

101
ESSAYS
that will
CHANGE
the way
YOU
THINK

BRIANNA WIEST



THOUGHT CATALOG BOOKS

Copyright © 2016 by Brianna Wiest All rights reserved.

Published by Thought Catalog Books, a division of The Thought & Expression Co., Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Art direction and design by KJ Parish.

General information and submissions:

hello@thoughtcatalog.com.

Founded in 2010, Thought Catalog is a website and imprint dedicated to your ideas and stories. We publish fiction and non-fiction from emerging and established writers across all genres.

Printed in Korea by Four Colour Print Group, Louisville, Kentucky.

ISBN: 978-1-945796-06-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

101 ESSAYS
that will
CHANGE
the way
YOU THINK

Brianna Wiest

Introduction

In his book *Sapiens*, Dr. Yuval Noah Harari explains that at one point, there were more than just *Homo sapiens* roaming the Earth¹. In fact, there were likely as many as six different types of humans in existence: *Homo sapiens*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo soloensis*, *Homo erectus*, etc.

There's a reason *Homo sapiens* still exist today and the others didn't continue to evolve: a prefrontal cortex, which we can infer from skeletal structures. Essentially, we had the ability to think more complexly, thus were able to organize, cultivate, teach, practice, habituate and pass down a world suited for our survival. Because of our capacity to imagine, we were able to build Earth as it is today out of virtually nothing.

In a sense, the notion that thoughts create reality is more than just a nice idea; it's also a fact of evolution. It was because of language and thought that we could create a world within our minds, and ultimately, it is because of language and thought that we have evolved into the society we have today—for better and for worse.

Almost every great master, artist, teacher, innovator, inventor, and generally happy person could attribute some similar understanding to their success. Many of the world's 'best' people understood that to change their lives, they had to change their minds.

These are the same people who have communicated to us some of the longest-standing conventional wisdom: that to believe is to become, that the mind is to be mastered, that the obstacle is the way². Often, our most intense discomfort is what precedes and necessitates thinking in a way we have never conceived of before. That new awareness creates possibilities that would never exist had we not been forced to learn something new. Why did our ancestors develop agriculture, society, medicine, and the like? To survive. The elements of our world were once just solutions to fears.

In a more cerebral context, if you consciously learn to regard the “problems” in your life as openings for you to adopt a greater understanding and then develop a better way of living, you will step out of the labyrinth of suffering and learn what it means to thrive.

I believe that the root of the work of being human is learning how to think. From this, we learn how to love, share, coexist, tolerate, give, create, and so on. I believe the first and most important duty we have is to actualize the potential we were born with—both for ourselves and for the world.

The unspoken line of everything I write is: “This idea changed my life.” Because ideas are what change lives—and that was the first idea that changed mine.

Brianna Wiest — July 2016

1 Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. 1st Edition. 2015. Harper.

2 Holiday, Ryan. *The Obstacle Is The Way*. 2014. Portfolio.

1

SUBCONSCIOUS BEHAVIORS *that are* KEEPING YOU *from* HAVING THE LIFE YOU WANT

Every generation has a “monoculture” of sorts, a governing pattern or system of beliefs that people unconsciously accept as “truth.”

It’s easy to identify the monoculture of Germany in the 1930s or America in 1776. It’s clear what people at those times, in those places, accepted to be “good” and “true” even when in reality, that was certainly not always the case.

The objectivity required to see the effects of present monoculture is very difficult to develop. Once you have so deeply accepted an idea as “truth” it doesn’t register as “cultural” or “subjective” anymore.

So much of our inner turmoil is the result of conducting a life we don’t inherently desire, only because we have accepted an inner narrative of “normal” and “ideal” without ever realizing.

The fundamentals of any given monoculture tend to surround what we should be living for (nation, religion, self, etc.) and there are a number of ways in which our current system has us shooting ourselves in the feet as we try to step forward. Here, 8 of the most pervasive.

01. You believe that creating your best life is a matter of deciding what you want and then going after it, but in reality, you are psychologically incapable¹ of being able to predict what will make you happy.

Your brain can only perceive what it’s known, so when you choose what you want for the future, you’re actually just recreating a solution or an

ideal of the past. When things don't work out the way you want them to, you think you've failed only because you didn't re-create something you perceived as desirable. In reality, you likely created something better, but foreign, and your brain misinterpreted it as "bad" because of that. (Moral of the story: Living in the moment isn't a lofty ideal reserved for the Zen and enlightened; it's the only way to live a life that isn't infiltrated with illusions. It's the only thing your brain can actually comprehend.)

02. You extrapolate the present moment because you believe that success is somewhere you "arrive," so you are constantly trying to take a snapshot of your life and see if you can be happy yet.

You convince yourself that any given moment is representative of your life as a whole. Because we're wired to believe that success is somewhere we get to—when goals are accomplished and things are completed—we're constantly measuring our present moments by how "finished" they are, how good the story sounds, how someone else would judge the elevator speech. We find ourselves thinking: "Is this all there is?" because we forget that everything is transitory, and no one single instance can summarize the whole. There is nowhere to "arrive" to. The only thing you're rushing toward is death. Accomplishing goals is not success. How much you expand in the process is.

03. You assume that when it comes to following your "gut instincts," happiness is "good" and fear and pain are "bad."

When you consider doing something that you truly love and are invested in, you are going to feel an influx of fear and pain, mostly because it will involve being vulnerable. Bad feelings should not always be interpreted as deterrents. They are also indicators that you are doing something frightening and worthwhile. Not wanting to do something would make you feel indifferent about it. Fear = interest.

04. You needlessly create problems and crises in your life because you're afraid of actually living it.

The pattern of unnecessarily creating crises in your life is actually an avoidance technique. It distracts you from actually having to be vulnerable or held accountable for whatever it is you're afraid of. You're never upset for the reason you think you are: At the core of your desire to create a problem is simply the fear of being who you are and living the life you want.

05. You think that to change your beliefs, you have to adopt a new line of thinking, rather than seek experiences that make that thinking self-evident.

A belief is what you know to be true because experience has made it evident to you. If you want to change your life, change your beliefs. If you want to change your beliefs, go out and have experiences that make them real to you. Not the opposite way around.

06. You think “problems” are roadblocks to achieving what you want, when in reality they are pathways.

Marcus Aurelius sums this up well: “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.” Simply, running into a “problem” forces you to take action to resolve it. That action will inevitably lead you to think differently, behave differently, and choose differently. The “problem” becomes a catalyst for you to actualize the life you always wanted. It pushes you from your comfort zone, that’s all.

07. You think your past defines you, and worse, you think that it is an unchangeable reality, when really, your perception of it changes as you do.

Because experience is always multi-dimensional, there are a variety of memories, experiences, feelings, “gists” you can choose to recall...and what you choose is indicative of your present state of mind. So many people get caught up in allowing the past to define them or haunt them simply because they have not evolved to the place of seeing how the past did not prevent them from achieving the life they want, it facilitated it. This doesn’t mean to disregard or gloss over painful or traumatic events, but simply to be able to recall them with acceptance and to be able to place them in the storyline of your personal evolution.

08. You try to change other people, situations, and things (or you just complain/get upset about them) when anger = self-recognition. Most negative emotional reactions are you identifying a disassociated aspect of yourself.

Your “shadow selves” are the parts of you that at some point you were conditioned to believe were “not okay,” so you suppressed them and have done everything in your power not to acknowledge them. You don’t actually dislike these parts of yourself, though. So when you see somebody else displaying one

of these traits, it's infuriating, not because you inherently dislike it, but because you have to fight your desire to fully integrate it into your whole consciousness. The things you love about others are the things you love about yourself. The things you hate about others are the things you cannot see in yourself.

¹ Gilbert, Daniel. *Stumbling on Happiness*. 2007. Random House.

2

The PSYCHOLOGY *of* DAILY ROUTINE

The most successful people in history—the ones many refer to as “geniuses” in their fields, masters of their crafts—had one thing in common, other than talent: Most adhered to rigid (and specific) routines.

Routines seem boring, and the antithesis to what you’re told a “good life” is made of. Happiness, we infer, comes from the perpetual seeking of “more,” regardless what it’s “more” of. Yet what we don’t realize is that having a routine doesn’t mean you sit in the same office every day for the same number of hours. Your routine could be traveling to a different country every month. It could be being routinely un-routine. The point is not what the routine consists of, but how steady and safe your subconscious mind is made through repetitive motions and expected outcomes.

Whatever you want your day-to-day life to consist of doesn’t matter, the point is that you decide and then stick to it. In short, routine is important because habitualness creates mood, and mood creates the “nurture” aspect of your personality, not to mention that letting yourself be jerked around by impulsiveness is a breeding ground for everything you essentially do not want.

Most things that bring genuine happiness are not just temporary, immediate gratifications, and those things also come with resistance and require sacrifice. Yet there is a way to nullify the feeling of “sacrifice” when you integrate a task into the “norm” or push through resistance with regulation. These, and all the other reasons why routine is so important (and happy people tend to follow them more).

01. Your habits create your mood, and your mood is a filter through which you experience your life.

It would make sense to assume that moods are created from thoughts or stressors, things that crop up during the day and knock us off-kilter. This isn’t so. Psychologist Robert Thayer argues that moods are created by

our habitualness: how much we sleep, how frequently we move, what we think, how often we think it, and so on. The point is that it's not one thought that throws us into a tizzy: It's the pattern of continually experiencing that thought that compounds its effect and makes it seem valid.

02. You must learn to let your conscious decisions dictate your day—not your fears or impulses.

An untamed mind is a minefield. With no regulation, focus, base or self-control, anything can persuade you into thinking you want something that you don't actually. "I want to go out for drinks tonight, not prepare for that presentation tomorrow" seems valid in the short-term, but in the long-term is disastrous. Going out for drinks one night probably isn't worth bombing a super important meeting. Learning to craft routine is the equivalent of learning to let your conscious choices about what your day will be about guide you, letting all the other, temporary crap fall to the wayside.

03. Happiness is not how many things you do, but how well you do them.

More is not better. Happiness is not experiencing something else; it's continually experiencing what you already have in new and different ways. Unfortunately as we're taught that passion should drive our every thought move and decision, we're basically impaled with the fear that we're unhappy because we're not doing "enough."

04. When you regulate your daily actions, you deactivate your "fight or flight" instincts because you're no longer confronting the unknown.

This is why people have such a difficult time with change, and why people who are constant in their habits experience so much joy: simply, their fear instincts are turned off long enough for them to actually enjoy something.

05. As children, routine gives us a feeling of safety. As adults, it gives us a feeling of purpose.

Interestingly enough, those two feelings are more similar than you'd think (at least, their origin is the same). It's the same thing as the fear of the unknown: As children, we don't know which way is left, let alone why we're alive or whether or not a particular activity we've never done before is going to be scary or harmful. When we're adults engaging with

routine-ness, we can comfort ourselves with the simple idea of “I know how to do this, I’ve done it before.”

06. You feel content because routine consistently reaffirms a decision you already made.

If said decision is that you want to write a book—and you commit to doing three pages each night for however long it takes to complete it—you affirm not only your choice to begin, but your ability to do it. It’s honestly the healthiest way to feel validated.

07. As your body self-regulates, routine becomes the pathway to “flow².” “Flow” (in case you don’t know—you probably do) is essentially what happens when we become so completely engaged with what we’re doing, all ideas or worries dissolve, and we’re just completely present in the task. The more you train your body to respond to different cues: 7 a.m. is when you wake up, 2 p.m. is when you start writing, and so on, you naturally fall into flow with a lot more ease, just out of habit.
08. When we don’t settle into routine, we teach ourselves that “fear” is an indicator that we’re doing the wrong thing, rather than just being very invested in the outcome.

A lack of routine is just a breeding ground for perpetual procrastination. It gives us gaps and spaces in which our subconscious minds can say: “well, you can take a break now,” when in fact, you have a deadline. But if you’re used to taking a break at that point in time, you’ll allow it simply because “you always do.”

² Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. 2008. Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

3

10 THINGS EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE *do not* DO

Emotional intelligence is probably the most powerful yet undervalued trait in our society.

We believe in rooting our everyday functions in logic and reason, yet we come to the same conclusions after long periods of contemplation as we do in the blink of an eye³. Our leaders sorely overlook the human element of our sociopolitical issues and I need not cite the divorce rate for you to believe that we're not choosing the right partners (nor do we have the capacity to sustain intimate relationships for long periods of time).

It seems people believe the most intelligent thing to do is not have emotions at all. To be effective is to be a machine, a product of the age. A well-oiled, consumerist-serving, digitally attuned, highly unaware but overtly operational robot. And so we suffer.

Here are the habits of the people who have the capacity to be aware of what they feel. Who know how to express, process, dismantle, and adjust their experience as they are their own locus of control. They are the true leaders, they are living the most whole and genuine lives, and it is from them we should be taking a cue. These are the things that emotionally intelligent people do not do.

01. They don't assume that the way they think and feel about a situation is the way it is in reality, nor how it will turn out in the end.

They recognize their emotions as responses, not accurate gauges, of what's going on. They accept that those responses may have to do with their own issues, rather than the objective situation at hand.

02. Their emotional base points are not external.

Their emotions aren't "somebody else's doing," and therefore "somebody else's problem to resolve." Understanding that they are the ultimate cause of what they experience keeps them out of falling into the trap of indignant passivity: Where one believes that as the universe has done wrong, the universe will ultimately have to correct it.

03. They don't assume to know what it is that will make them truly happy. Being that our only frame of reference at any given time is what's happened in the past, we actually have no means to determine what would make us truly happy, as opposed to just feeling "saved" from whatever we disliked about our past experiences. In understanding this, they open themselves up to any experience that their life evolves toward, knowing there are equal parts good and bad in anything.
04. They don't think that being fearful is a sign they are on the wrong path. The presence of indifference is a sign you're on the wrong path. Fear means you're trying to move toward something you love, but your old beliefs, or unhealed experiences, are getting in the way. (Or, rather, are being called up to be healed.)
05. They know that happiness is a choice, but they don't feel the need to make it all the time. They are not stuck in the illusion that "happiness" is a sustained state of joy. They allow themselves time to process everything they are experiencing. They allow themselves to exist in their natural state. In that non-resistance, they find contentment.
06. They don't allow their thoughts to be chosen for them. They recognize that through social conditioning and the eternal human monkey-mind, they can often be swayed by thoughts, beliefs, and mindsets that were never theirs in the first place. To combat this, they take inventory of their beliefs, reflect on their origins, and decide whether or not that frame of reference truly serves them.
07. They recognize that infallible composure is not emotional intelligence. They don't withhold their feelings or try to temper them so much as to render them almost gone. They do, however, have the capacity to withhold their emotional response until they are in an environment wherein it would be appropriate to express how they are feeling. They don't suppress it; they manage it effectively.

08. They know that a feeling will not kill them.
They've developed enough stamina and awareness to know that all things, even the worst, are transitory.
09. They don't just become close friends with anyone.
They recognize true trust and intimacy as something you build, and something you want to be discerning with whom you share. But they're not guarded or closed as they are simply mindful and aware of who they allow into their lives and hearts. They are kind to all, but truly open to few.
10. They don't confuse a bad feeling for a bad life.

They are aware of, and avoid, extrapolation, which is essentially projecting the present moment into the foreseeable future—believing that the moment at hand constitutes what your entire life amounted to, rather than just being another passing, transitory experience in the whole. Emotionally intelligent people allow themselves their “bad” days. They let themselves be fully human. It's in this non-resistance that they find the most peace of all.

³ Gladwell, Malcolm. *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. 2007. Back Bay Books.

4

HOW *the* PEOPLE WE ONCE LOVED *become* STRANGERS AGAIN

It's interesting to think about how we make people who used to be everything into nothing again. How we learn to forget. How we force forgetting. What we put in place of them in the interim. The dynamics afterward always tell you more than what the relationship did—grief is a faster teacher than joy—but what does it mean when you cycle out to being strangers again? You never really stop knowing each other in that way. Maybe there's no choice but to make them someone different in your mind, not the person who knew your daily anxieties and what you looked like naked and what made you cry and how much you loved them.

When our lives revolve around someone, they don't just stop doing so even if all that's left is some semblance of their memory. There are always those bits that linger. The memories that are impressed on the places you went and the things you said and the songs you listened to remain.

We all eventually find ourselves standing in the checkout line, hearing one of those songs come on and realizing that we're revolving around them again. And maybe we never stopped.

Do you ever really forget your lovers' birthdays, or all your first times, intimate and not? Do your anniversaries ever become normal days of the year again? Are the things you did and promises you made ever really neutralized? Do they become void now that you're broken up or do you decidedly ignore them because there's simply no other choice? The mind tells you to go on and forces your heart to follow suit, I guess.

I want to believe that you either love someone, in some way, forever, or you never really loved them at all. That once two reactive chemicals cross, both are changed. That the wounds we leave in people are sometimes too raw to risk falling back into them. I don't want to believe that we write each other off because we simply don't matter anymore. I know love isn't expendable. I wonder, and maybe hope, if we ever just force it to be out of necessity.

Maybe it's just that we're all at the centers of our own little universes, and sometimes they overlap with other people's, and that small bit of intersection leaves some part of it changed. The collision can wreck us, change us, shift us. Sometimes we merge into one, and other times we rescind because the comfort of losing what we thought we knew wins out.

Either way, it's inevitable that you expand. That you're left knowing that much more about love and what it can do, and the pain that only a hole in your heart and space in your bed and emptiness in the next chair over can bring. Whether or not that hole will ever again include the person who made it that way...I don't know. Whether or not anybody else can match the outline of someone who was so deeply impressed in you...I don't know that, either.

We all start as strangers. The choices we make in terms of love are usually ones that seem inevitable anyway. We find people irrationally compelling. We find souls made of the same stuff ours are. We find classmates and partners and neighbors and family friends and cousins and sisters and our lives intersect in a way that makes them feel like they couldn't have ever been separate. And this is lovely. But the ease and access isn't what we crave. It isn't what I'm writing about right now. It isn't what we revolve around after it's gone. We are all just waiting for another universe to collide with ours, to change what we can't ourselves. It's interesting how we realize the storm returns to calm, but we see the stars differently now, and we don't know, and we can't choose, whose wreckage can do that for us.

We all start as strangers, but we forget that we rarely choose who ends up a stranger, too.

5

16 SIGNS *of a* SOCIALLY INTELLIGENT PERSON

While you may not know what makes someone socially intelligent, you have likely experienced the kind of social tone-deafness that leaves you feeling frustrated at best, and physically uncomfortable at worst.

Manners are cultural social intelligence. Yet it seems traditional “politeness” is beginning to lose its appeal—it can conjure images of washing out your personality in favor of more uniform behavior. While we want to be able to engage with people in a mutually comfortable way, we shouldn’t have to sacrifice genuine expression in favor of a polite nod or gracious smile. The two are not mutually exclusive.

People who are socially intelligent think and behave in a way that spans beyond what’s culturally acceptable at any given moment in time. They function in such a way that they are able to communicate with others and leave them feeling at ease without sacrificing who they are and what they want to say. This, of course, is the basis of connection, the thing on which our brains are wired to desire, and on which we personally thrive.

Here, the core traits of someone who is socially intelligent:

01. They do not try to elicit a strong emotional response from anyone they are holding a conversation with.

They don’t communicate in such a way that aggrandizes their accomplishments to incite a response of awe or exaggerates their hardships to incite a response of sympathy. This usually occurs when the topic in question is not actually deserving of such a strong response, and therefore makes others uncomfortable because they feel pressured to fake an emotional reaction.

02. They do not speak in definitives about people, politics, or ideas.
The fastest way to sound unintelligent is to say, “This idea is wrong.” (That idea may be wrong for you, but it exists because it is right to someone else.) Intelligent people say, “I don’t personally understand this idea or agree with it.” To speak definitively about any one person or idea is to be blind to the multitude of perspectives that exist on it. It is the definition of closed-minded and short-sightedness.
03. They don’t immediately deny criticism, or have such a strong emotional reaction to it that they become unapproachable or unchangeable.
Some of the most difficult people to be in relationships with are those who are so threatened by even the slightest suggestion that their behavior is hurtful that they actually end up getting angry at the person suggesting it, reinforcing the problem altogether. Socially intelligent people listen to criticism before they respond to it—an immediate emotional response without thoughtful consideration is just defensiveness.
04. They do not confuse their opinion of someone for being a fact about them.
Socially intelligent people do not say, “He’s a prick” as though it is fact. Instead, they say: “I had a negative experience with him where I felt very uncomfortable.”
05. They never overgeneralize other people through their behaviors.
They don’t use “you always” or “you never” to illustrate a point. Likewise, they root their arguments in statements that begin with “I feel” as opposed to “you are.” They do this because choosing language that feels unthreatening to someone is the best way to get them to open up to your perspective and actually create the dialogue that will lead to the change you desire.
06. They speak with precision.
They say what they intend to say without skirting around the issue. They speak calmly, simply, concisely, and mindfully. They focus on communicating something, not just receiving a response from others.
07. They know how to practice healthy disassociation.
In other words, they know that the world does not revolve around them. They are able to listen to someone without worrying that any given statement they make is actually a slight against them. They are able to

disassociate from their own projections and at least try to understand another person's perspective without assuming it has everything to do with their own.

08. They do not try to inform people of their ignorance.

When you accuse someone of being wrong, you close them off to considering another perspective by heightening their defenses. If you first validate their stance ("That's interesting, I never thought of it that way...") and then present your own opinion ("Something I recently learned is this...") and then let them know that they still hold their own power in the conversation by asking their opinion ("What do you think about that?"), you open them up to engaging in a conversation where both of you can learn rather than just defend.

09. They validate other people's feelings.

To validate someone else's feelings is to accept that they feel the way they do without trying to use logic to dismiss or deny or change their minds. (For example: "I am sad today." "Well, you shouldn't be, your life is great!") The main misunderstanding here is that validating feelings is not the same thing as validating ideas. There are many ideas that do not need or deserve to be validated, but everyone's feelings deserve to be seen and acknowledged and respected. Validating someone's emotions is validating who they really are, even if you would respond differently. So in other words, it is validating who someone is, even if they are different than you.

10. They recognize that their "shadow selves" are the traits, behaviors, and patterns that aggravate them about others.

One's hatred of a misinformed politician could be a projection of their fear of being unintelligent or underqualified. One's intense dislike for a particularly passive friend could be an identification of one's own inclination to give others power in their life. It is not always an obvious connection, but when there is a strong emotional response involved, it is always there. If you genuinely disliked something, you would simply disengage with it.

11. They do not argue with people who only want to win, not learn.

You can identify that this is the case when people start "pulling" for arguments or resorting to shoddy logic only to seem as though they have an upper hand. Socially intelligent people know that not everybody

wants to communicate, learn, grow or connect—and so they do not try to force them.

12. They listen to hear, not respond.
While listening to other people speak, they focus on what is being said, not how they are going to respond. This is also known as the meta practice of “holding space.”
13. They do not post anything online they would be embarrassed to show to a parent, explain to a child, or have an employer find.
Aside from the fact that at some point or another, one if not all of those things will come to pass, posting anything that you are not confident to support means you are not being genuine to yourself (you are behaving on behalf of the part of you that wants other people to validate it).
14. They do not consider themselves a judge of what’s true.
They don’t say, “you’re wrong”; they say, “I think you are wrong.”
15. They don’t “poison the well” or fall for ad hominem fallacy to disprove a point.
“Poisoning the well” is when someone attacks the character of a person so as to shift the attention away from the (possibly very valid) point being made. For example, if a person who eats three candy bars a day says: “I don’t think kids it’s healthy for children to eat too much candy each day,” a socially intelligent person wouldn’t respond, “Who are you to say?”; they would be able to see the statement objective from the person who is saying it. Usually, it is people who are most inflicted with an issue that are able to speak out on the importance of it (even if it seems hypocritical on the surface).
16. Their primary relationship is to themselves, and they work on it tirelessly.

The main thing socially intelligent people understand is that your relationship to everyone else is an extension of your relationship to yourself.