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LET GO OF PUNISHMENT AND CONTROL

Do you ever feel like life is punishing you? Do you ever feel like so many bad things are happening to you that it must be personal? *Maybe life hates me*, you think. *Maybe life is out to get me. Maybe I'm being punished for some bad thing I did or some way I am.* If you've ever felt like that, you're not alone!

Actually, most of us feel that way from time to time. And, conversely, if everything is going right and you think you are doing everything right and something wonderful happens, you can feel like life has finally recognized that you're special and is *rewarding* you. What I want to point out in this chapter is how that idea, that life punishes or rewards you, really isn't helpful. The idea of punishment and reward, and what it suggests about controlling life, is something we all need to let go of. I want to help you give up the control you think you're supposed to have over something as wild and wonderful and surprising as life itself. Not only is "life's rewarding you" or "life's punishing you" a false, layered-on view of how things work, it makes



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everything in life about you and *about your worth*. The sooner you can let go of the notion that life is all about how you're performing, the better you'll feel. The sooner you let go of the idea that you can control how life goes, the better you'll feel. When everything is about you and you think you should be in control, you miss some pretty awesome stuff that doesn't fit into the story of your personal punishment and reward. Actually, you miss out on most of life.

It makes perfect sense that when your boyfriend breaks up with you, you feel like you're being punished, and when you get that promotion at work, you might feel like it's a reward somehow. You were likely given that as the only context for life events when you were little. To whatever extent, as you grew up, your parents (or whoever raised you) were your whole world. Early on, depending on how things went for you, you didn't even see or meet that many people outside your family. So much of your early environment was about how your family treated you. And for so many of us, how our family treats us is all about punishment versus reward. Do what your parents want and get a cookie, do what they don't want and get sent to your room. Whatever it looked like in your house growing up, life was likely about trying to avoid punishment and seek rewards.

Once you've become used to that system, how can you let go of punishment and reward? How can you choose something else now that you aren't that tiny kid anymore? You can attempt to see life as it is. You can attempt to see life as big as it is. Life is a huge mystery. The planets don't care how you did on your algebra test. And there is a reason for that: the universe is a vast place and you are not the only thing in it. So one thing you can do right away is keep in mind the biggest possible perspective as you make decisions and live your life. With all these planets and stars and rivers and mountains, it would be odd if all of it were centered on whether you're passing or



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failing. It would be strange if all this grandeur and splendor were dependent on how you said the wrong thing to a friend. It can't be. It isn't. This world and this universe is about so much more, and if you can remember that—if you can focus on that—you'll be ready to fully live.

When you're a kid, you have no autonomy. You aren't at a point where it's even possible to try to say, "You know what, family? You wanna control my life based on whether I do what you say? I'm going to live somewhere else." As crazy as it is to imagine a two-year-old leaving her parents and striking out on her own, it's just as crazy to be a teenager or even an adult still living under the two-year-old's system of right/wrong, good/bad, I'm being punished / I need to work for rewards. We're lucky there are ways out of that little kid's system.

What's another way out? How else can you let go of punishment and reward? By being present. Punishment and reward are actually tied to the past. Supposedly, you're being punished or rewarded for something you did in the past, but the past is actually an illusion. It's not happening here and now. It's a memory. It doesn't actually exist. When you feel like life is punishing you, try listening to birds or noticing the colors around you. Try to focus on something that's happening now—right now. Birds never sing about what happened yesterday because they know how to fully live this moment without dragging what they did then into the picture. Any idea of punishment reaches back into a (maybe not accurately remembered) past, then interprets what we remember, then assigns blame for it (to you), and then gets you feeling bad in the present. But often there is nothing in your *present* to feel bad about. You can't change the past and you shouldn't spend your present trying to do so. Being here and seeing the present clearly is your best shot at having the life you want—a life free of taking everything personally.



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And to be clear about punishment: it doesn't work very well. You know this is true inside yourself. Withholding affection from yourself or punishing yourself isn't a very effective way to change your own behavior. People who feel left out, like they are being singled out, like they are being abused by life, aren't too enthusiastic about changing. How many times does it take to punish a kid before they get it? And what do they get? If you're trying to teach a kid that cake for breakfast isn't very good for their health, will punishing them when they want cake really teach them anything? If a parent chooses to punish a kid, especially without talking about why, the parent runs the risk of sending a bad message. Instead of learning that cake isn't the best choice at the start of the day, a kid might "learn" that *they are bad for wanting cake* and that they deserve to be punished for liking cake. This child might even take that idea (what is happening is happening because I'm bad) out of childhood and into adult life.

So how can you drop those ideas? How else can you let go of punishment and reward? By giving yourself love. Love is the antidote to taking things personally and trying to control. Contrary to what you might have heard, it's fairly easy to love yourself. Most of us started out in this world pretty fresh and pretty loving toward ourselves. You must reconnect with that. You must be kind to yourself. Let yourself off the hook. Keep in mind your best qualities. Ask someone who loves you what they like most about you. Put those things in a note. Read the note every morning. Go on walks with yourself. Start to see yourself from the outside. How would you treat a friend who was struggling with feeling punished all the time? You would treat them with love. You deserve that acceptance and love too.

One more note here: as I said before, most people assume that



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life is punishing them *because of who they are*. You might think, *Life is doing this to me for a reason. It must be because I'm bad*. That's a natural, even logical, thing to think! And, yes, the flip of that is thinking that you are rewarded for who you are too. You get good rewards because you (finally) did something right. The big, fat philosophical question in all of this: what if you are already and without a doubt a good person, regardless of what happens to you in life? The things that happen to you have very little to do with who you are *as a person*. Things don't happen because of who you are. You lose your wallet or win the lottery not because of anything you *are*. If you can divorce your *ownership* of the things that happen in your life from the things themselves, you can end up having a better time. At least that's my experience of it!

Letting go of the concept of punishment versus reward is a big part of everything in this book. Do you see yourself as a person who constantly deserves the bad stuff in life—who constantly deserves to be punished? Well, you're not! When you start to see that life is not about punishment, then you won't be someone who *deserves* to be punished because no matter what happens to you, it's not a punishment. The big issue here is that if you feel like life is punishing or rewarding you, your relationship with the things that happen to you (all of life, really) is suddenly antagonistic. In that worldview, you are separate from life and you are being treated a certain way by life. But you are as much a part of life as anything else. You belong here as much as anyone else does.





Finish these sentences.

Don't try to control your answers—or say the right thing. Try to write as fast as you can without thinking too much about it.

A good mother would never . . .

A family should always . . .

I would be so hurt if a friend ever . . .

The perfect day would always have to include . . .



Go back and read over your answers. Are there any assumptions there that you could let go of? Are there any reasons for punishing yourself or other people that you see? Are there any invisible standards or shoulds that might be preventing you from being free?