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**MANDY
HALE**

**TURN
TOWARD
THE SUN**

Releasing What If and Embracing What Is

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**MANDY
HALE**



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For my mom and dad . . .
My heroes, my best friends, my sunflowers,
the strongest people I know.
Thank you for showing me what true courage looks like
and for always reminding me to turn toward the sun.
I love you.

This book is in loving memory of my uncle
Vernie Hale
1949–2021

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INTRODUCTION

The book you're holding in your hands was supposed to be a different book.

It was supposed to be a very sassy, pithy book about letting go and moving on. If you've read my other books, especially my last book, *Don't Believe the Swipe*, and/or if you follow me on social media, you know *I love* sassy and pithy. And letting go and moving on are both topics I love to talk about. You don't make it to age forty-two as a single woman and not know a thing or two about letting go and moving on. Those are both really important concepts to explore, as I think most humans in general inherently struggle with letting go and moving on (especially those of us humans who happen to be anxiety-ridden control freaks). So I was excited to dive into a book *all* about letting go and moving on: from lost love, from toxic relationships, from dead-end careers, from one-sided friendships, from negative mindsets, etc., etc. And this book *will* cover some of those things.

But they're not the overlying themes of the book.

Why?

Because 2020 happened.

The dumpster fire that was 2020. The year that a global pandemic left us all *shook*. The year that racial injustice and political mayhem and social unrest raged. The year that found many of us quarantining alone for months on end. The year that the murder hornets came for us all. (And then left just as quickly because they read the room and decided that even they couldn't handle 2020.) The year that kept going . . . and going . . . and going. The year that left every person on the planet changed in one way or another.

It was also the year that both of my parents were diagnosed with cancer, one month apart from each other.

Even as I type that sentence, it still feels unreal to me. Sometimes, like right now, it hits me all over again that both of my parents, my best friends on this earth, have cancer . . . and I struggle to catch my breath. I find myself mentally bargaining: *Well, what if we could go back in time and change this? What if the doctor had found it sooner? What if none of this is even real and I wake up tomorrow and it's all just been a bad dream? WHAT IF, WHAT IF, WHAT IF?!*

I've always been obsessed with the idea of how things *could* be or *should* be. A girl with her head in the clouds. A dreamer. An idealist. A believer in magic. I've spent most of my life rejecting reality. I love movies and romance and Hollywood endings and happily ever afters. One could even argue that that's why I'm still single—because when you go through life expecting to find rom-com-level love on every corner, it can make real-life love seem . . . ordinary. Boring. Disappointing even.

I've also projected my great big, unrealistic expectations and *coulda woulda shouldas* onto pretty much every other aspect of my life. I expect my friendships to look exactly like Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe's. I expect my writing career to mirror that of Carrie Bradshaw's. I expect family gatherings to be these grand Hallmark movie-level events, when in reality, they turn out to be much more National Lampoon-level fiascos. I have quite literally spent my life living in the *what if*. *What if* life was like this? *What if* love was like this? *What if* I was like this? So much so, that I have often overlooked and even downright ignored the *what is*. The *what is* being what is *really* happening. What my life really looks like. What actual love and not glittery love is supposed to look like. What real families and friendships and faith and feelings are made of instead of what TV and movies and books and everyone else's shiny social media posts tell me they should be made of.

And then 2020 happened. And then the pandemic happened. And then my parents' diagnoses happened.

And I couldn't live in Fantasyland anymore. Instead, I was brought crashing down to earth in a puddle of fear and grief and anxiety because this time, the *what is* was so big, I couldn't ignore it. I couldn't run from it. I couldn't deny it. I had to learn to live with it. And not just live with it but in it . . . and also somehow accept it and work with it and survive it and even thrive in the midst of it.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the whole thing is that for Lent 2020, I decided to give up . . . *control*.

For those of you not familiar with Lent, it's a Christian tradition in which you give up something—a bad habit, junk food, television, social media, etc.—for approximately forty

days, or from Ash Wednesday until Easter Sunday. It's designed to imitate Jesus's fasting in the wilderness before He began His public ministry. I try to give up something every year in an effort to better myself, even if it's just Netflix or a sugary addiction. But in 2020, I decided to go big or go home and surrender control. As an admitted lifelong control freak, I felt like it was time to take my hands off the wheel for a while and let God take over. You know that old adage about if you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans? Welp . . . I think in this instance, if you want to make God laugh, give up control in the year 2020, right before a global pandemic is unleashed into the world. I made my Lent resolution in February 2020. Exactly one month later, the entire world spun out of control.

And mine hasn't really stopped spinning since.

The thing is, you would think that when your world is spinning out of control, the best, smartest thing you could do would be to hold on even tighter.

But the thing you *actually* need to do . . . is learn to let go.

Let go into the grief, let go into the fear, let go into the sadness and anxiety and chaos and uncertainty. *Just let go.* Let yourself feel every last bit of it. Don't turn away from *what is* . . . turn toward it. Release your idea of what should be happening or could be happening or would be happening if things were only different and embrace what *is* happening. Even the big things. Even the scary things. Even the things you think you won't survive. Surrender control and just let go. Because the truth is, we're not in control of when global pandemics or illness or loss or heartbreak or even the really great big, amazing things in life happen. We're just not. We never were. If you're someone with anxiety, like me, reading

that might be nerve-racking, even triggering. Those of us with anxiety like to constantly control our environments to protect ourselves from the unknown. The unknown terrifies us. We'd rather hide out in the safety of the *what if* than face the uncertainty of *what is*. But you want to know a secret?

The *what if* is where comparison and discontentment and bitterness and unhappiness happen. You're so stuck in wishing to be somewhere else, doing something else, with someone else, living someone else's life that you never learn to appreciate or value or even like your own life. You spend so much time glancing over the fence to where the grass is seemingly greener, your own lawn becomes neglected, uncared for, unattended, and overgrown with thistles and weeds. While the *what if* might feel warm and fuzzy and safe and secure for a little while, it's actually where dreams and happiness go to die.

But the *what is*? Yes, it might be where bad things and heartbreaking things and life-altering things sometimes happen . . . but it's also where immeasurably good things and breathtaking things and life-affirming things happen. Because your life, *just as it is*, the good and the bad, is precious, wild, wholly unique, and entirely worth embracing, celebrating, and living. *Just as it is*.

In the *what is*, you stop fighting against the wind and you learn to turn toward the sun. Did you know that when sunflowers are baby flowers, they physically turn toward the sun to help elongate their stems? In other words, turning toward *what is* and toward what's real—even when it hurts—actually helps you grow. And, yes, much like turning your face toward the sun on a hot summer day, accepting and learning to live in the *what is* might feel like trial by fire at

times . . . but it's where necessary growth and change and life happen.

The *what is* is also where you discover your own inner fire, your own courage, and your own strength.

I never considered myself a particularly strong woman. Even when I wrote blogs, tweets, and books encouraging other women to tap into their inner strength, I didn't really feel like I had mastered tapping into my own. I think, perpetually living in the *what if*, I was writing more about the self I wished I could be than the self I really was.

Then 2020 happened. A year that crashed into me and my family like a freight train. A year that would have left the Mandy from even one year earlier flat on her back on the floor.

But 2020 Mandy?

Yes, she might have doubted and feared and worried and wavered.

But eventually, she stood and she dealt. On her own, without anyone helping her up.

Yes, the princess rescues *herself* in this book.

I want to suggest to you today that perhaps you are a heck of a lot stronger than you think you are too. Perhaps you don't need or require a handsome prince to come along and hold your hand, dry your tears, and "rescue" you. Perhaps you were always meant to rescue yourself. Perhaps the happy ending was always going to be learning that only *you* are the author of it. Coauthors and costars and cosigners not required. Perhaps letting go of everything you think your life is supposed to be and embracing everything that it is—in all its messy, awful, beautiful, chaotic, heartbreaking, unexpected glory—is where your salvation and contentment and strength lay all along.

Because, truly, is there anyone better equipped than a single woman to roll with uncertainty and disappointment and unfulfilled dreams and life just plain not being what you want it to be? At age forty-two, I've had to surrender that idea of what I *thought* my life would look like and learn to accept and embrace it and even love it for what it actually *is*. Otherwise, I'd just be a miserable bitter Betty right now. Most of the friends I grew up with have high-school-age children right now and twenty-plus years of marriage under their belts. A few of them are even grandparents! And I've yet to even get started. So isn't singleness, in and of itself, a bit of a master class in learning to let go of the *what if* and live in the *what is*?

A couple of things before we get started.

First, a word on toxic positivity. In the past, I've been guilty at times of being a little too Miss Merry Sunshine when it comes to frantically searching for the silver lining of every single thing that's ever happened in life. I was so desperate to find meaning and purpose in the bad times, I would gloss right over the sheer weight of what was happening in order to try to make lemonade from lemons. As a result, I know I probably sometimes came off as glib or shallow or even just annoyingly chipper. But guess what? We're not going to do that in this book. Because there is no silver lining to cancer. Or pandemics. Or a lot of other horrible things that happen in life. And it's okay to acknowledge that and sit with the heaviness of it and not try to dismiss it with a trite "Everything happens for a reason." That may indeed be true, but has that sentiment ever really helped anyone? So, while I will be sharing stories from my life and lessons I've learned along the way in both bad and good times, I won't

try to force you to find the good in every situation. Because in some situations, there simply is no good to be found. And I think it's healthy and necessary to admit that. It's also part of existing in the reality of *what is* instead of escaping into the fantasy of *what if*.

Second, my faith is very important to me, and I'll be talking about it throughout this entire journey but not in a "God works in mysterious ways and made that bad thing happen to make me stronger or to make you stronger" sort of way. I don't believe God makes bad things happen. I don't believe God is a God of bad things. I think bad things, like cancer and pandemics and divorce and wars and violence, happen separate from God, and while He doesn't cause these things, He does sit with us in the midst of them. There is not one single pain or fear or loss or tear we can experience that He has not experienced Himself. And isn't that kind of amazing when you think about it? That God doesn't run from your mess or condemn you for it but gets down with you in the trenches of it and holds you through every single second of it? That He wanted to be so close to us that He stepped into our skin to become one of us? That He needed to feel and experience the bittersweet journey of being fully human so we could never doubt that He knows what hurt and loss and disappointment and heartbreak feel like? And that He doesn't turn away from us, ever, for any reason? He turns toward us and accepts us and loves us not for who we could be or someday hope we will be but for exactly who we are.

So isn't it time for us to do that for ourselves?

I present to you now a collection of stories from my journey of being fully human. Times that stand out to me as examples of letting go of *what if* and surrendering to *what*

is. Times when I chose to relentlessly turn toward the sun, no matter how many storms life threw at me. We'll be talking about a bit of everything here. Some of it bad, some of it good, some of it sad, some of it funny, some of it serious, some of it silly . . . but all of it real. I hope that along the way you will find a reflection of yourself in these pages. And I hope that reflection is one you'll embrace and appreciate and even love, regardless of how messy or imperfect or unfinished it might look to you. Because a wise woman once said, many moons and several books ago, that happiness is letting go of what you think your life is supposed to look like and celebrating it for everything that it is. (That wise woman, in case you haven't figured it out, was me.)

It is my prayer that this book will help you let go of *what if* and embrace *what is*, even when it's challenging, even when it's painful, even when it's scary, and even when it's sad. Because when you're feeling, you're growing, and when you're growing . . . you're living. And to live, to fully live, right smack-dab in the present moment, no matter what it may bring, is a beautiful thing.

Shall we get started?

1

It's the End of the World as We Know It

Day 6 of self-isolation: I just caught myself having a full-blown conversation with my cat. Send help.

I remember a time before the words *Covid* and *coronavirus* were a part of our daily vernacular. It's a distant memory . . . but it's a fond one.

In January or February of 2020, I started hearing whispers of these words on social media, faint at first. So faint, I paid them little attention and continued on about my life. The idea of a global pandemic shutting down society felt more like something from a movie than anything I thought I would ever experience in real life.

As February went on, the whispers grew a little louder. Covid was officially in the US, and the danger of it becoming a great big, major deal was growing exponentially every single day.

Day 8 of self-isolation: Might put on pants today.

I still didn't quite grasp what a "global pandemic" meant. I remember hearing all the rumors that the country was going to be shut down for a few weeks and we would all be on lockdown, and as someone who has a deep fondness for apocalyptic TV shows, books, and movies, I foolishly felt almost a little . . . excited? I realize how insane that sounds now, but remember: the emerging pandemic was on a scale that few people had seen in our lifetime, so how was I to know what we were up against? None of us knew. And I don't think any of us dared to imagine, even in our worst nightmares, the level of havoc and death and destruction Covid would ultimately go on to wreak on our country and our world. In my mind, I thought we'd all stay home for a couple of weeks, giving me an excuse to do two of my favorite things—watch movies and read—the threat would dissipate, and we'd all be back to business as usual. I think that's what most of us were thinking.

I remember going out to lunch one final time with two of my girlfriends in late February and, immediately afterward, going to the grocery store to stock up on food and prepare to batten down the hatches for a week or two. I had no way of knowing then that it would be the last time I would set foot in a grocery store for a year.

March 2020 arrived—a month that I am convinced will go down as the longest month in the history of the world—and the whispers became a shout. It was the end of the world as we knew it . . . and the reality of what was happening started to sink in. Schools closed. Businesses closed. People started working from home. Major world events, like the Olympics, started to get canceled or postponed, one by one

by one. Covid officially arrived in Tennessee, where I live. The death toll began to slowly rise. Now the pandemic wasn't just a vague concern; it was a genuine threat. And my anxiety kicked in, hard core.

I've talked very openly about my anxiety on my blog, on my social media feeds, and in my books. I've suffered from anxiety for pretty much my entire life, and I've been diagnosed with panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. My anxiety is worse at some times than at others and is typically triggered by major life changes or events. It's also gone into what I think of as "remission" for years at a time, otherwise known as blissful seasons in which it will scarcely show its face. But in March 2020, it reared its ugly head in a whole new and uniquely awful manifestation—health anxiety. Suddenly everything and everyone seemed fraught with danger. Every snuffle and sneeze felt like coronavirus had invaded my body. Three other women and I lived in a house divided into apartments, which had always felt like a safe haven. Now it suddenly felt like a hotbed of germs. Could Covid be transmitted through the air vents? No one seemed to know. The *what ifs* were absolutely terrorizing me. *What if I get Covid? What if I die? What if my parents get it? WHAT IF, WHAT IF, WHAT IF?!*

Day 10 of self-isolation: Today the tears came. And I'm letting myself have a good cry.

All of this might sound crazy to people who have never dealt with anxiety and/or panic attacks, but any situation with a perceived lack of control sends my anxiety spiraling. And what on earth could be less controllable than a deadly and highly contagious virus? Especially one we had never dealt with and that even the smartest and most educated scientists knew very

little about. Every day I would wake up and monitor my body for symptoms. I checked my temperature at least five times a day. One morning, it was 99.1, and I was convinced the 'Rona had come for me. Panic became my moment-by-moment reality. The daily *what ifs* were literally driving me crazy.

Day 13 of self-isolation: Today has been horrible, anxiety-wise. But I met with my therapist online earlier, wearing pajamas and crazy hair, and was met with nothing but calming reassurance. So onward we go.

As she usually does when I'm camping out in the *what if* and spiraling into an anxiety free fall, my wonderful therapist talked me down. "Mandy, you have to stop living to die and start living to *live*," she said. "You're taking all the precautions. You're being safe. You have to get out of the *what if* and live in the *what is*. Most of what you are worrying about will never happen."

We kicked up our biweekly sessions to weekly, a change that has remained in place to this day. And slowly, as she had advised, I began to pull myself out of the *what if* and come back to the *what is*. If you don't have a therapist, or if you don't have a good one, I can't recommend enough that you do some research and find someone you feel comfortable opening up to and allowing to speak into your life. Therapy has literally saved me, more than once. Even through a computer screen, my therapist was able to reach out and pull me out of a quickly spiraling black hole. Day by day, moment by moment, I started to accept and even acclimate to my new and unusual circumstances.

Day 23 of self-isolation: Feeling productive today. Might put on actual clothes and reintroduce myself to my bra today. (Or not.)

I didn't start marking my days of self-isolation on Twitter until Day 6—and I would go on to do so, every single day, until Day 100. Then I would continue to do so sporadically for the next 265 days, as my self-induced quarantine would go on to last the greater part of a year. When I say “self-isolation,” I don't mean that I literally didn't see any humans or leave my house for a year. I saw my parents and my sister and her family, and I went to the bank and to the doctor and to the bookstore a couple of times, and I saw a few friends outside and from a safe distance. My parents and I even traveled to the Smoky Mountains in April 2020. So I didn't cut myself off from society and become the troll under the bridge. But I was about as cautious as a person could be.

A word to those of you who might think I was overreacting:

To some, Covid was no big deal. A lot of you probably went about your lives pretty much like normal. And that's fine, if that's what you felt led to do. Fine for you. For me, it was a very big deal. For one, we lost millions of people around the globe to this awful illness. I lost my great-aunt to it. I watched my cousins suffer her loss. I watched various social media friends grieve family members and other loved ones. I knew lots of other people who got very, very sick from it. So whether or not it happened to touch you personally . . . it was a big deal to me, and it was a big deal to countless others.

Aside from the obvious reasons why I was taking Covid so seriously, I wasn't eager to see how my anxiety and Covid would mix. Anything that makes me feel like I can't breathe can trigger a panic attack, meaning a disease like Covid is pretty much my worst nightmare come to life. And finally, my parents are my best friends and were my primary social

circle throughout the pandemic. Though they wouldn't be diagnosed with cancer for six more months, I felt frantic to protect them from Covid, even without knowing how truly high-risk they were. I constantly scouted eBay in search of disinfecting wipes, Lysol spray, masks, and gloves when they all became scarce on other platforms. I made sure my mom and dad had any and every supply they could possibly need to stay safe. And I admittedly, if somewhat ashamedly, joined in on the great toilet paper hoarding of 2020, stalking various online vendors for hours on end so I could snatch up rolls whenever they became available. (Something about running out of toilet paper made me feel especially anxious and vulnerable.) In other words, I was truly living my best life. (Pause here to note the obvious sarcasm.)

Day 38 of self-isolation: I just got toilet paper delivered, and I felt like a kid in a candy store, I was so excited!

Outside of my frantic toilet paper bingeing, I was starting to settle into a fairly content existence. My inner introvert had started to see the benefits of “normal” life coming to a grinding halt. Once I stopped scanning my body for Covid symptoms every day and stopped convincing myself that every snuffle or sneeze surely signaled the end for me, I looked around and realized that quarantine life was a little lonely, yes—but overall, surprisingly not so bad. No one else was really being super social during that time, so I didn't have FOMO (fear of missing out) when I would browse my social media platforms. I could wear lounge clothes all day, every day. I could catch up on that stack of unread books that was calling my name. I could bake and take naps and sit on my balcony and meditate and watch movies and color and basically do whatever I wanted. I had

never felt more grateful for my career path than I did during those long months of solitude. I didn't have to show up to an office every day and worry about being exposed to a ton of other people. I didn't have to worry about getting laid off or furloughed like so many people did. My heart still bleeds for all the people who lost jobs and houses and life savings and career security and livelihoods during that uncertain time. Though I was dealing with my own fears and uncertainties and stressors, I knew how very fortunate I was, and it made me want to step out of the *what if* and into the *what is* even more. Gratitude will always pull you out of *what could have been* and plant you firmly into *what is* and *what could still be*.

About once a day, my downstairs neighbor would play her piano for thirty minutes or so. I would turn off my television and get super quiet so I could sit and listen to her play. She didn't know it at the time, but that quickly became my favorite part of the day. In those early days, I wasn't around anyone—even my parents—for weeks, so the sound of her fingers dancing across the keyboard became extremely comforting to me. I particularly enjoyed her rendition of “It Had to Be You.” I think those are the moments from the early days of the pandemic that I'll look back on forever with such sweetness: that time in April 2020 when we were all weary and anxious and locked in our houses and still . . . the music played. God bless the creators.

God especially bless the creators who were able to continue creating during those weird days. I figured out quickly that while other people were “hustling and grinding” their way through the pandemic, I wasn't going to be one of those people.

Day 45 of self-isolation: I've made peace with the fact that I am not going to be that person who thrives in quarantine. I'm not going to start a podcast. I'm not going to lose twenty pounds. I'm not going to be the Moses of this operation and lead everyone out of the wilderness. And I'm okay with that.

A lot of people asked me, “Are you writing during this time?” And the answer was NO. I was barely even posting on social media. I had just finished a book. I knew I would be working on the next one (this one!) soon enough. I was just living. Breathing. Resting. Surviving. And I was completely at peace with that.

I knew someday I would be ready to write words again, and I hoped they would be good words and helpful words and meaningful words and deep words. But I also knew you couldn't have a story to tell if you didn't first live the story and survive the story. In spring 2020, I was living and surviving. It's okay if that's what you were doing too. It's even okay if that's what you're doing now. We all went through intense collective trauma for a solid year, and you don't just “bounce back” from that like you would a bad date or a rough day at work.

Sometimes, letting go of *what if* and learning to live in *what is* is about thriving. And other times it's about simply surviving. Learning to accept your circumstances with peace and finding contentment in the midst of the chaos doesn't mean you have to make friends with the chaos or be happy about the circumstances. I could be content with my life as it was in that season and still wish things were different. Same for you in whatever season you happen to be in right now. This is all part of what it means to turn toward the sun. It doesn't mean you have to turn every lemon into lemonade. It just

means you have to learn to accept that lemons are an unavoidable part of life and deal with it. I honestly think sometimes it's a lot braver to learn to just sit with the lemons as they are rather than frantically try to turn them into lemonade.

If there was any lemonade that came out of the twilight zone known as the pandemic, I think it was that I learned, perhaps for the first time in my life, how to just . . . be. I gave myself permission to stop asking questions and stop searching for answers and stop making things happen and stop *doing, doing, doing* and *going, going, going*, and I learned how to just *be*. To be still, to be quiet, to be alone, to be content . . . with just me. No one else. Just me. It really is a beautiful thing learning to truly love and appreciate your own company. And I never would have done so had I stayed stuck in the endless rat race of *what if* instead of letting go into the uncertain peace of *what is*.

Did I want to essentially lose a year of my life to a pandemic? A year of dating? A year of fun times with friends? A year of taking trips and making memories with my family? No. And I would gladly hand back anything remotely positive that I gleaned from the pandemic if it meant getting that year back. But that's not how life works. And we can either be bitter about what was lost or be grateful for what still remains. What remained for me was an enduring ability to just let it be and live each moment as it happened rather than obsess about the past or stress about the future. That lesson would serve me well in the months to come.

Whatever it is you're going through right now . . . whatever it is you're enduring or muddling through or just simply trying to survive . . .

I want to give you permission . . . to just . . . be.

You don't have to be World's Best Mom or World's Best Employee or really World's Best anything.

You don't have to write an award-winning sonnet.

You don't have to tackle that spring cleaning or that big goal.

You don't have to be productive at all.

Maybe, in this moment, you don't have to solve anything or prove anything or figure anything out.

Maybe for right now, you can just let it all go. Let go of the endless *what ifs* and relax into the *what is*—this present moment, reading this book, where you don't have to do anything other than just be.

Maybe what you need to do instead of moving forward frantically with no idea where you're headed is just be still.

Be angry if you need to be.

Be scared if you need to be.

Be honest.

Be lost.

Be uncertain.

Be whatever it is you are feeling without trying to put a happy sheen or a positive spin on it.

That's how you move on. That's how you survive. That's how you become.

Not by running in the endless hamster wheel of mindless productivity but by choosing to be at peace with whatever it is you need to do right now in this moment to get through this hard thing.

If that's not wearing pants for three days in a row . . . so be it.

If that's bingeing Netflix and eating ice cream . . . so be it.

If that's running five miles every day . . . so be it.

If that's shouting and screaming and cursing and punching pillows . . . so be it.

Just . . . let . . . yourself . . . *be*.

Whatever it is you're doing to get through the day right now . . . for now, it is enough. You are enough.

Take a deep breath, and let it be enough.

Take a deep breath, and let it be.

Take a deep breath, and just . . . *be*.

Day 365 of self-isolation: That's it. That's the tweet. Today marks one whole year of self-isolation.

As I write this, it's about fourteen months after March 2020, aka "the end of the world as we knew it." And I was telling my therapist just today that I feel like post-pandemic life is a bit like walking out of your house after a storm to find that everything has been completely leveled and you're left with a blank slate. Yes, we survived . . . but did anything from our previous lives make it out with us? As I look around, I'm not so sure yet. And in a way, that's terrifying. But in another way, it's incredibly exciting and even liberating. Can anyone else relate to that feeling? After a year of avoiding social contact and battening down the hatches and fighting to protect my high-risk parents from a deadly virus . . . after a year of just simply surviving . . . it's hard to figure out how to switch out of surviving mode into thriving mode. My social life has been impacted. My friendships have been impacted. (Some of them haven't survived at all.) My perspectives and mindsets on pretty much everything have been impacted. So where do we go from here?

Anywhere we want.

I want to invite you to shift your perspective today if you, too, feel like your life was leveled by the pandemic, or by

anything else that came before it or during it or after it. What if we just start viewing whatever blank slate we've been given as a new beginning? A fresh start. A clean slate. To be whoever we want to be and do whatever we want to do and go wherever we want to go. None of us are the same people we were two years ago, or even a year ago, and that's okay. The storm might have taken a lot of things from us . . . but we are still here. To hope, to dream, to love, to live in the great big, beautiful mystery of *what still is*. To be the people we always wanted to be. Because sometimes the storm levels us.

And sometimes the storm helps us level up.