
Encouragement

Adventures in Thinking: Opening the Mind Beyond Practiced  
Limitations

The Book of Relief: Passages and Exercises to Relieve Negative  
Emotion and Create More Ease in The Body

Thirty: A Collection of Personal Quotes, Advice, and Lessons

Energy of Emotions: The 10 Emotional Environments and How  
They Shape The World Around Us

The Process of I: An Exploration into the Intertwined  
Relationship between Identity and Environment

A Second Opinion: Theories and Observations on Life and  
Human Behavior



- Table of Contents -

An Invitation	9
Unlabeled	15
 <b>Part 1: Elements of Identity</b>	
Identity / Stereotype	25
Preference / Judgment	45
Self-Reflection / Projection	67
Compassion / Separation	85
 <b>Part 2: The Power of Choice</b>	
Appreciation or Comparison	101
Cooperation or Competition	117
Authenticity or Uniformity	131
Expansion or Contraction	149
 <b>Part 3: Expanding The Self</b>	
Self with Other	167
Us and Them	185
The Becoming	205
Unbound	229



Freedom is inevitable for the mind  
unwilling to defend its conditioning.





## An Invitation:

This book is an invitation to open your mind to self-discovery and exploration. Together, we will embark on a journey through the complex and multi-layered dimensions of the self and the other: the *I*, the *you*, and the *we*. Who are you? Who am I? Who are we as a community, a group, or a society? How does identity play a role in our liberation or limitation?

These questions have the potential to foster a more unified understanding. One where the limits of labels and categories start to fall away, revealing the wide range of human experiences that challenge simple classification.

No man is an island, as the saying goes. And so, no identity is defined in isolation. There is no *I* without *you*. No *you* without *I*. The *I* in me is better defined when it meets the contrast of *you*. We come to know ourselves not only through self-analysis but through interaction. Through reflection. Through contrast. Up is defined through its relation to down. Inside is defined by its relation to outside. To be defined as a “thing” is also to be defined as NOT another thing. *I am this, which also means I am not that.*

The *I* in me is better defined when it meets the presence of *you*. Your difference sharpens my clarity of self. Your truth invites me to examine mine. Your way of being reveals new facets of my own. Other people offer us mirrors of our

Emily Maroutian

own identities; the parts and aspects we have chosen consciously and subconsciously. Through each encounter, we face a choice: should we continue to hold and strengthen our responses, or should we seek change?

Every conversation, every disagreement, every unexpected reaction is a window. Each one is asking, Who are you here? Who are you now? How do you want to show up? Which identity is present? Do you want to continue showing up in this way? How would your life change if you showed up differently?

Since our identities were given to us by our families, cultures, traditions, and society, we might not even be willing to ask those questions. The more tightly we defend our identities, the more easily we are influenced, shaped, and controlled by those entities. By loosening our grip a little, by questioning our conditioning, we create the space to discover who we truly are beneath it all.

We are not meant to live inside echo chambers of sameness. We are meant to collide gently, to brush up against each other's edges, to stretch and soften and reconsider. To see ourselves more clearly through the mirror of another's eyes. That doesn't mean losing ourselves in others. It means finding ourselves through relationships, through experiences, through compassionate understanding.

## Unbound

We are not built in solitude. We are built in the space between self and other, between speaking and listening, between holding and releasing. And when we learn to see that space not as a threat, but as a bridge, we stop trying to define ourselves in opposition to others.

We begin to define ourselves in relation, not through comparison, but through connection. We understand that difference is not a call for more sameness. Difference is a necessary component for existence. It doesn't need to be changed or eliminated. It's the core and essence of all life.

This book is a journey into self-awareness. It's not about telling you *what* to think but encouraging you to question what you already do. Question what you've been taught. Question the assumptions you've made about others. Question the ways you've defined yourself. With questioning comes clarity, and with clarity comes liberation.

*Unbound* is essentially about freedom. The kind that lives beyond stereotypes, traditions, and societal expectations. It's not about rejecting identity or eliminating distinctions. Instead, it's about examining our inherited constructs and deciding which ones to keep, reshape, or discard. It's about moving from rigid definitions to fluid possibilities. Not through force, not through shame, not through blame, only through curiosity and open-mindedness.

Emily Maroutian

Small shifts in our perceptions of ourselves and others can break years of cycles of judgment and division, paving the way for deeper understanding and cooperation. Since transformation doesn't stop with the individual, this ripple effect can create waves of change that extend beyond individual lives and into families, communities, and even societies.

As you read these pages, I encourage you to remain receptive. Not all of these concepts will feel comfortable to you. Some will challenge the beliefs you've held for decades. However, if you remain curious, you will find that the freedom to think beyond conditioning leads to a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you.

However, none of this is meant to force a change. You are free to abstain from any abstract ideas this book presents. You don't have to "do" anything. This book is a concept you can "try on" much like a new jacket. See how it fits you. How do you feel in it? Does it feel like you? Do you want to keep it or pass it on to someone who would benefit from it more? These concepts may not be suitable for everyone, and that's okay. This book is not for them. It's for the ones "unreasonable" enough to believe we can, in fact, change the world one person at a time. That even one person is worth it if they go on to influence their little corner of the world.

## Unbound

Ultimately, this is a journey toward wholeness, where we rediscover the connection we've always shared and step boldly into a world no longer limited by fear, division, and labels. Together, we can uncover what lies beyond them, which is an expansive world of relation, compassion, and possibility.

You will find, as you turn these pages, that labels are not simply words. They are walls. Sometimes they keep us safe. Sometimes they keep us small. Sometimes they keep us apart. This book invites you to loosen those walls, not to erase your identity, but to remember who you are beneath what you've been told to be.

To be clear: This book does not ask you to condone hatred from another. It does not ask you to stand silent in the face of cruelty or harm. It asks you to understand what builds the walls between us, and what's possible beyond them. You do not have to open your arms to every belief that exists. The work here is not to excuse harm. It is to see the wounds beneath it, the personal systems that feed it, the fear that shapes it, so that *you* do not carry it forward within yourself.

As tempting as it may be to try to change others, this book is more about your own identity work. You cannot free anyone who is not ready to live a life of freedom. You cannot liberate anyone who finds safety or comfort in their

Emily Maroutian

own limitations. Your power resides within you, in how you shape your own life and how you show up in the world. That work is yours alone. You cannot do someone else's work for them, nor can you force their becoming. You can only become more of yourself. And by living that truth, you might just invite others to find theirs. Not through force, shame, pressure, or aggression, but through the example of what's possible. Allow them to be inspired enough to begin their own journey. You can't walk it for them, but you can set an example of a new standard.

Don't underestimate the power of living authentically and freely. It's contagious. When you stand true to yourself and stay present in your interactions, you become an opening for others. You may never know who is changed by your presence, or whose heart softens because you showed up as you. True change occurs in unseen spaces, where one honest heart makes space for another to open. This forms the foundation of lasting change.

This book is the essential practice of "be the change you wish to see in the world." So, turn the page and let this be the moment you step forward – unbound, unmasked, and unafraid to be you.

-Emily Maroutian

August 2025

# Unlabeled

Human beings are natural organizers. Our brains are wired to sort, categorize, and label the world around us. This instinctive ability enables us to make sense of our environment and navigate life more effectively. It not only supports our survival but also ensures our usefulness and productivity in society.

Imagine walking into a room filled with a variety of objects. Your brain would instantly begin identifying and labeling what it saw: a chair, a table, a book, or a lamp. This rapid and subconscious categorization process allows us to move through the world quickly and predictably. Without it, every experience would be a disorienting encounter with the unknown. Our brains would have to use significant energy to relearn every item and its intended use.

Neurologically, the brain conserves energy through

## Emily Maroutian

habit and repetition. When we encounter something new, our brain categorizes it in relation to a previously established category. It asks questions on an intuitive level, buried deep within our subconsciousness. How does this fit into what I already know? How does it benefit me? Could it be harmful to me? Do I want to engage with it or leave it alone? Is it a threat to my well-being or a helpful resource?

We remember past experiences and previously learned information to sort new experiences. This mental shortcut, often referred to as “heuristics,” is essential for our survival. The categorization does not have to be perfect or even correct; it must simply be “good enough” for survival. This, unfortunately, leaves too much room for errors.

Our ancestors depended on their ability to label threats quickly. For example, a rustling in the bushes could mean *wolf, danger, run!* This instinctual and automatic process ensured their survival, enabling them to respond quickly without wasting valuable time analyzing every detail about the sound or the location. They did not need to assess the sound accurately; they only needed to survive it. Facts were not a factor. It’s better to be wrong about the wolf in the bushes while fleeing from a rabbit than to assume it’s a rabbit and be mistaken—and eaten. Therefore, rustling in



## Unbound

the bushes became labeled as a threat.

This same mechanism continues to serve us in modern life. However, bushes have been replaced by buildings, and wolves have been replaced by other people. If we are not too careful, these lines can blur into boxes that keep us trapped, not only through how we define others, but also through how we see ourselves.

Most categories begin forming in our minds before we can understand what they mean. Some are assigned quietly within our homes: “You’re the responsible one,” “The difficult one,” “The funny one.” Others are assigned loudly by our larger environment: “You’re a girl,” “You’re Armenian,” “You’re Christian.” While there’s nothing inherently wrong or incorrect with any of these labels, they come with a predetermined set of behaviors and expectations. If your actions step outside these expectations, there will likely be unpleasant consequences.

It’s perfectly acceptable to embrace a label or an identity if it brings you pride or expands your sense of self. This book is not about rejecting what uplifts you or simplifies your life; it’s about questioning what confines you and how those labels can divide and diminish our shared humanity.

For example, it’s one thing to hold the label of Christian;

Emily Maroutian

it's another to carry "anti-Muslim" alongside it. One affirms your own faith. The other denies someone else's. One does not have to equal the other automatically. This is where labels can shift from self-focused to other-focused.

Some labels are personal. Some are cultural. Some are self-imposed. But all of them do the same thing: they reduce us to something simpler, something more manageable to understand. And over time, if we hear them enough, we start to believe they are the whole story of who we are.

On the other hand, labels can be very beneficial in today's world of significant technological and medical advancements. For one, they simplify communication and understanding. When a doctor diagnoses someone with hypertension, that label communicates a complex biological phenomenon in a single term. Instead of describing the physiological process, "Your blood vessels are constricting, causing increased pressure and impacting your heart rate," we use the term "hypertension." This label makes it easier to discuss, understand, and treat the condition. Similarly, labels like teacher, artist, or engineer help us quickly grasp someone's role or expertise in society. It saves us time and energy to condense the meaning into a word or two.

In many ways, labels are vital. They streamline our

## Unbound

interactions and allow us to function within a highly complex society. Explaining even the simplest concepts would become an overwhelming task without them. However, what is efficient for the brain is not always beneficial for society, humanity, or our personal lives.

While labels help us understand, they can also confine and distort our understanding. When we apply them without thought or awareness, labels can become harmful. They create stereotypes that reduce individuals to oversimplified and exaggerated representations. Instead of seeing a person for who they truly are, we judge them based on previously held beliefs about their gender, ethnicity, religion, or role in our lives. A single label can eclipse the depth and complexity of a human being, dividing us rather than connecting us.

This tendency to rely on stereotypes promotes judgment and hinders compassion. When we define someone by their label rather than their individuality, we lose sight of their humanity. We overlook the “grey” areas – the nuances of being human. A stereotype acts as a barrier, preventing us from seeing the shared experiences and emotions that unite us. It creates an “us vs. them” mentality, reinforcing divisions that isolate us in our corresponding categories.

## Emily Maroutian

Self-labeling can become a mental cage as well. When we over-identify with a label, we often restrict our choices and behavior to fit within its boundaries. For example, someone who identifies as “shy” may avoid opportunities to speak up, even when they feel confident in their abilities. A person who labels themselves as “the funny one” might suppress their more serious or vulnerable side, fearing it would contradict their perceived identity.

These self-imposed limitations can prevent growth and exploration. When we confine ourselves to a label, we deny the fluidity and complexity of our nature. We become stuck in patterns of behavior that feel safe and predictable, but may no longer serve us.

Breaking free from these self-imposed labels requires courage and curiosity. A willingness to step outside of our comfort zones and embrace all aspects of who we are. It’s about using the tools of awareness and detachment to free ourselves from the mental prisons we’ve forced upon ourselves because of family, society, culture, religion, politics, or community.

We want so much to identify and simplify the world around us that we’ve created complex problems our own minds can’t solve. We’ve created and fallen into our own

## Unbound

mental trap. The key here, then, is working with the mind itself.

Our perspective influences what we notice. If we search for faults in someone, we will find them. If we focus on our differences, they will stand out clearly. The brain is remarkably skilled at finding evidence that supports what it's looking for. Ask it to find reasons to dislike yourself; it will produce a list. Ask it to find reasons to dislike someone else; it will generate another list.

The questions we ask ourselves, the labels we use, the aspects we focus on, and the thoughts we believe all contribute to our connection or disconnection, success or failure, love or fear. This is why awareness matters. Because while the brain's need to label helps us understand faster, our conscious mind holds the power to slow down, question, and reexamine. It allows us to see beyond the surface and appreciate the intricacies that make each person, experience, and moment unique.

The fact is that labels don't just live in language. They live in memory, in emotion, in the body. We don't just think them, we carry them. Over time, they become woven into how we speak, what we expect, what we fear, and how we love. We stop noticing the difference between who we are

## Emily Maroutian

and who we've been told to be. That's why awareness is an essential tool, not just to perceive the world more clearly but to reconnect with ourselves.

The good news is that while the brain is wired for efficiency, it is also capable of adaptation and change. With practice, we can train ourselves to move beyond labels and engage with the world in a more conscious and inclusive way. The same brain that seeks out labels can be guided to look for deeper understanding and connection. It only requires your willingness, your sense of curiosity, and your participation.

Labels will always be a part of our lives; there's no question about that, but we don't have to allow them to define or dictate how we see ourselves or others. They don't have to control our choices or our perspectives. By opening our minds and questioning the limitations of these mental shortcuts, we can begin to see ourselves, the world, and each other through a lens of curiosity, understanding, and cooperation. That's where freedom begins, not in erasing the labels, but in loosening their grip on us. When we remember that we are more than the words used to describe us, we begin the real work of becoming who we truly are.

*Part 1:*  
*Elements of Identity*





# Identity / Stereotype

The moment we are born, we are given a name, a culture, a religion, a gender role, a social status, and categorized by race or nationality. These labels are meant to provide clarity and structure. They help us navigate the world by giving us a sense of belonging and direction. Additionally, defining roles, behaviors, and possibilities offers context for understanding ourselves and others.

However, while these labels are initially helpful, they can become limiting when they are rigidly applied. They begin as tools to simplify life, but can restrict personal growth and self-discovery over time. They are meant to guide us in the world, but often evolve into strict definitions that confine us. They dictate who we should be instead of allowing us to discover who we truly are or who we would rather be.

Emily Maroutian

For instance, what happens if we hold two contradicting characteristics within our identity? What happens when we no longer fit inside rigid boxes? What if we have two seemingly opposing truths or beliefs? What if we are both Muslim and gay, Republican and Pro-Choice, a Democrat and pro-gun? What if we don't entirely fit into the rigid definition of our labels?

What if our joy doesn't look the way it's supposed to, or our pain doesn't follow the script for grief or trauma? What if we don't behave the way "victims" are expected to behave? What if the roles we were given can no longer contain the complexity we've grown into? Do we choose one truth over another? Do we hide one aspect of ourselves to continue to belong within our communities? Do we suppress, deny, shame, or exile aspects of who we are to become a more digestible version for others?

Rigid identities don't allow room for contradiction, not without repercussions. They demand consistency over honesty. But human beings are not consistent. We are layered, evolving, and often contradictory by nature. However, the problem is not that we are complex; the problem is that we were taught that complexity is confusing, or worse, unacceptable. Instead of showing

## Unbound

others that the majority of the world exists in the grey zone, we follow the script and choose a side. And so, we shrink ourselves to fit what's familiar to others. We want to belong. We want to be understood. So, we reorganize our identity to fit in.

Since we are not born with a complete identity, we build it over time through the beliefs we inherit, the traditions we practice, and our overall experiences. From an early age, we absorb the ideas of others – parents, teachers, peers, media, and society – and unconsciously construct a sense of self from these external influences. We subconsciously scan our environment and ask ourselves some crucial questions: What part of me helps me feel more accepted? What makes me feel less left out? How can I improve my adaptability?

This begs the question, how much of our identity is truly ours? If we were born in a different country or raised by different parents, we would likely hold different beliefs and live by different values. This simple fact reveals that much of what we identify with is not fixed or intrinsic. It is borrowed, adopted, and reinforced by the environment around us. We rarely stop to question these layers, and so they solidify into “truths” that govern our identities and therefore our lives.

Emily Maroutian

Our sense of survival is deeply connected to these identities because they are rooted in our families, communities, and our sense of safety and belonging within them. Questioning our identity risks our sense of belonging within our environments. This is why we continue to cling to identities and communities that limit or confine us. We are not as willing to change because change feels like a sort of death.

But what if it's not a death at all? What if it's a returning? A return to something softer, truer, something that existed before the world told us who to be. Letting go doesn't have to mean losing ourselves. It can mean finally meeting ourselves without the noise or the boxes.

Yes, it may feel like the end of something, but often, what's ending is the performance. The pretending. The version of us that was shaped entirely by expectation and survival. And what begins in its place is real. Not polished. Not universally accepted. Not easy to explain. But real.

That is the invitation, not to abandon identity, but to reclaim authorship. To choose what stays. To release what no longer fits. To question, not as an act of rebellion, but as an act of reverence for the truth trying to rise within us. Because the more we understand how much we've

## Unbound

inherited, the more power we have to create something new. And that isn't the end. It's the beginning.

### **What is Identity?**

Identity is the inner story we tell ourselves about who we are. It's made up of the beliefs we hold, the roles we play, the traits we value, and the patterns we repeat. It's the answer to the question, "Who am I?" whether whispered quietly or shouted into the world.

But identity is not just one thing. It's a layered structure, built over time from our upbringing, culture, relationships, traumas, victories, and the meanings we've made of them. Some parts are chosen. Some are inherited. Some are reactions to pain. Some are dreams we haven't yet birthed to life.

At its core, identity is both the lens and the anchor. It shapes how we see the world and gives us a sense of continuity as we move through it. But when held too tightly, it can also become a cage. When we confuse who we are with who we've had to be, we limit the possibility of who we could become.

You might have been the peacemaker in your family, the overachiever, the quiet one, the strong one. Not because

## Emily Maroutian

that's who you truly were, but because that's what was needed for love, safety, peace, or approval.

Over time, those roles hardened into identity. You began to believe that being "The responsible one" or "The one who never needs help" was simply who you are. But those were just responses. Adaptations. They helped you survive environments that didn't make space for your whole self.

The problem isn't that you played a role; it's that no one told you that you were allowed to outgrow it. That you could choose a different way of being once the danger had passed. And that choice is where your real identity begins. Because you are not the choice; you are the chooser. You are the decider. You are the one who picks. True freedom is contained within this understanding.

True identity is not found in what we've been told; it's found in what remains when we start telling the truth. It's not a label. It's not a performance. It's not a role. It's the being beneath it all. And once we come home to that, everything else becomes a choice, not a prison. We wake up to our ability to choose who we are and how we move forward from here.

**Labels Expand or Constrict:**

Labels can enhance our identities and lives by offering a sense of belonging and connection. Labels provide us with community and support when we find others who share them. They have the potential to enrich our lives by fostering unity and understanding. There is value in feeling pride about a label that resonates with you, as it can add depth to your sense of self.

Labels can also carry automatic, limiting definitions. When you hear words like “Wife,” “Hindu,” or “Italian,” your mind immediately forms an image of who that person *should* be, what they *should* believe, and how they *should* behave. If the individual doesn’t conform to these expectations, it can create discomfort, shock, or even conflict. We unknowingly confine people within the boxes of our assumptions, expecting them to live up to our version of their label, whether the expectation is positive or negative.

This dynamic not only restricts others but also creates tension in our relationships. By imposing expectations of roles, we burden others with the task of meeting our ideas of who they should be. In doing so, we limit their freedom as well as our own ability to truly see and understand them.

Emily Maroutian

The same is true for ourselves.

Philosopher and author Søren Kierkegaard captured this paradox when he said, “Once you label me, you negate me.” When others project predefined labels onto us, they diminish our individuality. We are no longer seen as we are but as the image created by their expectations. This is the restrictive side of labels. It’s something we must keep in mind when choosing our labels. It is a delicate balance between expanding and restricting our sense of self.

Your beliefs about labels either liberate or constrain. They have the power to set you free or keep you boxed in. The same is true for how your beliefs impact others. However, you can let go of the stereotypes and limiting definitions tied to labels. You can allow yourself to experience the full spectrum of life. In this way, the world becomes larger, more expansive, and filled with possibility. This is the path to true freedom: by eliminating the barriers imposed by labels and embracing the infinite complexity of who we are.

### **The Trap of Simplification:**

While identity is deeply personal, stereotypes are society’s way of simplifying it. They are prepackaged



## Unbound

definitions based on external traits, such as gender roles, race, or profession. Stereotypes are convenient for the brain, which seeks shortcuts to understand the world. But these shortcuts are limiting. They reduce complex individuals to oversimplified categories, stripping them of their depth and humanity.

Stereotypes not only affect how we perceive others but also shape our self-perception. A young boy who is told he should be great at sports may carry the label of weakness throughout his life simply because he's not. A woman who is repeatedly told she is "quiet" might avoid speaking up, believing her voice does not matter. These labels become self-fulfilling prophecies, not because they are true, but because they are considered to be true.

Over time, stereotypes become more than assumptions; we start to wear them. We internalize the judgments, expectations, and roles that have been assigned to us, and they begin to shape how we behave, what we believe is possible, and even how we value ourselves. Without realizing it, we move through life responding not to who we truly are, but to who we think we're supposed to be.

Pride in a label can feel empowering. "I am the reliable one," or "I am the achiever." However, it can also trap us.

## Emily Maroutian

We may feel pressure to maintain that identity, even when it no longer serves us. We may fear that stepping outside of it will disappoint others or disrupt our sense of self. Self-labeling can be just as confining as societal stereotypes.

When we define ourselves by one characteristic or role, we limit our possibilities, even when we perceive ourselves as complex or multilayered.

In fact, it's easy to fall into the trap of seeing ourselves as complex and others as simple. If I were having a bad day and reacted rudely to someone, I might give myself the benefit of the doubt because I was having a bad day. I wouldn't make the short experience a part of my personality. However, the other person might. They might see it as, "This generation is bad-mannered." "Armenians are rude." "Women are inconsiderate." I will be stereotyped as part of a group I appear to belong to. It won't just be me, as an individual, who is accountable for her own actions. A whole group of people will be included in that judgment.

We grant ourselves the nuance of being multilayered while reducing others to stereotypes. This double standard blinds us to our shared humanity and creates an "us vs. them" mindset that fuels division and misunderstanding.

Stereotypes are not just social tools; they are identity

## Unbound

shapers. They influence how we present ourselves in the world, how safe we feel being seen, and how much of ourselves we are willing to reveal. And while we may not be able to control how others perceive us, we can reclaim the power to decide what we internalize. When we do, we begin to make the subtle but radical shift from being defined by the world to defining ourselves within it.

### **Living Through Roles:**

Consider the roles we play – parent, partner, artist, leader. These roles shape how we see ourselves, but what happens when they change? When the relationship ends, the children grow up, or the art no longer inspires? Does our identity disappear with them? If our sense of self is tied to things that can change, then who are we when those things are gone? If other people determine who we are based on the roles we play with them, are we free to be ourselves? Are you ever truly “you?” Is there a “you” without another?

You might know yourself through a profession or a job, but what happens when you lose the job, or you don’t like the profession anymore? Who are you then? Where did your identity go? Did you stop being yourself if you no

## Emily Maroutian

longer practice law, write books, or teach a class? Are you a sum of all your parts? What happens when those parts change? What happens when our role changes?

Roles are deeply intertwined with our identities, but they are not fixed; instead, they are dynamic and evolving. They are not the essence of who we are. They are often projections of familial or societal expectations. For example, a parent is expected to be nurturing, selfless, and sacrificial. A boss is expected to be decisive, commanding, and confident. While these traits may align with some individuals' natural tendencies, they can also feel restrictive for those who don't fit the mold.

The pressure to conform to roles can stifle authenticity. A mother who pursues her own passions might be labeled as neglectful. A man who expresses vulnerability might be told he is failing at being a "real" man. These judgments not only limit the individual but also reinforce narrow definitions of what a role should be.

Once we believe we are the role, we begin to live for it. We measure our worth by how well we perform it. We suppress the parts of ourselves that don't fit it. Even when the role becomes heavy, we still carry it because we've tied it to our values, our identity, and our relationships. We fear

## Unbound

that stepping out of it will make us unrecognizable, unlovable, or even abandoned. So we stay inside the version of ourselves that feels acceptable, even when it no longer feels true.

However, roles are not static; they evolve as our lives change. A teacher might leave the classroom to become a student again. An athlete might transition into coaching. A caregiver might need care themselves. These shifts can feel destabilizing, as though a part of our identity is lost. But they also offer a chance to redefine who we are within our own identities.

We don't necessarily need to eliminate the role; it might just require a redefinition. Sometimes it simply needs to be expanded to hold more of who we are. A man doesn't have to reject manhood to be whole; he can redefine it to include emotional awareness, kindness, and vulnerability. A leader doesn't have to stop leading; she can lead with empathy instead of control, and collaboration instead of authority. When we expand a role rather than escape it, we allow ourselves to grow inside it. We make room for our full humanity to breathe.

Perhaps, then, we are the observers of these changes, the awareness that remains constant while circumstances, roles,

Emily Maroutian

and identities shift around us. This perspective invites us to see identity not as something fixed or lost but as something fluid. Something constantly adapting to the new while holding onto an unchanging core of self-awareness.

### **Identity in Motion:**

When we allow external factors to control us, we give away our power. A breakup, a job loss, or a life transition can feel like an identity crisis, but it can also be an opportunity to ask ourselves some profound questions: Who am I without these things? What do I want to become? Am I just reacting to life?

Perhaps the answer is that we are not fixed identities, but ever-changing, evolving beings. Perhaps our identities are always in motion. When we let go of the need to fit into a box or to put others into one, we experience a deeper sense of freedom. This freedom feels like breathing fresh air after being in a confined space; it expands our perspectives and allows us to see ourselves and others more clearly.

Practically, it means questioning the roles and labels we've accepted and asking whether they serve who we want to be. It means giving ourselves permission to explore new interests, adopt different roles, and redefine our values.

## Unbound

It also involves extending this grace to others by withholding judgment and remaining curious about their complexities.

In letting go, we open the door to infinite possibilities for connection, growth, and understanding. We begin to see ourselves and others not as labels, but as living, breathing expressions of possibility. We can embrace the full spectrum of who we are and extend the same understanding to those around us.

So, who are you? Are you the roles you play, the beliefs you hold, and the labels you've adopted? Or are you the fluid and evolving essence that remains as these roles and labels shift? Are you something deeper than what is perceived by others? These questions challenge us to look beyond the surface and to reconnect with the essence of who we are.

By tying our identity to something greater than external definitions, we can embrace the freedom to grow, adapt, and rediscover ourselves continuously, regardless of what that might look like or how others might feel about it. This reminds us that life is not about being defined; it is about simply *being*. It is about *life*, energy, flow, and movement.

### **Identity as Creation:**

What if identity isn't just something we create, but also identity creates as well? Identity isn't just a costume we put on; it's active. It's not buried underneath life; it's woven into it. Every time we tell the world who we are, every time we act on a belief about ourselves, we are not just revealing identity; we're building through it. We are shaping the world around us through our understanding of self. We move through the world based on how we see ourselves.

The self isn't just a fossil we dig up from the past. It's a blueprint we write into the future. The person we believe ourselves to be becomes the architect of our reality. If we believe we are unworthy, we will build a life that confirms it. If we believe we are powerful, we will build a life that reflects it. Identity is not just a mirror; it's also a projector. It doesn't wait for reality to validate it. It creates a reality to match it. Who we think we are becomes the limit or the launch point for what we allow ourselves to have, be, or do.

Who we believe we are — our "I am" — doesn't just shape our behavior, it shapes the world we live in. This belief acts like a filter, a lens. It colors what we see, how we interpret others, and how we interpret ourselves. If your lens says, "I am not enough," then everything becomes evidence of that



## Unbound

belief. Compliments feel suspicious. Opportunities feel unreachable. Rejection feels inevitable. The people around us begin fulfilling their roles in our story. But when the lens shifts to “I am whole,” or “I am allowed to make mistakes,” then the same life starts to look different. That’s the creative power of identity. We’re not just responding to life, we’re forming it. We’re “activating” it through our identities and behaviors.

Most change happens when we adjust our behavior, but transformation happens when we release the identity that created that behavior in the first place. You can work on breaking the habit, which is usually unsuccessful, or you can release the part of yourself that needs the habit to feel whole, validated, loved, or safe.

We can spend years trying to fix symptoms without ever addressing the root cause. We can read every book, take every course, and still feel stuck, because nothing changes until the identity changes. But when we let go of the old “I am,” the one who needed protection, validation, or control, we open the door to a new way of living. Not a better version of the same story, but a different story entirely.

Emily Maroutian

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Becoming the Author of Your Identity

Notice the Narrator: For one full day, become aware of the internal narration that uses “I am...” Every time you catch it, whether it’s “I am tired,” “I am too much,” “I am not good at this” — pause. Ask yourself: Is this a truth or a habit? Is this an identity I want to carry forward? You’re not trying to change the thoughts yet. Just observe. Awareness is the first act of liberation. It’s step one.

Challenge a Label: Choose one personal label, journal about how it has shaped your behavior. Ask yourself: What would I do differently if I didn’t identify with this label? Who am I with this label? How am I expected to act or behave through it? Do I want to keep it? What would it mean to expand it or remove it altogether?

Observe Without Assumptions: For one day, consciously avoid assuming someone’s identity or beliefs based on their appearance, occupation, or political/religious affiliations. Instead, ask questions or stay curious about who they really are. Reflect on how this changes your interactions.

## Unbound

Sometimes it's simpler to free others of their identities before we can free ourselves. Getting into the habit of releasing others from their stereotypes will affect how you begin seeing yourself as well. It doesn't matter where you begin the practice; what matters is that you practice.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

Who Am I Without the Noise of Labels?

What identity have I subconsciously inherited through culture, family, religion, or survival that may no longer feel true? (Notice what feels imposed rather than freely chosen.)

What "I am" statements quietly shape how I see myself today? (Examples: "I am not lovable," "I am the responsible one," "I am too much," etc. Where did they come from? Are they still serving you? How are they limiting you?)

When I imagine releasing one of those identities, what emotions come up — fear, relief, resistance, grief? (Let yourself feel the cost of holding on and the risk of letting go.)

Emily Maroutian

What identity am I ready to grow into now? What new “I am” would align with the life I want to create? (It doesn’t need to be grand. It just needs to be true.)

How does the way I see others shift when I feel safe and grounded in who I am? (Do I judge less? Compete less? Connect more? Am I more fun, open, and kind?)

Have I ever mistaken a stereotype for someone’s identity or my own? What happened when I looked deeper? (Explore one experience where your perception shifted.)

If I let go of who I was taught to be, who might I become? (Allow yourself to sit with that one.)

## Preference / Judgment

Human beings naturally notice differences in one another and in our environments. We observe differences in people, places, and things as part of how we make sense of the world. Whether it's the color of someone's skin, the language they speak, or the traditions they follow, recognizing differences is part of our inherent wiring. This ability helps us navigate unfamiliar spaces and develop a deeper understanding.

Alongside those distinctions, we also develop preferences — leanings toward the experiences, people, and ideas that feel familiar, safe, or enjoyable. These preferences are shaped by our upbringing, culture, values, and memories. Over time, we begin to favor certain expressions of life over others, often without questioning where those

inclinations came from.

By the time we've constructed our identity, our preferences often reflect more than just mere taste. They reflect how we've been shaped. What we were praised for, what we were punished for, what we had to become to belong within our communities. Preferences seem innocent, but they often carry the weight of identity.

When preferences are attached to judgment, they lose their helpfulness. Consider the difference between saying, "I prefer hazel eyes," and "Hazel eyes are better than blue eyes." The former expresses personal taste; the latter implies a hierarchy of values. It suggests that one characteristic is naturally superior to another, creating unnecessary conflict and comparison.

The moment we begin to assign meaning to the differences we observe in others by labeling them as better or worse, right or wrong, we step into the realm of judgment. What began as a neutral observation evolves into a subtle hierarchy. We didn't just notice what we would prefer; we ranked it. And in doing so, we began to separate, limit, and close ourselves off from what we don't understand.

The problem isn't the preference; we all have

## Unbound

preferences. They are formed through our experiences with the outside world and with one another. From the foods we enjoy to the clothes we find most appealing, our preferences shape how we show up in the world. They are personal expressions of taste, formed by a combination of biology, upbringing, and experience. We all have a multitude of preferences spread across various subjects.

You might prefer pizza over burgers, a black car over a white one, pants over skirts, a cold day over a hot one, a friendly waiter over a mean one. Every experience shifts and shapes our preferences. More of this. Less of that. But what happens when these preferences evolve into judgments? When our personal likes and dislikes are no longer just about our choices but become standards by which we measure others?

Preferences say, "This is what feels right for me." Judgments say, "This is what should be right for everyone." One leaves space for difference; the other seeks agreement, often subconsciously. This shift from personal taste to imposed value can have real consequences, especially when it reinforces assumptions about people, cultures, or ways of being.

This is where our internal biases begin to take shape.

Emily Maroutian

When we consistently see our preferences as superior, we start to believe that our way is the right way. This belief then becomes a lens through which we evaluate others, not just as different, but as wrong, lesser, or even threatening.

What starts as a quiet judgment can quickly take root in collective thinking, reinforced by culture, media, and history. And without realizing it, we begin to mistake familiarity for truth, and difference for danger.

### **Creating Value Judgments:**

The ability to notice distinctions is deeply rooted in our biology. Our ancestors relied on their capacity to recognize differences in their environment as a survival mechanism. Identifying distinct patterns, like changes in weather or the behavior of animals, helped them adapt and prepare for challenges. Similarly, noticing differences in people, such as friend versus opponent or ally versus stranger, was crucial for ensuring safety and building communities.

This tendency to categorize and differentiate is a function of the brain's need to process vast amounts of information quickly. By sorting the world into distinct categories, the brain conserves energy and allows us to make rapid decisions.



## Unbound

In ancient times, this skill enabled quick assessments of danger and opportunity. Distinctions like unfamiliar clothing or accents could signal the presence of another tribe, helping early humans determine whether to approach or avoid a situation.

While this process was vital for survival, it also planted the seeds for biases and assumptions that would later influence our understanding. What began as a neutral and necessary skill to recognize distinctions became a way to judge and rank differences. We didn't just see a difference; we started to measure it. And that's where the fracture began: not in the act of observing, but in the meanings and values we assigned to what we observed.

A value judgment occurs when we assign something worth or meaning based on our beliefs, preferences, or cultural norms. Unlike neutral observations, value judgments reflect subjective interpretations that can create hierarchies and divisions. For example, saying, "This painting is better than that one," is not a factual statement; it's a value judgment based on personal taste or societal standards of what makes art valuable. Similarly, statements like "This culture is more advanced" or "This profession is more important" are value judgments that often reflect

## Emily Maroutian

biases rather than objective truths. Better in what regard? Whose standards are we using as a measure of success?

Value judgments influence how we perceive the world and interact with others. They create unnecessary hierarchies by elevating one thing while quietly diminishing another. Someone might claim that a doctor is more “important” than a garbage collector. But I’d invite them to imagine a world without garbage collection. You can live your entire life without ever needing a doctor, but try living in a city for one month without trash removal. Suddenly, the definition of “important” begins to shift. That doesn’t mean doctors aren’t essential. It means we don’t need to rank contributions to recognize their value.

Different roles serve different needs, and each holds its place in society. Someone might view one profession as superior to another, not because one is inherently better, but because it aligns with their personal values. Perhaps they come from a long line of doctors, or maybe they were taught that medicine is the only true profession.

These personal judgments often go unexamined. And yet they shape how we approach relationships, career choices, and opportunities in life.

**The Fear of Difference:**

Distinction is a fact that requires no additional meaning. The fact that people have different skin colors is no different from acknowledging that flowers bloom in various shades of color. The distinction exists, but it doesn't have to imply separation or inequality. There is no meaning or value, only fact. Is a rose better than a lily? In what sense? Based on whose standards of beauty?

Distinctions become the seeds of division when we assign value to them by deciding that one skin color, language, or belief system is superior to another. We create separation that feeds into an "us vs. them" mentality, fostering prejudice, fear, and conflict. The challenge for us, then, is to untangle facts from the meanings we impose on them. Because once meaning is added, perception is no longer neutral; it becomes filtered. We don't just see what's there; we see what we've been taught to see.

We rarely see people as they are. We see them as they appear through the lens of our identity. Perception is not a clean window. It's a reflection of the self, cast onto the world. If you are not like me, you are "other." Possibly dangerous. A threat to my identity. Are you better than me? Less than me? Harmful to me?

## Emily Maroutian

Distinction makes space for variety without turning it into hierarchy. But when our identity feels threatened, when we are uncertain of our own worth or belonging, those same distinctions become judgments. The mind rushes to label, rank, and separate in an attempt to reestablish control.

Contrary to popular belief, discrimination is not just about ignorance. Sometimes it's about fear. It's the fear that someone else's existence invalidates our own. That their truth erases ours. That their way of being challenges our right to be. But that fear only exists when identity is fragile, when it depends on comparison to survive.

Someone else's religious identity or gender identity does not threaten ours, unless our own identity is not secure. The mere existence of something that is different from us does not inherently harm our own existence. Our mind creates the threat as an attempt to preserve and protect our identity. That's not to say there are no real threats, only that those actual threats are often created through a response to a "perceived" threat that doesn't exist in the first place.

When identity is rooted, however, it doesn't fear difference. It doesn't wage war with difference. It doesn't make laws against difference. It welcomes it as an

## Unbound

alternative experience. So, to transcend discrimination, we don't just need new beliefs about others; we need a healed relationship with ourselves. Because when we stop defending who we are, we no longer feel the need to attack who others are.

### **Turning It Inward:**

This process of attaching meaning to distinctions doesn't stop at how we view others; it often turns inward, too, shaping how we see ourselves. We compare our distinct features, skills, or characteristics to others. And in doing so, we sometimes decide that we're not good enough. This internal discrimination creates a hierarchy within our own minds, where we place ourselves below others based on perceived deficiencies.

For example, you might look at someone else's achievements and think, "Why can't I be as successful?" or observe someone's appearance and think, "I'll never be as attractive as they are." These comparisons stem from noticing distinctions, but they become harmful when we attach negative judgments to our own differences. Instead of celebrating what makes us unique, we use these distinctions as a measure of inadequacy or failure.

## Emily Maroutian

This mindset can diminish self-esteem and hinder personal growth. By concentrating on what we lack compared to others, we overlook our strengths and contributions. The very distinctions that define us become sources of self-doubt rather than reasons for self-appreciation.

This kind of internal judgment often leads us to search for someone else to place beneath us. If comparison with those we perceive as “above” us makes us feel small, we may unconsciously seek out those we view as “below” us to restore a sense of worth.

It’s a coping mechanism; subtle, often unspoken, but deeply ingrained. We build invisible hierarchies in our minds because we are trying to balance the scale of our own inadequacy. This is how the cycle of judgment sustains itself, not just outwardly, but inwardly too. We judge ourselves, hurt our own feelings, and then judge others to compensate for the pain we feel. And in doing so, we reinforce the very systems of separation we wish to escape.

To counter this, we must practice self-compassion and reframe the way we view our differences. Instead of seeing them as shortcomings, we can see them as aspects of our individuality. And if they are locked into an identity that

## Unbound

does not allow healing and wholeness, we must examine those aspects of the identity and shift them, whether through releasing or rewriting.

It's important to embrace our distinctions without judgment. We can cultivate a healthier relationship with ourselves and develop a greater sense of self-worth within the whole of humanity. This will, in turn, create a healthier relationship with others. We will no longer engage in using others as an excuse to make ourselves feel better or worse about ourselves.

There is no better or worse, only different. Imagine listening to a symphony. Each instrument is distinct in sound, yet together they form a cohesive and beautiful song. The distinctions between the instruments are essential to the song's beauty. The violin is not superior to the flute. Both are needed for the symphony. Similarly, when we see our individual differences without judgment, we can see their contributions to the greater whole of humanity.

At its best, recognizing distinctions can enrich our lives. The differences between us — our cultures, perspectives, and experiences — offer opportunities for learning and growth. They provide a broader view of humanity and encourage mutual respect. For example, acknowledging the distinct

Emily Maroutian

flavors of foods from around the world allows us to celebrate the richness of cultural diversity. Recognizing different creative traditions, such as music, movies, and art, broadens our appreciation of creativity and expression. Adopting advancements in medicine, technology, and innovation can improve our own way of life.

When we celebrate distinctions, we create an environment where variety is valued and respected. This mindset allows us to move beyond tolerance and into a space of genuine curiosity and connection. Differences are no longer seen as threats but as opportunities to expand our understanding of the world and one another.

### **Preferences Without Judgments:**

Many of the divisions we experience in the world are human-made. Nationality, borders, religion, politics, money, and economies are all constructs created by humans to organize society. These constructs are not inherently problematic, but the meanings and values we attach to them often are.

You might argue that some differences are not human-made. Yes, I have hazel eyes, and you have blue eyes. That is a real, natural difference. But is it a justification for



## Unbound

conflict? Is one inherently better than the other? According to whom? These differences, while real, gain meaning only when we impose that meaning upon them. Hazel eyes are not “better” or “worse” than blue eyes; they are simply different. When we turn these distinctions into judgments, we create separation where none is necessary.

Additionally, not all preferences come from desire. Some come from defense. Sometimes we don’t choose things out of desire; we choose what makes us feel safe. We align with ideas, people, aesthetics, or behaviors that reinforce our sense of who we believe we are. Not because they speak to our soul, but because they protect our image. Our ego clings to what preserves identity and resists what threatens it. That’s when preferences become judgments; when someone’s difference becomes evidence that we are wrong. Or worse, proof that we might not exist as we believe we do.

The more uncertain we are of our own value, the more rigid we become about what we like, what we allow, and what we accept. Our preferences shift from pursuing joy to pursuing control. “This is the only right way.” “This is the only good kind of person.” “This is the only valid belief.”

We use preference like a sword. Not to express truth,

Emily Maroutian

but to protect a fragile sense of self. However, when we feel rooted in who we are, our preferences become more nuanced. They stop needing to dominate. We no longer need others to agree in order to feel right. We can simply say, “This is what I prefer,” and leave it at that.

A healed preference is a quiet thing. It doesn’t shout. It doesn’t shame. It stands open, like a door, not a wall. When we recognize that preferences are subjective, we open the door to understanding and acceptance. We can allow others to have their preferences without feeling the need to defend our own. This mindset fosters mutual respect and encourages curiosity about the diverse perspectives and tastes that exist in the world.

We don’t catalog others by hair color or eye color. Why do we separate them by skin color? People don’t separate family members with brown hair from those with blond hair. Do they sit at different tables during family parties? Do we truly “see” a difference in them? So, why is skin color an acceptable reason for separation?

This raises another critical question: How much difference is acceptable before someone becomes an “other”? What’s the threshold for the “otherness”? How much difference are we allowed to prefer without being

## Unbound

labeled as fundamentally different? Can our preferences be different without us being different? Can our eye color, skin color, or beliefs differ without creating a divide? Where's the line? Who draws it? Why have we all decided to follow it blindly?

The truth is that our differences don't have to define our worth. They are parts of us, but they don't decide our value. For every aspect of who you are, there is someone in the world who holds its opposite. If you are white, someone else is Black. If you are a woman, someone else is a man. If you lean towards communism, someone else leans towards capitalism. If you're heterosexual, someone else is homosexual.

In another part of the world, each of these traits might be seen through an entirely different lens. What's acceptable here may not be there. What's praised there may be judged here. It's all relative to where you stand and who you're standing with.

This is why it's essential to become aware when we begin engaging in judgment. When we notice ourselves feeling divisive and critical, we can pause and reflect on our thoughts. Why do we feel the need to label one thing as better than another? What does this judgment say about our

Emily Maroutian

own insecurities or biases? By questioning our assumptions, we can begin to dismantle the hierarchies we've created in our minds.

This process requires humility and self-awareness. It asks us to recognize the ways in which we've been conditioned to see the world and to challenge those perspectives. It invites us to replace judgment with curiosity, to ask questions rather than make declarations, and to see differences as opportunities for growth rather than as threats.

When we embrace preferences without judgment, we create space for all of us to thrive. We allow ourselves and others to exist as unique individuals, unburdened by the need to conform or compete. In this space, differences become sources of beauty and inspiration, not reasons for hate or division.

### **Mindfulness is Key:**

Navigating the line between distinction and discrimination requires self-awareness and intention. It involves questioning our assumptions and challenging the biases we've absorbed. When we notice a difference, we can pause and ask ourselves: Am I simply observing this

## Unbound

distinction, or am I attaching a value to it? What does this difference mean to me, and why? Am I labeling one thing as better or worse than another? Am I attaching worth to something based on my personal preferences?

When you catch yourself making a value judgment, pause and reframe it as a neutral observation. For instance, replace “That style of music is bad” with “That style of music doesn’t appeal to me. I prefer...”

Practicing mindfulness in this way allows us to separate personal preferences from imposed hierarchies. It also opens the door to greater understanding and empathy. You might not like that style of music, but it’s okay if others do. By acknowledging that our judgments are subjective, we create space for others’ perspectives and experiences to coexist alongside our own.

By practicing mindfulness, we can train ourselves to see differences as opportunities rather than threats. We can appreciate individuality without crossing into judgment or prejudice. This practice not only enriches our interactions but also strengthens our ability to build inclusive communities.

When we learn to celebrate distinctions without discrimination, we shift our focus from separation to

Emily Maroutian

connection. We begin to see the humanity in each person, recognizing that while we may differ in some ways, we share a common essence. This perspective fosters empathy, respect, and collaboration.

Distinctions are not the problem; they never were. The problem is the meanings we impose upon them. By separating fact from judgment, we can transform differences into opportunities for growth and acceptance. In doing so, we honor the complexity of the world and the beauty of its diversity without losing sight of the shared humanity that unites us all.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Clarity without Separation

Find the Distinction: Observe an area in your life where you tend to make comparisons in others (e.g., appearance, lifestyle, or achievements). Note the differences without attaching value judgments. Practice saying, “This is different, not better or worse.” It’s okay if this person has something I don’t want. It’s okay if this person looks different from what I’m used to. It’s okay if this person is living their life differently from me. It doesn’t make it right

## Unbound

or wrong, just different. We can both exist.

**Practice Conscious Distinction:** For one day, observe the internal labels you give to people, ideas, or behaviors, especially ones that make you feel “better than” or “less than.” Instead of reacting, ask yourself: Is this a preference? A fear? A defense? A value? The goal isn’t to judge the judgment. It’s to bring light to it and see if it still serves your integrity. Do you want to continue thinking these thoughts? How do they serve you? Does it actually serve you? Does it actually make your life better, or does it just make your ego feel better about itself?

**Distinguish Preference from Judgment:** List three of your preferences, then ask: Do I judge others who prefer something different? Why or why not? Notice judgments and reframe them as neutral differences. Can you sit with the discomfort of other people’s preferences? Can you allow them to be without trying to change them?

**Preference Without Comparison:** When you encounter someone else’s preferences that differ from yours, practice asking: What can I learn from their preference? How does it

Emily Maroutian

expand or add to my view of the world?

Track a Preference: Choose one strong preference you hold—about lifestyle, behavior, values, or appearance—and gently trace its origin. Ask yourself: Where did this come from? Is it still mine? Is it about desire, or is it about fear and defense? The goal isn't to change it, only to understand it. Awareness turns rigidity into choice.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

What Makes Me, Me?

In what ways have I confused my preferences with judgments of others? (Explore where personal choice turned into silent comparison.)

Have I ever mistaken someone's difference as a threat to my identity? (What might have been possible if I had approached with curiosity instead?)

Where am I still defining myself by what I'm not, rather than who I truly am? (Can I shift from separation to clarity?)



## Unbound

What new distinctions am I ready to make about who I am and who I am not? (Not in opposition to others, but in alignment with my own truth.)

Which of my preferences feel like they come from joy, and which ones feel like they come from fear or self-protection? (Notice what feels expansive vs. what feels defensive.)

Have I ever judged someone simply for making a different choice than I would have made? (What part of me felt threatened by their difference?)

Where do my preferences become rigid rules about myself, others, or the world? (Are those rules helping me feel more free or more limited?)

What personal standards have I mistaken for universal truths? (Where have I confused comfort with correctness?)

What am I trying to prove or preserve through my preferences? (What identity do they reinforce? And is that identity still mine? Do I want to keep it? Why?)

Emily Maroutian

Can I allow someone to live differently without needing to label them as wrong? (What makes that hard? What makes that possible? What do I need to be right about? Can I let it go and allow them to live their life?)

## Self-Reflection / Projection

We experience life through the filter of our own identities. Through the lens of our past, our pain, and our programming. Depending on what we've experienced, that lens can either clarify or distort what we see. It can bring us closer to our truth, or further away from it. That's where self-reflection and projection part ways.

Self-reflection is the practice of turning inward with honesty, curiosity, and compassion. It's a willingness to examine our own thoughts, behaviors, and emotional patterns without judgment. It's how we grow, how we heal, how we find the truth of who we are beneath the noise.

Projection, on the other hand, is the opposite. Instead of looking within, we cast our inner world onto someone else and then proceed to judge or shame them for it. We use

Emily Maroutian

others as screens for our unacknowledged or unprocessed pain.

If we're ashamed of something in ourselves, we might judge it in someone else. If we feel powerless, we may criticize those we see as more powerful. If we carry unprocessed grief, we may call someone else "too emotional." This isn't because we're cruel; it's because we refuse to see it within ourselves.

Unexamined pain must go somewhere, or else it will destroy our psyche. So the unconscious choice becomes to shame someone else instead. To project it onto someone else, to judge, to ridicule, and maybe even destroy that aspect in others.

Projection occurs when we refuse to engage in self-reflection. It's easier to see the problem outside of us than to confront it within us. But that ease is not only temporary, it's an illusion. What begins as a defense can quickly become a pattern. One that distorts our perception, damages our relationships, and keeps us trapped in the stories of our past.

We have all engaged in it, and we have all been on both sides of it. It's very human to project unresolved pain onto others. It's the mind's way of protecting itself from self-

## Unbound

destruction. However, if we're not paying attention, we won't notice that it's happening. We'll just keep reacting. Keep blaming. Keep defending ourselves from past threats. Threats that no longer exist. Threats that may never have existed in the first place.

This is an invitation to look closer. To recognize the difference between what you're seeing and what you're projecting. To ask yourself the hard questions: Am I reacting to this moment, or to something older, deeper, perhaps unresolved within me? Am I seeing this person clearly, or through the fog of my own wounds?

The goal isn't to shame ourselves. Since projection is caused by shame, that will only make it worse. The goal is to free ourselves through compassion and understanding. Because the more we practice compassion, the less power projection has over our lives. The more we turn inward with acceptance, the more we can accept others.

### **Harmful Projections:**

Negative projections often serve as a way to externalize our own pain, insecurities, or shortcomings. Instead of looking inward and addressing the root cause of our struggles, we shift the focus onto others, blaming them for

## Emily Maroutian

what we feel or perceive as wrong. While this may provide temporary relief from discomfort, it ultimately deepens the divide between us and those around us, harming relationships and creating unnecessary conflict.

In personal relationships, projections can take many shapes:

**Jealousy:** A partner who secretly struggles with feelings of attraction outside the relationship might accuse their significant other of being unfaithful. Not because there's evidence, but because they can't accept this desire within themselves.

**Control:** Someone who fears being controlled might interpret their partner's harmless suggestions or questions as attempts to dominate them. They react with defensiveness or withdrawal, protecting themselves from a threat that lives more in memory than reality.

**Insecurity:** A person who feels unintelligent may belittle their partner's ideas, picking apart every word, projecting their hidden fear of inadequacy instead of owning it.

**Anger:** A person who believes they must always be calm may feel triggered by someone else's healthy expression of anger. They may accuse them of being "too much" when they have disowned that part in themselves.

## Unbound

Victimhood: Someone who struggles to take any responsibility for their own actions might constantly feel victimized. They might see manipulation or disrespect where none exists, because it absolves them of facing how they contribute to the problem.

When we behave this way, we're not reacting to what's happening; we're reacting to what *has* happened. The mind stores emotional memories like bookmarks. When a present moment feels similar to a past wound, the mind doesn't just remember, it reactivates. It brings forward the old story, the old feeling, and the old identity that lived through it. It returns to its previous survival method because it was successful in the past.

We see a tone in someone's voice and hear our critical parent. We feel a delay in someone's response and remember being ignored. We sense distance and relive abandonment. None of it may be true in the moment. But it's true in the body. And the body doesn't know the difference between a memory and a moment that feels like a memory.

When we don't realize this, we start protecting ourselves from ghosts. We become angry with our partner for what someone else did in our past. We assign intentions

## Emily Maroutian

that were never there. We reject others before they can reject us. This is how projection works; it's a pre-emptive attack disguised as self-protection.

But the deeper truth is this: we are not just protecting ourselves from pain, we are protecting the identity that was born from that pain. That's the part we're trying to keep alive. The part that says, "I was the one who was mistreated. I was the one who wasn't chosen. I was the one who had to become strong, guarded, invisible, or perfect."

When we stop identifying with that self, we stop needing to replay its story. Self-reflection breaks the loop. It allows us to pause before reacting. It allows us to save our relationships instead of projecting the past onto the present; instead of projecting our own unresolved feelings and wounds onto others.

Projection not only harms those we blame but also limits our own ability to grow and develop. When we use others as a scapegoat, we avoid taking accountability for our own actions, decisions, and beliefs. This avoidance might feel easier in the moment, but it ultimately keeps us stuck.

Blaming others robs us of the opportunity to reflect, learn, and improve. It prevents us from addressing the real



## Unbound

sources of our discomfort and leaves us perpetually looking outward instead of inward. Not only does this make us feel victimized, but it also hands someone else the responsibility of fixing our problems, leaving us at the mercy of other people's decisions. Projection leaves us powerless, and only we can restore our power by returning to self.

### **Illusions of Idolization:**

Idolizing others might seem like a positive act, an expression of admiration or respect. But in reality, it's another form of projection. When we place someone on a pedestal, we are not seeing them as they are; we are seeing them through the lens of our own desires, aspirations, or unmet needs. We create an idealized version of them, assigning traits and qualities that may not align with their true selves.

When you idolize someone, you project your idea of what perfection looks like onto them. You might think, "They have everything figured out," or "Their life is so much better than mine." But this perception is incomplete. You're only seeing the surface, the parts of their life they choose to share, or the image they've cultivated. Beneath the surface, they may struggle with the same doubts, fears, and

insecurities as anyone else.

For instance, consider how we often idolize public figures such as celebrities, leaders, or influencers. We admire their accomplishments, their charisma, or their seemingly flawless lives. But this admiration often comes without a full understanding of their humanity. We don't see their private struggles, their moments of vulnerability, or the sacrifices they've made. Instead, we create a narrative about who they are, a narrative shaped more by our own needs than by their reality.

We're projecting our hopes, desires, or unmet needs onto them. The image we create is a reflection of what we wish to see, not necessarily who they are. Similarly, when we judge someone for their choices, like criticizing someone who struggles with addiction, we are projecting our own biases and coping mechanisms onto them. We may feel superior because we don't share their habit, but that doesn't mean we are free from harmful coping mechanisms of our own. We are not superior to others simply because we have a different pattern or habit for dealing with pain.

Idealizing others can also harm our relationships. When we see someone as perfect, we place unrealistic expectations on them. We might feel betrayed when they fail to live up to

## Unbound

the ideal we've created, even though that ideal was never truly theirs to uphold. This can lead to disappointment, resentment, or disillusionment, not because they changed, but because we never truly saw them to begin with.

Idolization also creates distance. When we elevate someone above ourselves, we separate them from their humanity. We see them as "other," as something beyond reach, rather than as an individual with flaws and complexities. This separation can prevent genuine connection and understanding.

Whether you look down on someone or up at them, you're not engaging with the truth of who they are. Instead, you're seeing them through the lens of your own projections, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. You're still judging them based on your own experiences, values, and beliefs.

### **Reconnecting with Self and Other:**

Genuine connection requires seeing people as they are, not as we want them to be. This means recognizing their humanity, their strengths and their struggles, their successes and their failures. It means accepting that they, like us, are works in progress. By letting go of idealization

## Emily Maroutian

and criticism, we open the door to deeper, more authentic relationships. We can't connect to an illusion; we must be willing to see others as they are. If we want a genuine connection, we must be willing to see the truth.

The same applies to how we view ourselves. When we idolize others, we often compare ourselves to an impossible standard and end up feeling worse automatically. This comparison leaves us in a state of illusion. By consciously acknowledging this, we free ourselves from the burden of comparison and create space for self-acceptance. No one is perfect, and that's okay.

The freedom to truly connect with others begins with self-reflection. It requires recognizing our projections and understanding how they color our perceptions of them. Self-reflection is about asking hard questions: What does this reaction reveal within me? Where is my unhealed wound? Where do I feel shame? Am I projecting my fears, insecurities, or desires onto someone else?

These questions, though challenging, serve as a gateway to growth and intimacy. When we blame others, we disconnect from them. We create a defensive block that doesn't allow the process of relation to occur. Without that, there is no *relationship*.

## Unbound

Healing yourself is the most powerful way to break the cycle of projection and deeply connect with others. When you address your own wounds, you stop using others as scapegoats for your pain. Instead, you cultivate empathy and compassion, not only for yourself but also for those around you. This inner work transforms your relationships, allowing you to connect without the barriers of projection.

When you recognize your own humanity – your flaws, struggles, and triumphs – you begin to see others in the same light. This perspective fosters mutual understanding and respect. It allows you to let go of the need to control or judge others and instead embrace them as they are.

By breaking free from the cycle of projection, you create space for authenticity and connection. You stop needing others to fit into your narrative, and in doing so, you free them to live their truth. It's only by recognizing your own projections that you can allow others to be themselves. Their freedom comes from being free of your expectations, projections, and judgments. Your freedom comes from self-realization.

Ultimately, self-reflection liberates both you and those around you. It allows you to see yourself with clarity and to extend that clarity to others. When you learn to forgive

Emily Maroutian

yourself, you also become more forgiving of others. This is how we create lasting change within our relationships, by healing our relationship with ourselves.

### **The Roles They Play:**

How we feel about ourselves is reflected in our relationships with others. We subconsciously choose those who validate our self-perception. If you've adopted the identity of "The one who's always abandoned," then you'll unknowingly gravitate toward people who leave. Or, you'll interpret their absence, their silence, their boundaries, as proof that they are leaving even when they're not. You'll cast them in the role you've already written. Not because you want to be hurt, but because the story feels familiar. Predictable. Safe in its own painful way.

This is the trap of a chosen identity. Once you've decided who you are – whether it's the abandoned one, the invisible one, the fixer, the strong one – you'll start subconsciously shaping your relationships to match it. You'll attract people who confirm the story or project the role onto people who don't even know they're in your play. You'll overlook kindness in favor of coldness because it better fits the script. You'll sabotage love because it confirms

## Unbound

your belief that you're unlovable. You'll push people away and call it proof that no one stays. All the while, you're not chasing connection; you're chasing consistency, even if you don't want the result of it.

The identity you formed was never about truth. It was about survival. And survival doesn't ask, Is this good for me? It asks, Is this known to me? Because the known feels safer than the unknown, even when it hurts.

But what happens when you stop needing the story to be true? What happens when you decide you're no longer the abandoned one? Or the one who feels like they're too much? Or never enough? The whole cast of characters changes. The roles dissolve. The pattern breaks. You start seeing people for who they are, not for who they need to be in order to keep your pain alive.

That's when healing becomes possible. Not because others changed, but because you stopped needing them to play a part in a play you no longer want to put on. And that, too, is an act of freedom. For both of you.

### **Breaking the Cycle:**

We don't truly see people; we see our past stories and beliefs. The ones we've survived, the ones that crushed us.

Emily Maroutian

That's the illusion. When we project, we're not interacting with reality; we're interacting with our memory of reality. We are not responding to the person at *this* moment. We're responding to a ghost from our past who hurt, ignored, abandoned, or dismissed us. And we're trying, often without realizing, to keep the old, wounded version of ourselves safe now by treating the person in front of us as the threat from the past.

That's what projection really is. It's not just blame; it's incomplete protection. It's the mind saying: I've been here before, and I didn't make it out untouched. So let's defend first. Let's accuse before we're accused. Let's pull away before we're left behind. Let's make sure this time is different.

But here's the truth: You're not that version anymore. You are not the child trying to be chosen. You are not the child trying to be enough. You are not the forgotten one, the abandoned one, the unworthy one. You may still carry their pain within you, but you also have the power to heal it. You hold the ability to offer them the compassion and understanding they never received from the people who caused their wounds. That's your power.

The cycle breaks the moment you realize that the threat



## Unbound

you're reacting to doesn't exist anymore. It lives only in memory. And memory is not a map of truth; it's a record of pain. You don't need to keep defending your identity if that identity was built in survival. You don't need to prove who you are if you no longer want to be who you had to become. That version of you isn't bad. They were brilliant. They found a way to keep you safe when no one else did. But they don't need to be in charge anymore.

Self-reflection gives you the key back. It lets you pause and ask: Am I protecting myself from this person or a past that no longer needs protecting against? When you can answer that with honesty, with tenderness, with compassion, the illusion begins to fade. You start seeing people not as enemies or saviors, but as humans. Flawed, beautiful, complex humans. Just like you.

You stop needing them to play a part in your pain. You stop needing to rewrite the past through the present. You meet the moment for what it is, not what it reminds you of. And that's where freedom begins. Not in perfect behavior. Not in mastering every trigger. But in recognizing that you are no longer the person the pain happened to. You are the one choosing what happens next.

Emily Maroutian

**Putting it into Action:**

The Pause That Heals

Catch Blame: Pay attention to moments when you're tempted to blame someone else for your feelings. Ask yourself: Is this about them, or is it revealing something about me? Is there something deeper happening here? Write down your insights. What is this argument or conflict truly about? Are we really fighting over forgotten toilet paper or is this triggering old feelings of neglect and not being heard?

Self-Compassion Check-In: When you feel critical of someone else, pause and ask: What am I needing in this moment? Is there a need that is going unmet? Can I meet it myself? Offer yourself what you're seeking, whether it's understanding, rest, or validation.

Use the Projection Pause: The next time you feel yourself reacting strongly to someone, pause. Before speaking or acting, ask yourself: Are these my feelings that I'm projecting onto the other person? Is there something I'm afraid to accept within myself? Is it easier to deal with it

## Unbound

externally rather than internally? Give yourself a breath. Then respond, not from the past, but from your current self.

Reclaim the Mirror: Choose one recent interaction that triggered you and write about it in your journal. Don't analyze them. Explore you. Ask: What did I feel? What belief about myself got activated? What version of me was present in that moment? What would the healed version of me have seen instead? This practice helps turn projections into self-awareness, and self-awareness into transformation.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

What am I Really Responding to?

When I feel triggered by someone's words or actions, do I pause to ask if it's really about them, or something unresolved in me? (What wound might this be touching?)

What story am I carrying about myself that gets projected onto others again and again? (Does that story still reflect the person I'm becoming or just the person I've been?)

Emily Maroutian

Have I ever misread a situation or intention because I was filtering it through past pain? (What helped me realize it wasn't what I thought?)

What version of myself do I protect when I lash out, withdraw, or shut down in relationships? (Is it the hurt self? The abandoned self? The one still asking to be chosen?)

When do I see people more clearly? When I feel safe and whole, or when I feel fragile and afraid? (How does my state of being shape my perception?)

What patterns keep repeating in my interactions, and what do they reveal about my internal narrative? (What role am I unconsciously playing, again and again?)

## Compassion / Separation

The way we treat people we don't like is often a reflection of the way we treat exiled or shadow parts of ourselves. Compassion, at its core, is an inner state before it ever becomes an outer gesture. It begins with how we respond to our own pain, our own history, our own humanity. If we meet our shame with judgment, we will struggle to meet others with grace. But when we learn to hold ourselves gently, when we begin to welcome the parts we've pushed away, we open the door to deeper connection. Not just within, but with the world around us.

Separation doesn't start with politics or identity; it starts with disconnection from the self. The more fragmented we are inside, the more we unconsciously divide the world into "me" and "them," "safe" and "unsafe." We exile others because they remind us of the parts of ourselves that we have exiled. We blame, criticize, or reject them because we

Emily Maroutian

have yet to make peace within.

But compassion doesn't require sameness. It doesn't erase differences or ask us to agree. It asks us to see clearly. To look past the surface and into the shared thread that runs through all of us, which is the longing to be seen, to be safe, to be loved. When we heal the separation within, we stop projecting it outward. We stop needing others to reflect only the parts of us we've accepted. We stop dividing the world into parts we can tolerate and parts we must push away.

True compassion is born when we remember that everyone is carrying something. That behind every behavior is a story, and behind every story is a wound, a fear, or a need. And while we may not always condone their choices, we can still recognize their humanity just as we are learning to recognize our own.

Separation is the habit of the wounded self; compassion is a practice of an integrated one. As we heal, we begin to see people not as threats or strangers but as humans. Just like us. Flawed, complex, hurting, trying. And in that recognition, we build the bridge back to one another.

### **The Roots of Separation:**

Separation begins within. Before we ever divide the

## Unbound

world into categories, before we ever label someone as “other,” our own inner world has already been split. As children, we learn which parts of us are acceptable and which are not. We learn what earns us love and what invites punishment, what brings us safety and what brings rejection. Slowly, without realizing it, we begin to fragment.

We repress our sadness if it makes someone uncomfortable. We silence our anger if it gets us in trouble. We hide our curiosity if it threatens the rules. Piece by piece, we exile parts of ourselves just to belong. Not because we are broken, but because we are adaptive. A child will do whatever is necessary to maintain connection, even if it means disconnecting from themselves.

These exiled parts don’t disappear. They live in the background, waiting. And unless they are acknowledged and integrated, they will eventually manifest in our relationships. We’ll feel triggered by someone’s sadness because it reminds us of the sadness we weren’t allowed to express. We’ll reject someone’s anger because it mirrors the rage we were taught to fear in ourselves. We’ll envy someone’s freedom because we still haven’t forgiven ourselves for needing to stay small.

When we haven’t reconciled with our own disowned

Emily Maroutian

parts, we project them onto others. We label them as too much, too sensitive, too angry, too loud. Not because they are, but because we were never given permission to be. And so, what we can't allow in ourselves, we won't allow in others. This is where separation begins, not through ideology, but through unhealed identity.

The people we push away or judge often represent the parts of us we haven't made peace with. And until we recognize that, we'll keep trying to fix the world outside us instead of healing the world within. We'll create division where we need integration.

But when we begin to turn inward with compassion, when we say to those exiled parts, "You can come home now," something shifts. We soften. We stop needing others to be different so we can feel okay. We stop demanding sameness as a condition for connection. We stop using others as battlegrounds for our own inner war.

Because that's what it becomes—a war. Not loud and obvious, but subtle and quiet. The kind of war that lives in our reactions. In the way we criticize someone for being "too emotional" when we've never allowed ourselves to cry. In the way we resent someone's confidence because we've never given ourselves permission to feel powerful. In



## Unbound

the way we cling to someone's approval because we haven't yet learned how to approve of ourselves.

Other people become the stage where our unresolved parts act out their stories. The perfectionist in us needs others to fail so we can feel competent. The abandoned part needs others to stay, even when it costs us our dignity. The ashamed part needs someone to blame, someone to punish, someone to carry what we refuse to feel.

Without realizing it, we begin to cast people in roles we've been rehearsing for years. The villain, the betrayer, the judge, the savior. Not because that's who they are, but because that's what our inner narrative needs them to be. We're not relating to the person in front of us. We're relating to the part of ourselves they represent. We think we're arguing with a friend, a partner, a stranger online, but we're really arguing with our unmet needs, our unspoken grief, our unresolved past.

This is why healing matters. Not just for our peace of mind, but for the way we show up in the world. When we make space for our own pain, we stop demanding others carry it for us. When we offer compassion inward, we stop weaponizing our wounds outward. The war ends not when others change, but when we no longer use other people to

resolve our pain.

True belonging starts when we make space for all of ourselves. And when we do, we start to make space for others, too. Not because they've changed, but because we have.

### **A Lack of Self-Compassion:**

A lack of compassion for others stems from a lack of self-compassion. A child who blames himself for his own abuse or bullying might grow up to lack empathy for other victims. Instead of placing the accountability on the abuser, which might be a parent or someone else the child's psyche wants to protect, the child blames himself. The child focuses on his own "weakness" or lack, and believes that having a different trait would have saved him from the abuse. He takes responsibility for his own abuse, even though it wasn't his fault. In doing so, he doesn't develop compassion or empathy for himself. Therefore, he doesn't develop compassion or empathy for other victims.

"He shouldn't have abused you" becomes "You shouldn't have placed yourself in that situation in the first place." "He shouldn't have raped her" becomes "She shouldn't have been drinking." "She shouldn't have thrown

## Unbound

things at him.” becomes “He shouldn’t have made her angry.”

This line of thinking absolves the abuser of their own actions and places the responsibility in the hands of the person receiving the abuse. It’s generally developed by a person who feels responsible for their own abuse.

In their reprimand of others, they are actually reprimanding themselves. In their judgment of others, they are actually judging themselves. Their lack of empathy for others is a lack of empathy for their younger, wounded selves.

If I wasn’t so small, if I wasn’t stupid, if I hadn’t opened my big mouth, if I hadn’t triggered his rage, if I hadn’t been so trusting, if I hadn’t taken that drink, if I hadn’t trusted him. It was me. I did something to cause my own abuse or pain.

And so the self is wise enough to split the responsible part and hold it in exile, away from our awareness. Since it’s a painful conclusion, “It was my fault,” our consciousness would rather not think about it further. When it encounters other people’s victimhood, it triggers our protective parts, and that manifests as anger, criticism, or judgment.

Disconnection from the self creates projection onto the

## Emily Maroutian

other. If I've rejected a part of myself, I will instinctively reject it in you. I cannot accept in you that which I haven't accepted in myself. This is why compassion isn't just an outer practice. It's an inner state. The more we welcome rejected and exiled parts of ourselves, the more we make room for others.

Compassion flows most easily when we're in self-alignment, when we feel whole, calm, and centered. When we are integrated. In that state, we're not easily threatened by others. We're not trying to prove, defend, or control. We can allow people to be who they are without making it mean something about us because it's not about us. How other people choose to live their lives has nothing to do with us. Their experiences are their own.

However, when we are out of alignment, when we are not integrated, when we feel unsure of who we are, we start separating. We start blaming. We start needing others to validate us or mirror us just so we can feel safe. We need them to be like us. We need them on our side so we feel as though we're on the right side.

On the other hand, the more we accept our own contradictions, the more grace we extend to theirs. The more we accept the rejected parts of us, the less we punish

## Unbound

people who remind us of them.

True compassion is not about agreement. It's not about condoning harmful behavior or erasing boundaries. It's about seeing clearly without dehumanizing. It's about staying rooted in self while recognizing the shared thread in someone else.

When I remember my own suffering, I can honor yours. When I remember my own healing, I can hold space for yours. That's how connection begins again, not through sameness, but through recognition and compassion.

### **Practicing Compassion in a Divided World:**

It's easy to speak of compassion as a virtue, a value, an ideal. But in practice, compassion is often uncomfortable. It asks us to stay open when we want to close. To remain curious when we feel defensive. To reach for understanding when judgment would be easier.

True compassion doesn't just live in grand gestures or public acts of kindness. It lives in the quiet moments, when we choose not to take something personally. When we take a breath, instead of making an assumption. When we remind ourselves that someone's behavior might be shaped by pain we can't see. Not to excuse it, but to humanize it.

Emily Maroutian

This kind of compassion is not passive. It's active. It's a decision we make, sometimes again and again, to stay connected to our own humanity and to the humanity of others. Even when it's hard. *Especially* when it's hard.

But we can only offer that kind of compassion when we've made space for it inside ourselves. If we're still at war with our own emotions, we'll struggle to hold space for someone else's. If we're still trying to prove our worth, we'll see others as threats to it. If we haven't allowed ourselves grace, we won't know how to extend it. What we haven't received, we don't feel safe to give.

That's why compassion begins within. Not as a concept, but as a practice. As a habit of turning toward yourself instead of away. Of noticing your pain instead of numbing it. Of holding your contradictions without shame. The more often you do this for yourself, the more naturally it begins to extend outward. Not as effort, but as overflow.

Because when you feel safe inside your own skin, you stop needing to control everything around you. You don't require sameness to feel secure. You don't panic at difference. You don't see disagreement as danger. You can stay present, rooted, and open. Not because others have earned your compassion, but because you've made a home

## Unbound

for it in yourself.

In a world divided by beliefs, choices, and experiences, compassion becomes a bridge. A reminder that while our wounds may look different, they come from the same ache. The same longing to be known. To be safe. To be loved. And when we remember that, something shifts. We stop needing to win. We start wanting to understand. We stop asking, “Who’s right?” and begin asking, “Can we meet in the middle?” “Can we find common ground?” Because we don’t need to agree to feel connected. We need to recognize that underneath all the noise, all the pretense, all the roles, we are human. And that is always enough to try again.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Cleaning The Mirror

The Mirror Pause: When someone triggers discomfort in you, whether through their behavior, choices, or beliefs, pause. Instead of reacting, ask: What part of me feels unsettled? Is there shame or judgment here? What part of myself do they remind me of? Is this an unhealed part? Use that discomfort as a mirror to check yourself, not a judgment of them. Let it show you where you’re still at war

Emily Maroutian

with yourself. Engage in some shadow work. Welcome the parts of yourself that feel unlovable, offer them some love and compassion.

Compassion from the Inside Out: Choose one part of yourself you've struggled to accept, maybe your anger, your sadness, or your fear, and spend five quiet minutes offering it compassion. Say to it what you wish someone had said to you. Or write it a letter in your journal. Offer it the compassion it never received from others. When you begin practicing this kind of inner kindness, you naturally begin offering it to others.

Witness Without Agreement: This week, when you encounter someone whose perspective you disagree with, challenge yourself to stay present without needing to fix, educate, or agree. Just witness. Ask yourself, What pain might they be carrying? If they chose this perspective, it must serve a protective purpose for them. What might they be protecting? Let your goal be understanding, not control.

Give What You Needed: Think of a time you felt unseen, unheard, or misunderstood. Then choose someone in your



## Unbound

life to offer that to. Listen without interrupting. Validate without rushing to correct. Let the compassion you longed for become the compassion you now offer others. Be the person you needed.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

What am I Willing to See in Others?

When do I find it hardest to feel compassion for someone?  
(What part of me do they reflect or challenge?)

What stories do I tell myself that create distance between me and others? (Do I label them before I understand them?)

What do I need others to be in order to feel okay? (And what does that say about what I haven't fully accepted in myself?)

What becomes possible when I stop needing to be right and instead become willing to be present? (What opens up inside me and between us?)

When someone bothers me, what part of me are they

Emily Maroutian

waking up? (Is it a disowned part? A memory? A wound?)

Who have I unconsciously turned into a symbol for something I've rejected in myself?

Where do I still feel unsafe with difference, not because it's harmful, but because it challenges a part of me I haven't made peace with?

When I find myself judging or separating from someone, I can ask: What would it feel like to see them as human first?

What does it mean to extend compassion without abandoning myself? (Where's the balance between empathy and self-respect?)

Where do I need to feel safe before I can open up to others? (Which part of me still feels unsafe in accepting others? Why?)

*Part 2:*  
*The Power of Choice*



## Appreciation or Comparison

We can only meet the world at the depth we have met ourselves. When we are cut off from parts of who we are, we see others through that same fractured lens. We mistake their reflection for our truth. We project. We defend. We divide.

Part One of this book was about seeing that division clearly. It was about noticing the split between self and other, and understanding how much of it is born from unhealed wounds. We saw the ways separation can masquerade as safety, and how compassion can dismantle the walls we've built to protect ourselves.

But awareness is only the beginning. Once we see the divide, we are left with a choice. We can continue to live from the patterns that keep us small, or we can step toward the discomfort of change. Both paths are familiar in their

## Emily Maroutian

own way: one keeps us in known pain, the other moves us toward unknown possibility.

Part Two is about that movement forward. It's about what happens when we begin to choose differently, not just in thought, but in how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we measure worth. It's about noticing the pull of disconnection and choosing to connect anyway. It's about releasing comparison and learning to shift away from judgment. It's about loosening the grip of scarcity so that difference no longer threatens us, but expands us beyond what we've known.

### **The First Choice:**

As the saying goes, comparison is a thief of joy. But it doesn't just steal, it distorts. It sneaks into our thoughts, whispering that what we have, who we are, or how we live is somehow not enough. It pulls our attention outward and upward, scanning for someone who has more, is doing more, or seems to be better. And when it finds them, it triggers your wound.

"Why not me?" That question seems harmless. Sometimes it even sounds motivational. But underneath it lives a subtle message: "I am behind. I am lacking. I am

## Unbound

losing. I am missing out.” Those messages chip away at self-worth because your mind builds a mental scoreboard where someone else’s joy automatically becomes your failure; where someone else’s light casts a shadow on your own.

Comparison shrinks us. Not because others are too big, but because we forget how vast we are. It draws our focus toward what’s missing. It forces us to focus on lack. We begin measuring ourselves against images, timelines, or ideals that were never meant for us. We adopt someone else’s path as our measuring stick and wonder why our lives don’t line up.

What if we shifted our perspective? What if, instead of comparing, we began to appreciate? Comparison seeks to rank; appreciation seeks to understand. When we compare, we fixate on what divides us: what they have that we don’t, what we perceive as better, easier, or more beautiful. We miss the story behind their surface. We ignore the price they may have paid. And we forget that they, too, are likely comparing themselves to someone else.

Appreciation invites us to pause and look again, not to diminish ourselves, but to honor what is. To see the unique path that each of us walks. To recognize that our value isn’t measured by achievement, speed, or visibility. It’s

Emily Maroutian

measured by truth. By how much of ourselves we're willing to bring forward. How can a tree compare itself to a river? How can a mountain envy the sky? They serve different but equally essential roles in nature, and so do we all.

To appreciate is to see clearly. Not just them, but also yourself. It's to realize that someone else's success doesn't mean your failure. That someone else's beauty doesn't mean your invisibility. That someone else's love doesn't mean your unlovability. Appreciation is what happens when we stop asking, "Why them and not me?" and start affirming, "Yes, them and me too."

### **The Trap of Comparison:**

Comparison stems from our desire for validation. We want to know where we stand, how we measure up, and whether we're doing "well enough." This instinct might have once served as a motivator for survival, pushing us to improve and compete. But in modern life, it often becomes a source of dissatisfaction.

Social media amplifies this tendency, offering a curated highlight reel of other people's lives that we use as benchmarks for our own. We scroll through photos of someone else's accomplishments, travels, or relationships,



## Unbound

and suddenly, our own lives feel smaller by comparison. They're eating better foods, going on better vacations, and buying more expensive items. So, what does that mean about me?

This cycle of comparison robs us of the ability to appreciate what we have and who we are in this moment. It doesn't factor in our past, our growth, or our journey. It replaces presence with pressure. It turns blessings into benchmarks. It turns joy into a performance. It turns life into a competition. Now, nothing is enjoyable unless you can keep up or get ahead of others. Unless everyone else can see that you, too, are just as worthy.

The real question is, keep up with whom? Get ahead of what? There is always someone who has more. When does it end? Where does comparison draw the line? When is enough, actually enough? When can you finally rest and say, "Yes, I've arrived; I'm done. I can now be happy."? Is there a final resting place that's not the grave?

When this mindset extends beyond our personal lives, it seeps into our view of others as a whole. We start measuring groups of people against each other, assigning worth based on arbitrary standards. This can lead to biases, stereotypes, and divisions, all rooted in the false belief that

Emily Maroutian

differences must be ranked rather than celebrated.

We create invisible scales comparing cultures, appearances, careers, lifestyles, even struggles, as if worth is something that must be earned or proven. As if humanity is a competition for who gets to earn the right to take up space in this world.

This is where comparison becomes dangerous. It leads to bias. To stereotyping. To systems that reward sameness and punish difference. And all of it is rooted in the false belief that value must be measured, that there's only so much to go around, and that someone must be above while another falls below. But worth doesn't live on a ladder. It lives in presence. In truth. In the space where we can stand beside each other without needing to win over each other.

### **Identity as a Measuring Stick:**

At the heart of many comparisons is not just admiration or envy; it's identity. It's the quiet belief that who you are is not enough when placed next to who they are. That your very being—your timing, your style, your story—somehow falls short when held up to someone else's.

We don't just compare what others have. We compare who they are. Their personality. Their relationships. Their

## Unbound

visibility. Their ease. And underneath that is the hidden question: Does their identity make mine feel less worthy?

If you believe you are the successful one, someone else's perceived failure may feel validating. But someone else's success might feel threatening. If you identify as the overlooked one, someone else's recognition might bring your pain into sharper focus. We're not just looking at others; we're checking our story about ourselves against how they show up in the world. Their life becomes a measuring stick for our own.

When identity is built subconsciously, it can trap us in a loop of comparison. Because every time someone else thrives outside of the role we've assigned ourselves, it challenges the foundation we've built. If I've always been the struggling one, and someone with a similar background starts thriving, what does that mean for the story I've been telling? If I've always been the "pretty one," what happens when someone else walks in and receives more attention? If I've built my worth on being the best, what happens when I'm no longer at the top?

Comparison is most painful when it threatens identity. That's why we take it so personally. It's not just about them. It's about what they reveal in us, what we haven't accepted

Emily Maroutian

about ourselves, what we've tied our worth to, and what we still believe we have to earn. But there's another way. When identity is rooted in wholeness instead of performance, we no longer need to compete. We no longer need to defend a fragile sense of self. Someone else's beauty, success, joy, or ease doesn't take anything away from us. It simply reflects another way to be human. Another path. Another truth.

You are not behind. You are not too late. You are not in competition. You are on your path. And your path does not need to look like theirs to be sacred. You are not a reflection of anyone else's story. You are a full and complex narrative of your own. So when comparison creeps in, return to yourself. Ask: What part of me feels threatened? What identity is being challenged? What if I don't need to protect that story anymore? What if I can just let it go? That's where freedom begins. Not by becoming more like them. But by reclaiming yourself fully.

### **The Power of Appreciation:**

Appreciation shifts our focus from competition to connection. It softens the impulse to rank and replaces it with a willingness to receive. To witness. To honor. Appreciation says, "There is space for all of us." It invites us

## Unbound

to see beauty not as a limited resource, but as a language with many dialects. Yours. Mine. Ours.

When we appreciate something or someone, we don't need to measure them against ourselves. We don't need to ask who's better, faster, more successful, or more worthy. Instead, we declare, "This has value. And so does that." That recognition opens the door to empathy, to curiosity, and to shared growth.

Appreciation helps us see differences as offerings rather than threats. A different opinion becomes an opportunity to understand. A different lifestyle becomes an invitation to learn. A different path becomes a mirror, showing us what else is possible.

For example, consider cultural diversity. Instead of comparing one tradition to another in terms of which is "better," "truer," or "more evolved," appreciation invites us to look deeper. To ask: What does this mean to them? What can I learn from this? What beauty exists here that I've never seen before? How does this expand my experience as a human?

This shift in perspective doesn't erase differences. It elevates them. It moves us from judgment to reverence, from othering to belonging. And in doing so, it deepens our

Emily Maroutian

connection not just to people, but to the full spectrum of human experience.

But appreciation isn't only external. It transforms how we see ourselves. When we stop comparing, we create space to notice what is already good, already valuable, already worthy within us. We begin to see our uniqueness not as something to fix or prove, but as something to protect and nurture. We start honoring our timing, our path, our process. We stop asking, "When will I be enough?" and start declaring, "I already am."

Appreciation grounds us in truth. It quiets the noise of expectation and brings us back to center. It reminds us that we don't need to outperform to belong. We don't need to shrink someone else's light to see our own.

We are allowed to celebrate others. We are allowed to celebrate ourselves. And we are allowed to exist with each other without comparison.

### **Shifting from Comparison to Appreciation:**

When we're trapped in comparison, we use difference as a dividing line. We rank one way of life above another. One style, one language, one belief system, one body, one tradition labeled as superior while the others fall behind.

## Unbound

But appreciation dissolves that line. It says, There is more than one way to be. There is more than one path to truth. There is more than one kind of beauty or success.

The shift from comparison to appreciation is not a one-time decision; it is a gradual process. It's a practice. A return. A quiet redirection of thought and attention. It asks us to be mindful of where our focus goes and intentional about how we interpret what we see.

Comparison is often automatic. It sneaks in before we realize it, turning admiration into envy, observation into insecurity, and curiosity into self-judgment. But we can interrupt that pattern. We can choose to meet those moments with awareness.

Instead of asking, "How do I measure up?" we can ask, "What is this showing me about what I value?" Instead of thinking, "I wish I had what they have," we can think, "What in me is being awakened by what I see in them?" We can use comparison, envy, or jealousy as an opportunity to look within. To self-reflect. To work with our own wounds of unworthiness. It's only then that we can release the aspects of our identity that create envy or jealousy in the first place.

Every experience offers us a point of clarity. Do I want

## Emily Maroutian

more of this or less of it? Do I also desire what they have, and how can I get it as well? Do I want to be more like them or less like them? Did this experience expand my mind or shrink it? Does it offer me clarity? Does it offer me contrast through which I can understand myself better? How did it serve me? Can I appreciate it even if I didn't like it the experience of it?

Appreciation doesn't mean ignoring our desires; it means honoring them without turning them into wounds. It means recognizing that someone else's expression of beauty, success, or joy can be a mirror into our longings, not a threat to our worthiness. It's a reflection of what's possible, not a reminder of what's missing.

Appreciation invites us to step into another's world without losing our own. It encourages us to stay rooted in ourselves while remaining open to the vastness of others. It's a way to learn, not just about them, but about who we are in relationship to them.

It's also about finding ways to appreciate what exists within us as well. Our own authenticity, beauty, and skills contribute to the vastness of humanity. We deserve to recognize it within our own hearts and minds, too. And when we do, we stop comparing ourselves to others. We



## Unbound

stop engaging in a hierarchy of value. We stop needing anyone else to be above us or below us.

This shift, like all healing shifts, takes time. It takes patience. It takes gentleness. But with each moment of awareness, we loosen the grip of comparison and return to something far more powerful: the ability to see clearly, honor fully, and love without condition. Not just others, but ourselves as well.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Appreciate Everything

**Flip the Comparison:** The next time you catch yourself comparing your life to someone else's, pause. Instead of asking, "Why don't I have that?" ask, "What does this awaken in me? What part of me wants to grow, express, or be seen?" Let admiration become a mirror, not of what's missing, but of what's possible for you, too.

**Create a Daily Appreciation Ritual:** Each day for one week, write down three things you appreciate: one about yourself, one about someone else, and one about your life. Don't overthink it. Let it be simple, sincere, and specific. This

## Emily Maroutian

small practice rewires your attention away from what's lacking and back toward what's living. It helps you see that you also hold many valuable experiences in your life.

**Gratitude for Your Path:** Write down three things about your life that you value or appreciate, without comparing them to anyone else's. How did your experiences shape you? Even the ones that were unpleasant or upsetting? How did they make you who you are today? Sit with gratitude and remind yourself that your journey is uniquely yours.

**Celebrate Someone Else:** Choose one person in your life and intentionally celebrate their success without comparison. Send them a kind message or express your admiration in person. Reflect on how it feels to uplift someone without diminishing yourself.

**Hype Someone for One Minute A Day:** Take a minute from your day to express appreciation to others on your social media. Send them congratulations for a recent accomplishment or compliment their outfits. Make sure it's genuine. Express the things you like about others.

## Unbound

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

#### What do I Already Hold?

What makes me feel like I am falling behind, and who or what am I comparing myself to in those moments? (What identity is being challenged or diminished?)

When I see someone succeeding, do I feel inspired, discouraged, envious, or something else entirely? (What might that feeling be pointing to in me?)

What part of me still believes that someone else's joy, beauty, or success means there's less for me? (Is that belief based in truth, or in fear? Who did I pick that up from?)

What do I admire in others that I may be afraid to claim in myself? (What part of me is asking to be seen, expressed, or nurtured?)

What do I want that I already have in some form, but haven't yet learned how to appreciate? (Where have I overlooked my own fullness?)

Emily Maroutian

When I feel deeply connected to myself, how does that change how I see others? (Do I compare less? Celebrate more? Feel more at ease?)

When I feel happy about myself and my life, am I more encouraging and appreciative of others or less? (What does that say about my state of mind now?)

## Cooperation or Competition

From a young age, identity becomes entangled with performance. We're praised for winning, recognized for standing out, and validated when we are the first. And so, without realizing it, we begin to build our sense of self in contrast to others. We must be better, faster, and smarter. However, what if identity isn't something we use to win over others, but something we contribute with?

Cooperation with others doesn't require you to lose your individuality. It invites you to use it. To offer who you are in service of something larger. Not to disappear into sameness, but to weave your uniqueness into the collective.

Human beings have always survived through cooperation. Not because we all thought the same, but because we didn't. One person hunted; another gathered.

Emily Maroutian

One led; another taught. One was a soldier; another a healer. Different roles, different minds, one shared goal.

This is not just a relic of the past; it's how we thrive even now. Families endure through mutual support and diverse roles. Communities flourish when needs are met together. Innovation blooms when diverse perspectives come together to solve problems no one could solve alone. True strength isn't found in isolation. It's found in interconnection; in the way our lives, minds, and efforts support one another.

Cooperation doesn't ask us to give up who we are. It asks us to bring who we are fully, consciously, willingly. Not to compete for value, but to create value together. Because we don't just grow through independence, we grow through interdependence. And when we stop using identity to separate ourselves from others, we begin to see how deeply we are meant to belong to each other.

### **The Power of Cooperation:**

Human history is often told as a story of competition; nations at war, businesses battling for supremacy, and individuals striving to excel. We've been conditioned to view life as a series of contests, where winning means

## Unbound

someone else must lose. We're told repeatedly that "only the strongest survive." However, the man often credited with that concept actually conveyed a different message.

In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin wrote: "Those communities which included the greatest number of the most empathetic members would flourish best." He considered traits such as cooperation, empathy, and altruism—not just strength—as the keys to survival and thriving within a species.

What if the true measure of success wasn't about defeating others, but about working together to achieve something greater than any of us could accomplish alone? Something we all could benefit from.

Cooperation is the foundation of every thriving community, every scientific breakthrough, and every movement for social progress. When we choose cooperation over competition, we create an environment where innovation flourishes, empathy deepens, and collective success becomes possible.

One reason competition feels so ingrained is because we have been taught scarcity. Whether it's wealth, recognition, or resources, we are taught to think that we must fight for our share or risk being left behind. This scarcity mindset

## Emily Maroutian

fuels rivalry and distrust, turning potential collaborators into adversaries. When we believe this story, it creates an “us vs. them” mindset that focuses on the “otherness” of the other. It treats them as an obstacle standing in the way of what we desire or need. Difference is treated as a threat, not a resource.

Cooperation doesn't mean sameness; it means contribution. It means finding strength in our differences. In a successful team, every member plays a unique role. A symphony requires multiple instruments to create harmony, not just a single violin playing alone. Similarly, society functions best when our varied talents, perspectives, and strengths are brought together in a shared purpose.

True unity is not uniformity; it is diversity working together toward a common goal. When people bring their unique perspectives to the table, solutions become more innovative and inclusive. Imagine a group of people trying to solve a complex problem. If every person thinks the same way, they may get stuck in the same cycle of ideas. However, when different voices are heard, new paths emerge that no one person could have envisioned alone.

Consider the way ecosystems thrive through interdependence. Trees provide oxygen, bees pollinate



## Unbound

flowers, and rivers carry water that nourishes all life. No single part of the system can exist in isolation; it is their cooperation that creates balance and allows life to flourish. Likewise, human cooperation creates networks of mutual support that sustain and uplift us.

Throughout history, the most transformative moments have come from people uniting for a shared purpose. Even in everyday life, we can see how unity strengthens us. A family that supports each other through difficult times emerges stronger and more resilient. A team at work that collaborates rather than competes creates an environment of trust and innovation. The power of cooperation doesn't eliminate individuality; it enhances it, allowing each person to contribute their strengths while feeling valued and understood within the whole.

### **Identity as Collaboration:**

The roles we play in life — leader, helper, rebel, healer — are often shaped by identity. But when identity becomes rigid, it can make us compete instead of collaborate. We begin to define ourselves by contrast: If I am the strong one, then you must be weak. If I am the expert, then you must be the student. I cannot have positive qualities unless they

## Emily Maroutian

stand out against your negative ones. Without realizing it, our sense of self becomes tied to comparison, and collaboration begins to feel like a threat.

However, identity doesn't have to isolate. When we view our identities not as fixed roles that exist in contrast to others but as living contributions, we create space for others to contribute as well. We begin to see their value as well. We stop needing to be everything and start allowing ourselves to be a part of a greater whole.

Think about the power of diversity in the brain. Each part of your mind serves a different function: logic, emotion, memory, intuition. On their own, each part is limited. But together, they form a kind of internal ecosystem, an intelligent whole that makes decisions more powerfully than any single part could. The same is true in communities. When we bring together different minds, backgrounds, skills, and experiences, we don't just get more ideas, we get better ones. We create a kind of collective intelligence, a shared wisdom that emerges only through connection and unity.

This is where identity transforms, not from individual pride, but from shared purpose. We begin to see that our unique way of thinking, being, and doing isn't meant to

## Unbound

compete with others; it's meant to complement them. The artist needs the muse. The visionary needs the implementer. The expert needs the researcher. Each one brings something essential to the whole.

And if we're honest, many of us are tired of pretending we can do it all. Tired of defending our value by standing alone. True identity doesn't need isolation to feel real. It becomes most powerful in relation when it finds its place in the larger harmony. We weren't meant to become self-contained brands. We were meant to become a symphony: each voice, each role, each note adding to the richness of the whole. Not to outshine each other. But to create something beautiful together.

### **When Competition Becomes Harmful:**

Competition can have its place. It can motivate us, sharpen our skills, and push us to grow. But when it becomes a dominant mindset, it can create isolation and burnout. If life is seen only as a race, we miss the beauty of the journey and the chance to connect with those running alongside us.

In a hyper-competitive world, it's easy to internalize the belief that resting, slowing down, or collaborating means

## Emily Maroutian

falling behind. This belief fuels burnout. The pressure to outperform others can become an endless loop of “never enough,” where no achievement feels satisfying because there’s always someone higher up on the imaginary ladder.

This isolation isn’t just felt on an individual level; it extends to organizations and communities. A workplace where employees are pitted against each other in constant competition fosters resentment rather than resilience. Instead of celebrating collective wins, people are more concerned with individual recognition, which weakens the team as a whole. By contrast, a collaborative workplace encourages mutual respect, idea-sharing, and a sense of belonging, leading to greater innovation and long-term success.

When competition becomes a cultural norm, it permeates institutions and influences how societies operate. Education systems, for example, can become more focused on rankings and test scores than on fostering creativity, collaboration, and holistic learning. Students may feel valued only for their grades, not for their unique perspectives or talents. The emphasis on “beating the curve” creates a divide between individuals who are labeled as “winners” and those deemed to have “fallen short.”

## Unbound

Success achieved through competition is often short-lived. It can feel like a solitary victory with no one to share it with. Cooperation, however, creates legacies that last. A company that promotes collaboration doesn't just build profits; it builds a culture where people feel empowered and valued. A family that supports one another through hardships grows stronger, deepening their bonds of trust and resilience. A society that prioritizes collective well-being over individual gain becomes more compassionate and enduring.

True progress requires shifting the focus from "Who wins?" to "How can we all benefit?" When we replace rivalry with collaboration, we create environments where every individual can contribute their strengths and feel supported in their weaknesses. The beauty of cooperation is that it doesn't diminish individual achievements; it amplifies them and makes them more possible.

### **Reimagining Success:**

To embrace cooperation, we must also redefine success, not as a solitary climb, but as a shared becoming. However, the myth of the "self-made" person runs deep. We are often inundated by the stories of entrepreneurs who did it

## Emily Maroutian

“alone.” Though behind every story of achievement is a quiet network of someone who encouraged, someone who taught, someone who made space. Someone who purchased the product, used the service, created the app, etc. Even our boldest acts are shaped by the invisible threads of community. To acknowledge this isn’t to diminish our efforts; it’s to tell the whole truth. One that includes connection and contribution from others.

When we expand our definition of success to include relationship, contribution, and shared growth, something softens. We stop needing to be the best and start wanting to be a part of something meaningful. We stop asking how to get ahead and start wondering how we can move forward together.

That doesn’t mean losing identity. It means evolving it. Moving from “I am what I achieve” to “I am what I bring.” From “I must do this alone” to “We’re better when we do it together.” Cooperation doesn’t erase who we are. It makes space for all of us to be more fully expressed. It reminds us that our individuality isn’t a barrier to connection; it’s the bridge. We thrive in ecosystems, not empires.

When you let go of the need to stand alone, you discover that you were never meant to. You were meant to

## Unbound

belong. You were meant to build. You were meant to share the weight, the vision, and the victory.

That is success. Not in competition with others. But in collaboration with life itself. It doesn't need to be big or dramatic. We can start small; collaborating instead of competing at work, reaching out instead of withdrawing in personal relationships, and choosing to celebrate others' achievements instead of envying them. These small acts of cooperation ripple outward, reshaping the way we approach challenges and successes.

Imagine a world where we celebrate cooperation as much as competition. Where our instinct is to reach out a hand rather than race ahead. This vision isn't naive; it's necessary. In an interconnected world, our survival and progress depend on our ability to work together, not just for our individual gain, but for the collective good.

At its core, unity is about connection. It's about understanding that collaboration doesn't weaken us; it reinforces our shared purpose and makes the impossible possible. When people feel they are a part of something larger than themselves, they become more invested in their communities and relationships.

Our differences are not obstacles to overcome but assets

Emily Maroutian

that enrich the whole. This shifts the focus from “me” to “we,” creating a culture where empathy, respect, and collaboration become the foundation for lasting change.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### **Unity Over Separation**

**Co-Create One Thing:** Choose one task you usually do alone – at work, at home, or in your creative life – and invite someone else into it. Not because you need help, but because you want to share the process. Let it be an experiment in trust, not control. Notice what opens up when it’s not just yours anymore.

**Reframe Success:** Identify an area where you feel pressure to “win” or outdo someone else. Instead of viewing it as a competition, ask: “How can we both succeed here?” Is there a win/win option? Take one action that fosters mutual support rather than rivalry.

**Celebrate a Collective Win:** Think of a success in your life that wasn’t entirely yours. Who else helped shape that outcome? Reach out to them and acknowledge their role.



## Unbound

Give them credit, even if it's small. Let success become something shared, not hoarded.

Interrupt the Scarcity Mindset: When you catch yourself feeling competitive or left behind, pause. Ask, What story am I telling about my worth right now? What if their success is proof that mine is possible too? Let someone else's light become inspiration, not a threat.

Practice Being Part of the Whole: In your next group setting (like a work meeting, family dinner, or community event), practice softening your need to perform or prove. Show up with presence, not pressure. Offer your piece without trying to be the whole. Let your contribution be enough.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

Who Am I in a Group Setting?

When do I feel the need to compete instead of collaborate? (What part of my identity feels threatened in shared success? Is it okay if others win too? What does it say about me if others win?)

Emily Maroutian

What roles have I taken on in life that make it hard to ask for help? (Who did I have to become to feel valuable? Do I take on too much?)

Where in my life do I tie my worth to being the best, the first, or the one who does it all? (What am I afraid would happen if I wasn't?)

When I see someone else succeed, what story does that activate in me? (Does it affirm my path or make me question it?)

Who do I become when I work in a group? (Do I disappear, take over, perform, withdraw, or contribute honestly?)

What identity have I built around independence or self-sufficiency? (Is it still serving me, or just protecting me?)

How does it feel in my body when I imagine being supported by others? (What resistance comes up?)

# Authenticity or Uniformity

Contrast is fundamental to how we understand the world. It shapes our perceptions, refines our definitions, and provides clarity in a variety of experiences. Without contrast, we lose the ability to make differentiations. And without differentiation, meaning dissolves.

Consider the simple concept of “up”: it only exists because we also have “down.” Likewise, “left” only makes sense in relation to “right.” Contrast gives definition and substance to the things we see, feel, and believe.

This principle extends to everything in life. If the world consisted only of the color white, it would be indistinguishable from nothing. We need other colors to define what white is, to give it context and significance. If I were to present you with a blank canvas as art, you would

## Emily Maroutian

be confused. Where is the color? The shapes? The objects? What is “it”? There is no “it” to perceive, to appreciate, to elicit any emotional response.

Imagine walking into a museum filled with identical paintings. The absence of variation would make the experience entirely meaningless. Your mind wouldn’t know where to look or what to feel.

Even in our emotions, contrast gives meaning. Joy tastes sweeter after sorrow. Peace feels more profound after chaos. It’s not that suffering is required, but that our ability to recognize depth is often forged through contrast. Without it, experience flattens. Awareness dulls. Contrast allows us to identify, compare, and ultimately, understand what we’re experiencing.

We are designed to notice differences. Not as a flaw, but as a function. It’s how we learn. How we evolve. How we begin to understand ourselves in relation to everything else. My voice sounds like mine because it doesn’t sound like yours. My perspective feels unique because it has something else to rub up against – a contrasting viewpoint.

Contrast is not the enemy of unity. It’s the brushstroke that paints the full picture. It’s what gives color to the canvas of our lives. When we stop fearing difference, we

## Unbound

start discovering oneness. When we stop ranking contrast as better or worse, we begin seeing it as essential. That's when understanding happens. That's when something soft opens inside us, and we realize that none of this would mean anything if it were all the same.

Contrast isn't a flaw to be smoothed out. It's the very shape of knowledge.

### **Our Definitions:**

Throughout history, contrast has shaped how we define complex concepts like culture, religion, and identity. Some native cultures did not possess a word for "religion" because there was no exposure to other belief systems. Their practices and traditions were simply life itself, encompassing every aspect of their existence. It was only when they encountered contrasting beliefs that the need to define "religion" arose. Suddenly, what had been an unspoken way of life required a name, a boundary, a distinction.

Contrast forces specificity. It compels us to articulate what something is by showing us what it is not. This can be illuminating, helping us gain clarity and insight. But it can also lead to separation and division if we begin to see

## Emily Maroutian

differences as barriers rather than as opportunities for understanding.

Contrast enriches our lives by providing depth and variety. Imagine a world where everything is identical, where every tree, every person, every thought is indistinguishable. It would be a monotonous existence devoid of growth or inspiration. Contrast fuels creativity, innovation, and progress. It challenges us to think critically and to see the world through a more nuanced lens.

What would change in the world if we simply imitated everyone else? What would be different if we all tried to be the same? What would develop? What would evolve? What would be invented or created? What would happen to humanity if everyone was exactly the same? What would we do with a society of eight billion doctors or eight billion abstract painters? Who would write the books, sing the songs, build the roads, plant the food, or make the clothes? How would a world of sameness even function? It could not. Nothing functions or exists without contrast.

Yet despite this, we often try to mold ourselves and others into sameness. We try to streamline identities, categorize people into neat definitions, and create standards of what is normal, acceptable, or ideal. We define beauty by

## Unbound

a single image. We define success by a narrow path. We define gender, intelligence, love, and worth with rigid expectations. And when something or someone exists outside those definitions, they are seen as wrong, rather than different.

But every definition we create is born from contrast. Masculine only exists because we understand what we've labeled as feminine. Wealth has meaning because we also know what it's like to lack. Civilization is defined in contrast to tribalism. None of these ideas were formed in isolation. They emerged from comparison. From observing the "other" and trying to name the "self" in relation to it.

The danger is when we mistake definitions for truth. When we forget that our ideas of normal or right or better are not facts, but constructs shaped by time, place, culture, and power. Definitions are not neutral. They are often political. They reflect who had the authority to decide what counted, what mattered, and what belonged.

If the dominant culture defines intelligence as academic performance, then the child who is brilliant with their hands but struggles in school is seen as unintelligent. If beauty is defined by light skin color, thinness, or symmetry, then everyone outside of that mold is judged against an artificial

## Emily Maroutian

scale. These definitions do not reflect the full spectrum of human potential. They reflect contrast that has been weaponized.

But we can return contrast to its rightful place as a tool for discovery, not division. As a way to deepen understanding, not diminish difference. We can let it stretch our definitions instead of shrink our humanity. Because the truth is, contrast does not separate us. It connects us. It allows us to see the full picture. To hold space for the many ways of being human. And when we stop fearing difference, we begin to expand, individually and collectively. We move from labeling to listening. From defining to discovering. And in that space, something new becomes possible. Something freer. Something unbound.

### **Stepping Outside of Definitions:**

What we consider “masculine” or “feminine” is not universal truth across all cultures or traditions. It’s mostly a performance. A script passed down through generations, reinforced by repetition, reward, and rejection.

In the West, long hair, skirts, and makeup are often seen as feminine. But that belief dissolves the moment we step outside of our cultural lens.



## Unbound

Native American men have worn their hair long as a symbol of strength, connection to spirit, and cultural pride. In Scotland, men wear kilts – essentially skirts – with dignity and honor, especially during sacred ceremonies. In many African and South American cultures, men paint their faces before hunting, adorning themselves with color and symbolism that, through a Western lens, might be mistaken for “makeup.” None of these practices are feminine. They are cultural. Contextual. Normal in one place. Misunderstood in another.

In the early 1900s in the U.S. and parts of Europe, pink was often recommended for boys and blue for girls. Magazines and baby guides from the early 20th century sometimes suggested pink for boys because it was seen as a stronger, bolder color. Blue, on the other hand, was considered delicate and dainty and more suitable for girls.

Young children of both sexes typically wore dresses or gowns until about age 6 or 7. This made diapering easier and was practical at a time when childhood clothing norms were more about ease than gender.

The color association shifted gradually over decades, mainly through mid-century marketing, mass production, and big retail’s push for more gender-specific children’s

## Emily Maroutian

clothes. Major department stores and manufacturers popularized the modern “pink for girls, blue for boys” standard through advertising from the 1940s onward. That essentially means our current standards for masculinity and femininity were determined by department stores that wanted to sell more clothes by dividing gender by color. This enabled parents to have to purchase separate clothes for boys and girls instead of reusing them.

This is what it means to say that gender is a social construct; it’s not a fixed reality. It’s a set of expectations. A learned choreography of appearance, expression, and behavior. “Boys don’t cry.” “Girls play with dolls.” In other words: stay on script; perform your assigned role. But who wrote the script? And who gets to edit it? And how often?

The truth is, we perform gender the way we’ve been taught to. And when someone veers off-script, it’s not always because they’re confused. Sometimes it’s because they’re free. Free to express without explanation. Free to exist without apology. Free to redefine the expression of a man, a woman, or something beyond both.

While gender expression can feel meaningful, even sacred to some, it is not a universal truth. It is tied to culture, religion, and tradition. However, traditions can

## Unbound

evolve. And in some ways, they must evolve because sameness cannot sustain a society for long. It cannot build it, grow it, or move it forward. A world made of one type of person — one role, one way of thinking, one way of being — would collapse under the weight of its own uniformity.

Sameness may feel safe in some regards, but it doesn't create anything new. It doesn't innovate or evolve. Moving from the telegram to the telephone to a cell phone took thinking outside the norms of society. Every invention, every breakthrough, every piece of art has come from someone who thought differently, who imagined something that didn't exist yet. Difference isn't just helpful, it's essential. The very structure of humanity relies on contrast.

Even within ourselves, we thrive through variety. We wear different clothes depending on our mood, the weather, or the occasion. We crave different foods, explore different ideas, and express ourselves through different means. That internal diversity is mirrored in society. It's what makes us interesting. It's what gives life texture.

Uniformity may offer order in some cases, but it does so at the cost of personal expression, freedom, and authenticity. It flattens the human experience. If we all thought the same, looked the same, loved the same,

Emily Maroutian

dreamed the same, what would be left to discover? The world would be a dull place.

It's perfectly okay if you hold gender expression as sacred, if you cherish tradition, if it feels true and grounding for you. This is not about forcing you to release something that gives your life or identity meaning. It's about making space for others to hold their truth too, even when it looks nothing like yours. This is simply an invitation to allow others the same freedom to live authentically without fear, just as you live in what feels right for you.

Because sameness might feel comfortable in theory, but in practice, it starves us of growth. It starves our curiosity and potential. It replaces possibility with predictability. And human beings are not meant to be predictable. We are meant to be expansive, alive, and ever evolving. And so, we must allow ourselves to evolve.

### **The Trap of Uniformity:**

While contrast is essential for understanding, it can also lead to conflict when misinterpreted or mishandled. Differences in beliefs, practices, or values often become points of contention rather than opportunities for connection and understanding. Instead of celebrating

## Unbound

authenticity, we may feel threatened by it, retreating into uniformity as a way to protect our sense of self.

Uniformity feels safe because it eliminates the need for negotiation or compromise. But this safety comes at a cost: it stifles growth, narrows perspectives, and creates echo chambers where only one way of thinking is permitted.

However, in certain circumstances, this safety can be beneficial. For example, when people of a particular group come together to ensure their rights are protected, uniformity provides a unified voice that can be more powerful than individual efforts. Similarly, shared experiences, such as enduring a common trauma, can create a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding that offers comfort and healing. This form of uniformity fosters strength, stability, and resilience within a group. It allows individuals to unify under the same cause or idea.

Generally speaking, uniformity creates community, but it can also stifle free expression. There's a cost to conformity. Typically, it asks you to trade pieces of yourself for belonging. To silence your instincts. To smooth your edges. To laugh when it's not funny, agree when you don't mean it, smile when you feel like screaming. You get to stay in the room, but at what cost? Fitting in, when it requires self-

Emily Maroutian

abandonment, is its own kind of loneliness. You can be surrounded by people and still feel invisible because they're not seeing you. They're seeing the version of you that performs well enough to stay accepted.

There is a cost to authenticity as well. To choosing your own path. To refusing to shrink yourself to fit into spaces that were never built with you in mind. It can be isolating. People may not understand you. They may criticize you, hate you, or leave you. You may find yourself walking alone, carrying the weight of your truth without a hand to hold.

Still, being alone does not have to mean being lonely. Solitude can be sacred. When you stop trying to fit into a single mold, you realize that you were never meant to belong to just one group. You are not one thing. You are not one label. You are layered, fluid, and expansive. And that expansiveness allows you to move freely between spaces. To connect without conforming. To belong without dissolving. To keep your authenticity everywhere.

I float between communities. I am Armenian. I am spiritual. I am queer. I am a philosopher. I am a writer and a poet. I own businesses. I perform a multitude of actions and duties in various spaces. I move through different

## Unbound

communities with ease: Artists. Activists. Altruists. Entrepreneurs. Trauma survivors. Therapists and healers. I don't live inside a single adjective. I exist at the intersections of all of these communities. I carry many "labels" at once. And I don't need to define myself by any one of them. Because when I show up in one community, I don't hide the other parts of me. I do not become a single label at the expense of my authenticity. I cannot split myself to make others comfortable. No one grows through comfort. And I am a catalyst for growth.

That is the quiet power of authenticity. It creates space where none existed. It allows you to find connection on your own terms. It lets you keep your selfhood intact while still reaching toward others. Not through assimilation, but through resonance. Not because you fit, but because you're full. And that kind of belonging is real because it doesn't ask you to disappear in order to belong. I belong to myself first and foremost. Everything else second.

### **Embracing Contrast:**

Contrast invites us to embrace diversity and to recognize that our differences are not inherently divisive. They are opportunities to expand our horizons and to see

## Emily Maroutian

the world in ways we might never have considered. But the challenge lies in finding balance. How do we embrace contrast without allowing it to divide us? How do we celebrate differences while fostering a sense of unity? The answer lies in shifting our mindset from one of comparison to one of curiosity. Instead of seeing contrast as a threat, we can see it as an invitation to learn and grow.

Uniformity has its place. It provides stability and cohesion, allowing societies to function and individuals to feel a sense of belonging. But when uniformity becomes rigid, it limits our ability to adapt and evolve. Contrast, when approached with an open mind, can complement uniformity by introducing fresh perspectives and new possibilities.

Ultimately, contrast is not about opposition. It's about relationship. Heads and tails may face in different directions, but together they form a single coin. Light and shadow dance together to create depth. Sound and silence shape music. Difference is not the enemy of unity; it's the condition for it.

Contrast reminds us that we are not separate from one another; we are defined in relation to one another. My perspective expands when it meets yours. My truth



## Unbound

sharpens when it's held up to another. Even when we disagree, we are still in dialogue, still connected by the space between our views.

When we stop fearing difference, we begin to see it for what it truly is: an invitation. An invitation to learn, to listen, to stretch beyond what we've known. Contrast doesn't weaken us. It strengthens our understanding. It adds color to our worldview. It makes room for nuance, for empathy, for expansion.

By embracing contrast, we move from defensiveness into curiosity. From judgment into appreciation. We stop asking, "How are you different from me?" and start wondering, "What can I learn from the way you see?" Because contrast doesn't just teach us what something is; it also shows us what it isn't. It teaches us who we are. It reflects us back to ourselves, not as a fixed identity, but as a fluid and evolving expression of life.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Practicing Openness

Seek Contrast: For one week, notice areas where diversity of thought, experience, or background enriches your life (e.g.,

Emily Maroutian

conversations with people who challenge your views).  
Reflect on how contrast helps you grow and develop.

**Test Uniformity:** Identify a space in your life where uniformity provides comfort or strength (e.g., shared family traditions, belonging to a team). Bring a different aspect of your identity to this space and see how it is accepted. Express a truth, share a label, connect through a different experience. Journal about how unity in these areas contributes to your sense of belonging, but also inhibits your full expression.

**Release the Need for Agreement:** In your next conversation, especially one involving different opinions, practice staying connected even when you disagree. Instead of planning your rebuttal, try saying, “Tell me more about why you feel that way.” Let understanding be your goal, not winning. This is how we build bridges, not walls.

**Work with Triggers:** If a part of this chapter stirred something in you, take a moment to turn inward. Notice what rose to the surface. Did you feel defensive, uneasy, or tempted to stop reading? Gently ask yourself why. Did it

## Unbound

threaten a part of your identity? Which part? Sit with whatever comes up, without judgment. Let the answer show you where to look next.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

What is Difference Teaching Me?

When have I felt uncomfortable in the presence of difference? (What did it stir in me, fear, curiosity, judgment, inspiration?)

What part of me feels safer when everyone agrees, behaves, or believes the same way? (What identity is being protected in that sameness?)

Where in my life have I mistaken comfort for truth? (What might open up if I allowed discomfort to be a doorway, not a danger?)

What have I learned from people who are not like me? (How have their perspectives expanded my own?)

What personal or cultural beliefs do I hold that were shaped

Emily Maroutian

by conformity rather than curiosity? (What would it look like to question them now?)

Do I allow space for nuance in others, or do I feel the need to categorize them quickly? (What would it feel like to let people unfold instead of defining them upfront?)

How many different communities do I belong to? Can they intersect? (Can I create an overlap for some of them? Can I bring a different aspect of myself there?)

## Expansion or Contraction

Fear and curiosity are both responses to the unknown. One pulls us back into contraction, the other helps us expand. Fear tightens the body, closes the mind, and tells us to protect what we know. Curiosity softens the body, opens the mind, and invites us to explore what we don't know. Either one can arrive in the same moment, depending on our practiced responses.

Fear wants certainty. It wants guarantees before it takes a step forward. Curiosity doesn't need to know what's on the other side. It just wants to see. It's not reckless; it's receptive. It asks questions instead of making assumptions. It listens instead of retreating. And in that space of listening, something new becomes possible.

When we meet differences—whether in ideas, people, or parts of ourselves—fear tells us to judge, label, or control.

Emily Maroutian

Curiosity, on the other hand, asks us to wonder. To pause. To make room. Curiosity doesn't mean we accept everything as truth, but it means we're open enough to find out what's true *here*. Not what was true in the past. Not what was true for someone else. Not what was true at another time, at another place, with a different person. Here. Now. What's happening *now*?

This chapter is not about silencing or ignoring fear. It's about choosing what to do when it shows up as a practiced response and not a life-saving response. It's about noticing the door that fear tries to close and opening it anyway, not with force, but with interest. Not with resistance, but with presence.

Curiosity doesn't require you to be fearless. It just asks you to stay with yourself long enough to see what's there.

### **The Nature of Fear:**

Fear is wired into our biology. It's an ancient mechanism designed to keep us alive by alerting us to danger and preparing us to respond. In the wild, it was vital, pumping adrenaline through the body so we could run, fight, or disappear in the face of threat. That system still lives in us today, even though the dangers have

## Unbound

changed. We no longer run from wild animals, but our nervous system doesn't always know the difference between physical danger and emotional discomfort. It still reacts in the same way.

The brain's amygdala is tasked with detecting threats. But it can't always distinguish between an actual emergency and a difficult conversation, a new idea or a moment of vulnerability. When something feels unfamiliar or unsafe, it signals the body to prepare for survival. The heart beats faster. The breath becomes shallow. Muscles tense. Digestion slows. Awareness narrows. The body shifts into a state of readiness, not for listening, but for defending. This is the fight, flight, or freeze response, and it's incredibly effective at protecting us from harm. But when it's activated in moments of interpersonal relationships, it often does more harm than good.

Instead of hearing what someone is saying, we filter it through our past pain. Instead of asking questions, we prepare to argue or retreat. The brain's prefrontal cortex—the part responsible for empathy, logic, and reflection—goes offline, while the more primitive parts of the brain take control.

In this state, we don't communicate to understand. We

Emily Maroutian

communicate to protect. We interrupt, shut down, lash out, or go quiet. Not because we're flawed, but because our minds and bodies are trying to keep us safe.

The tragedy is that these fear-based responses often arise in moments when what we truly need is connection. When someone's perspective challenges ours, when we feel misunderstood, when difference appears, we don't always stay open. We get small. We armor up. And in doing so, we miss the moment. We miss each other.

Fear narrows. It makes us contract, emotionally, mentally, and even physically. It creates tunnel vision. It makes us mistake disagreement for danger and curiosity for threat. It fills in gaps with assumptions, imagines motives that don't exist, and reduces the complexity of another human being into a story we can control. And while fear may feel protective, it often isolates us, cutting us off from new perspectives, new experiences, and deeper forms of understanding.

Curiosity, by contrast, is not a survival response. It doesn't rise from threat; it rises from interest. While fear contracts, curiosity expands. It invites us to lean in, to listen more closely, to explore without needing to control. But for curiosity to emerge, fear must soften. Not disappear



## Unbound

entirely, but set aside so we can shift from guarding ourselves to opening ourselves. Not recklessly, but with presence.

Understanding the nature of fear and how it lives in the body and hijacks the mind gives us power. It helps us recognize when we're reacting from old instincts instead of current truth. And that recognition is the beginning of choice. Because we can't stop fear from arising, but we can decide what to do when it does.

### **The Power of Curiosity:**

Curiosity invites us to explore the unknown with an open heart and an open mind. When we are curious, we ask questions instead of making assumptions. We seek to understand rather than to judge. Instead of saying, "I don't understand, so I'll avoid it," curiosity says, "I don't understand, so I want to learn more."

Curiosity is not about agreement or acceptance; it's about exploration. You don't have to agree with someone's beliefs or choices to be curious about their story. You don't have to accept your own shame or judgment to be curious about its origins.

Curiosity leads to empathy because it asks us to wonder

Emily Maroutian

instead of judge. What might have caused my outburst? Is there a part of me that feels threatened? What might cause someone to hold this negative belief? What life experiences might have led them here?

Curiosity is a quiet form of courage. It doesn't shout or demand. It leans in. It asks, gently, "Tell me more." Whether we are speaking to our own internal processes or wondering about someone else's, curiosity opens the door that fear slams shut.

When we are curious, we aren't trying to win. We aren't trying to be right. We are trying to understand. Curiosity takes us beyond the limits of our current understanding and opens a pathway into something new.

When fear rises within us, it doesn't only tell us to guard against someone else; it can also turn us against our own thoughts, feelings, and memories. Shame, judgment, and self-criticism are just fear in a different disguise.

Meeting ourselves with curiosity means pausing before deciding that a part of us is wrong or broken. It means asking, "Why is this here?" instead of declaring, "This shouldn't be here!" It's a willingness to listen to the parts of us we've tried to exile; the ones carrying old pain, the ones afraid of being hurt again, the ones still waiting for safety.

## Unbound

It's genuine inquiry. It's looking at our fear and saying, "Tell me what you need me to know." It's meeting the shamed part with the same gentle questions we would offer a friend: What happened to you? What are you protecting me from? What would help you feel safe?

When we practice this, our inner world changes. We stop treating our fear as an enemy and begin to see it as a messenger. We stop silencing the exiled parts of ourselves and start inviting them to speak. And the more we do this, the more we can extend that same patience and openness to others.

This is not always easy, especially when someone's story is different from ours. Especially when their truth challenges what we've known or believed. In those moments, it's tempting to shut down or turn away. To assume that difference means danger or that if their experience is valid, ours must somehow be invalid. But that's the lie fear tells us: that only one truth can exist at a time. Curiosity knows better. It knows that two things can be true. That another person's story doesn't erase ours. It adds to the landscape of what it means to be human.

When we meet people with curiosity instead of defense, we begin to see beyond roles, labels, and appearances. We

Emily Maroutian

start to wonder about the invisible stories that shaped them. The grief they carry, the values they hold, the places where their heart broke open. We ask not to challenge them, but to know them. And that simple act of asking becomes an invitation to connect.

### **Curiosity Requires Presence:**

Curiosity requires presence because fear regurgitates the old story. It recreates the past, pulling fragments of memory and old pain into the present moment until we're no longer responding to what's actually in front of us. We're reacting to ghosts.

Fear doesn't look for what's new; it looks for what's familiar. It tries to confirm what it already believes, even if that belief harms us. Presence interrupts this loop. It brings us back to what is unfolding right now, without the distortion of what happened before.

When we are present, we can notice the difference. We can ask questions that belong to this moment instead of assuming the answers from another time. Curiosity is more interested in asking the question than finding the answer. Fear, on the other hand, always has an answer.

Presence keeps us in our bodies instead of being lost in

## Unbound

our minds. It lets us listen without rushing to interpret. It gives us the time to feel before we decide. This is why curiosity and presence are inseparable. Without presence, curiosity gets swallowed by assumption. With presence, it becomes a doorway to something new.

Curiosity doesn't require you to lose yourself. You can listen to someone's story and still hold your own. You can understand where they're coming from without letting go of what's true for you. Curiosity makes space for both. It doesn't flatten difference; it honors it. It says, "I see that you are not me. And I want to know what that's like."

In divided times, curiosity is revolutionary because it humanizes. It takes what fear has made into "other" and brings it closer. It doesn't ask us to abandon our values or beliefs; it asks us to soften around them. To make room for someone else to exist beside us, not against us.

When we stay curious, we become better listeners, partners, and neighbors. We stop looking for what separates us and start noticing what connects us. The same longing to be understood. The same ache for safety. The same desire to feel seen. These common threads begin to emerge when we stop talking over each other and start asking better questions. Instead of assuming someone's behavior is

Emily Maroutian

“wrong,” we can ask: What experiences might have led them to act this way? What is this opinion revealing about their values in life? How is it similar to mine?

Fear-driven responses often begin with, “What if?” What if they are a threat to my way of thinking? What if I’m wrong? What if this changes how I see the world? But curiosity shifts those questions: What if they have something valuable to teach me? What if I can grow from this encounter? What if we are really alike?

Questions are powerful because they lead us to answers, and the right questions can lead us to connection. They replace judgment with a desire to understand. They reframe fear as an opportunity for growth. They can open the lines of communication and understanding.

So the next time you feel the rise of resistance, the urge to defend or withdraw, pause. Ask yourself, What story haven’t I heard yet? What part of this person have I not seen? What might I discover if I stop needing to be right and start wanting to understand?

Curiosity softens the hard edges of fear. It transforms strangers into stories and differences into dialogues. It doesn’t ask us to approve of everything; it asks us to understand. It is not weakness; it is a strength rooted in

## Unbound

openness. It is a commitment to growth over certainty. And in a world that teaches us to fear what we don't understand, choosing to stay curious just might be a revolutionary act.

### **The Courage to Remain Curious:**

Curiosity asks us to be vulnerable. To stay open when it would be easier to close. To admit we don't know when we'd rather be certain. To question what we've always believed and listen without needing to defend. That kind of courage begins on the inside because choosing curiosity over fear isn't always comfortable, but it is powerful.

Fear contracts the body, narrows the mind, and tells us to protect. Curiosity slows us down, softens the edges, and tells us we're safe enough to explore. This shift isn't just emotional; it's biological. When we pause, breathe, and stay present, we activate the parasympathetic nervous system — the body's natural calm state. The heart rate slows. The breath deepens. The brain reopens to new information. We are no longer in survival mode. We are in awareness.

And that awareness gives us options. In the space between reaction and response, we can choose a different path. One where questions replace assumptions. Where connection takes priority over control. Where difference

Emily Maroutian

doesn't trigger fear, but invites us to wonder, What else might be true?

This is how curiosity becomes a practice. Not a performance, but a quiet return to presence. A moment-to-moment decision to stay with ourselves long enough to stay with each other. Each time we breathe instead of brace, ask instead of assume, listen instead of defend, we rewrite the story fear tries to tell us. We train our nervous system to recognize that the unknown is not always dangerous. Sometimes, it's discovery.

Curiosity doesn't require perfection. It requires willingness. A willingness to believe that growth is possible. That people are more than the roles we cast them in. That we are more than the stories we cling to. And in that willingness, we begin to shift. Not just how we see others, but how we see ourselves.

To be curious in a fearful world is a radical act. Not because it changes what we know, but because it changes *how* we know. With sincerity. With humility. With one heart opening toward another.

### **From Fear to Curiosity:**

Fear is a contraction of the nervous system. When we



## Unbound

sense a threat — whether it's physical danger or emotional discomfort — the body shifts into survival mode. This is useful when we're in real danger, but in moments of difference or disagreement, it often shuts down the very openness we need. To move toward curiosity, we need to help the body feel safe again. That safety begins in the parasympathetic nervous system, the branch that calms and restores.

Simple physical cues can invite it back online. We can pause before responding to give our body a moment to register that we're safe. We can breathe slowly and deeply, signaling to the brain that there is no immediate threat. We can soften our posture, unclenching our jaw and relaxing our shoulders. We can widen our gaze, literally looking around the space, reminding ourselves that we are not trapped.

These signals tell the body it can shift out of defense and into awareness. From there, the prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain that allows for empathy, reflection, and perspective — comes back online. In this state, questions feel possible again. Listening feels possible again. The connection no longer feels like a threat.

Fear may still linger, but it no longer drives the moment.

Emily Maroutian

Curiosity becomes the guide. Then we can ask, What might I discover here? What can I learn from this? Am I open to hearing something new? And in asking these questions, we choose expansion over contraction.

Curiosity doesn't require us to be fearless; it requires us to be willing. Willing to keep the door open, to stay present long enough to meet the unknown, not as an enemy, but as a teacher.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Let the Questions Breathe

**The Curiosity Pause:** The next time something someone says triggers a strong reaction, pause before responding. Instead of bracing or shutting down, gently ask yourself: What part of their story might I not know yet? What part of me feels unsafe hearing this? Can I hold space for both truths at once, mine and theirs?

**Start a Curiosity Journal:** Each day for a week, write down one thing you're curious about, no matter how small. It could be a topic, a feeling, a behavior, or a person. Then take one small step to learn more about it. Notice how curiosity

## Unbound

feels in your body compared to fear.

**Fear vs. Curiosity Roleplay:** Write a dialogue between Fear and Curiosity as if they were characters inside you. Let Fear speak first, voicing its concerns. Then let Curiosity respond, not to fight, but to understand and gently offer a new path. This gives voice to both parts within yourself and helps you find balance between them.

### **Questions for Self-Reflection:**

Fear or Curiosity?

What does fear feel like in my body? (What are the physical sensations? What does it want me to do — shut down, run, argue, prove?) What does curiosity feel like in my body? (What are the physical sensations? Where do I feel open, soft, or drawn to learn more?)

When I become defensive, what am I actually trying to protect? (Is it my truth, my identity, my sense of safety?)

What part of me believes that someone else's truth might erase mine? (Is that belief rooted in fear or fact?)

Emily Maroutian

In what situations do I consistently choose fear over curiosity, and what would I need in those moments to feel safe enough to explore?

What does it feel like to admit I don't have all the answers? (Is it freeing or uncomfortable? Why?)

How can I practice listening without planning my following response? (How can I just be with this experience without feeling defensive about it?)

What scares me most about perspectives that challenge my worldview? (What would happen if I stayed curious instead of defensive?)

How can I foster a spirit of curiosity in my daily interactions, whether with loved ones or strangers?

*Part 3:*  
*Expanding The Self*



## Self with Other

We come to know ourselves not just through inner reflection, but also through the way we think others perceive us. We adjust our behavior, beliefs, and even identities based on those imagined perceptions. What will they think of how I dress? How I speak? Who I love?

Sometimes, it's not even a specific person, but the echo of society, religion, school, or family. Their voices live in our minds like mirrors, and slowly, the self becomes shaped in their imaginary gaze.

This is the quiet birth of internal "otherness." How we view ourselves through other people's eyes. This projection isn't directed at the difference we see in them; this is the difference we *think* other people see in us. It's an internal policing we do to ensure our family, community, religion,

Emily Maroutian

or friends don't ostracize us.

We police our thoughts, edit our behavior, and wear identities designed to keep us close to our community. To be lovable. Respectable. Safe. We learn to perform. To show strength so no one sees weakness. To display confidence so no one senses fear. To remain quiet and agreeable so we don't create conflict and disharmony. To prove our worth through roles, titles, and masks.

We don't want others to see us as those "different" people, so we put on displays to appear otherwise. We present as the opposite of what we fear. For example, to display strength is to fear appearing weak to others. To display wealth is to fear appearing poor. To display masculinity is to fear appearing feminine.

These roles are a means of protection by an insecure self. If we were strong, we wouldn't need to display it. It's the performance that implies the insecurity. It's the performance that becomes a mask. Because when our sense of self is built on the fear of separation from others, we live in reaction and performance, not in truth. This is mainly because we're afraid others will shame and exile the parts of us they deem unlovable, just as we have to ourselves.

So if the primary purpose of our chosen identity is to



## Unbound

avoid exile and separation from our family, friends, and community, then who are we? Are we the version of ourselves that keeps us safe? Or the one that keeps us true? Because often, they are not the same person.

### **The Looking Glass Self:**

The Looking Glass Self, a term coined by sociologist Charles Cooley, describes how we form our sense of self by projecting how we think others see us. We imagine their judgment, their approval or disapproval, and then shape ourselves in response. Not based on who we are, but on who we think they see us as.

This happens so subtly, we often don't notice it. We adjust our tone to sound more intelligent. We hide a part of ourselves we think might be judged. We post something online we hope others will admire, or we don't post at all out of fear they won't. We ask ourselves: "What would other men think of my masculinity?" "Would my friends respect my taste in music?" "What would my mom say if I told her the truth?" These questions don't just linger in the background; they shape our choices, sometimes profoundly.

The danger here isn't just uniformity. It's disconnection. When we live according to what we think others want, we

Emily Maroutian

lose touch with our own desires, our own values, our own voice. We begin to perform rather than live. To anticipate rather than feel. To seek approval instead of alignment.

But here's the truth: most people are not thinking about us as much as we imagine. Their imagined gaze lives inside our own minds. It is our perception of their perception. Which means the only approval we're really seeking is our own.

To untangle from this loop, we have to ask: Who am I when no one is watching? Who am I beneath expectation? Beneath performance? Beneath the mirrors I've been looking into for too long?

When we stop asking, "How do I appear to others?" and start asking, "How does it feel to be me?" we begin the process of reclaiming the self from the other. We begin to live, not as a reflection, but as something whole and real.

When we're young, we learn to choose safety first. To shrink or stretch ourselves into roles that preserve connection, even if that connection is conditional. We become the agreeable one. The strong one. The one who doesn't question. The one who doesn't need too much. These identities may earn us approval, but they come at the cost of our authenticity.

## Unbound

And the longer we stay in those roles, the harder it becomes to tell where the mask ends and we begin. We convince ourselves this is just who we are. But underneath the surface, there is often a quieter self, still waiting to be seen by us.

That self remembers what it feels like to be whole before the performance. Before the adaptation. Before the fear. It holds the parts of us we've hidden to be accepted. The questions we were told not to ask, the dreams we were told not to want, the truths we were told not to speak. And to return to that self is to risk being seen. To risk being different. To risk losing proximity to the people we love most.

But it's also the only way to belong without betraying yourself. Because real belonging isn't earned by fitting in, it's revealed by showing up as you are and letting that be enough. And if it costs you someone else's comfort, it's not a loss. It's a return. A return to the self you left behind to survive.

So the deeper question becomes: Am I living a life that reflects my truth, or one that protects me from rejection? And what would it take to cross that threshold, to reclaim the self that was exiled in order to stay loved?

Emily Maroutian

That's where the real self begins, not in opposition to others, but in an honest relationship with our own soul.

### **The Otherness of the Other:**

The line between self and other shapes how we move through the world. It tells us where we end and someone else begins. But that line is not as solid as we think; it's easily smudged by trauma, memory, culture, judgment, and need.

We live in a world where individuality is celebrated, and yet we constantly measure ourselves against others. This tension between self and other creates a paradox: we long for connection, yet we fear vulnerability; we want to be seen, yet we hide behind roles and masks. To bridge this divide, we must understand both our own complexity and the humanity of those around us.

At its core, "the other" is anyone we perceive as separate or different from us, different in beliefs, background, lifestyle, or values. But "otherness" is often an illusion, a construct that allows us to justify disconnection. When we categorize someone as "different," we create a mental boundary that can lead to feelings of superiority, judgment, or fear. The more distant we perceive someone to

## Unbound

be from us, the easier it becomes to misunderstand or even dehumanize them.

This not only creates a separation within society, but it also creates a separation within ourselves. We subconsciously understand the consequences of being an “other” and so the protector part of our identities desires nothing more than to keep us from the pain and suffering of this separation. To do this, it creates a split within the self. It labels some aspects of the self as unlovable and exiles them into the shadows of our being. It uses shame as the guard to this internal prison.

The moment we internalize the cost of “otherness,” we begin to police ourselves in an attempt to avoid it. We quiet our questions, hide our softness, harden our edges. We align ourselves with the dominant voice – whether it belongs to family, culture, or community – not out of truth, but out of survival. We tell ourselves, If I am like them, I will be safe. If I am different, I will be alone.

And so we fracture. We disown the parts of ourselves that threaten acceptance. We label them as weak, wrong, dramatic, naive, unholy, too much. These exiled parts don’t disappear. They go underground. And the longer they remain buried, the more foreign they begin to feel until we

Emily Maroutian

treat them as we were taught to treat the other: with suspicion, with rejection, with silence.

But what we reject in ourselves, we inevitably reject in others. If I have buried my tenderness, your tenderness will disturb me. If I've been punished for needing too much, your vulnerability will feel like a threat. This is how the inner split becomes an outer judgment. This is how "otherness" gets projected.

The more we exile parts of ourselves, the more we divide the world into categories: acceptable and unacceptable, right and wrong, one of us or not. And with each division, we distance ourselves not just from other people, but from our own humanity. Because the truth is: everything we see in the other lives in us too. We are just as capable of softness and cruelty, ignorance and insight, despair and grace. To deny that is to deny our wholeness.

To collapse the illusion of otherness, we must begin by turning inward. By facing the parts of us we were taught to abandon. By welcoming them back without shame. Not because they're perfect, but because they're ours. The more we integrate within, the less threatened we feel by difference without.

And in that place of integration, something shifts. We

## Unbound

no longer need to define ourselves in opposition to others. We no longer need sameness to feel safe. We can allow people to be who they are fully, freely, because we have made space to be who we are, too.

The way we treat others is how we treat the “othered” parts of ourselves. When we stop exiling our contradictions, we stop fearing them in others. And that’s where the real bridge begins. Not through agreement, but through the recognition and acceptance of the “me” in “you”.

### **I as Other:**

Perception is not neutral; it’s personal. We carry an internal system built on decades of beliefs, stories, and experiences. That system becomes the lens through which we see everyone else. If I believe I am unworthy, I may interpret love as obligation or kindness as manipulation. If I believe I am superior, I may interpret disagreement as ignorance. If I believe I am invisible, I may perceive exclusion where none was intended. In any case, I am not responding to the person in front of me. I am responding to the identity I am bringing into the interaction.

This is the silent influence of identity. Who I believe I am determines what I expect from others, how I interpret

Emily Maroutian

their actions, and what role I unconsciously assign them in my story. Some become threats. Some become rescuers. Some become reflections of a wound I haven't yet healed. Others become proof of a truth I'm not yet ready to hold.

The less secure we are in our identity, the more likely we are to project it outward. We will label others to reinforce our position. We will elevate or diminish them in an attempt to stabilize ourselves. But the more grounded we become in who we truly are (beyond fear and ego) the less we need to do that. We stop using people as mirrors for our insecurities. We start meeting them as they are, not as extensions of our unresolved selves.

We become more understanding of their experiences and perspectives. We remember that just as we are shaped by our own lens, so is everyone else. I am not only the one perceiving, but I am also the one being perceived by others. I might be the "other" in someone else's system. The outsider. The unfamiliar. The one who doesn't quite fit in. My words, my values, even my kindness can be misunderstood. And they're not necessarily wrong, I just don't match the lens through which they view sameness.

This is humbling. It reminds us that while we may feel centered in our own truth, to someone else, we may appear



## Unbound

as a contradiction. To someone carrying the wounds of abandonment, our need for space might feel like rejection. To someone shaped by control, our freedom might feel threatening. To someone raised in certainty, our questions might sound like rebellion. We don't live in a vacuum. We live in the shared field of perception. And just as we want to be seen clearly, we must also be willing to see others clearly.

This means we must bring compassion to the table, not only for those we meet, but for the fact that we, too, may be misread or othered. We must include in our identity the awareness that we are not always experienced the way we intend. And so we must extend to others the very grace we hope to receive: the benefit of the doubt, the willingness to stay curious, the openness to understand what lives behind the mask.

When we recognize that we can be "the other" in someone else's eyes, it softens us. It makes us more patient, more present. It reminds us that connection is not just about being understood; it's about choosing to understand, even when the path isn't clear.

To carry this awareness is to expand identity itself. Not just to include the self we know, but also the self we become in the presence of others. The self that listens before

## Emily Maroutian

reacting. The self that remembers how easy it is to misjudge what we do not yet understand.

Perhaps that's the way forward; not erasing the lines between us, but walking them slowly, with care. With the courage to say, "You might not see me clearly. I might not see you clearly. But let's stay long enough to look again."

To dissolve the barrier between self and other, we must first see how much of the other is being shaped by the definition of self. And when we shift our identity from separation to wholeness, we stop asking "Are they for me or against me?" and start wondering, "What part of me is meeting them right now?" "Am I looking for connection or the validation of an old identity?"

### **The Path Toward Wholeness:**

The other is not just out there; it is also within. The voices we dismiss, the beliefs we condemn, and the traits we can't tolerate in others all exist in some form within us. Maybe they've been silenced. Perhaps they've been shamed. Maybe they were never allowed to surface. But they live there, beneath the surface of who we think we are. To see "the other" clearly is to remember that everything we fear, everything we admire, everything we struggle to

## Unbound

understand in someone else is also a possibility within ourselves. We contain multitudes. We are not fixed beings; we are fluid, capable of contradiction, growth, and change. And in that way, we are more alike than different.

Every time we turn away from difference, we risk turning away from a part of ourselves. Every time we judge what we don't understand, we miss an invitation to grow. The qualities we reject in others often mirror what we've been taught to reject in ourselves. And so, the path toward wholeness is not paved by separation, but by integration.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote that "the face of the other" is a call to responsibility. Not responsibility to fix or control, but to see. To recognize that within every face is a life as full, as complex, and as sacred as our own. When we truly witness another person, we are reminded that humanity lives in all of us, not just some of us.

It is easy to live inside the comfort of sameness. To surround ourselves with those who reflect back what we already believe. But comfort is not the same as connection. A world without difference may feel predictable, but it is also narrow. Our personal reality expands every time we choose to stay present with something unfamiliar. Not to change it. Not to agree with it. But to understand it.

Emily Maroutian

Difference is not a threat; it's a doorway. Every interaction with someone unlike us presents a choice: defend or discover. When we choose discovery, we turn the "other" into a teacher, not an enemy. We become students of humanity, not its gatekeepers. And in that space, something softens. We begin to understand that we, too, are someone's other. That our beliefs, our choices, our way of moving through the world might feel unfamiliar—or even threatening—to someone else. And if we want to be met with grace, with curiosity, with care, then we must offer the same in return. Not as a performance, but as a principle. Not to be liked, but to be whole.

Wholeness asks us to widen the circle. To shift from self *versus* other to self *with* other. It doesn't require us to collapse our differences or blur our boundaries. It simply invites us to remember that beneath every identity is a shared thread. The need to be seen. The need to belong. The longing to be safe in who we are. When we walk that path, with compassion for both our own complexity and the humanity of others, we stop building walls and start building bridges. And in that bridging, we don't lose ourselves. Instead, we find more of who we are.

## Unbound

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Meeting Without the Mask

**Stay With Yourself:** Choose one moment this week—a conversation, a gathering, a relationship—where you often shape-shift. Instead of adjusting to who you think you need to be, stay grounded in who you are. Let your tone match your truth. Let your gestures come from ease, not performance. Connection doesn't require you to become like them. It asks you to remain you.

**Practice Listening Without Positioning:** The next time you encounter someone whose identity challenges you, resist the urge to defend or retreat. Instead, get curious. Ask: "What might I be missing about their story?" or "What experience might have brought them here?" Let understanding matter more than being understood.

**Use the Mirror, Not the Measure:** Reflect on a recent interaction that evoked a strong emotional response like admiration, defensiveness, jealousy, or judgment. Journal about it. What were they mirroring back to you? A longing? A wound? A part of yourself you haven't yet accepted?

Emily Maroutian

What if they weren't a problem to solve, but a reflection to understand? What if it was an invitation to do some inner work on yourself?

### **Self-Reflective Questions:**

Who Do I Become in Relation to Others?

What do I believe I need to be in order to belong? (Who taught me that? Am I trying to be more like them? Do they even like themselves?)

What parts of myself do I quiet in the presence of others? (What am I afraid they'll see, or not see?)

When I feel disconnected from someone, what story do I tell myself about them to make sense of that disconnection? (What part of me is trying to stay safe?)

How often do I meet others as they are versus as I imagine them to be? (How does my lens shape what I'm willing to see?)

In what ways have I expected others to complete or validate

## Unbound

the version of myself I'm unsure of? (Do I use them to feel better about my insecurity?)

When I feel fully myself, how does that alter my perception of others?

What becomes possible when I stop defining myself in contrast to others, and start seeing myself alongside them? (How do I define myself in relation to others? Do I focus on our differences or our similarities?)

What parts of myself do I tend to hide, shrink, or exaggerate when I'm with others? (What am I trying to protect or prove?)

When do I feel most separate from others, and what belief about myself gets triggered in those moments? (Do I feel less than? More than? Not enough? Invisible?)

In what ways do I subconsciously expect others to validate, mirror, or complete me? (How does that shape the dynamics I create or tolerate?)

Emily Maroutian

What would become possible in my relationships if I no longer needed to be defined by contrast? (If I didn't need to be better, safer, smarter, more spiritual, more right?)

How can I shift my perspective from "self vs. other" to "self *and* other" in my daily interactions?



# Us and Them

Each of us lives within a personal system of reality shaped by our beliefs, perspectives, identity, and life experiences. What we regard as “truth” is often just what makes sense within our system. Everything we know fits inside it. Everything connects. But remove one belief from that system, and it might suddenly seem irrational, contradictory, or even absurd.

This is why we can hold conflicting beliefs that seem valid. Each one belongs to a different system of logic. A different version of self. A different context. Each belief holds its own weight within its system. But when pulled into a different system — one shaped by someone else’s identity or life experience — it begins to unravel. Not because it’s false, but because it doesn’t belong there.

## Emily Maroutian

This is why it's so difficult to talk someone else out of a belief that seems false to you. You're not just questioning a simple thought. You're stepping into a context where that thought is true. It has been proven through life experience, and there is a history of evidence to support it. It has been reinforced by their pain, their family, their religion, or their culture. And within that system, their belief isn't illogical. It's self-protective. It's earned. It makes sense.

The frustration we feel when others "refuse to see it differently" often comes from trying to drag their belief into our system, expecting it to survive there. But it can't. And they can't follow us there either. Not without dislodging a part of their identity. Not without the ground beneath them shifting. And most people aren't ready for that, not all at once. Sometimes, not at all.

Since the system is bigger than the belief, it's maintained by everything they've known. Their family system. Their cultural system. Their religious and political systems. These collective structures create the backdrop for their personal reality, and within that backdrop, only the parts that align with their chosen identity are allowed in.

Even when two people seem to share a label, such as the same religion, culture, or background, their personal

## Unbound

systems are never identical. No one lives in the same internal world. Because each system is filtered through personal experience. And what doesn't match that filter is often invisible. This is why people can live inside entirely different realities while standing in the same room.

But every system has its cracks. Small openings where new information can slip through. A conversation that lingers. A question that won't go away. A moment of contradiction that gets under the skin. These are the invitations; the subtle, sacred opportunities for expansion. Most of the time, we miss them. Not because we're unwilling, but because we're unconscious of the system itself. We think we're seeing the world. But we're really just seeing our version of it.

To expand our personal systems, we don't have to destroy them; we simply have to become aware of them. And that happens through identity work. Through asking, "What do I believe and why?" "Who does this belief make me?" "Who gave it to me?" "Who would I be without it?"

The more we get to know the architecture of our reality, the more open it becomes. The more we can hold contradiction without collapse. And the more compassion we gain for the systems that others live in, too. Because if I

Emily Maroutian

know that my truth lives inside a system, then I can understand that yours does, too.

Even though we each live inside our own reality, we're not as separate as we seem. The systems may be personal, but the needs beneath them are universal. We all want to feel safe, valued, and understood. We all want to belong somewhere.

That's where the illusion of "us vs. them" takes root; not in evil or ignorance, but in unfamiliarity. We assume that someone living in a different system cannot understand us, cannot care for us, cannot belong with us. But the truth is, every person's system is built on the same raw material: experience, emotion, memory, meaning. That's the door.

If we look beyond the surface, beyond the beliefs and identities that appear to divide us, we begin to see that what truly separates us is often just a story. One we inherited. One we've never questioned. One that dissolves the moment we meet someone who lives differently, yet feels the same. We then understand that belonging is bigger than identity. That the "us" we've drawn too tightly can be widened. And that there's no need for a "them" at all, because it's just more of us waiting to be discovered.

### **The Psychology of Belonging:**

We are wired to belong. It's not just a social preference; it's a survival instinct. From the beginning, we needed one another to make it. To gather food. To share warmth. To stay alive. And even now, long after the threat has changed, that need remains, not just in the body, but in the mind.

The brain scans for belonging the way it scans for danger. It asks, "Am I safe here?" But it's not just asking about physical safety. It's asking, "Will I be accepted?" "Do I have a place?" "Will I be cast out if I show too much of who I am?"

Belonging soothes the nervous system. Rejection activates it. Even subtle forms of exclusion—being ignored, misjudged, or misunderstood—can register as pain. That's why we shape-shift. Why we hide. Why we perform. It's biological instinct.

But sometimes, the instinct to belong becomes a strategy for survival. We start shrinking to fit into spaces we've outgrown. We stay quiet so we don't lose connection. We silence parts of ourselves just to stay inside the circle. And the more we do that, the more we begin to forget who we were before we started editing ourselves.

Real belonging doesn't require performance. It doesn't

Emily Maroutian

ask us to earn our place. It asks us to bring our whole selves. Not the polished version. Not the palatable one. The real one. The one who is soft and sharp. Whole and healing. The one who doesn't always know where they fit, but shows up anyway.

Belonging that costs your truth is not belonging. It's bargaining. And the truth is, the more we allow ourselves to belong to who we are, the less we fear people who are different. Because we're not looking for safety through sameness anymore. We've found it within.

When we feel safe inside ourselves, we stop needing to exclude others to feel included. We stop building identity on contrast. We stop needing to define "us" by making someone else the "them."

And that's where the shift begins. Belonging that starts within expands outward. It doesn't shrink our world. It opens it. It doesn't erase difference. It honors it. Because when you feel grounded in who you are, you're no longer threatened by who someone else is. You don't have to draw lines. You can build circles.

The human need to belong does not have to be fulfilled by excluding others; it can be expanded by including them. Our instinct to form bonds can become a source of strength

## Unbound

rather than division if we widen our understanding of who belongs to “us.”

Instead of shrinking our sense of belonging to fit narrow categories, we can choose to see how our identities overlap and intersect with one another. We belong to many groups simultaneously — cultural, social, and human. By recognizing this, we begin to dissolve the barriers that divide “us” from “them” and make room for the truth that there is no “them.” There is only “us.”

In a world that often tells us to choose sides, the courageous act is to choose connection. It is to resist the instinct to categorize and instead lean into the fullness of our shared humanity. The more we expand our sense of belonging, the more we create space for empathy, understanding, and healing. In doing so, we not only strengthen our communities but also free ourselves from the isolation of division.

Connection is not a loss of identity; it is the recognition that our individuality flourishes most when it exists alongside others, not apart from them.

### **Me and You:**

It's one thing to accept others in theory. It's another to

Emily Maroutian

stay open when someone challenges what you believe, how you live, or who you are. In those moments, our instinct to belong can collide with our instinct to protect. We might feel ourselves retreating. Judging. Tightening. Not because we're bad or intolerant, but because something inside us feels unstable. Something says, "If they are that, then what does that make me?" We forget that belonging doesn't require opposition. That someone else's identity doesn't erase our own.

When we believe our identity is fragile, we protect it by highlighting contrast. We draw lines. We make groups. We decide who is right, who is wrong, who is safe, who is dangerous. We do this not because we are inherently cruel, but because we are trying to stabilize something unstable inside ourselves. We fear that if we allow too many truths to exist, our own might disappear.

If I accept other cultures, won't my own culture disappear? If I'm respectful of different religions, won't mine matter less? If I accept people who are gay, won't it negate my own sexuality? And so I ask, why does the inclusion of something have to mean the negation of something else? It doesn't. You are still a part of your culture, regardless of what anyone else is. You are still a



## Unbound

Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, regardless of who isn't. You are still attracted to the opposite sex and gender, regardless of who other people are attracted to. Their existence does not negate yours. You can both exist as opposites without canceling each other out.

The mind craves certainty. And unconscious identity becomes a survival mechanism — a way to make sense of the world quickly. But when it hardens into “us vs. them,” it stops serving clarity and starts serving control.

Who we believe we are determines who we believe they are. If I define myself as morally superior, I will need someone to be wrong, to be beneath me, or else I can't be superior. If I define myself as a winner, I will need someone to be a loser. If I define myself as chosen, I will see others as excluded. My definition of myself must exclude others from it, or else it isn't defined. Identity needs *other* to exist. This is where division begins, not in the other, but in the self.

However, identity doesn't have to separate us. It can connect us if we stop treating it like a wall and start treating it like a window. If we let go of the need to be right, pure, best, or better, we can start to see that our differences aren't barriers; they are variations of the same truth expressing itself in infinite forms.

Emily Maroutian

We are not just us and them. We are all expressions of one human experience. We grieve. We hope. We struggle. We try. We want to be loved, to be safe, to be seen. And underneath every label, every border, every belief, we are not strangers; we are reflections.

That Muslim man wants to protect his family and provide for them in the best way he can, just like you. That transgender woman wants to feel loved and seen, just like you. That gay person wants community and safety, just like you. When we remember that, we don't have to defend our identity anymore because the existence of others doesn't threaten it. Instead, we can expand it. We can redefine "us" to include more. And "them" to mean less. That's where healing begins, not in sameness, but in shared humanity.

Because in order for "me" to exist, "you" have to exist in contrast. That's a fact we often hold against others, failing to recognize the crucial importance of distinction, not just in identity but in humanity as a whole. The truth is, I need you to be you so that I can be me.

### **Expanding Our Circle of Belonging:**

One way to dissolve the illusion of "them" is to expand our idea of who belongs in "us." If you are Armenian, you

## Unbound

might feel a natural connection to other Armenians. They are part of your “us” because you share a common heritage, culture, or history. However, the truth is that your “us” is not limited to nationality or ethnicity. You are also part of other groups — perhaps as a woman, as a parent, as a student, or as someone who shares a profession, hobby, or value system. You belong to many categories, and each one overlaps and connects you to others.

Maybe we’re not in the same “us” when it comes to language or lifestyle. But maybe we’ve both buried a parent. Maybe we’ve both survived cancer. Maybe we’ve both held our broken hearts in our hands and wondered how we would survive it. Is that not, in its own way, a shared belonging?

Someone from your religion or culture might not share that life experience, but someone else might understand exactly what that pain involves. Would you feel *more* seen, understood, and validated by someone who simply shares the same culture as you, or someone who has experienced the same pain as you? Someone who understands that grief is just love collapsing in on itself from the weight of its own inertia.

That’s a kind of belonging, too. One that doesn’t always

Emily Maroutian

have a name, but lives in the body. The knowing that says, *I've been there*. Maybe not in the exact way you have, but close enough to recognize the shape of your pain. Or the weight of your joy.

These are the hidden circles we share; the quiet ones. The ones not drawn by ancestry or ideology, but by experience. And once you begin to notice them, you realize how many there are. Circles of grief. Circles of resilience. Circles of survival, creativity, humor, longing, recovery, love. You belong to more than one “us.” You always have. And so does everyone else.

When we stop narrowing our definition of belonging, we begin to see the connections that were always there. The friend who doesn't share your faith but understands your doubt. The stranger who doesn't speak your language but still smiles with the same tenderness. The coworker who grew up worlds apart from you, but somehow gets your sense of humor.

This is how the circle widens. Not through agreement, but through recognition. Through the choice to look for what we share instead of what we lack. Through the willingness to see the full human in front of us, not just the labels wrapped around them.

## Unbound

We can still hold our identities with pride. We can love our people, our culture, our stories, but we don't have to use them as fences. We can let them be roots instead, anchoring us in who we are, while still making space for who others are, too.

When you start to see the many ways you already belong, it becomes clear that belonging doesn't have to be exclusive or narrow. If you can widen your sense of "us" to include not only your immediate cultural or social groups but also people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and identities, the concept of "them" begins to dissolve. Why narrow it down when you can widen it? Why isolate yourself in a small corner of identity when you could stand in the vastness of shared humanity?

The circle of belonging was already wide; it was just waiting for us to recognize it beyond race, culture, or religion. Beyond the obvious surface-level commonalities we share. Instead of building walls to preserve our sense of belonging, we can widen the circle to include more people, strengthening connection rather than fear.

Belonging isn't diminished when it's shared; it's multiplied. By expanding our sense of "us," we create space for empathy, compassion, and collaboration. We begin to

Emily Maroutian

see that the world is not divided into “sides.” There is no “other.” There is only “us,” woven together by our shared humanity.

Belonging doesn’t shrink when it’s shared; it grows. It deepens. It becomes more real. And if we’re brave enough to let others in – not just the ones who look like us, vote like us, or think like us – but the ones who remind us of our shared humanity, then the idea of “them” begins to dissolve. And what’s left is just *us*.

### **From Walls to Bridges:**

The wall is easy. It’s solid. Familiar. It keeps things out and keeps other things in. It tells you where you stand. Who’s on your side and who isn’t. And for a while, that can feel like safety. But walls don’t just protect. They isolate. They cut us off from what could be possible if we dared to reach across. The comfort it offers is quiet, but so is the loneliness. Eventually, the same wall that kept you safe becomes the reason you feel separate. Alone. Disconnected.

A bridge asks more of you. It asks you to risk being wrong. To listen. To look again. To remember that understanding is not the same as agreement, and that compassion doesn’t require consensus. It only requires

## Unbound

recognition. The recognition that the person on the other side is human, too.

To build a bridge is to choose connection over comfort. To reach toward someone not because they match you, but because they matter. It's to ask, "What lives behind your belief?" instead of, "How can I prove mine?" It's to stay curious, even when it would be easier to close.

Bridges don't erase difference; they honor it. They don't say, "You must be like me to belong." They say, "You belong, even if you're not like me at all."

You don't need to build a bridge with everyone. Some connections are not safe. Some conversations are not meant to be had. But the world is still full of people you haven't looked at closely enough. People who've walked through pain you understand. People who are more like you than you ever imagined. And every time you choose to soften instead of harden, to listen instead of assume, to stay open instead of shut down, you're placing another stone in the bridge between you.

This is how we begin again. Not by tearing down every wall at once, but by finding the places where a hand can reach through. Where a heart can be seen. Where a quiet "me too" can resonate across what once felt like a divide.

Emily Maroutian

The future doesn't need more echo chambers. It needs more bridges. And those bridges begin not with policy or persuasion, but with presence. With you and me. Right here. Right now.

Because what we do in our ordinary lives matters more than we think. The way we speak to someone different. The way we hold space in discomfort. The way we choose to see each other as full, complex beings rather than simplified categories. That's what builds the world we live in.

So if you're wondering where to start, start small. Start local. Start with the stranger at the grocery store. With the person who sees the world differently from you. With the loved one you stopped listening to because it felt too hard.

Start with the next moment when you feel yourself pulling away. Don't rush to label or defend. Just pause. Breathe. Ask yourself, "Is there a bridge here I'm willing to build?" Not every moment calls for one. Not every person will feel safe to reach out to. And that's okay. You don't have to connect with everyone. But you also don't have to turn them into an enemy.

Let people be who they are, even if they are not for you. Even if their values don't align. Even if their presence feels like a closed door. You can walk away without wounding.



## Unbound

You can honor your boundary without causing harm — mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically. They may not belong in your life, but they still belong to the human story. Let that be enough to treat them with dignity.

Ultimately, the choice to move beyond “us vs. them” is not just about creating peace in the world; it’s about creating peace within ourselves. When we stop separating within ourselves, we stop separating others into categories, too. We release the tension between belonging and individuality and embrace the truth that connection doesn’t require conformity. It only requires a willingness to allow the other to exist, to matter, to be important too. Just like you.

### **Putting it into Action:**

#### Expand the Circle

Notice the Subtle Separations: For one day, pay attention to the small ways you mentally distance yourself from others. It might be through silent judgment, a dismissive thought, or a refusal to engage. Each time you notice it, pause and ask, “What part of me feels the need to separate right now?” “Is it protecting me from something?” You’re not trying to

Emily Maroutian

fix it; just notice what it's protecting.

**Practice Leaving People Whole:** Choose one person you usually reduce to a label; someone you've mentally categorized based on their job, belief, background, or behavior. Instead of reinforcing that narrative, write down three things that might also be true about them. Let them be more than the role you've assigned.

**Repair Without Agreement:** Think of someone you've distanced yourself from due to disagreement. Reach out, not to change their mind, but to reconnect with the shared humanity beneath the conflict. You don't have to rehash the issue. You can simply say, "I know we see things differently, but I value you." Let the relationship be bigger than the belief.

**Widen the Circle Intentionally:** Spend one day consciously expanding your "us." At the coffee shop, in traffic, online, look at strangers and silently remind yourself: They belong too. Notice what shifts in your body when you see them as part of your world rather than outside of it.

## Unbound

### **Self-Reflective Questions:**

#### Where do I Draw the Line?

Who have I unconsciously labeled as “them” in my life, and what belief about “us” does that protect? (What part of my identity feels safer when they are kept separate?)

What fears or wounds get activated when I’m confronted by people who think, believe, or live differently than I do? (Is it fear of being wrong? Being unsafe? Being changed?)

Where have I inherited an “us vs. them” mindset, from family, culture, religion, or history? (What would it mean to question it now?)

What happens inside me when I imagine expanding “us” to include those I’ve previously excluded? (What resistance arises? What compassion becomes possible?)

Who have I dehumanized — quietly, socially, ideologically — in order to feel more certain or superior? (What would it look like to see them as complex, too?)

Emily Maroutian

What do I gain when I release the need to be on the “right side”? (What opens when I stop needing sides at all?)

In what ways do I define who belongs in my circle of “us”? (Are these boundaries flexible or rigid? Why?)

What fears or insecurities drive my sense of separation from others? (Why do I *need* to be separate from them?)

How can I practice expanding my circle of belonging in small, daily ways?

# The Becoming

Underneath all the labels, beneath the roles you've performed and the names you've answered to, there is something that has never changed. It was there before the first wound. Before the first identity. Before you were told who you had to be.

This isn't a version of you. It's not something you build or become. It's what's left when everything false has been released. It's quiet. Unshaken. Whole.

You don't need to explain it to live from it. You don't need to prove it to deserve it. You just need to stop covering it. This is the part of you that watches without judgment. That speaks without performing. That remains when everything else falls away. Some call it presence. Some call it soul. Some never name it at all, but they know when they're living from it, because there is peace, even in

Emily Maroutian

discomfort. There is clarity, even in uncertainty. There is belonging, even when you stand alone.

This is the return. Not to a new identity, but to your original one. The one you didn't have to earn. These steps are not extra lessons or quick fixes. They are a living practice. A way to keep unbinding long after you close this book.

They are not a straight line. They are a spiral. You will circle through them many times in your life, each time deeper, each time truer. You do not rush them. You do not perform them. You live them. Each step asks you to see, to heal, to acknowledge, to question, to loosen, to grow, to live differently. Together they form the shape of freedom.

The following steps are not a formula. They are a path back to that center. Each one is a movement inward—away from performance, toward presence. You may revisit them many times, in different seasons, through different wounds. That's okay. The journey is not linear. But each time you walk this path, something softens. Something loosens. Something comes home. This is not self-improvement. This is self-returning. A remembering of who you are without the barriers of who anyone else told you to be.

## Unbound

### **Step 1: Observe**

The first step in any transformation is learning how to see. Not with the eyes alone, but with awareness. With stillness. With honesty. This kind of seeing is not reactive. It doesn't rush to fix or correct or explain. It simply notices.

Most of us move through life unaware of the identities we've collected and the roles we've rehearsed. We wear them like a second skin, forgetting they were once put on. To see them is to remember that they are not you; they are performances shaped by memory, pain, culture, and the need to belong.

Seeing is the practice of witnessing yourself in motion. It's observing how you speak around different people, how you shift your tone, how you alter your posture, how you avoid or over-explain or reach for validation without knowing it. It's observing the quiet ways you seek safety in every interaction. Noticing what you emphasize, what you hide, what you deny, and what you cling to because it gives you a sense of identity.

This isn't about blame. It's about awareness. There is no need to shame the self for doing what it learned to do in order to survive. The goal is not to tear yourself apart. It's to become intimate with your own patterns. Because you

Emily Maroutian

cannot shift what you won't allow yourself to see. And you cannot claim your truth while denying the performances you've been living through.

Seeing is the foundation. It is the light that enters the room. It's the quiet pause where you name what has been unconscious. And when you begin to notice, not just what you do, but why you do it, then something begins to loosen. The grip softens. The performance flickers. And you start to realize that the self you've been showing to the world may not be the self you truly are.

So for now, there is no need to change anything. Just observe. Notice your reactions. Notice your defenses. Notice what makes you feel small, and what you use to feel big. Let your life become a mirror, and let that mirror show you what you've been carrying. See it fully. See it kindly. See it without needing to do anything else because this kind of seeing is not passive. It is the first act of becoming.

It asks you to bring all of this to the surface. To hold it in the light. To say: *This is what I have been called. This is what I have called myself.* Without trying to fix it yet. Without needing to judge whether it's good or bad. Without rushing to let it go. It is the act of witnessing yourself.

To witness means to become conscious. To stand before



## Unbound

the mirror of your life and name what you see. Not the parts you wish were there, not the parts you pretend aren't, but all of it.

Sit with your labels. Not just the ones you wear proudly, but the ones you whisper. The ones others gave you that you accepted. The ones you rejected but still feel under your skin.

Observing means to notice without flinching. It means to stay with what is real, even when it stings. It means to pause long enough for the truth to rise. Don't rush past this. You may want to move quickly to breaking or releasing, but all transformation begins here, in the slow, honest seeing. To witness is to say: *This is what has defined me. This is what I have performed to belong. This is what I have hidden to stay safe.* It's tender work. It's also the strongest work because nothing changes if it stays invisible.

So let observing be your first promise to yourself: *I will see what is here, fully.* No blame. No shame. Just truth. That is enough. That is powerful. That is the beginning.

### Step 2: Question

Once you begin to see your patterns clearly, the next step is to question them. Not in a way that interrogates or

Emily Maroutian

attacks, but in a way that gently asks: *Is this really mine?*

Most of what we believe about ourselves was handed to us. It came from voices we trusted, systems we depended on, and experiences we survived. Over time, those beliefs hardened into identity. We stopped asking where they came from, and started living as if they were true.

Questioning is the act of softening those edges. It's a quiet rebellion against certainty. It's what allows you to hold your beliefs up to the light and examine them without fear of what you'll find. This is why I have included self-reflective questions at the end of all of the previous chapters. It's to give you a chance to sit with those questions and see what comes up for you.

Sometimes it's the simple questions that trigger the biggest breakthroughs: *Who taught me this? When did I first believe this about myself? What was happening around me when I decided this was true? And more importantly, Did I ever consent to this belief?* You may just discover that some of your deepest ideas about who you are were never yours to begin with. They were someone else's fears, someone else's rules, someone else's expectations projected onto you.

Questioning invites you to break the automatic agreement you made with those ideas. It doesn't mean

## Unbound

they're all wrong; it just means they deserve a second look.

This process isn't about erasing your past. It's about reclaiming your authority in the present. When you begin to question, you begin to choose. You create space between what you've been told and what you actually believe. Between what you've performed and what you truly value. And in that space, you get to rebuild from clarity rather than survival.

You are not dishonoring your history by asking these questions. You are honoring your capacity to grow beyond it. To evolve. To decide, with full presence, what still fits and what never did.

This step takes courage. It can feel destabilizing to question the ground you've been standing on. But what's built on truth will remain. And what falls away was never you to begin with. Keep asking. Keep listening. Not for the loudest answer, but for the one that brings you peace. That quiet knowing; that's the voice of the self returning.

Questioning asks you to open the door to what you keep hidden, from the world, but more importantly, from yourself. Sometimes it's a buried belief: *I am unworthy, so I must appear perfect.* Sometimes it's an old wound: *They will abandon me if they see who I really am.* Sometimes it's a

Emily Maroutian

contradiction: *I want closeness, but I push it away.*

The question is not to fix these contradictions but to let them breathe. To let the parts of you that whisper in the dark come into the light. Not to scold them. Not to explain them away. But to let them exist without the mask.

The work of questioning is tender because it asks for honesty without performance. Not to share it yet. Not to defend it. But to stand in front of the mirror of your own life and ask, *Is this me? Is this who I want to be?* No spin. No apology. Just truth.

There is no timeline for this. Revelation is a process, a flower that opens when it's ready. Be patient. Be kind. Be brave enough to stay when the truth is uncomfortable.

Question is your second promise to yourself: *I will allow what is hidden to come forward. I will let my truth breathe and I will question its origins and reasons for being.* In the quiet, the truth does not harm you. It frees you.

### **Step 3: Acknowledge**

To acknowledge is to face what you've uncovered through questioning and offer it your full attention. Not just a glance, but a gaze that says: *I see you. I understand why you're here.* This step is both an act of compassion and an act

## Unbound

of responsibility. It asks you to acknowledge what you've hidden, not only the parts of yourself you rejected, but the reasons you created them in the first place. It's not enough to simply see the pattern. You must name its purpose, name its weight, name the way it shaped you.

Every identity you've performed came with a trade. It gave you something you needed — protection, praise, connection, power — but it most likely cost you something too. A voice. A softness. A truth. A right to exist without permission. This is the moment to take inventory. To acknowledge the true cost of your identity.

Ask yourself: *What did this identity give me?* Maybe it offered a sense of control. Maybe it made you feel chosen. Maybe it helped you avoid conflict or invisibility. And then ask: *What is it costing me now?* Because every mask, no matter how useful it once was, begins to suffocate if we wear it for too long.

If you lived as the peacemaker, you may have gained approval but lost your ability to speak your truth. If you lived as the achiever, you may have felt worthy, but at the cost of exhaustion and isolation. If you lived as the invisible one, you may have avoided harm, but forfeited your right to take up space. To have your voice heard and validated.

Emily Maroutian

This is the quiet work of maturity, to hold your old self gently, thank it for what it carried, and admit where it no longer fits. To say, *I see how this has served me. I see how it limits me now.* Both can be true.

To acknowledge is to count both sides of the ledger. No shame. No self-blame. Only honesty. It's a mature reckoning with the fact that every identity shaped by fear or survival carries both a gift and a burden, and only you can decide if that burden is still worth carrying.

This is the moment you stop performing for love and start choosing yourself. The moment you thank your old self for getting you here, and gently admit it cannot take you further.

This is not an intellectual step; it's a felt one. You may feel the tightness in your chest, the drop in your belly, the grief of what was lost, or the quiet relief of being seen at last. Let it rise. Let it speak. Because acknowledging the cost is what allows you to stop paying it.

This is the step where fantasy falls away. Where you stop pretending that you can stay the same and still be free. To become unbound, you must first name how you have been bound. That is the gateway. That is the third promise you make to yourself: *I will take responsibility for my identities.*

## Unbound

*I will honor what they gave me, and I will release what no longer serves. Only then can you begin to choose something new.*

### **Step 4: Challenge**

To challenge is not to destroy. It's to confront gently, to stand at the edge of what you've believed and ask, *Is this still true?* You're not at war with yourself. You're simply no longer willing to protect what keeps you small.

This is the step where you meet your comfort, your history, your inherited stories, and you press against them. Not to collapse them, but to test their strength. Not everything you've lived has earned the right to stay.

To challenge is to touch the edges of your comfort, the lines you swore were you, and see what happens when you lean against them. Who told you not to question this? What happens if you do? What fear arises when you wonder, *What if I'm not only this?*

For some, this will feel like betrayal. Like treason against family, culture, religion, self. That's how you know you're near something real. Not because you wish to destroy your roots, but because you wish to see if they still fit the life and future you want to grow.

When you challenge an old identity, you don't tear it

Emily Maroutian

down with force. You test it with tenderness. Does it stand when you look it in the eye? Does it soften when you name its cracks? Does it crumble when you stop performing it?

Now that you've seen your identity and acknowledged its weight, this step asks you to engage with it. Not just to observe, but to lean into it. To step closer. To see how far it stretches before it resists you. Ask: *Is this identity aligned or just rehearsed? Is this belief expansive or constricting? Is this role serving my future or just repeating my past?* These aren't surface-level questions. They are the kind that unsettle the foundations and stir the quiet parts of your being.

To challenge is to step into the tension between who you've been and who you might become. That tension is sacred. It holds the friction that precedes growth. It holds the resistance that guards your freedom. And sometimes, what you feel isn't resistance to change; it's loyalty to something that once gave you love, or safety, or meaning. Let yourself feel that. You're not betraying your roots by challenging them. You're honoring your right to evolve.

Choose one truth you've been living — an identity, a belief, a way of being — and let yourself sit in its discomfort. Not to fix it. Not to run from it. But to ask, *If I didn't need to be this anymore, what might be possible?* You don't need to



## Unbound

have the answer. You just need to be willing to hold the question and the feelings that arise with it.

This is not passive work. This is the quiet courage of becoming. It's the moment you stop defending the mask and start listening for the voice underneath it. Because when you finally stop performing, the truth has room to rise to the surface.

This is your fourth promise to yourself: *I will no longer protect what keeps me small. I will challenge what feels permanent. And I will give myself permission to outgrow even the things that once kept me safe.* This is how you loosen the chains: by asking if they were ever locked at all.

### **Step 5: Feel It Fully**

Seeing, questioning, acknowledging, and challenging will open the door, but feeling is what walks you through it. This is where the work moves from the mind into the body. It's where information becomes experience.

Most of us have been trained to analyze our emotions rather than feel them. We try to understand pain intellectually, hoping that insight will be enough to free us. But the truth is pain doesn't release through logic. It releases through presence. Through breath. Through

Emily Maroutian

willingness. It releases by meeting it where it is.

Every identity you've worn has carried emotional weight. Maybe it held shame, or fear, or longing. Maybe it was built around rejection, or abandonment, or the need to be chosen. Maybe it's saturated in grief.

You didn't just think your way into those identities; you felt your way into them. You adapted, not only to survive physically, but to survive emotionally. And now, if you want to become whole, you have to revisit the emotions you buried in order to free yourself from them.

This step is not about reliving your pain; it's about making space for what was never given room to exist. You may feel grief for who you had to be. Anger for what was expected of you. Sadness for the parts of yourself you silenced in order to belong. These feelings are not obstacles; they are signals. They tell you what mattered. They tell you where the wound lives. And by allowing yourself to feel them, you begin to reclaim the parts of you that were hidden beneath the performance.

Let the emotion rise without needing to fix it. Let the tears come without trying to explain them. Let your body speak the truth your mind has been trying to protect you from. Because when you feel something fully, without

## Unbound

judgment or resistance, it no longer has to shout. It no longer has to control your behavior from the shadows.

Feeling doesn't make you weak. It makes you real. It makes you honest. It brings you back to the parts of yourself that were left behind in the name of survival. So let it move through you. Let it show you what's still unhealed, what's still raw, what still matters. Because once you feel it, you no longer have to fear it. And when you no longer fear it, you are free.

This is your fifth promise to yourself: *I will feel it fully to free myself from the grips of shame and silence. I will free myself from the past.*

### **Step 6: Allow Healing**

After you've seen your patterns, questioned their truth, acknowledged their cost, challenged their hold, and felt your feelings, healing becomes possible. Because you are no longer inside the identity trying to survive it. You are outside of it now, with perspective, with presence, with choice.

We allow healing by not resisting its process. By not interfering with its natural flow. We allow our emotions to surface, we allow grief to move, and instead of fighting

## Emily Maroutian

parts of ourselves that only need love and acceptance, we embrace them.

Healing is not about forgetting what happened or pretending it didn't shape you. It's about bringing care to the places that were once abandoned or rejected. It's about returning to the wound with the wisdom you didn't have when it was first formed.

To heal is to tend. To offer warmth where there was coldness. To bring compassion where there was self-blame. You may find that the identities you've worn were never just masks; they were bandages. Holding together parts of you that didn't know how to exist in the open.

Maybe you became an overachiever because you didn't believe you were enough. Maybe you became the peacemaker because conflict once meant danger. Maybe you disappeared because visibility brought harm. These weren't flaws. They were survival responses. Intelligent, adaptive, protective responses.

Healing begins when you stop punishing yourself for what you had to do to survive. It's not always a dramatic unraveling. Sometimes it's quiet. A single moment of forgiveness. A soft breath where there used to be panic. A pause where there used to be reactivity.

## Unbound

Healing is when you no longer need the identity to carry the pain for you. When you can feel the sorrow without collapsing into it. When you can remember the past without reliving it. This is the space where integration begins, not by force, but by grace.

To heal does not mean to become someone else. It means returning to who you were before you developed an identity to survive the wound. And it means choosing, again and again, to relate to yourself through tenderness instead of protection. Healing won't erase the scar, but it will release the compulsion to keep touching it.

When you heal, you set it down. Not with violence. Not with shame. Not with self-punishment. With a simple, brave choice, *I no longer need to carry this*. You do not force what is not ready to go. You do not yank it out like a weed. You let it loosen on its own because you have stopped feeding it. You allow the healed parts to be integrated into your system, and this releases the old survival patterns.

Release is where all of that becomes an embodied letting go. You might feel grief. Or relief. Or fear. Or lightness. Sometimes it feels like losing a piece of yourself, but what falls away is only the costume, not the core. You let go of the performance, and you remember who you are.

Emily Maroutian

*To release is to say, Thank you for what you gave me. I see that you have done your job. And now I choose to grow beyond you. It is a gentle farewell to an old identity, a limiting belief, a mask that has grown heavy on your skin.*

*This is your sixth promise to yourself: I will bring care to the parts of me I once abandoned. I will stop performing my pain and begin tending to it. I will let go of what hurt me, not to forget it, but to finally move beyond it.*

### **Step 7: Expand**

Healing creates space. Now we can fill it, not with new identities, but with permission. With breath. With possibility. This is the step where you stop asking who you're allowed to be and start becoming who you already are beneath the fear, the armor, and the roles you once performed.

When you expand, you invite the hidden self forward; the one who learned to whisper instead of speak, to wait instead of want, to shrink instead of shine. Now, you begin to stretch into that quiet potential. Not as a performance. Not as a reinvention. But as a return.

Expansion is not about becoming someone new. It's about uncovering the parts of you that have been waiting;

## Unbound

your voice, your presence, your creativity, your power. It's the choice to stop editing yourself to fit what the world expects and start expressing what your soul has always carried.

Sometimes expansion will look bold – speaking louder, standing taller, saying no without apology. Other times, it will be soft – a deeper breath, a small boundary, a simple truth spoken clearly. You don't have to know where it leads. You only have to remain open. Because expansion isn't a destination, it's a willingness.

You do not need to know exactly where this will lead. Expansion is not a goalpost. It is a way of living; staying open to new possibilities instead of retreating into old cages.

Expansion is your seventh promise to yourself: *I will not limit what I can become to what I have been. I will remain open to more, even when more feels uncertain.*

When you expand, you teach life how to meet you where you truly are. This is freedom in motion.

### Step 8: Embody

This is where the work leaves the page and enters your life. Not as a concept. Not as a feeling. But as action. As rhythm. As truth in motion.

## Emily Maroutian

To live it means you stop trying to become and start being. You stop explaining who you are and begin living as if you already know. Because you do. You've seen the masks. You've questioned the stories. You've acknowledged the cost, healed the wound, and stretched into new possibility. Now comes the part that doesn't need to be spoken. It just needs to be lived.

Living it doesn't mean you'll never forget again. It doesn't mean you won't slip back into old patterns. It means that when you do, you'll recognize it sooner. You'll soften instead of spiral. You'll return instead of collapsing. This is what integration looks like. It's not perfection, but presence.

You may still feel afraid. You may still feel the tug of old roles, the pull of familiar cages. But now you have a choice. You can respond from your becoming, not your past. You can choose alignment over performance, clarity over control, and truth over comfort. This is where your healing becomes visible: in your decisions, your relationships, your silence, your voice.

Embodiment might not look radical to others. It may be quiet, subtle, slow. It may look like saying no when you used to say yes. Like resting when you used to push. Like asking for what you need, even when your voice shakes.



## Unbound

Every time you choose what aligns with your wholeness, you deepen your freedom. Every time you act from truth, you remind your nervous system that it is safe to be real.

When you expand, you glimpse who you could be. When you embody, you become it; not just as an idea but as a lived truth. This is where the work leaves the page and enters your day. This is where freedom stops being something you *want* and becomes something you *embody*.

To embody means you carry the new truth into the ordinary. Into how you wake up, how you speak, how you love, how you stand up for yourself, how you soften when you want to armor.

Integration is not perfection. It is not a flawless performance of your new becoming. It is the practice of letting your choices match your freedom. This is not a performance of a new identity. It is the embodiment of your unbound self. And it will not come all at once. It will come in practice, in pause, in breath. Again and again.

Ask yourself, *How do I move through the world now that I am not bound by that old story?* If you have released the need to compete, how do you relate to others at work, at home, in love? If you have expanded into a more honest self, how do

Emily Maroutian

you speak when your truth trembles at the edge of your mouth? If you have dissolved the dividing wall between you and *them*, how do you listen when difference feels uncomfortable?

Integration lives in the tiny everyday moments. In the pause before you choose an old reaction. In the breath you take to remember, *I am no longer only that.*

No one will hand you a certificate for becoming unbound. No one will announce when you arrive. Integration and embodiment are not an arrival. They are how you return to yourself, every time you forget.

This is your final promise to yourself: *I will live as the self I have returned to. Not in theory. In action. In choice. In the quiet way I show up, even when no one is watching. I am not performing for others. I am not seeking their agreement or validation. I am who I choose to be in the world.*

This is not the end of the work. But it is the beginning of a life rooted in who you truly are. A life shaped not by performance or protection, but by presence. A life where you no longer chase identity to be worthy, but live in alignment because you already are.

The steps you've taken are not a formula; they are a foundation. One you will return to again and again, each

## Unbound

time deeper, each time truer. Becoming is not something you finish. It's something you practice. In the way you speak. In the way you choose. In the way you show up for yourself when no one else is there to witness it. Let this be your beginning. Not of something new, but of something real. Something whole. Something unbound.



# Unbound

By now, you've questioned almost everything — your assumptions, your labels, your roles, your beliefs. You've loosened the grip of stories you didn't write, and you've looked honestly at the parts of yourself that were shaped by survival instead of truth.

You've asked the hardest questions. You've let go of names that never belonged to you. You've peeled back stories layered in fear, survival, and performance. And maybe now, there's silence. Maybe now, there's space.

This is not a void. This is the beginning. This space is where anything is possible because you are undefined. Definition is a lack. It's bordered and limited. It must negate one thing to become another. When it says, *I am this!* It's also saying, *I am not that!* It's a simultaneous declaration

Emily Maroutian

that immediately boxes and shrinks the thing we are defining. So now we are releasing the definitions, the stories, and the boxes. We are unraveling.

That unraveling is sacred. But it can also feel disorienting because we are taught that identity is security. That to be someone, we must name it. Claim it. Announce it. But what happens when those names no longer fit? What happens when the roles fall away, the categories dissolve, and we are left in the space between who we were and who we are becoming?

That space can feel like emptiness. But it's not emptiness. It's openness. It's the part of the journey where the old skin has shed, but the new one hasn't formed yet. Where the structure is gone, and the stillness feels almost too loud.

You may not recognize yourself here, without the roles, without the names, without the familiar edges. You may want to grasp for something solid, anything that gives you back the comfort of knowing who you are.

That's normal. That's human. That's the echo of the world saying, "Define yourself so we know where to place you." But what if you don't place yourself anywhere yet? What if you let yourself float in this space a little longer?

## Unbound

Not lost. Just free. Because this openness isn't a lack of identity; it's the freedom to create one. To explore what fits without needing it to be final. To say, "I am in motion," and let that be enough. You don't need to fill this space with performance or certainty. You can fill it with breath. With curiosity. With honesty.

You can rest here. You can listen. And from that listening, something new will rise. Not from pressure. Not from tradition. Not from fear. But from truth.

You are not meant to be unidentifiable. You are meant to be unbound. Free to choose, free to change, free to evolve beyond what anyone expected of you. Including yourself.

Being unbound doesn't mean being undefined. It means being the one who defines. It means moving through life with a conscious relationship to who you are and who you are becoming. It means asking, not "What do they want me to be?" but "What feels most true to me now?"

You are not here to erase yourself. You are here to remember yourself, before the world told you who to be. To rewrite yourself, based on clarity, not conditioning. To reclaim yourself—fully, boldly, and without apology.

Let your identity be a living thing. Let it shift when you grow, soften when you heal, and expand when you learn.

Emily Maroutian

Let it hold all your contradictions. Let it evolve with your becoming.

You don't need to be certain. You only need to be honest. Because the most powerful thing you can ever be is not understood. It's not agreed with. It's not admired. It's real. And that's what you are now. Not labeled. Not boxed. Not bound. Just real. What does that look like for you?

It could be different than what it looks like for me. And that's okay. It has to be. If it's not okay then we're back to square one. We're back to divisions and discrimination and fighting each other over labels. Let's instead redirect that energy from fighting each other to building together.

Imagine a world where we no longer define ourselves or others by rigid labels. A world where curiosity replaces judgment, compassion outshines fear, and connection becomes the norm, not the exception. This is not a distant dream; it is within our reach. But to create this world, we must first unbind ourselves from the mental and emotional chains that keep us small and separate.

When we begin to see ourselves as multi-dimensional, ever-changing beings, we open the door to profound freedom. We no longer have to fit into the categories that society, tradition, or fear have built for us. We can shed the



## Unbound

labels that limit us and embrace the fullness of who we are and who we are becoming. This freedom is not a rejection of identity but an expansion of it. It is the recognition that our complexity is not something to fear but something to celebrate.

This journey begins with you. With each moment of awareness, each act of kindness, and each choice to remain open rather than closed, you create ripples of change. When you see others without the distortions of stereotype and assumption, you create space for connection. When you offer compassion instead of judgment, you invite others to do the same. This is how walls fall, one conversation, one act, one heart at a time.

Our liberation is collective. By freeing ourselves from the need to categorize and control, we help free others from the weight of expectation and misunderstanding. We begin to see that there is no “them,” there is only “us.” The things that once divided us become bridges rather than barriers.

So, what kind of world will you create with your energy and presence? One where fear and separation define us? Or one where empathy, understanding, and love dissolve the lines that divide? You have the power to choose.

Every moment offers the chance to widen the circle of

Emily Maroutian

belonging, to live unbound by fear and open to the infinite beauty of diversity. Let this book be more than something you read. Let it be an invitation to live differently. To live unbound.

You are not just an observer of this change; you are a creator of it. Your life will not change because someone else rises to meet the challenge; it will change because you did.

Freedom is not something we must wait for; it is something we can embody today. In every act of connection, in every moment of compassion, in every decision to stay open, we reclaim our power to create a better world.

The future is not prewritten. It is being shaped, breath by breath, choice by choice. And as we step forward, unbound, unmasked, and unafraid, we step toward a future defined not by fear or separation but by unity, courage, and love. This is who we are. This is who we've always been. And this is who we can become.

We are one. We are all.