

THE DRIVE

— TO —

I N N E R

P E A C E

**HOW YOUR
COMMUTE CAN MAKE YOU
HAPPIER & LESS STRESSED**



C u r t R o s e n g r e n

The Drive to Inner Peace

How Your Commute Can Make You Happier & Less Stressed

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INTRODUCTION

Are you the person you aspire to be when you're behind the wheel? If not, take heart. You're in good company. No matter who I ask that question, the answer is almost always a resounding, "No!"

In describing what prompted me to write *The Drive to Inner Peace*, I often say, with a touch of humorous understatement, "I realized that people are not quite at their best when they're driving their car." Almost without fail people will laugh and sheepishly confess that they relate to that all too well.

Their response is a nod to how common it is for people's everyday Dr. Jekyll nature to transform at least occasionally into a monstrous Mr. Hyde when they get behind the wheel.

Nobody I know likes that about themselves. Nobody likes how it feels when Mr. Hyde comes roaring out. And yet he does, and they feel helpless to stop it.

Sadly, I'm no exception. In fact the seeds of this book were planted because all too often I found myself feeling anything BUT peaceful.

I can remember exactly where I started using my time in the car as a growth practice. I was on my way to a meeting, running late, and caught in grindingly slow traffic. Stuck at a stoplight, I could feel myself getting more and more irritated and tense. My steering wheel was in grave danger of getting an undeserved beating, and I could feel a bubbling cauldron of f-bombs just aching to come pouring out.

Any of that sound familiar?

At one point it occurred to me to take a mental step back and say, "Hang on, what's really going on here?" I imagined looking down on

the scenario from high above. What were the facts? There was this guy who looked suspiciously like me, sitting in a metal box. He was surrounded by a lot of other people in metal boxes. The boxes were moving more slowly than anticipated, and he was unlikely to get to his destination at the time he had originally projected.

Those were the facts. Everything else - everything that was sparking my irritation and tension - was just a crazy-making story I was adding to the mix.

As I explored that high-level view and tried the story-less version on for size, I felt the stress start to subside. It wasn't magic, and it didn't flip a switch where I was suddenly the embodiment of Auto-Zen, but it gave me a brief taste that made me want to explore more.

I started using my car as a mobile learning laboratory, taking advantage of the inevitable irritation, impatience, even the occasional roadrage-ishness, to explore new ways to relate to my experience that gave me a greater sense of peace. Over time, I started to see real changes – not just in how I felt and behaved in the car, but how I showed up in the rest of my life.

I have two primary motivations in writing this book. The first is that using my time in the car as a practice for positive change has had an immense impact on my life, and I want to share that.

This book is an opportunity to help people:

- Dismantle the inner workings that block the flow of that aliveness.
- Create a more natural sense of spaciousness and peace.
- Develop the tools to cope and even thrive when things get challenging.

The second motivation is that I'm on a mission to change the world from the inside out.

My entire career has been centered on helping people feel more energized and alive (and less stressed and depleted). It's not just about helping people feel better, though I do love that. It's also about helping them show up in a way that has a positive impact on the world around them.

There's a quote attributed to Gandhi that encourages us to "be the change you want to see in the world." Personally, I want to see a world where we're taking steps towards peace, rather than joining in on a feeding frenzy of conflict.

For most of us, at least some of the time, the way we show up in our cars is anything but being the change we want to see in the world – unless what we want to see is a world that is impatient, angry, irritated, and self-absorbed.

This book is part of my effort to turn that on its head, helping people use those constricting and limiting ways of feeling and reacting as fodder for doing the inner work of peace.

In a way, the work in this book has an alchemical effect, like turning lead into gold. Except in this instance the lead is dead time in your schedule that you most likely dislike (your commute) and the gold is a greater sense of aliveness and inner peace.

Thanks for joining me!

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Part One:

THE FOUNDATION

How much time do you spend in your car? If you're like most people, your answer is probably, "way too @%#! much!"

The average American spends 100 hours a year just in their commute, never mind all the time spent zipping hither and yon in the rest of their lives. That's the equivalent of 2 ½ 40-hour work weeks every year trapped behind the steering wheel, just getting back and forth to their job.

And for most people, that time spent "packed like lemmings into shiny metal boxes" (as that 80s song by The Police so aptly describes it) feels like a colossal waste of time.

But what if your commute is actually an enormous blessing in disguise? What if that commute could be not just tolerable, but the source of tremendous positive change in your life?

I know, I know. That seems like a stretch, but stay with me here. It's not as crazy as it sounds.

Your commute has the potential to be a powerful practice for personal growth. It has the potential to be a place where you can develop a deeper and more consistent sense of peace.

Think about it. Time in traffic takes some of our biggest obstacles to peace-of-mind and distills them into a four-wheeled learning laboratory. Impatience. A desire to control life (and frustration when we can't). Anger. Disconnection from others. And that's just for starters.

Sounds a bit like a living hell, doesn't it? And that's exactly why it can be one of your biggest gifts.

Have you ever read some kind of self-help advice on staying calm in the midst of the storm and nodded to yourself sagely, saying, "Yeah, next time the shit hits the fan, that's *exactly* what I'm going to do"? And then the next time you find yourself in the midst of the splatter, your mind starts shrieking like a banshee and you go completely sideways? Yeah, me too.

Reading about how to navigate the challenges of life more skillfully isn't enough. We have to actually put the ideas to work while we're in the thick of it.

And that is precisely why your commute has the potential to be so beneficial if you approach it consciously. Over and over, you will be presented with opportunities to practice a different way of working with the things that block your peace. As you work with them, you will become increasingly adept at engaging them in a more productive way.

In the pages of this book, you will find ideas and exercises you can apply to turn your commute into the path to inner peace. Here in Part One, I look at some of the ideas underlying making your commute your practice. If you are itching to get right to the practices, you can skip directly to Part Two and dive in.

WHY USE YOUR COMMUTE AS A PRACTICE?

I'm firmly convinced that the "wasted" time we spend in our shiny metal boxes is one of the most concentrated, focused, and ubiquitous opportunities for growth we have. You might say we are blessed by our curse.

Here are just a few reasons you might want to use your commute as a practice for personal growth.

You can train your inner peace

Driving in traffic can be like going to the gym for equanimity. There is enormous value in working with life's small irritations. It's a chance to practice the mental and emotional muscles for dealing with the setbacks and irritations that life delivers, and to do it on a regular basis. Continually training that ability makes you ever-better equipped to stay grounded and avoid pouring fuel onto life's troubles. Becoming adept at dealing with the small bumps prepares you to better handle the big challenges.

Life is never going to cooperate 100% with how you want it to be. The more gracefully you learn to navigate that fact, the less unnecessary pain you inflict on yourself, and the greater your sense of peace.

You can develop life-enhancing habits

The great thing about your commute is that it happens day after day. That might not feel so great when you would rather spend your time doing something else, but from the perspective of developing life-enhancing habits, it's golden!

Your commute is the perfect place to develop those habits. Spending time in traffic gives you an opportunity to:

1. Recognize when your habitual response has a constricting effect.
2. Explore more expansive ways to engage.
3. Practice actually doing it over and over.

The repetitive nature of that time in traffic gives room for the ebb and flow of positive change to take its course. With two steps forward and one step back, day after day, you have an opportunity to keep coming back to what fosters that sense of wholeness and peace.

As you do that, it evolves into an increasingly natural and habitual way of engaging and responding that shifts towards what feels open and expansive (and away from what feels closed and constricted).

The groove you wear in your mind as you recognize limiting patterns, let go of them, and develop new ones makes it easier for the same thing to happen in other parts of your life.

You can change the world

The first step to creating a more peaceful, loving world – and the only step over which you have any real control – is opening to more peace and love within yourself.

The way you show up in the world impacts everything around you. Focusing on a practice that cultivates more openness, love, and connection gives you a greater potential to set those qualities in motion in the world you come in contact with.

Taking it a step further, living with a greater sense of peace and equanimity gives you a more solid foundation to stand on in any work you undertake to make the world a better place. That has the dual effect of making your efforts both more effective with less wasted energy and more sustainable over the long term.

So the choice is yours. Treat your commute (or any time you spend in traffic) as a necessary but irritating evil, or use it as a way to learn, grow, and open. You're already investing your time – why not get a return on that investment?

NEW HABITS & BRAIN SCULPTING

Habit is the mortar that holds the bricks of positive change together. Without it, the potential for that change to stick is drastically reduced.

Let's say you want to make a simple change, like deciding to take a mental step back and focus on your breath for ten breaths whenever you notice yourself having a habitually reactive response to someone who irritates you.

You can declare that you are going to start doing that from here on out, but without continued conscious cultivation of the new habit, odds are good that at some point you'll lapse back into that familiar habitual reactivity.

New habits don't happen with the flip of a switch. They require persistent repetition over time. The repetitive nature of the commute makes it an ideal training ground for developing new habits and rewiring your brain.

Yes, you read that right. Rewiring your brain. The practices in this book aren't just about developing new habits. They are quite literally about changing your brain!

That's not as dramatic as it might seem, mind you. Your brain is always changing. New neural connections – connections between brain cells, or neurons – are constantly being made. Did you meet someone yesterday and now you remember their name? Your brain was just ever so slightly rewired. New connections were forged in the structure of your brain that weren't there before.

These changes happen all the time. It's called neuroplasticity. You learn a new word. You find a new way to work and remember it the next day. You see a face and recognize it later.

Much of the time those changes just happen. But you can also take an intentional approach to making changes in your brain. This is often called “self-directed neuroplasticity.” I call it “brain-sculpting.”

It is this neuroplasticity that gives the repetitive, ongoing nature of your commute so much potential to transform your life.

Intentionally developing a habit is brain-sculpting in action. Your brain is an efficiency seeking machine. When it sees that the same thing happens again and again, it begins to restructure itself to facilitate the continued repetition of whatever that action or behavior is.

You have probably heard the phrase, “neurons that fire together wire together.” Without going into the technical details of it, repeated actions create connections between neurons, building new neural pathways.

Think of it as a progression from an overgrown thicket to a well worn path and ultimately to an easily traveled highway.

When you develop a new habit, what you’re really doing is traveling that path over and over until, because of the brain’s natural tendency to take the easiest, least energy intensive route, it becomes the easiest path of choice.

USING THIS BOOK

This book is intended to be an action-based resource. Just reading it is more beneficial than never taking a look at it, but not by much.

My intention in writing it was for you to be able to use it in whatever way works for you. That might mean reading it beginning to end, experimenting with ideas along the way. It could mean reading the whole thing and then going back to start exploring the exercises. Or it might mean just jumping in, grabbing the first practice that catches your eye, and seeing where it takes you.

Take an experimental, experiential approach to the ideas here. Don't just believe anything you read here just because I happen to think it's a good idea. Test the practices for yourself and see. Odds are some of them will resonate more than others. Take what works and build on it. Let go of what doesn't.

Over time you will create a toolkit of effective practices, tailor made for what works best for you.

However you choose to engage it, the book is structured in the following sections:

Foundation

This section explores the basic premise of the book, the benefits of using your time in the car as a practice, and the fundamentals of making positive change and how your commute offers the ideal opportunity for that.

Create a structure that works for you

Using your commute as a practice isn't a one-size-fits-all affair. You can tailor an approach that suits you best.

This section offers ideas that you can take and run with as they are, revise to make them resonate more with what feels best for you, or use as an idea springboard for an approach of your own creation.

Practices

This section is where the action happens. It explores dozens of specific practices, arranged in thirteen primary practice areas, aimed at using your commute to improve your life.

While you can use the practices here in a step-by-step way, it's not necessary. It is presented more as a structured collection of individual practices you can explore. (See the section on creating a structure that works for you for more ideas on how to engage it.)

Enhancing the learning

This section offers ideas for how to squeeze more insights out of your practice beyond your time in the car.

Tips for making the most of your practice

Here we'll look at ways to engage the practices most effectively, as well as ways to get out of your own way. I encourage you to spend some time familiarizing yourself with the ideas here, as they can make all the difference between successfully developing a car-based practice and dabbling, getting frustrated, and chucking the whole thing out the window.

Appendix: Exercise compilation

Here you'll find a distillation of the exercises described throughout the book for easy reference.

OVERTHROW THE TYRANNY OF THE IDEAL

One of the things I feel most strongly about as you start exploring the use of your commute as a practice is that you don't have to be perfect.

Let me say that again.

YOU!

DON'T!

HAVE!

TO!

BE!

PERFECT!

You don't even have to be anywhere in the *neighborhood* of perfection. All that counts is that you're moving in the right direction for a greater percentage of time than you're moving in the wrong direction. And your commute offers a repeated chance to consciously choose your direction.

As you can perhaps imagine, writing this book has made me acutely aware of my experience in the car. Sometimes I find myself feeling, "Wow, this focus on using my car-time as a practice is really working. I feel so much less reactive, so much more peaceful."

And then sometimes I completely lose it in an f-bomb laden, finger flying constriction of my world into a distillation of everything that *doesn't* work. I find myself feeling like the world's biggest hypocrite, a

blatant imposter for even *trying* to help people on their own journey towards peace.

But here's the thing. Over time, I have noticed that happening less and less. And even when it does happen, I find myself being able to step back and say, "Wow, do I really want to create that horror movie for myself? Is that the experience I really want to have?"

The horror flick still comes up, but it's usually more like a trailer than a feature length film. Because I spend so much time focused on noticing both what expands my sense of peace and what constricts it, I have become less and less inclined to keep feeding the horror show when it comes up.

I lay absolutely zero claim to perfection as I write this book. But between my own personal journey and seeing the results of the work I have done with my clients to help them let go of the hamster running amok on that hamster wheel in their head – not just in traffic, but in their lives overall – I know that it's invaluable work to do.

Sometimes I find myself getting tired of constantly using life as an opportunity to grow. And then I remember that my alternative is to simply blindly experience it, while having my puppet strings yanked in an endless show of constriction and friction, frustration and conflict.

On my own path, my commitment is to keep moving – sometimes gracefully and sometimes stumblingly – toward greater openness, love, and connection, with both myself and the world around me. By writing this book, I am sharing some of what I have found to be effective in the hope that it will help you move, with perfect imperfection, towards a greater sense of peace as well.

Part Two:

THE PRACTICES

As you read Part One, you might have found yourself nodding your head in agreement and thinking, “Yeah, that’s a good idea.” But none of what I described there will do a lick of good in your life if you don’t put it into action.

And action is what Part Two is all about. The practices I describe in the pages below are where the rubber hits the road in using your commute as a practice for personal growth (you didn’t really think I was going to go the entire book without using that pun, did you?).

Before I plunge into specific practice ideas, I want to look at three broad ideas that run through everything you’ll do as you develop your own commute practice – first, the importance of awareness, second, the four main themes you will encounter throughout your exploration, and third, the constant presence of yet another opportunity to make a different choice.

Awareness

All positive change starts with awareness. Without awareness, the best you can hope for is accidental change for the better. With no awareness, you’re a puppet on a string, controlled by automatic thoughts, feelings, and actions that are beyond your field of view.

With awareness, you can cut those puppet strings and take greater control. Cultivating awareness is like taking off your mental blindfold, showing you what’s working and what’s not so you can take more conscious action toward positive change.

The practices throughout this book aim to help you develop a greater awareness, empowering you to take a more purposeful and intentional approach to crafting an ever greater sense of peace.

Four main themes

In the pages that follow you will find a broad array of practice areas, allowing you to approach your practice from multiple angles.

While it's useful to have many options to choose from, it can also be helpful to keep a simpler perspective in mind. So let's start there. Every practice area described in the pages that follow contains one or more of these four primary themes.

1. **Experiencing the present:** This is basic mindfulness. How can you stay more fully, non-judgmentally present in the here-and-now of your own experience?
2. **Cultivating the flow:** What helps you feel a greater sense of spacious aliveness?
3. **Reducing the blocks:** What blocks and constricts that sense of spacious aliveness?
4. **Acting and interacting:** What active choices can you make to feel a greater sense of spacious aliveness? How can you more consciously interact with others?

None of these happens in its own silo. To varying degrees at any point in time they are all interconnected. But it can be helpful to separate them out as a way to be more aware of the different pieces of the puzzle and how they play out.

At any given time you can pull out one or more of these themes and use it as a lens to look at what you're experiencing.

Another moment, another choice

None of these practices is a magic wand. There will be times you feel like they're working, and times you will feel like a complete flop. But remember this. Whatever is going on, even if you find yourself a hot mess of road rage, the next moment always, always, *always* carries with it a choice that has the potential to move you in the direction of peace.

That's so important, I want to repeat it.

*The next moment always, always, **always** carries with it a choice that has the potential to move you in the direction of peace.*

Each and every moment presents an opportunity to make a choice. Will you lean towards peace, or lean towards conflict? Will you create more resonance, or more dissonance? Even if your drive home has been filled with all the knee-jerk reactions that have ever created conflict and tension in your life, the very next moment brings with it the chance to say, "Hey, this isn't working. This isn't who I want to be. How else could I approach this?"

Making the choice to lean towards peace might not always *feel* like an option. Sometimes you'll be too far down the rabbit hole to be able to back your butt out. But over time the cumulative effect of even considering that choice can be a softening of the seeming solidness of that negative state, eventually making it easier to break free when it does come up. Those negative states start to feel less sticky.

And the best part of focusing on your moment-by-moment choices is that even if you have a complete mouth-frothing, tail-gating, finger-flying, f-bomb laden meltdown, there is a new choice inherent in the very next moment.

Maybe that choice looks like taking a deep breath and letting go. Or maybe it looks like recognizing that you're too spooled up to let go and simply being present with that, using the opportunity to treat yourself with compassion.

The choice is always there. And the more you practice it, the more available it will be.

The Practices

The practices in the rest of this book are grouped in the following broad areas.

1 – Ask the simplest question: Returning over and over to the question, “Is this helping me feel more open and connected, or is it making me feel more closed and disconnected?”

2 – Mindfulness / staying present: Cultivating a focused, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment.

3 – Story management: Recognizing and shifting the limiting stories we tell about ourselves, our experiences, and the world around us.

4 – Negative emotions: Using any negative emotions that come up to develop a greater ability to engage them more skillfully.

5 – Self-talk: Recognizing and shifting negative and limiting self-talk.

6 – Mind sculpting: Sculpting your mind and your view of the world by focusing on what's positive, enriching, healing, and chock full o' love.

7 – Heart: Using your commute to practice stepping more fully into the heart flow.

8 – Letting go: Practicing the fine art of letting go.

9 – Acceptance: Learning to accept life as it is in the present moment without resistance.

10 – Ego / Small-self identity: Noticing how your ego/small-self creates unnecessary suffering and getting to know how it impacts and controls your life.

11 – A broader perspective: Expanding your view beyond the narrow confines of your small-self and experiencing a more all-encompassing perspective.

12 – Connection: Stepping out of isolation and exploring the experience of connection.

13 – Doing no harm: Staying conscious of keeping clear of the ways our actions can cause harm.

You will also find a list of each of the exercises in the Practices section as an appendix to this book (a useful reference when using this book as an ongoing grab bag of ideas to engage).

My no-brainer disclaimer

One last thing before we dive in. I know it's a no-brainer, but please don't read this while driving! Obvious, right? But all it takes is one person getting in a nasty accident because they're distracted, scrolling down on their iPad to find one of the ideas they read earlier and – poof! – there goes all the good karma I'm getting from writing this.

So don't be a karmic kill-joy! Stay safe.

CREATE A STRUCTURE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

There is a lot of material in this book, and trying to put all of it into play is a surefire recipe for putting *none* of it into play. With that in mind, I want to offer some ideas for several ways you might approach it.

There is no one right way to go through this book and incorporate the ideas into making your commute your practice. Each person's practice will be tailor made for them. With that in mind, here are four possible ways to start exploring.

- Pick one thing and dive in
- Do a weekly experiment
- Explore different themes
- Make and follow a six-week plan

Structure idea one: Pick one thing and dive in

The easiest way to start is to pick one of the ideas and dive in. Take it and play with it for a week. See what happens. If you like it, keep doing it. Add other ideas as it starts to become a more ingrained part of your commute.

There is no right place to start. Just check in with yourself to see what calls to you most, and begin there.

Structure idea two: Do a weekly experiment

Each week, pick something new to experiment with. You might keep a journal to note which ideas resonated and which ones fell flat. Think of it as research and development to discover a way to use your commute as a practice that works best for you. There is no wrong or right way to do it – only the way that works best for you.

Structure idea three: Explore different themes

Another approach might be to choose a theme to focus on for a period of time and dedicate your drive to practicing and exploring it. It could be different theme each day, or it could entail focusing on a theme for a longer period of time like a week or a month.

Some possible themes include:

- Mindfulness
- Compassion
- Letting go
- Patience
- Gratitude
- Positive focus
- Noticing the constriction
- Noticing what's good

This list is just to start you off. There might be any number of themes you could explore. Try making a list of ideas to draw from. Start with an initial brainstorm, and then keep adding new ones as they occur to you over time.

Structure idea four: Make a six-week plan

One way to dive into this is with a six-week plan, with each week focused on a different area. You'll find one possible six-week plan starting on page 95. You can follow it as is, revise it to reflect what works best for you, or start from scratch and create your own.

PRACTICE AREA ONE: ASK THE SIMPLEST QUESTION

At the heart of it all, each of the ideas described below for using your commute as a personal growth practice is a variation on the simplest version of the question:

“Is this helping me feel more open and connected, or is it making me feel more constricted and disconnected?”

That one simple binary question – is it this, or is it that? – can open the door to a path to greater peace. And if you really immerse yourself, making it a deep and ongoing practice, you probably don’t even need the rest of this book. You can just keep asking that question and, when you notice a constrictive effect, say, “OK, what would open me up? What would help me come from love? What would help me feel more connected?”

Of course, the natural thing for most of us is to start to lose interest in something so simple. Like a sticky note on the wall to remind us to do something, it soon fades out of our awareness. And since the question is only powerful if you remember to *ask* it, the rest of this book explores a variety of ways to engage in the spirit of that question.

PRACTICE AREA TWO: MINDFULNESS / STAYING PRESENT

How much time do you actually spend in the here-and-now? How often is your mind focused on the pure experience of what's happening in the present moment, rather than running wild somewhere in the past or the future? How much of your life do you experience directly as it is, rather than with an ongoing overlay of stories about what you're experiencing ("I like this. I don't like that. This is how it should be. Why isn't it like that? Those people are wrong! What a stupid thing to say.")

If you're like most people, your answer is probably, "not a lot."

Your commute presents a golden opportunity to develop mindfulness – a focused, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, unfettered by the distracted noise and chatter that typically fills our minds.

It's impossible to fully experience life when our minds are elsewhere. Most of us spend our time in a state of distracted disconnection. We're disconnected from the world around us and, strange as it may sound, we're disconnected from ourselves.

I recently saw a picture of a guy on a sailboat looking at his cell phone as the hump of a whale breached the water right next to the boat. The person who took the picture said he never even looked up. Absorbed in the virtual world of his phone, he missed the whale completely. That's a perfect visual metaphor for what happens when our minds are caught up living life everywhere but the present moment.

Your commute is an excellent opportunity to dive into a practice of staying present. You can approach that practice from several different directions:

- **Paying attention:** Being aware, noticing what you are thinking, feeling (both physically and emotionally), seeing, hearing, etc.
- **Returning to the present:** Noticing when your attention and awareness has drifted off to anything other than the here-and-now and bringing it back (this will happen a lot!).
- **Practicing “being”:** Letting yourself sit in the open space of the present moment without needing to be entertained or distracted.

Paying attention

Paying attention is the heart of mindfulness. It’s an active attention, engaging your senses and awareness. Below are some ways to engage in the practice of attention. (I should caution that the goal of this is not the kind of attention that distracts you from the most important aspect of what you’re doing, which is driving safely. It’s a broader and more attentive focus that includes these experiences.)

Mindful driving:

Make a game out of noticing what there is to be aware of in your drive. Some examples of that might include:

- The feel of your steering wheel in your hands, both as you hold it straight and as you turn.
- The pull on your body when you turn your car.
- The sensation of speeding up and slowing down.
- The movement of your muscles as you steer, use the brake, push down on the clutch, or shift gears.
- The sound of your turn signal.
- The sound of the road as both your speed and the road surface changes.
- The interaction of your car with other cars as you merge and change lanes (the space that opens up – or not, the motion of the other cars, etc.).

Any aspect of the driving experience can be an object of attention in mindful driving. You can set the intention before you start your drive to notice a specific aspect of that experience (like the movement of your muscles), or you might challenge yourself to see how much you can notice, including new things you might not have noticed before.

One way to dive deeper into the exploration of what there is to notice is to look at it sense by sense.

- What am I seeing?
- What am I hearing?
- What am I feeling?
- What am I smelling
- What am I tasting? (This one may or may not be relevant at any given moment.)

Notice challenging feelings

For many of us, challenging emotions like impatience, anger, and judgment of other drivers come up far more often than we would like. And when they do, there is a tendency for them to take over our entire experience.

Instead of letting them take control, use them as an opportunity to practice mindfulness. Let's use impatience as an example. First, name what you notice. "Oh hey, check it out. That familiar ol' impatience is up."

Once you name the feeling, stop and check in with your body. What physical sensations are accompanying that feeling? Where? Do you feel a tightening in your belly? A tension in your shoulders? Are you gripping the wheel extra-hard? Are you furrowing your brow?

Most of us have a tendency to experience those challenging feelings as one big unpleasant block, but if you start deconstructing them and

noticing the components, they often start to feel less solid and oppressive.

Returning to the present

Most people spend a lot of time focused anywhere and everywhere but the here-and-now of our present experience. Our minds tend to be wanderers, drifting off to ruminations about the past, worries about the future, and ideas about what might be happening elsewhere. In this exercise, you'll practice extricating yourself from the past and future and returning to the here-and-now.

For one day, try making your commute about noticing when your mind wanders off and bringing it back to the present moment. Odds are that you will have the opportunity to do it repeatedly.

When you notice your mind occupied elsewhere, come back to your actual experience. Check in with your bodily sensations. How does the seat feel on your butt? What is the sensation of your breath moving in and out of your lungs? What are the colors you notice as you scan the traffic outside your car?

The more you practice returning to the present moment, the easier and more natural it becomes.

One nifty way to practice recognizing when you have left the present is to focus on your breathing for a count of five. (This isn't a meditation practice, so remember to keep your main focus on safe driving.) Simply pay attention to your breath going in and out. If you find yourself counting past five, it's a good bet your mind is starting to drift and you're counting on autopilot. Use that as a signal to come back to the present.

As you experience being more fully in the present while you drive, compare how that feels with, for example, the future focus we so

often get consumed by (“I want to be there already. Traffic is so slow! It’s going to take me forever. I’m going to be late!”).

Explore the impact of those two options. How does it feel when you are fully present in the moment? How does it feel when you are consumed by that future focus? What is the difference between the two?

Practice “being”

In our fast-paced, high-stimulation culture, most of us have a challenging time just “being.” We want to be doing something. We want to be entertained and distracted. We want to fill the empty space with something – anything – to keep us from being bored.

Our collective addiction to stimulation and aversion to just being makes it difficult, if not impossible, to touch something deeper within ourselves. There is always a noise and a chatter filling the space, drowning out that still small voice within.

Your commute is a fantastic opportunity to practice just being. For a specific period of time, let yourself sit in silence. Don’t look to be entertained or distracted. Don’t reach for the radio. Don’t even listen to an uplifting audiobook. Resist the urge to escape when you start to feel boredom creep in.

If you find this difficult, start with a short period of time, maybe five or ten minutes. As it becomes more natural, try extending that time.

One of the best pieces of meditation advice I have ever read is to not let yourself get up from your meditation until you have felt the urge to stop three times. Each urge to stop will eventually subside. When I started applying this three-urge rule, I found my meditations started to go much deeper, and it gradually became much easier to sit for longer periods of time.

You can apply that same idea as you practice being. When you feel the discomfort of boredom or desire to distract yourself, just notice it. Watch how it feels, but don't do anything about it. Make it an object of your mindfulness. Let it subside. Repeat that cycle another two times. (Then notice the internal sigh of relief as you reach for the radio and crank it!)

Contrary to our initial experience with it, cultivating the ability to just be opens us to the aliveness of the present moment. When we can simply be, without distractions or escape, we are more open to everything we're experiencing.

Your commute is the perfect place to learn to be alone with yourself. No running away, no avoidance. Simply an embrace and experience of your internal space.

Begin and end with a conscious breath

Before you start your car and when you turn it off, take a conscious breath. Relax into it. Try combining it with a positive word or phrase that you particularly resonate with.

PRACTICE AREA THREE: STORY MANAGEMENT

There's a quote from Stephen Covey that goes, "We see the world, not as it is, but as we are – or as we are conditioned to see it."

The human brain evolved to tell stories about what we see and experience. It's how we make sense of the world. And while that's a handy ability, it can also get in the way.

Have you ever had someone say something or do something you didn't like and all of a sudden your response is based not just on what they said or did this one time, but on all the times it has happened in the past? Your mind goes galloping down the path of, "They always _____," or, "They never _____!"

"My friend is late" becomes, "They're always late" or even, "They're always late. They don't respect my time. They don't respect *me*! This is an insult and a complete show of just how little they respect me!"

Our stories get in the way when they add a layer of interpretation over the facts that results in an unnecessarily negative reaction, feeling, or experience. Something happens that doesn't synch with how we want things to be, and rather than just noting how things actually are, we slather on an unpleasant story about what that means.

If you're stuck in a traffic jam and feeling impatient and irritated, the traffic jam isn't the problem. Your interpretation of what the traffic jam means is the problem. You could have the exact same experience, interpret it in a completely different way (for example, if you decided to treat the stop-and-go traffic as a valuable opportunity to work with your tendency to be impatient), and the pain you have been adding to the situation would magically disappear.

And we do this all the time. We create so much unnecessary suffering, all because of stories that exist *only in our minds!*

Developing a greater awareness of the limiting, constricting stories you tell yourself gives you a greater potential to question them and let them go. And guess what? Most people's time behind the wheel is chock full of limiting, constricting stories, just waiting to be noticed and worked with.

Notice negative stories

The first step in working with your limiting stories is noticing what they are to begin with. You can start this any time. You don't even need to be in the car.

Simply ask yourself, "What are my stories? Where do I have negative reactions during my drives because I think things should or shouldn't be the way they are?"

If your stories are creating your reality, what reality are they creating?

Once you put your finger on the most obvious ones, you can keep watching as you drive to see what other stories come up. You might want to jot down a list of any stories you notice when you reach your destination, just to help you remember them.

Everyone has their own set of stories. Here are some common ones.

- Traffic shouldn't be so slow / I should be able to get there faster.
- A perceived need for speed / a false sense of urgency.
- That person should/shouldn't do that.

You might also recognize underlying themes that set a negative stage for your experience. For example, you might realize you're

approaching the commute as drudgery, a battle, a problem, etc. When that is your basic context, you're more likely to see what you experience through that lens.

Recognize when you disappear into the story

Ultimately the goal is to tell a more life-enhancing story, but just knowing what the stories are isn't enough. You have to recognize when you're getting caught up in them. Often these are knee-jerk reactions that happen quickly and naturally, so catching them on the fly can be easier said than done.

One way to train your brain to notice them is to look back after the fact and ask, "Where did these stories come up? How did I react?" It's like sending your brain to the gym to practice recognizing the stories so you're more able to catch them on the fly in the future.

Question your stories

Recognizing the degree to which your experience is determined by the stories you tell creates an opportunity. You don't have to take your stories hook, line, and sinker. You can take a step back and look at them objectively.

Any time you notice limiting stories painting the picture of your life, question them. Ask, "Is that really true, or is that a strong opinion? Is there another way to see it?"

As you do that, you just might start to see that what feels like a solid truth is often only a temporary truth, one that can be changed merely by choosing to tell a different story.

Find alternative stories

When you look at your story and ask if it's really true, you might find yourself saying, "What kind of stupid question is that?? Of *course* it's true!" If that happens, question *that* story. Pretend you *have* to come up with another way of looking at it. Better yet, pretend you have to come up with *five* other ways of looking at it.

Your story might be, "This slow traffic is killing me. I hate wasting my time like this." Some alternative stories might be:

- This is a great opportunity to practice feeling more grounded in any situation.
- I love that this gives me time to get my mind ready for work / decompress after work.
- This slow traffic gives me more time to listen to this audiobook novel I'm enjoying so much.
- The more time I spend in the car, the more I learn from this personal development audiobook I'm listening to.
- This commute is a reminder of how blessed I am to have a job that is meeting my basic needs. So many people in the world don't have that.

Those are the first five stories that came to mind as I was writing this. There are many more to be had. You might even make a game of coming up with a new story (and playing with making that your "truth" of the moment) any time you find traffic slowdowns grating on you. The same holds true for any limiting story you discover yourself telling.

If you find your brain rebelling against the positive spin stories, one story you could tell is, "It doesn't really matter whether I like this or not. It's what is. I might as well find a way to experience it in the most positive and productive way I can. I only make it worse by fuming about it."

Practice shifting your stories

When you shift your story from one that causes a constricted, contracted reaction (like irritation, resistance, or anger) to one that allows you to feel more positive and open (even if it's just to a more neutral story), you have in a very literal sense changed your life.

Learning to recognize and shift those negative, constricting stories is one of the most powerful skills you can learn.

Shifting your limiting stories on the fly can be difficult, especially at first. Don't expect that you'll be adept at this right away. It takes practice.

A great way to give your mind practice in doing this is to practice after the fact (the same approach I suggested for learning to recognize the stories as they come up).

For example, if you realize in hindsight that the person who wouldn't let you merge set off a domino effect of negative assessments about that person, and even "those stupid drivers" in general, you might step back and say, "OK, here's how I reacted. Here are the thoughts and reactions that set in motion. What might some alternatives have been? What other stories could I have told? What would have felt better?"

If you discover that anything that comes up is a recurring story, you can identify an alternative story so it's ready to tell next time that situation comes up. Better yet, come up with multiple stories so you have a grab bag to reach into and pick the one that works best just then.

There is a three-way merge near where I live. I typically come from the third street, which merges into a second, which then merges into the main arterial. It often happens that the driver coming down the second

street won't let me merge in, but then expects that whoever is driving on the main arterial will let *them* merge.

That one little spot has offered me no end of opportunities to practice what I'm talking about here. More often than I would like to admit, I have gotten indignant, irritated, or angry. The bird has been flown on more than one occasion. Something about it just pushes my buttons (largely, I think, because they expect to be able to merge while not letting me do the same, so it grates on my sense of justice). It's not a rational response, and the negative energy of it is way out of proportion to what is actually happening.

I have a constricting story that says they should let me merge and takes it as both a personal affront and a slap in the face of justice when they don't. The alternative story I want to tell is, "Huh. OK. I'll merge after them. No big deal."

Because it's a spot I drive through frequently, I get a lot of practice recognizing when my negative story is in danger of rearing its head. I have developed a visceral sense of what it's like to step back from it, shrug my shoulders, and merge into the next space.

The sense of peace, in comparison with the constriction my irritation and anger cause, is palpable. When I have one of my less-enlightened responses, I often step back afterwards and ask, "How would I like to have reacted," running through a more preferable response in my mind.

Here are some examples of ways you might shift your stories.

Shift your mindset

Instead of resenting the waste of your valuable and limited time, try focusing on the value of using the commute time for growth and development. Another way to shift your mindset might be to start

looking at your commute as a way to prepare for the day – a little like washing your face – and wind your day down. Instead of a waste of time, you could explore what it would be like to look at it as an opportunity for sacred time with yourself. For many people, it's the only time alone they experience in a hectic, overbooked schedule. Why not consciously turn that into something valuable?

Your mindset has an impact on everything you experience. It's like changing the color of the lighting in a room. Some colors lend themselves to feeling tension and stress, while other colors have a soothing effect.

Take a moment to ponder your mindset as you look at your commute. How does it set the stage for what you experience?

Say, "It's OK."

Sometimes shifting your story is as simple as stopping and saying, "It's OK." It's OK that traffic is like this. It's OK that that guy cut me off. It's OK that I'm going to be late.

Even if you don't actually believe it, play with it as a thought experiment of sorts. "If this really were OK, how would that feel?" See if you notice any difference when you come from a space of "It's OK," whether that is in your thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations.

See everybody/everything as your teacher

Every jerk, poor driver, or traffic jam has the potential to be your teacher. You can either shake your fist at the existence of what you don't want, or you can develop the attitude that each of those people or situations has something to teach you, or is an opportunity to practice refining a more open and connected way of being.

Externally, nothing changes, but your internal experience of those things will.

Any time you find yourself demonizing a person, their action, or the situation, you can turn it into a learning opportunity by asking questions, like:

- What can I learn here?
- What is this giving me the opportunity to practice?
- Who is this giving me the opportunity to be?
- How is this an opportunity to respond in a more open and expansive way?
- What knee-jerk response is this giving me the opportunity to recognize and change?

Change the “facts” of the story you’re making up

Since so much of what we experience out on the road is really in reaction to a story we’re making up in our heads – often about circumstances where we don’t know the actual facts – changing your interpretation of events to a more positive one can change your experience.

For example, a few years ago I was on the freeway coming in to Seattle when a car went zooming past me at a recklessly high speed. My initial reaction was, “What a jerk!” I could feel the physical response to that course through my whole body. But then I thought, “I don’t really know what’s going on. That negative perception is really just a story I’m making up. What if I made up a different story?”

I decided to tell the story that his wife was pregnant and he was rushing to the hospital. It was completely made up too, but playing with seeing it as true changed the way I felt entirely. Whatever story I chose would have no impact whatsoever on him, but choosing a

different spin shifted me out of a constricted response into one that felt more open.

Another example might be shifting from seeing someone as a complete jerk to seeing them as a good person who wasn't paying attention, or who had a traumatic event that day that resulted in their making worse decisions than they ordinarily would. Are the new interpretations true? Who knows? But if they leave *you* feeling better, why not pretend they are?

Dropping the story and returning to the facts

This is similar to shifting your story, except instead of coming up with a new story, you just look at the facts without any story overlay at all.

Remember the scenario I described in the introduction, where I experimented with taking a high view in my mind's eye, looking down on the cars? I looked at it objectively and asked, "What are the facts here?" The facts were simply that there were a lot of people in cars, one of whom was me, sitting in traffic that was moving slower than usual, and that I would arrive where I was going later than intended.

That was it. Those were the facts. Anything else was just a misery-making overlay of story. And as I focused on the facts instead of the story, my stress started to subside.

Practice looking at your experience through a no-story lens. What would it be if it weren't all about you? What would it be if you were able to see it objectively, without the weight of wanting it to be different?

Practice learning from your stories

Finally, your stories are an opportunity to gain insight into your shadow side. We all have that shadow, what the Swiss psychologist

Carl Jung called the parts of us that we find undesirable and reject or ignore. We often project those shadows onto others. Noticing what really bothers us in others is a way to discover what those shadows are.

For example, back to my story about the three-way merge and what irritates me so much when someone doesn't let me merge but then expects someone else to let them merge. If I'm honest, part of the shadow reflected there probably has a lot to do with a selfishness and self-centeredness in myself I would rather not acknowledge.

What you reject doesn't disappear. It goes underground and still has an impact on you, often in undesirable ways.

When you start to see your shadows, you have an opportunity to bring them into the light, acknowledging and integrating them into a more whole you.

PRACTICE AREA FOUR: NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

When you feel anger surge, what effect does that have on your experience of the world? Do you feel more open, or does your world constrict and close down?

Silly question, right? Of course it has a constricting effect. The same holds true of any emotions we perceive to be negative. So it stands to reason that if we want to cultivate a life where we spend more time in a state of aliveness and inner peace, we have to work with the negative emotions that blast us in the opposite direction.

I mentioned working with negative feelings in the mindfulness section, but it's such a big part of the opportunity your commute presents, and such a significant piece of what stands between us and experiencing that aliveness and inner peace, that I want to take an expanded look here.

Most people's time in the car is chock full of opportunities to learn to engage more skillfully with negative emotions. Impatience, irritation, anger, fear – they all rear their heads in different guises more frequently than we would like. And believe it or not, when it comes to using your commute as a growth practice, that's good news!

It's not enough to read about how to manage difficult emotions when things are bright and sunny. To make real change, you have to actually engage those emotions as they happen.

Let's take impatience as an example. The more it comes up, the more often you have the potential to notice it, explore it, and move towards a more expansive alternative. If it comes up in traffic, it probably comes up in the rest of your life as well. So the work you do during your commute is laying the groundwork for you to show up in a different way in your life overall.

Watching those emotions as occur offers a great opportunity to get to know why and how they come up, as well as to explore ways to both head them off before they come up and minimize their impact when they do.

Here are just a handful of negative emotions that can come up behind the wheel:

- Impatience
- Irritation
- Anger
- Fear
- Crankiness
- Frustration
- Vindictiveness

Think about your own tendencies. Do any of these come up in your drive? What other negative emotions do you experience?

There are many ways to work with the negative emotions that come up while you're driving. We'll explore some of them here.

Use it as a training ground for letting go

Earlier we talked about the power of letting go of your limiting stories. A related practice is using your commute to improve your ability to let go of negative emotions.

When you find yourself having a negative reaction, use it as an opportunity to practice letting go. Try approaching it with a sense of curiosity. "What would I happen if I just let this feeling go? What if I didn't take this feeling so seriously?"

The trouble with negative emotions is that they often feel so sticky. We get caught in them, and it seems nigh on impossible to let them go. We feel them, and that kicks up both negative thoughts about those feelings and sensations in the body, which in turn feed the challenging emotions. It can be a self-feeding loop that is difficult to escape.

As you return over and over to letting go, practicing and building the mental “muscle memory,” the negative emotions often start to loosen their grip.

In fact, that’s one of the biggest differences I have noticed coming out of my own driving practice. While I still get wound up more often than I would like (though nowhere near as often as before I started putting my time at the wheel to use), I find that the negative feelings subside much more quickly. When they do come up, I have less of an inclination to hold on and keep feeding them.

Feel the flow and let it go

Let’s say someone cuts you off and you feel a surge of anger. It’s all too easy to feel consumed by that anger as a solid experience, rather than recognizing that the anger experience is just a collection of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that arise and eventually subside.

When you notice a negative emotion coming up, try stepping back and watching the flow. Notice the architecture of the feeling, how it builds, crescendos, and ultimately ebbs away.

Stepping back and watching the shape of the emotion beginning to end is a page straight out of the mindfulness playbook. It lets you watch what is happening without identifying with the emotions so much. The less you identify with them, the less sticky they are, and the easier it is to let them go.

Excavate the unpleasant emotion

When you notice a challenging emotion, rather than getting sucked into it, follow it and explore what's behind it. For example, the anger we feel when someone cuts us off might actually be fueled by fear.

When you feel an unpleasant emotion surge, it's a prime opportunity to take a step back and say, "Hey, check that reaction out. Interesting! What's that all about? Where is that coming from? What's behind that emotion?"

It's easy to get caught up in the raw flood of emotion. The more practice you have stepping out of that emotion and deconstructing it, the less you are at the whim of its strong current, and the more clarity you have to work with what's really happening.

Taking the anger/fear scenario, for example, when you realize that your angry response is really an expression of the fear kicked up by what felt like a life-threatening action by another, it gives you another point of engagement. Instead of being swept away by anger directed at another person, you can soothe your fear, maybe reminding yourself that you're OK and no longer in any danger, or having a compassionate conversation with yourself about how scary that was.

Breathe deeply

When negative emotions come up, a simple practice is to shift your focus to deep breathing. Start consciously taking slow, deep breaths, breathing in deeply and exhaling fully.

This has multiple benefits. First, at a basic physiological level, when challenging emotions come up, our breathing tends to get shallow. When our breathing gets shallow, not only do our bodies not get

enough oxygen coming in to function optimally, they also don't have enough breath exiting the lungs to carry away waste (and since 70% of the body's waste is eliminated through breathing, that has no small impact).

On top of that, the brain is a huge consumer of oxygen, requiring 20% of our oxygen intake. When your breathing is shallow, your brain doesn't get enough oxygen, and an oxygen-deprived brain is a stressed brain. It's easy to see how that negative loop can feed on itself without some conscious intervention.

Second, deep breathing has a calming effect on the mind. When challenging feelings like anger come up, it triggers the sympathetic nervous system, the part of your nervous system involved in the fight-or-flight reaction. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the "rest and digest" counterpart to the sympathetic nervous system.

Put in the context of using your commute as a practice, deep breathing can take you out of that constricted feeling and into a more open and relaxed state.

As you explore this, remember that safe driving is always your primary focus. If you're not used to breathing deeply you can start to feel a little dizzy, so start small and work up. You might even want to experiment with this first when you're not driving to see how it affects you.

Breathe in the good, breathe out the limiting

If you want to turn up the volume on the positive impact of the deep breathing practice, combine it with a visualization of breathing in what you want to experience and breathing out the challenging emotion. For example, you might accompany your deep breathing with repeated words, like, "Breathing in peace. Breathing out anger."

Use negative reactions as invitations to _____ (notice, love, show compassion, etc.)

You can use negative reactions as a signal to shift gears. When something sparks a negative emotion, use that as a signal to do something that is more conducive to the state you want to experience

If you catch yourself having an angry response to another driver, that's the perfect signal to take a deep breath and send that person a blessing. If you feel frustration at being stuck in traffic start to bubble up, use it as a reminder to actively practice self-compassion.

I first started exploring a variation on this idea when I was working with my all-too-human judgmental tendencies. I didn't like having judgmental reactions to people, but they came up automatically. As a way to shift that judgment, I began playing with seeing the person I was judging in a positive light, recognizing the deeper truth of our shared humanity below whatever I happened to be judging.

It was an excellent way to interrupt the judgment pattern and replace it with something more aligned with how I want to show up in the world.

As my behind-the-wheel practice evolved, I started applying that to any negative reactions I noticed. Treating them as signals to do something different transformed those negative responses into the gateway to something new.

This is a potentially powerful practice. If you really pay attention, you'll notice no end of opportunities to turn negative reactions into positive reminders. And with repetition, it becomes more and more natural.

Let negative emotions be the catalyst to practice positive habits

In a similar way, your negative emotions can also support the development of new positive habits.

Pick a habit you would like to develop. Maybe it is getting into the habit of focusing on the calming flow of your breath when you feel yourself getting angry. Or maybe it's automatically looking for things you can be grateful for in a situation you find yourself irritated with.

Rather than remaining a rabbit hole you habitually go down, a negative reaction can start to act as a trigger for that positive habit.

New habits come with repetitions over time. The more you do a particular action and the more you make a particular association, the more the neurons in your brain start to wire together to make it an automatic pathway. This practice takes advantage of the repetitive nature of those negative emotions you don't want in order to help you strengthen the habit you do want.

The result probably won't have a perfect track record – there will likely still be plenty of times you dive down that rabbit hole – but over time the power of repetition will make the positive response easier and easier to find.

Hold negative thoughts and emotions in a love bubble

When negative thoughts and emotions come up, it's natural to want to change those, or push them away. In this practice you're going to put that natural inclination on hold.

When you have negative thoughts about people, the situation, yourself, or anything else, hold those thoughts in a space of love. Don't try to get rid of them or ignore them. Just mentally wrap them in

feelings of love and compassion. I find it helpful to work with a visual of a bubble filled with love.

It might sound kind of silly to describe it as holding the negative things that come up in a love bubble, but play with it and see what happens. If it resonates with you, you can play with applying it to all kinds of people and situations, not just the challenging ones.

Remind yourself that undesirable reactions are simply practice points

What if those undesirable reactions are in fact a big part of the path to aliveness and equanimity? What if that's how the whole shebang works, and here you are trying to make them go away?

While you may not like them, it is precisely those undesirable negative emotions that shine a light on the practice points where you have an opportunity to plunge in and do the work that needs to be done. Each negative emotion that arises is an opportunity to loosen up the knot that keeps you feeling constricted and disconnected.

Each time you feel angry is an opportunity to work with letting go of anger. Each time you feel impatient is a chance to explore, understand, and let go of the constricting story behind the impatience. Each time you feel irritated is an opportunity to show love and compassion, both for yourself and the object of your irritation.

Of course, your negative emotions can only offer practice points if you first recognize them and then engage them. Otherwise it is, and will continue to be, a colossal pain in the ass that detracts from your quality of life.

PRACTICE AREA FIVE: SELF-TALK

Does the way you talk to yourself contribute to feeling open and connected? Or does it leave you feeling constricted and tight? Does it support a positive sense of self, or does it leave you feeling like the world's biggest schmuck?

We all have a monologue running through our heads. If we're awake, that voice in the peanut gallery is probably flapping its lips. It talks about everything – the weather, the meal you just had, the gorgeous person who just walked by, what's going to happen on your favorite TV show, anything and everything – and one of the most common topics of conversation is *you*.

While sometimes the content of that self-directed monologue is positive and supportive, after all the years I have spent helping people feel more energized and alive, I can tell you that far too much of it seems to be the complete opposite. Self-criticism, self-doubt, even self-loathing. It all makes our world feel smaller and more isolated.

Listening to the way you talk to yourself is another opportunity to shape how you experience the world by noticing and guiding your self-talk.

Replace your negative self-talk

Make it a habit to pay attention to how you talk to yourself and guide the conversation away from negative thoughts to ones that uplift and expand your positive perspective. Just like with the negative emotions and reactions described above, you can use negative thoughts – especially habitual ones – as signals to shift your focus.

You might, for example, find yourself ruminating on something you don't like about yourself. Or you might sit and fume about how much it

drives you nuts to be sitting in traffic. Worse yet, you might let the fact that you're in rush hour on the way to a job you don't like spiral into rumination about what a complete disaster your life is.

If you find yourself sliding down any slippery slopes of that nature (or if you find yourself flat on your back at the bottom of the hill looking up and wondering how the hell you got there), stop and replace that thought stream with something more constructive.

If you're lost in self-criticism, you might say, "OK, what *do* I like about myself?" Or if you're trapped in how much you dislike what's going on right now, try replacing that with, "How many things can I find to be grateful for right now?" The negative has the potential to be a reminder to focus on the positive, over, and over, and over again.

PRACTICE AREA SIX: MIND SCULPTING

Let's go back to that Stephen Covey quote. "We see the world, not as it is, but as we are – or as we are conditioned to see it." That's a powerful insight not just because it shines a light on the fact that the world we see is actually based on the stories we tell, but also because it states that the way we see the world is *conditioned*. It's not something that is inherently part of our DNA, forever immutable. It is conditioned by experiences and thoughts and feelings over time. And that means we can *recondition* it.

I think of this as "mind sculpting." As we focus on what's positive, enriching, healing, and chock full o' love, our minds are conditioned to experience the world that way.

In the section on self-talk, we looked at catching the negative thoughts and swapping them out with positive ones on a one-off basis as they come up. Mind sculpting is a more intentional way to build the positive aspect, consciously and consistently directing your thoughts and awareness towards a more life-affirming perspective.

The more you focus on what's good in your life, the more habitual noticing the positive becomes. It's one of the simplest opportunities available to you to change your life for the better. And that change can be significant. The more you notice what's good, the more you habitually look for it. And the more habitually you look for it, the more frequently you see it – which means an ever greater percentage of your awareness is taken up with the positive aspects of life.

Think of your life as a two-in-one pie. Some of the slices are a kind of pie you love, while others taste a bit like earwax. Mind sculpting is a way to shift the balance toward more of that pie being made up of the slices you love.

Below are some simple ideas to help you start mind sculpting.

Notice the good, the beautiful, etc.

As you drive, look for opportunities to notice the positive aspect of your experience. What is good about it, not in general, but that day specifically? Maybe the traffic is flowing more freely than usual. Maybe someone let you in when you were trying to merge. Maybe it is giving you a much needed buffer zone of down time between the demands of work and the demands of life at home. Let your focus linger on it so you can really absorb it.

Look around you. Where is there beauty to notice? Is it a beautiful sunny day? If it's a crappy, rainy day, is the rain making the greens of the trees and grass richer and lusher? Perhaps there is a hawk circling as you drive past. Watch for opportunities to see the beauty in your drive.

Look for gratitude opportunities

A specific way to notice the good is to look for things to be grateful about. They don't have to be anything momentous. It could be as simple as being grateful for how well the new windshield wipers you just put on clear the rain off the window. Or that the construction project that has been slowing traffic for the last two months is over. Or that the cup of coffee you just got at the drive-through espresso stand is finally kicking into gear and jolting you out of your morning stupor.

Do a blessings review

Another way to use your time in the car to shift your focus in a positive direction is to review the blessings in your life. Start off with, "I'm blessed that _____" and fill in the blank.

Positive word practice

Words carry a power with them. Try picking a word and focusing on it during your commute. Contemplate its meaning. Ponder where and how it shows up in your life. Repeat it out loud. Notice the sensation. Notice how you feel when you let yourself sink into the word. What impact does it have on your mind? How does it make your body feel?

Examples of powerful positive words include:

- Love
- Compassion
- Share
- Blessing
- Open
- Connection
- Acceptance
- Peace
- Delight
- Joy
- Success
- Giving

Feed your mind the good stuff

Mind sculpting isn't just about working with what you focus on. It's also about what you choose to feed your mind.

Think about what you put into your brain on a regular basis. Do a quick mental scan of the last two weeks and note what you have read, what you have watched on TV or online, movies you have seen, and so forth. Does the content of that media consumption nourish a positive, uplifting perspective, or is it a toxic soup of doom, disaster, and despair?

What you choose to expose yourself to and focus on matters. It shapes the way you see the world, which in turn shapes both the way you experience the world and the way show up in your life.

You can use your commute to reinforce a positive, productive way of experiencing the world (for example, with uplifting podcasts, personal development audiobooks, or audiobook biographies about people who inspire you).

Avoid filling your mind every day with “what’s wrong with the world” (for example, the news or pretty much any talk radio show). You’ll come across enough of that without reaching out and intentionally giving yourself an even bigger dose, especially when you can’t be selective about which news stories you choose.

PRACTICE AREA SEVEN: HEART

In many ways, this area of practice is at the core of everything I'm talking about in this book. Living from the heart is an inherently open, expansive, interconnected way to experience life. If you have ever felt your heart open wide looking at a baby, or had a moment where you automatically reached out with deep compassion to help someone in need, or felt the spaciousness of awe at a scene of natural beauty, you've already had this experience.

My belief is that this is our natural state. It's not so much something we need to develop it as something we need to allow to emerge. It might not feel natural because so much of what we do and think has a constricting effect on its natural flow, caking it with layers of muck so we lose track of its existence. But when we can quiet the rogue's gallery of thoughts and reactions that keep us small, it's that state of openness and love that begins to come to light.

Many of the other areas of practice I talk about in this book are aimed at how to stop adding those layers of muck. This section is aimed at how to practice stepping more fully into that heart flow.

Begin and end with a blessing

Before you start your car and when you turn it off, pause and give a blessing to your drive and everyone you will/did come into contact with.

Practice experiencing love

In the superficially charged culture we live in, connecting with that state of love can often seem easier said than done. Your commute is a perfect time to practice.

Start by taking five minutes every time you hop behind the wheel to connect with a feeling of unconditional love. Focus your attention on something that makes that feeling well up. That might be a loved one, an experience where that feeling came up unbidden, or a favorite pet. Play with it to see what works. You might experiment with a different image each day to see what opens the door to feeling love most effectively.

It might help to brainstorm things that bring that feeling up beforehand. Look back over your life. When have you felt that? You might find things that bring up that feeling consistently, or it might be one single memorable experience. One of the things that reliably brings up that feeling for me is puppies (I know, kind of schmaltzy, but it's true). For me, puppies present a combination of animals and babies that consistently brings me into that heart space. For you, it might be something completely different.

It doesn't have to be obvious and syrupy. Another one that comes up for me is an experience I had recently where I opened the door early one morning to find a homeless guy sleeping on my door step, taking shelter from a downpour.

As I looked down at him, his head on my welcome mat, my heart spontaneously melted with compassion (I invited him in for coffee, gave him some food and a couple of pairs of dry socks, and after maybe 45 minutes he left). It still opens my heart as I focus on it now.

The goal with this practice is to make it easier to connect with that space as you drive (and ultimately, easier to connect with that space in your life in general). And that happens bit-by-bit. Don't pressure yourself to suddenly have a mind-blowing heart-opening experience. It's enough to feel a little glimmer. And then to do it again. And again.

Drive from the heart

As you drive, ask yourself this funny little question: “How would my heart drive?” If your heart were in complete control of how you drove, the decisions you made, and how you both viewed and responded to everything that happens, what would that look like?

That idea might seem a little goofy, but here’s what it does. It narrows down the options to the ones that align with the heart space you’re cultivating. It gives you a simple frame of reference, a lens through which you can look at your choices and actions.

Imagining your heart at the wheel opens the door to greater awareness of how you’re driving and the effects – both on others and on you – of your choices, actions, and the thoughts you choose to feed.

With your heart at the wheel, the inner dialogue might start looking something like this. “That jerk is camped out in the fast lane. I’ll just ride his ass and get him to move! Oh, wait a minute, is that really what my heart would do? Probably not. Why not?”

“Well, first, it’s not safe. It puts me and that guy and even the other drivers around me at risk. Second, that’s probably going to piss him off. My heart doesn’t want to bring that kind of feeling to someone else’s life. And it makes me feel more constricted too, more tense, more irritated. I don’t want to feel like that. Not only that, it turns the whole experience into a battle, me against him. I don’t want to feel that kind of division and conflict.

“If my heart were driving, I would take a deep breath and see what it feels like to practice being patient. I would keep a safe distance behind him and trust that I would be able to pass soon enough, without all the tension and conflict. I might even wish him a feeling of peace.”

Use HeartMath® techniques

What if I told you that your heart can have an amazing amount of control over your brain – and that you can use that fact to feel less stressed and happier? And what if I told you that wasn't just some fluffy feel-good idea, but a fact that has a lot of solid research behind it?

Since 1991, The HeartMath Institute has been researching the relationship between the heart and the brain. They looked at something called heart rate variability, and how it impacts the brain. Heart rate variability is the change in heart rate from beat to beat. Your heart isn't a steady metronome; it actually changes speed with each beat. When you are calm and relaxed, there is a smooth, regular pattern to this variability. When you are stressed, it's more chaotic.

The smooth pattern of heart rate variability is described as coherent, while the chaotic pattern is called incoherent.

The amazing thing is that it's not just about stressed feelings causing incoherence. It goes the other way as well. The coherence or incoherence of your heart rate variability actually has an impact on how you feel. When your heart rate variability is coherent, it's like your heart is sending your brain a message, "Hey, everything is OK! You can kick back and relax." By the same token, an incoherent heart rate variability grabs a megaphone and screams, "Hey you! Yeah you! Saber toothed tiger coming! Run!" Your brain kicks into stress mode.

While this is all interesting, I wouldn't be writing about it here if it didn't lay the groundwork for a way to bring yourself into a better mental and emotional state. What the by The HeartMath Institute has found is that you can use this heart/brain relationship to consciously, intentionally modulate how you feel.

When you actively bring your heart into a coherent state, it has a positive impact on your emotions. Your heart sends the message, “Everything’s copasetic. It’s all good.” The HeartMath Institute has developed a variety of techniques for doing that. Here’s a basic one, called the *Quick Coherence*® *Technique*. I’m consistently floored how effective it is. There are two simple steps.

Step 1:

Heart-Focused Breathing

Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area. Breathe a little slower and deeper than usual.

Step two:

Activate a Positive Feeling

Make a sincere attempt to experience a regenerative feeling such as appreciation or care for someone or something in your life.

There’s nothing more to it. Easy as pie. (It’s worth mentioning that the practice of experiencing love I described at the beginning of this section fits hand-in-glove with the heart feeling aspect of this technique.)

The HeartMath Institute has developed several techniques to help you take advantage of this heart-brain connection. You can find out more at www.heartmath.org. I recommend it.

Practice lovingkindness

It’s particularly easy when we’re in our cars to completely separate from our connectedness with others and turn all the other drivers into the Anonymous Other. That offers a perfect opportunity to turn that

disconnectedness on its head and cultivate a sense of shared human experience.

In Buddhism there is a tradition of lovingkindness meditation, where you hold a person in your mind and remind yourself that “this person is just like me.”

“Just like me, this person wants to be happy. Just like me, this person sometimes struggles. Just like me, this person wants to be loved. Just like me, this person has less-than-shining moments, and probably feels bad about some of them later. Just like me, this person sometimes feels overwhelmed.”

As you drive, look around you. Pick one fellow driver at a time and practice lovingkindness. If you’re in a situation where everybody is likely to be feeling a similar reaction, like being stuck in a traffic jam, you can use that as the subject of your lovingkindness practice. “Just like me, this person is probably frustrated at being stuck. Just like me, this person probably doesn’t like how this situation makes them feel. Just like me, this person probably has things that feel more important to be doing in her life than sitting here stuck in traffic.”

You can even apply it in situations where you might ordinarily respond with irritation or anger. Someone just cut you off? Perfect! Pull out your lovingkindness instead of feeding that negative response. “Just like me, that person wants to be happy. Just like me, that person has bad days. Maybe he is having one right now? Just like me, that person probably gets distracted and does things that other people respond negatively to. Just like me, that person is doing the best that he can at this present moment.”

Practicing “just like me” is a way to get us out of focusing exclusively on ourselves and recognizing the commonalities we share with those around us. It’s a way to shake ourselves out of the us-and-them mentality and turn it into common ground.

Acknowledge the suffering of others

When someone else is acting like a jerk, it's easy to make jerkdom our one-dimensional assessment of who they are and leave it at that. But not only does that create separation, at a deep level, it's just not true.

When someone is behaving badly, there's something behind it. And if you dig deeply enough, that something tends to be some kind of pain. If someone gets angry, it's not because anger is at the core of who they are. It's because something painful is going on. Maybe they feel insecure. Maybe they feel afraid. Maybe it's a conditioned response rooted in a painful history. Whatever it is, they're suffering.

When another driver aims that bad behavior at you – perhaps they're animatedly angry, or they just flew you the bird – remind yourself that they must really be suffering to be feeling and expressing that kind of negative emotion.

Rather than responding to it in kind, try feeling compassion for that suffering. Send them a silent blessing. Say a prayer for them. Not only do you benefit by not matching rage for rage, you also benefit from connecting with a feeling of compassion.

You can also pull out the lovingkindness practice described above. "Just like me, that person wants to be happy. Just like me, that person suffers when they feel that negative emotion. Just like me, that person is doing the best she can right now."

Turn your negative judgments into compassion

Every once in a while I come across someone that just leaves me shaking my head in negative judgment. I recently realized that presents an opportunity to shift out of judgment and into compassion.

This happened at the same three-way merge I have described before. A woman had stopped at the merge instead of more assertively inserting herself into the flow of traffic. It was clear she wasn't comfortable, and seemed a little out of her element.

As traffic backed up behind her, I found myself being judgmental her timidity. Suddenly it occurred to me, "Hang on, I'm comfortable merging into traffic in a situation like this, but aren't there situations where I feel uncomfortable and insecure? Aren't there situations where I feel just like this?"

Immediately I started relating to this woman in a completely different way. I related to her discomfort, and my judgment shifted to a sense of compassion, not just for her, but for all the people who find themselves where they feel uncomfortably uncertain and hesitant.

When you find yourself judging people on the road, ask yourself, "Is there ever a situation where I'm like that?" If someone is driving too slow in the fast lane, are you ever lost in space and not paying attention? Or if someone goes speeding past you in a way that doesn't feel safe, is there ever a time when things feel so urgent that you get self-absorbed and don't take others into account?

Look for opportunities to give

One way of expressing love is through generosity. We tend to think of giving in stereotypical ways – donating to charity, etc. – but the truth is that our days are full of ways we can give. Your commute is no exception.

Watch for opportunities to give to others. Maybe that is putting on your brakes so someone can merge. Or maybe it is getting over to a slower lane when you notice someone wants to go faster than you (looking at that as an opportunity to give can transform an experience

where you might ordinarily have thought, “Stop tailgating me, you jerk!”).

Some of this practice involves looking for more opportunities to give, but some of it also entails simply being more aware of opportunities to experience the giving you already do. Giving feels good. We can increase the positive impact of that feeling simply by noticing the giving we’re already doing and then pausing to soak in the feeling. The more we notice, the better it feels, and the more it impacts our lives.

Make your car a mobile blessing machine

Imagine your car as a mobile blessing machine. As you drive, focus on sending blessings in all directions. Maybe blessings of peace, or love, or freedom from suffering. Picture it as a big blessing bubble that touches everyone around you. Just think of how many people those blessings could touch over the course of a year’s commute!

Acknowledgement / recognition

Everybody likes to be acknowledged. It makes us feel good and creates a sense of connection, however brief. When somebody does something kind or courteous, like letting you merge in front of them, acknowledge them with a smile or wave.

Practice self-love / self-kindness / self-compassion

You might say self-love is at the heart of love. If you don’t treat yourself with love and compassion, it’s infinitely more difficult to treat others with the same. When you realize you’re treating yourself unkindly, or if you’re just having a difficult time, it’s time to push pause and practice love and compassion for yourself.

If you notice yourself getting angry or impatient, or tangled in some other challenging emotion, stop, take a deep breath, and be kind to

yourself. Acknowledge how challenging it is. Talk to yourself like you would to a dear friend who is feeling gripped in the middle of a painful experience.

Here's a self-compassion hack I first learned from Kristin Neff's excellent book, *Self-Compassion*. You may be aware that human touch (like a hug, or stroking the skin) prompts your brain to release oxytocin – often referred to as the “love hormone” – into your system. Oxytocin has many positive effects, among them a reduction of stress and anxiety.

What you may not know is that your brain doesn't distinguish between the touch of someone else and your own touch. So if you find yourself feeling spooled up and stressed, try stroking your arm soothingly. Even better, combine the stroking with soothing, compassionate words.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an act of love. Instead of getting sucked into irritation when someone does something that feels like an affront, try shifting into forgiveness instead.

At its simplest, forgiveness is about letting go. It's about the release of letting go of the negative stories and emotions associated with whatever happened. And that makes it a prime growth practice, because if you want to live a life of aliveness and equanimity, the last thing you want to do is constantly drag a bag around filled with those stories and emotions.

Whether you forgive someone else for cutting you off or forgive yourself for tipping over into an angry reactivity, the effect is the same. You're letting go of a toxic story and making more room to feel good.

Unless something dramatic and life-altering happens in your commuting experience (like a major accident), forgiveness on a large scale isn't likely to be a big part of the picture. But small opportunities abound. "I choose not to hold on to this toxic feeling. I forgive them for cutting me off. I forgive them for tailgating me. I forgive them for flipping me off."

That forgiveness might be directed to yourself as well. Any time you find yourself letting the self-judgment fly for a negative reaction that you're not proud of, pause, take a deep breath, and say, "I'm human, and this response isn't who I am. I forgive myself, and let it go."

Self-forgiveness, in all its forms, is part of treating yourself with love and compassion. And treating yourself with love and compassion is the starting point for being the change you want to see in the world.

The more you take advantage of the small opportunities to forgive, the more it builds and strengthens your ability to forgive and let go when it comes to the bigger things.

Love or fear?

It has been said that there are two basic emotions, love and fear. As you drive, check in with yourself from time to time and ask, "Am I coming from love, or am I coming from fear?" Having that simple dual-option context can help you notice what sets each in motion.

Shift your thought-habit to one of love

We all have habitual thought patterns that come up, often without our even noticing. Sometimes those thought-habits support the life we want to experience, and sometimes they make us feel constricted and unhappy.

Use your time in the car to pay attention to any constricting thoughts that come up regularly. Are they judgmental? Angry? Pessimistic? Rather than staying enmeshed in them, treat them as a signal to make a shift. When you notice those limiting thought-habits, use them as a reminder to replace them with thought-habits fueled by love.

One way I have worked with this idea is directing love and compassion towards myself when I realize I'm angry or irritated at someone else on the road. I figure if I'm feeling a strongly negative emotion like that, it's a good bet that any shift needs to start with loving myself.

Smile

This is one I have been playing with a lot lately. I wasn't quite sure which practice area to put this one. Ultimately, I decided that smiling was a subtle act of love, both for yourself and the people around you.

Research has shown that smiling actually has a positive impact on your mood. Smiling can make you happier.

Try putting on a smile for a while and see how it feels. Let it linger for a while. Let the feeling it brings up deepen. If you like it, try doing it for an extended period of time (maybe even an entire commute!).

It doesn't have to be a big cheesy grin. I tend to do it with a little half-smile, and consistently notice the positive effect it has on how I feel.

Look for and create opportunities to love

The ideas outlined in this section are just a handful of the ways love could show itself in your commute. Challenge yourself to keep looking for more. "How can I love during this commute?" can be a fruitful daily question.

Loving when it's hard

One last thought on love. Loving is easy when your heart is bursting wide open. But loving when it's hard is much more difficult. Loving when you're irritated, or angry, or impatient – that's the real magic. The exercises in this section give your mind a chance to practice letting your heart love even when it doesn't feel like it.

PRACTICE AREA EIGHT: LETTING GO

If you run your life under the illusion that you are in control, a single day stuck in traffic should shine a light on just how wrong you are. Can you influence? Sure. But there is precious little in the outside world you have out-and-out control over.

Time in traffic often brings this up for me. It's a superb opportunity to take a deep breath, let go of that desire to control, and allow what is to simply be, without resistance.

The greatest moments of peace I ever experience happen on those rare occasions when I am able to simply let go. I stop trying to control. I stop resisting. I even stop trying to let go. Unfortunately, in a culture that values controlling everything over letting go, doing that can seem like an impossible task.

Your commute is the ideal place to cultivate a mind that learns to let go. As you let go, over and over again, it gradually becomes easier. "Oh! There's that insistence that the guy in that car in front of me should play by my rules." Let it go. "Oh! There's that attachment to my commute being faster than it is today." Let it dissolve.

Let go of attachment and aversion

So much of the internal unpleasantness we experience in our lives comes from two things – attachment to what we want and aversion to what we don't want.

The reason those things cause us so much trouble is because they're completely disconnected from the reality that everything in life changes.

Nothing in life is permanent. Everything in your life will one day change. Your relationships change. Your work changes. Your body changes. Your health changes. It's a fact of life. The more you resist that, the more you suffer.

Your commute is an opportunity to use small changes to get more adept at surfing that impermanence, letting go of your attachment to what's going well, and not getting consumed by the feeling that what's not going well is going to last forever.

Attachment

Wanting things to stay the same – the very definition of attachment – introduces struggle into the picture. It creates a tense grip on things as they are (however ineffective that might be), as well as a fear that things might change.

When things go south in your commute (like when there's an accident up ahead and traffic suddenly grinds to a halt) and you find yourself having a negative response to it, that's the perfect time to practice letting go of attachment. In that case, the attachment might be to having traffic flow freely, to being able to get where you're going quickly.

When you notice that response, pause, take a deep breath, and mentally let your attachment flow out with the outbreath. Notice if there is any tension in your body, and let that go too.

Aversion

Any time you feel the constriction of wanting something to be different than it is, aversion is hard at work. The best and most obvious place this shows up is that dreaded traffic jam I keep talking about. When you notice that aversion, take a deep breath and remind

yourself, “Everything is OK just the way it is.” Think of it as training in feeling an internal contentment whatever your external circumstances.

Ask, “What am I trying to control?”

If you find yourself feeling tense or irritated while in traffic, it’s a good bet you’re trying to control something outside the scope of your control. When you notice your experience contracting, ask yourself, “What am I trying to control?” When you identify it, let go.

Easier said than done, I know. But like most things, it becomes easier with practice. You can draw from an abundance of ideas throughout this book to help (like focusing on your breath, or changing your story about what’s happening, or shifting your focus).

Control what you can. Let go of what you can’t.

It’s also helpful to ask, “What *can* I control?” Do that, and let go of the rest. Maybe you can change the route you take. Maybe you can listen to an audiobook to make the drive more enjoyable. Maybe you can change your story about what you’re experiencing.

You might even want to make a list of “things I can control” to have options to choose from when you notice yourself tensing up in your drive.

Let the thoughts flow

If you step back and actually watch your thoughts, you’ll inevitably notice that they don’t come and stay for good. There is an ebb and flow to their nature. First you’re thinking about how bad the traffic is. Then you’re thinking about the presentation you’re giving tomorrow. Before you know it you’re losing yourself in thoughts about your favorite dessert. Thoughts come, they hang out for a while, and then they wander off.

We typically identify with our thoughts. We think our thoughts are who we are. But how can something that fleeting and changing really be our identity? Better to think of them as clouds drifting through the sky. Appearing and disappearing, affecting our experience, but not who we actually are.

Use your drive time to practice letting your thoughts come and go. Notice them, watch them, but don't hold on to them. Resist the urge to feed them with more attention.

In this exercise, your thoughts are the object of your attention. You're not trying to control them. You're not trying to let them go. You're just sitting back and watching where they take you.

Listen to them like you would listen to a conversation at a nearby table in a coffee shop. Be curious. Eavesdrop. And when they drift off to something else, eavesdrop on that as well.

As you do this, you'll start to catch glimpses of just how little substance those negative thoughts that feel so all-consuming and real actually have. One minute you can be having happy thoughts about time with a friend last night. The next you can be having angry thoughts about the driver that just cut you off. And before you know it you're wondering what time the movie is tonight.

They come. They go. They're not you.

Let go of false urgency

When I first started really paying attention to what was influencing my driving, I realized just how often I create a false sense of urgency. You know the feeling – you're on the way someplace with plenty of time to spare and run into something that slows you down, maybe somebody driving slower than you think they should, and before you know it

you're starting to feel tense. There's a sense of, "I have to get there faster!"

I started realizing how often I created unnecessary stress for myself, even champing at the bit to get where I was going in situations where I knew full well that I was early enough that I would have to sit and wait once I got there.

If that kind of situation pops up for you, it's the perfect opportunity to practice accepting where you are. You might, for example, challenge that false sense of urgency by staying in the lane you're in, resisting the urge to move to a faster moving lane. As you do that, pay attention to the habitual responses that come up. How does it feel? What is your knee-jerk reaction? What is the story you're telling?

You can add another dimension to this practice by repeating the mantra, "Where I am is perfect." See if you can actually start to experience that.

Life is full of knee-jerk reactions like this that influence us in ways we're not fully (or even partially) aware of. By noticing when false urgency comes up and practicing acceptance of where you are without the need to do something about it, you're eliminating stress and developing peace.

Let go of the instant gratification mindset

A practice related to letting go of false urgency is, when you find yourself chafing under the desire to be there ASAP, to use it as an opportunity to ask, "What if that's not true? What if I don't really need to be there quickly? What if it's OK for it to take more time?" It's amazing how simple questions like this can shift our experience.

Let go of being righteously right

We've all experienced it. Someone does something that pisses us off and suddenly the righteous anger comes pouring out. "That so-and-so! They should this! They shouldn't that!"

If we're honest, we'll probably admit that being righteously right feels really good. There's a certain delight in that indignation. But in the end, it's just as toxic as any other negative response. When you find yourself climbing up on that high-horse and pouring out a heap of righteous rightness, see if you let it go.

If you can't let it go immediately, step back and sit with how it's making you feel. Do you like it? Is how you feel when you work up a full head of righteous rightness how you really want to live your life?

Ask yourself, "How is this making my life better? How might this be making my life worse?"

Ultimately the choice with your righteous rightness boils down to that old question, "Would you rather be right, or happy?"

Stop setting yourself up to be the victim

Would you knowingly volunteer to be a victim? Would you intentionally set yourself up to feel like life is pouring a steaming load of manure on your head? I'm going to go out on a limb here and say no, of course you wouldn't.

But that's exactly what you're doing when you succumb to the desire to control what's beyond your control. It places you in an unworkable situation that can only end up in your feeling unhappy. When your happiness rests in being able to control the uncontrollable, you inevitably come out on the losing end.

Start paying attention to when that unsatisfiable desire for control comes up. You'll probably start to see some common themes. Once you start to see those themes, you can be more aware of them so you can head them off at the pass. You can also explore how to work with them so they don't come up as much to begin with.

PRACTICE AREA NINE: ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is the natural outcome of letting go. Wanting life to be different than it is in the present moment is a recipe for frustration, irritation, and anger. This is probably the biggest and most destructive source of disturbance to my peace-of-mind, whether in the car or elsewhere. As Byron Katie so brilliantly puts it, “When I argue with reality, I lose – but only 100% of the time.”

Traffic – especially rush hour traffic – is the perfect opportunity to practice finding peace with what is.

“What is” doesn’t care if you resist or not. It’s still going to be what is. So the better you get at letting go of your perceived need for something to be different than it is, the more peace you’ll be able to feel.

Whether it is toleration of others behaving in a less-than-enlightened way, being OK with slow traffic, or not fighting your own challenging responses to your drive, acceptance is an important key to a greater sense of peace.

Let’s look at a few of those opportunities.

Accept others’ humanness

When I first jotted this idea down, I wrote “tolerance of others’ humanness.” On reflection though, I realized that it’s not just tolerance I’m talking about. It’s acceptance. Tolerance to me carries a certain resistance with it, a grudging acceptance. Real acceptance is being able to say, “Yes, I embrace you as you are.”

Usually we don't have any trouble accepting when others do things we like, so this practice is inherently focused on the things that rub you the wrong way.

When someone irritates you, take a deep breath before reacting. Look at the person and say (out loud or to yourself), "You are not what you just did. I don't like what you just did, but I have done things that weren't ideal, too. That's just part of being human. I can let that go."

This has the added bonus of shining a light on our shared humanity.

Accept the inherent messiness

Unless you drive to work at two in the morning, your commute will probably never be completely smooth. That gives you a wonderful opportunity to practice accepting the inherent messiness of it all (which, in turn, is a great training ground for accepting the inherent messiness of life).

You can reinforce this by reminding yourself, "Just because this is messy doesn't mean it's wrong. Messiness is a part of life. This is the perfect training ground for developing a greater sense of peace through acceptance of that."

You might also remind yourself of the relative nature of it all, saying something like, "It's only messy because that's the way I choose to perceive it. If I let go of the notion that it's supposed to be a certain way, the perception that it's messy goes away too."

Accept whatever you resist

Finally, at a broader level, take advantage of the fact that you will probably have resistance coming out your ears during your commute. Watch for what you resist and make it the center of your acceptance practice.

PRACTICE AREA TEN: EGO / SMALL-SELF IDENTITY

An over-identification with what is commonly described in Buddhist philosophy as the ego or small-self is one of the most common barriers to a feeling of peace. Even if you take it completely out of a spiritual context and look at it from a purely logical point of view, that makes sense. From the ego's perspective, the world revolves around you. Life becomes a non-stop pursuit of what the ego wants, and pushing away what it doesn't. Your ego has a very clear picture of how it thinks everything in your life – from the minute-to-minute minutia to the big events that impact everything – should be.

And when life has other plans, as it so often does, the ego has a tendency to stomp its feet and throw a fit. Sometimes that's a minor fuss, other times a full-blown banshee-howl.

Your commute is a superb opportunity to put your ego under the microscope and get to know how it impacts and controls your life.

What would it be like if my ego weren't driving?

Pull this question out whenever you find yourself feeling challenged. If you're having a difficult response to something, it's a pretty sure bet your ego – the small self so intent on protecting its vulnerable identity – is driving.

What would it be like if it weren't? What would it be like if you weren't letting yourself be swayed by the stories and reactions of your ego? How would it be if that situation that brings up your irritation, or anger, or impatience just had no story attached to it? What if you didn't make anything that happened about you?

This might not make the ego reaction go away completely, but it can help explore a broader context beyond the limited, constricted world of the ego.

Many of the other previously explored aspects of your commute's potential to be a practice show up in the context of letting your ego drive. For example:

- **Control and letting go:** What if you didn't need to control anything? What if your ego didn't feel the need to assert its will over the world?
- **Changing your stories:** Changing your stories to ones more conducive to inner peace is in many ways about getting your ego out of the driver's seat.
- **Letting go of being right:** This is ego territory if ever there was one! The ego loves, Loves, LOVES to be right – in fact, if you pay attention, you'll probably notice that in its own mind, the ego is never wrong. And from the ego's perspective, if you can pour a little righteous indignation on the fire, so much the better.
- **Disidentifying with our thoughts:** We are not our thoughts. But the ego definitely is. It is created, shaped, and sustained by our thoughts. Recognizing the stream of thoughts but not diving in the river and getting swept away by them helps you take a step away from being trapped in the small self identity.

Each time you let go of that small-self ego, you touch, however briefly, a spaciousness that the constricted nature of ego-self prevents you from experiencing. As you do that over and over, you loosen ego's grip.

PRACTICE AREA ELEVEN: A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Imagine two scenarios, both involving you and a room full of people. In the first scenario, you feel isolated and alone. You don't feel like part of the group. You don't know them. You're not even sure if you like them. As you look around, you wonder which ones would be beneficial to know. You're judging people right and left, and the more you judge, the more disconnected from everyone you feel.

In the second scenario, you know most of the people. Even the ones you don't know, you feel open to. You feel connected to the community. You care about each person there and celebrate their joys and feel compassion for their sorrows. You can feel how everyone there – including you – is interconnected.

Which of those scenarios is more conducive to a life of aliveness? Kind of obvious, right?

Most of us go through our lives a little like the isolated person in the room. We spend our days looking out for number one. Our perspective expands a bit here and there with our immediate loved ones or a special community, or when our hearts feel moved by the plight of particular people in need, etc. but on the whole we hang out in our isolated little bubble-o-self. We might intellectually grasp how everything is connected, but really feeling it in our bones is a different question.

While you're driving, you can practice experiencing that interconnectedness, from a very literal, physical level (like the flow of traffic) to an emotional level (how people respond to each other) to a more metaphysical level (for example, imagining an underlying common energy that all the people you see share).

Here are a couple exercises to help you play with getting out of your small self point of view and seeing the whole.

Widen your perspective to the flow of traffic

Notice your point of view. You're probably very focused on what's immediately around you, but not so aware of what's going on outside your immediate sphere of interaction with other cars, the road, etc.

While keeping that immediate focus enough to stay safe, start to expand your awareness. Widen your perspective. Instead of just what the cars around you are doing, expand your view to include the entire flow of traffic. Watch how it flows. Notice how one thing – a person changing lanes, perhaps – can have an impact on the flow of the whole.

With practice, you can easily hold both your immediate surroundings and the overall flow in your awareness simultaneously.

Widen your perspective to the flow of people

Once you have played with that for a while, try expanding your awareness to all the people in those cars. Notice how the people around you look. Are they singing? Do they look tense? Are they paying attention, or talking on the phone?

Then expand your awareness in your imagination. Each of those drivers is coming from and going to someplace. Imagine how that unfolds in your big picture awareness of the traffic flow. Their cars coming into the flow of traffic, merging into the whole. Their cars leaving the flow of traffic, making their way down streets, stopping at stop lights, turning right, turning left, and eventually getting where they're going.

Now take it down to a human level. Each of those drivers has a story. Each of those stories is interwoven with dozens, even hundreds of

other stories. Each of them has hopes and dreams. Each of them is struggling in their own way.

Now imagine how all of that affects the whole.

This is what is happening every single day. We tend to get caught up in our own limited view of the world, so we don't notice it.

Even if the idea of "we're all One" doesn't resonate with you, this is still where life happens. This is how life unfolds. Not in an insular bubble of individuality, but in an interconnected, interdependent mass.

Your time in traffic is a perfect place to build a greater awareness of that.

PRACTICE AREA TWELVE: CONNECTION

One significant source of suffering that obscures our innate state of openness, love, and connection is the feeling of separateness, isolation, and disconnection that is so common in our Western society. Not only does it make us feel alone, it also blocks our natural compassion by reinforcing a sense of otherness as we divide the world into “us” and “them.”

Most of us have responded to people in our cars in ways that we never would if we were face-to-face. Part of the reason for that is how anonymized others are in traffic. We don't relate to them as individuals trying to get to their destination and feeling the same things we are. Our traffic experience becomes about “me,” rather than “we.” And that almost inevitably yields a me-against-them perception.

That's a micro-view of something that many of us experience to some degree in the bigger picture.

The commute is inherently about being part of the whole, but most people have a very isolated experience while they're on the road. Your commute provides a chance to step out of that mental isolation tank and explore the experience of connection, even when you're alone in your car.

Practice the Golden Rule

A super-simple way to take your commute out of your isolation bubble and expand it to include others is practicing the Golden Rule. At any point of interaction with others on the road you can reflect, “How would I like to be treated here?”

You can expand that to look at the different options in any circumstance and for each one, ask, “How would I feel if that

happened to me?” For example, if someone wants to turn into the lane in front of you, you could speed up so there was no room, pretend you didn’t notice them, or ease off on your gas so they had plenty of room (waving them politely over, for good measure). How would being on the receiving end of each of those feel?

Create positive ripples

This practice is another spin on the golden rule practice. Your interactions with others create ripples. Sometimes those ripples are big. Sometimes they’re barely noticeable. But over time, they add up.

Make it a game to look for as many ways to create positive ripples as you can. For example:

- Letting someone cut in front of you.
- Smiling at someone.
- Waving at someone who was courteous to you

Expand to other perspectives

Play with seeing the experience of any given moment from multiple perspectives. Your perspective is only one of them. There’s the perspective of the driver in front of you, and the one behind you. There’s the perspective of the collective whole, maybe seen from up above. There’s the perspective of the person who is annoying you and the person who – given the way they’re waving hello with their middle finger – you apparently just annoyed.

To the degree that you can, immerse yourself in each of these points of view as a valid perspective, even if it is at odds with yours.

Deeply see the other drivers

We're often so absorbed in the hubbub of our own lives that we fail to deeply see the people we come face-to-face with, let alone the anonymous faces in the metal boxes we're competing with for space on the road.

The fact that you're a captive audience until you get to your destination makes the commute an ideal time to practice deeply seeing people. Pick a driver nearby and take a look at them (keep your eyes mainly on the road, of course).

See if you can see them as something deeper than the surface level story based on what you see at first glance. Get past the caricature, and see their humanness. Be aware that they too have a complex matrix of positive and negative traits, hopes and fears, abilities and shortcomings.

PRACTICE AREA THIRTEEN: DOING NO HARM

Finally, there is a practice area you can use as a basic underlying concept for your commute: Doing no harm.

In Buddhism there is a concept called Ahimsa, meaning non-harm. It is the principle of non-violence toward all living things. That principle can apply to both physical and mental/emotional harm.

In your car, you can practice Ahimsa in a number of ways. The first and most obvious is to be a safe and aware driver. You can also practice Ahimsa by not instigating anger (whether by your driving or your action towards someone else) and not responding to and feeding the anger of others.

In a way, all of the practices in this book contribute to the practice of Ahimsa in your commute. By increasing the responses that lead to greater openness, love, and connection, and decreasing what leaves you feeling closed, constricted, and disconnected, you automatically gravitate to patterns of thought and behavior that cause less harm.

ADDITIONAL PRACTICE IDEAS

In this section I want to share some ideas that aren't specific to any of the practice areas outlined in this book.

Create reminder questions

Play with ways to remind yourself of questions to help keep your awareness on your practice. For example:

- What's my story?
- What am I feeling? (Physically? Emotionally?)
- What am I resisting?
- Where is my mind (am I reliving the past or preliving the future)?

You could keep one question in mind for a period of time, like a week, or a month, or you could pay attention to a different question each day. If you decide on a daily question, try writing it on a sticky note before each commute and stick it to your dashboard as a reminder.

Again, the questions listed here are just to get you started. Keep adding questions to the list as they occur to you.

Pick a daily quote or passage to ponder

Use your time in the car as an opportunity to go deep into an inspiring quote, or a passage from a book. Look at it through the lens of questions like:

- What does this really mean?
- How does this apply in my life?
- What would I do differently if I really took this to heart?
- How would my life change if I took this to heart?

- What is it about this quote/passage that resonates with me?
- Is there more to it than my initial impression?

Ask questions that help foster a growth-oriented approach to commuting

Asking open ended questions that invite insight is another way to plant a seed and provide space for it to sprout. You can ask questions like:

- How can I _____?
- How can I relax into this?
- How can I let go?

Focus on an either/or

As you drive, pick an either/or to use as a lens to look at your reactions. “Does this leave me more ____ or ____?” For example:

- Expansive vs. contracted
- Receptive vs. reactive
- Relaxed vs. rigid
- Flexible vs. controlling
- Open vs. closed

ENHANCING THE LEARNING

You might find it useful to enhance the learning by taking it out from behind the wheel.

Incorporate journaling

Start a journal to unpack some of the insights and experiences from your commute practice. This might involve taking a look at an approach you found particularly effective, examining an ingrained, automatic pattern you have noticed that contributes to feeling constricted, or, as suggested in the last item, exploring the parallels between your experience in traffic and your experience in the rest of your life.

Questions to explore might include:

- What can I learn here?
- How do the constricting habits and patterns I'm noticing show up in the rest of my life?
- How can I apply the positive insights I'm gaining to the rest of my life?

Notice the parallels between traffic and life

How do the things you experience show up in other parts of your life? How could the ways you engage during your drive that allow you to feel more open, loving, and connected translate to the rest of your day? Are there specific events or circumstances that feel like there is a particularly strong parallel?

As you notice parallels, you can start playing with different ways of engaging your day even beyond your commute time.

You might make a list of the particularly strong parallels you have noticed. If you want to start noticing them more as they show up in your life, try writing them down on sticky notes and put them where you will see them regularly.

Another way to start noticing the things you want to be more aware of is to do an end-of-day review. At the end of each day, scan back and ask, “Where did that show up?” Jot down some notes. It doesn’t have to be a novel – just a laundry list will do.

This gives your brain a chance to train its tendency to notice those things. The goal is to be able to recognize them on the fly, and ultimately make changes you want to make.

Apply these practices at work

This book is focused on your time behind the wheel, but really you could apply many of the practices to any other part of your life.

Beyond just noticing the parallels between your experience using your commute as a practice and other parts of your life, try actively applying the practices.

For example, since your commute forms bookends around your workday, you could explore many of the practices in the preceding pages while on the job.

TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR PRACTICE

As you start exploring the potential of using your commute as a personal growth practice, there are some ways to approach it that can smooth the way.

Let go of any quick fix expectation

Let go of the idea that it's going to result in some kind of flip-of-the-switch transformation. I'm not saying it absolutely won't (who am I to say?), but in my experience change as fundamental as this is more likely to evolve over time. There is an incremental nature to it, and looking for the Grand Slam homerun is more likely to lead you to give up than to motivate you to keep going.

So be patient. Recognize that it's not about flipping a switch. It's about moving in the right direction. At any given moment, you have the ability to move toward openness or constriction, peace or conflict, connection or disconnection, resonance or dissonance, flexibility or rigidity.

You are always in motion. You are always moving towards one or the other. Even from a pure neuroscience perspective, every time you react in a certain way, you are wiring and reinforcing pathways in your brain, moving your brain's structure in that direction.

Think process, not perfection

The intention here is not to achieve a perfect score. It's to consciously direct the flow of your overall momentum towards what helps you feel greater peace and aliveness. Sometimes that will look like being in the groove. Other times it will look like catching yourself in clench mode and saying, "Oh yeah, I should probably breathe, huh."

Don't make it into a project with a goal

As you explore turning your commute into a practice, hold it with a sense of light curiosity. Rather than trying to achieve a goal with it, explore and experiment. See what happens. Introducing goals into the mix is a great way to clench right up and take you in the opposite direction from inner peace.

Forget pursuing achievement with an exclamation mark (“Huzzah! I did it right!”). Instead, wield the mighty question mark. Approach your drive with questions like:

- What if I...?
- What could I...?
- How did I...?
- How did that...?

The less attached you are to doing it “right,” the more space you will have for a positive evolution to unfold.

Take an experimental approach

One great way to get out of goal-mindedness is to approach it with an attitude of experimentation. Instead of trying something with the express intention to get a specific result, you can look at it through the lens of curiosity. “If I focus on this for the week, what will happen?”

This is one of my favorite personal growth tips. Treating your explorations as experiments takes failure out of the picture. The goal of an experiment isn't to “succeed.” It's to gain insight.

When you experiment, you try something with curiosity to see what happens. Sometimes what happens will be something you want to keep replicating, other times it won't. Either way, you have more

information (which, I might add, you gained by keeping it light and interesting, rather than grasping at a result).

Experimentation helps you identify what works best for you so you can craft your own personalized toolkit for your commute.

Remember that you will forget (again and again)

Another related piece of advice is that you will forget. Over and over again, you will lose track of your commitment to move towards wholeness and away from what keeps you feeling fractured and closed.

And that's OK.

Be patient with yourself. Use it as an opportunity to practice both coming back to peace and letting go of judgment. Some days you will feel like you're really starting to groove with the whole practice. Other days you'll probably be convinced that you aren't cut out for this. Enjoy the first, and don't worry about the second. Just keep coming back to the overall direction. Two steps forward, one step back. It's all OK. The only way you can fail is if you consciously decide to stop moving in the direction of peace.

There is a meditation practice that entails continually noticing when your mind has wandered off someplace else and gently bringing it back to the present moment. This happens again and again. Each time it happens is an opportunity to practice bringing yourself back. It's the same with your driving practice.

When you notice that you have wandered off the track, just say, "Oops. OK, come on back," as gently and compassionately as you can. It's all part of the process.

Beware self-criticism

Ultimately the goal of using your drive time as a personal growth practice is to cultivate a happier, more peaceful life. Unfortunately, it's all too common to take something with good intentions and turn it into a set of "shoulds" that we don't measure up to. What starts out as a vehicle for personal expansion becomes a club to bludgeon ourselves with as we deem we're not doing it right.

With that in mind, it's especially vital to watch out for self-criticism. Watch for things like, "I suck at this. I'm just not cut out for inner peace. What the hell is wrong with me?"

As you work on steering your heart and mind in a positive direction, be mindful of any tendency to use the times you fall short of your ideal to beat up on yourself. Check in with yourself on a regular basis and ask, "What am I telling myself about this whole process? What am I saying about myself?"

Accept "failure"

One of the hazards of writing a book like this is the way it shines a high-intensity floodlight on the times my responses don't quite measure up to the ideas I'm writing about. Along the way I have been acutely aware of the need to accept "failure" as part of the process.

Recently while on the way to an intimate gathering of friends, I found myself stuck in parking-lot traffic. The nature of the gathering made it feel important to be on time, so my negative stories had plenty of fuel.

As I crawled along, repeatedly checking the time, my tension started to grow. I was aware of the need to just let go and accept the situation (since there was absolutely zero I could do about it), but I still felt my irritation and impatience taking the helm. When I got there, I couldn't help but complain about the traffic. One of my friends who knew I was

working on this book said, “Well, sounds like it was a good opportunity to practice.”

I laughed and said, “No, it was a good opportunity to fail.”

There will be days in your driving practice when you just can’t bring yourself to put the ideas in this book to use. You know your commitment is to moving towards that openness, but all you can manage is a headlong slide into “This sucks!” If you’re looking in black-and-white terms, you might be inclined to see that as a failure. And that’s exactly what it would be, if as a result you said, “See? I just suck at this. I tried. It doesn’t work. I quit.”

But having a day – or even a stretch of days – where you fall face-first off the horse doesn’t mean you’re a failure. It just means you’re aiming well outside the scope of your habitual comfort zone. You might even take it as an indication that your aim really is high enough.

So when you have a commute that doesn’t measure up to your golden expectations of how you should be, take it as an opportunity to step back and stop taking it all so seriously. Recognize that the occasional face plant is just a part of process. It’s the perfect chance to practice not turning the occasional failure into the entire story.

That day as I sat stuck in traffic, I couldn’t for the life of me find a way to move toward the feelings of openness, love, and connection I aspired to. In every sense of the word, I failed. I could easily have made that a story about what a hypocrite I am to be writing this book. Instead, I just laughed at how hopelessly off track I had been.

That left much more space for the practice to start again the next time I got into the car.

Celebrate partial success

Sometimes your success will come wrapped in the disguise of failure. For example, a few days ago I had yet another experience where my reality didn't quite measure up to my aspirations. I was going to visit friends and ran into an unusual amount of traffic, which delayed me significantly. I tried to apply the ideas I explore in this book, but the best I could do was not go as far down the rabbit hole of negative response as I might historically have done.

Talking with my friends about it afterwards, I realized that even though I had showed up with a little dark cloud over my head, it dissipated fairly quickly. Because I hadn't gone down the rabbit hole, I was able to let go of the foul mood quickly.

On those inevitable times when you feel like you have failed in bringing peace to your commute, ask yourself, "Was it better (or at least less bad) than it ordinarily might have been?" If you can answer yes to that, celebrate! It's a step in the right direction.

Start where you are / Be where you are

Start where you are and let it unfold from there. Don't try to approach it as someone you're not. If you're a road-raging monster when you step behind the wheel, that's where you start. Trying to suddenly be a paragon of Zen-like bliss is only going to frustrate you, make you feel incapable, and make it likely that you're just going to chuck the whole damned idea out the window.

Similarly, let go of the idea that you should be experiencing anything other than what you're experiencing. If yesterday you felt like you had the whole thing mastered, and today you have steam coming out your ears fueled by impatience and a desire to control the uncontrollable, that's where you are. The steaming-ears state of mind is your place of practice that day. Telling yourself the story that you should be

experiencing something else is only going to slather on another layer of discomfort, and rob you of the opportunity to work directly with what you *are* experiencing.

Look at the long arc

One of the things that can be so frustrating about working with a major change like a shift towards greater equanimity is how slowly it seems to unfold. Sure, we'll have our little Zen-like moments now and then that make us feel like we're making progress, but often the growth and progress isn't obvious enough to give us a good hit of immediate gratification. It's like not noticing how much your kids are growing because you're with them every day.

The solution? Be like the crazy uncle who bombs into town once a year and exclaims, "How did you get so big?" As you stick with it over time, take an occasional step back and ask, "How is my experience different now than it was three months ago? Six months ago? A year?" Make it a habit to look at the long arc, not just how present you managed to be on the way home today.

Cultivate what works and let go of what doesn't

In the pages that follow you'll find a lot of ideas to explore. I share them for you to explore in the spirit of experimentation, not as a rigidly defined framework for what you need to do.

Take the ideas below and start to experiment. Give them time to unfold, but hold them loosely. If you find that something resonates deeply or is particularly effective, great! Keep using it. Build on it. Explore where else it wants to take you.

But if something falls flat, let it go. It might be the perfect method for someone, just not you (just as the perfect methods for you might fall flat for someone else).

SIX-WEEK PLAN

In the section on creating a structure that works for you, I promised an example of a six-week plan for your rolling learning lab. Feel free to take the plan below as is, or use it as a starting point, slicing and dicing and splicing to suit you best.

Week one: Noticing

In this first week, don't worry about making any changes. The goal here is simply to start building an awareness of what is happening in your experience. Pay attention to things like:

- What is having a constricting effect on you?
- What leaves you feeling open?
- What situations bring up a habitually negative reaction?
- What are the stories you habitually tell?

Spending a week focusing solely on noticing gives you a chance to start building an objective picture of what's going on that you can build on in the weeks to come. As I mentioned earlier, without awareness, you're pretty much at the whim of those limiting thoughts, beliefs, and habits.

Weekend journaling: What did I learn? What were the most common responses? How did they impact my state of mind?

Week two: Exploring your stories

This week, your focus your attention exclusively on the limiting stories you tell. These are the stories that, for example leave you fighting with what you can't control, or that bring up feelings of frustration, irritation, or anger.

There are three primary questions to ask in your week of story exploration.

1. What stories am I telling?
2. How do those stories make me feel?
3. What are some alternatives?

The goal of this week is to build a deeper awareness of the stories that are influencing how you experience life behind the wheel.

For the first couple days, just concentrate on noticing. As you start to recognize the stories that come up, you can start exploring different alternatives that are more conducive to the state of being you want to experience.

Weekend journaling: What did I learn? What were my most common stories? How did they impact my state of mind? What were some possible alternative stories?

Week three: Mindful driving

This week, you have one objective and one objective only – to notice when you have left the here-and-now and come on back. Easy, right?

You can play with the different suggestions from the chapter on mindfulness, or come up with your own. Possibilities include:

- Noticing what you notice (physical sensations, sounds, sights, etc.).
- Mindful breathing.
- Practice returning to the present moment. “Oops. My mind drifted. OK, come on back. What physical sensations am I feeling?”

Staying mindful – even just remembering to come back to the present once your mind has wandered – can be easier said than done. You might play with setting a reminder on your phone to go off every few minutes to help you remember.

Weekend Journaling: What did I learn? How was the experience of mindfulness for me? What was challenging? What felt good? What helped me stay mindful?

Week four: Focusing your attention

They say “what you focus on grows.” This week takes a cue from the mind sculpting chapter and focuses your attention on the things that contribute to a greater sense of aliveness and equanimity. For example:

- Gratitude
- Noticing beauty
- Dwelling on positive words
- Listening to positive audiobooks

One thing to keep in mind this week is what neurobiologist Rick Hanson calls “taking in the good.” Practice savoring the positive for at least 15 -20 seconds to help it land at a deeper level.

Weekend journaling: What did I learn? How did focusing on the positive impact me? What could I carry forward for my focus in the future?

Week five: Heart-based commuting

In week five, you’re going to experiment with letting your heart drive. In the chapter on bringing love, compassion, and heart to your commute, you’ll find numerous practices to explore this week. They all boil down to variations on these three themes:

- Practice feeling love.
- Practice cultivating love.
- Practice putting love into action.

Weekend Journaling: What did I learn? What resonated most? How was my experience with heart-based commuting different than my usual experience?

Week six: Experiencing the whole

In week six, you'll be exploring a combination of getting beyond the limiting constraints of "Me! Me! Me!" and expanding your perspective to take in a more holistic view. You can pull practices from the chapters on ego/Small-self, Getting Beyond Small-self, and Connection.

The practices in this week focus on three primary ideas.

- Noticing when you're coming from a constricting small-self view.
- Expanding your perspective.
- Seeing the connection.

Weekend Journaling: What did I learn? What helped me step out of small-self mode? What contracted me into small-self mode? How do I feel when I'm in small-self mode? How do I feel when I expand my perspective?

A PARTING THOUGHT

As I close this book, my parting thought is, “What if?”

What if you started using your time in the car as a practice, and it really *did* make a difference? What if you noticed yourself beginning to feel happier and less stressed? What if you actually did start to feel more inner peace?

And what if that started to seep into the rest of your life as well? (Which it inevitably would, because the *you* behind the wheel is the same *you* working at your desk or eating dinner with your family.)

How would that impact your life? How would it impact your relationships? What example would it set for others?

Beyond that, how would a more open and alive, less constricted and depleted *you* affect your ability to show up more fully in your life, allowing you to play a bigger game and make a difference you care about?

The more you look at it, the clearer it becomes that feeling a greater sense of peace doesn't just affect you. It affects the world you come in contact with as well.

And that's just with one person. Now multiply that by the potential for thousands – millions, even – of other drivers to be doing the same thing. Imagine the impact!

As I mentioned in the introduction, I didn't write this book solely so you'll feel happier and less stressed (though that *is* important!). I also wrote it because *I want to change the world.*

I want to be part of creating a culture and a society we can feel good about handing down to our kids, and their kids.

On the surface this book is about helping you, the individual driver, have a better quality of life, but it's really much bigger than that.

It starts with you feeling better. That in turn influences the choices you make and actions you take, which changes the impact you have on the world at a fundamental level.

When you feel more at peace, it filters into everything you do. You care more, and you're less self-absorbed in the limiting smallness of your ego story. You're less reactive and more responsive. It filters into both your interactions with people and how people feel around you.

It filters into the lens through which you see the world, giving you a more positive, expansive field of view. You see more possibilities. When you see more possibilities, you take more action and set more of those possibilities in motion. You live more fully into your potential.

From an internal foundation of peace, the ripples you create – whether through the mundane activities of your everyday life or the inspired action you take to breathe life into your dreams and visions – plant the seeds for a better world for future generations.

The exact same story can unfold for anyone.

For me, the bigger picture perspective of *The Drive to Inner Peace* boils down to one simple question: *What kind of world do we want to hand down to future generations?* Is it one where we have tipped the balance toward a culture of caring, compassion, and connection? Or is it one where conflict and tension rule the day?

I mentioned in the introduction that Gandhi is purported to have said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Another way you could

spin that is, “Peace is an inside job.” If we want a world that values peace, and justice, and love, we have to start with our own inner world.

The seeds for the world future generations will live in are being planted today. That’s true from a broad societal level all the way down to what gets handed down generation to generation in families.

One of the greatest things we can do is to live our lives as a gift to the future. And that starts on the inside.

What seeds do you want to plant today?

APPENDIX: EXERCISE COMPILATION

As you use your commute as a personal growth practice, you will no doubt want to both find new exercises to explore and revisit old ones.

To make it easy for you, this appendix offers a distillation of the exercises suggested throughout the book without the accompanying explanatory text.

THE SIMPLEST QUESTION

“Is this helping me feel more open and connected, or is it making me feel more closed and disconnected?”

MINDFULNESS

Mindful driving:

Make a game out of noticing what there is to be aware of in your drive. Some examples of that might include:

- The feel of your steering wheel in your hands both as you hold it straight and as you turn.
- The pull on your body when you turn your car.
- The sensation of speeding up and slowing down.
- The movement of your muscles as you steer, use the brake, push down on the clutch, and shift gears.
- The sound of your turn signal.
- The sound of the road as both your speed and the road surface changes.
- The interaction of your car with other cars as you merge and change lanes (the space that opens up – or not, the motion of the other cars, etc.).

Idea: Set the intention before you start to notice a specific aspect of that experience (like the movement of your muscles).

Idea: Dive deeper into the exploration of what's there to notice by looking at it sense by sense.

- What am I seeing?
- What am I hearing?
- What am I feeling?
- What am I smelling
- What am I tasting? (This one may or may not be relevant at any given moment.)

Notice challenging feelings

Use negative emotions as an opportunity to practice mindfulness.

1. **First, name what you notice.** “Oh hey, check it out. That familiar ol’ impatience is up.”
2. **Check in with your body.** What physical sensations are accompanying that feeling? Where?

Returning to the present

For one day, make your commute about noticing when your mind wanders off and bringing it back to the present moment.

When you notice your mind occupied elsewhere, come back to your actual experience. Check in with your bodily sensations.

Tip: To help you recognize when you have left the present is to focus on your breathing for a count of five. (This isn't a meditation practice, so remember to keep your main focus on safe driving.) If you find yourself counting past five, it's a good bet your mind is starting to drift. Use that as a signal to come back to the present.

Practice “being”

For a specific period of time, let yourself sit in silence. Don't look to be entertained or distracted. Don't reach for the radio. Don't even listen to an uplifting audiobook. Resist the urge to escape when you start to feel boredom creep in.

Begin and end with a conscious breath

Before you start your car and when you turn it off, take a conscious breath. Relax into it. Try combining it with a positive word or phrase that you particularly resonate with.

STORY MANAGEMENT

Notice negative stories

Ask yourself, “What are my stories? Where do I have negative reactions because I think things should or shouldn't be the way they are?” If your stories are creating your reality, what reality are you creating?

Keep watching as you drive to see what other stories come up. Jot down a list of any stories you notice when you reach your destination.

Recognize when you disappear into the story

Train your brain to notice your limiting stories is by looking back after the fact and ask, “Where did these stories come up? How did I react?” It's like sending your brain to the gym to practice recognizing the stories so you're more able to catch them on the fly in the future.

Question your stories

When you notice your limiting stories, question them. Ask, “Is that really true? Is that really true, or is that a strong opinion? Is there another way to see it?”

Find alternative stories

Pretend you *have* to come up with another way of looking at it. Better yet, pretend you have to come up with *five* other ways of looking at it.

You might even make a game of coming up with a new story (and playing with making that your “truth” of the moment) any time you find traffic slowdowns grating on you. The same holds true for any limiting story you discover yourself telling.

Practice shifting your stories

When you look back and realize that a limiting story was at play, practice shifting your stories in hindsight by saying “OK, here’s how I reacted. Here are the thoughts and reactions that set in motion. What might some alternatives have been? What other stories could I have told? What would have felt better?”

Shift your mindset

Change how you see your commute. For example:

- Focus on the value of using the commute time for growth and development.
- Look at your commute as a way to prepare for the day – a little like washing your face – and wind your day down.
- Explore what it would be like to look at it as an opportunity for sacred time with yourself.

Say, "It's OK."

Sometimes shifting your story is as simple as stopping and saying, "It's OK." It's OK that traffic is like this. It's OK that that guy cut me off. It's OK that I'm going to be late.

Even if you don't actually believe it, play with it as a thought experiment of sorts. "If this really were OK, how would that feel?" See if you notice any difference when you come from a space of "It's OK," whether that is in your thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations.

See everybody/everything as your teacher

Develop the attitude that every jerk, poor driver, or traffic jam has something to teach you, or is an opportunity to practice refining a more open and connected way of being.

Change the "facts" of the story you're making up

Changing your interpretation of events to a more positive one can change your experience.

Drop the story and return to the facts

Look at the facts without any story overlay at all.

Practice learning from your stories

We all have that shadow, what the psychologist Carl Jung called the parts of us that we find undesirable and reject or ignore. We often project those shadows onto others. Noticing what really bothers us in others is a way to discover what those shadows are.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Watching those emotions as they come up offers a great opportunity to both get to know why and how they come up, and explore ways to both head them off before they come up and minimize their impact when they do.

Use it as a training ground for letting go

When you find yourself having a negative reaction, use it as an opportunity to practice letting go. Approach it with a sense of curiosity. “What would I happen if I just let this feeling go? What if I didn’t take this feeling so seriously?”

Feel the flow and let it go

When you notice a negative emotional reaction (e.g., anger) coming up, step back and watch the flow of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that arise and eventually subside. Notice how transient they are.

Excavate the unpleasant emotion

When you notice a challenging emotion, follow it and explore what’s behind it. For example, the anger we feel when someone cuts us off might often be fueled by fear.

Breathe deeply

When negative emotions come up, a simple practice is to shift your focus to deep breathing. Start consciously taking slow, deep breaths, breathing in deeply and exhaling fully.

As you explore this, remember that safe driving is always your primary focus. If you’re not used to breathing deeply you can start to feel a

little dizzy, so start small and work up. You might even want to experiment with this first when you're not driving to see how it affects you.

Breathe in the good, breathe out the limiting

Take a deep breath in, then breathe out the negative emotion. You might accompany it with repeated words, like, "Breathing out anger. Breathing in peace."

Use negative reactions as invitations to _____ (notice, love, show compassion, etc.)

When something sparks a negative emotion, use that as a signal to do something positive. "Oh, I'm angry at that other driver. That's my signal to take a deep breath and send that person a blessing. Oh, I'm frustrated with this traffic jam. That's my signal to hold myself in compassion."

Let negative emotions be the catalyst to practice positive habits

Pick a habit you would like to develop. Maybe it is getting into the habit of focusing on the calming flow of your breath when you feel yourself getting angry. Or maybe it's automatically looking for things you can be grateful for in a situation you find yourself irritated with. Each time that negative emotion comes up, it can act as a trigger for that positive habit.

Hold negative thoughts in a love bubble

When you have negative thoughts about people, the situation, yourself, or anything else, hold those thoughts in a space of love.

Remind yourself that undesirable reactions are simply practice points

Remind yourself that each negative emotion that arises is an opportunity to loosen up the knot that keeps you feeling constricted and disconnected.

SELF-TALK

Replace your negative self-talk

Use negative thoughts – especially habitual ones – as signals to shift your focus.

MIND SCULPTING

Notice the good, the beautiful, etc.

As you drive, look for opportunities to notice the positive aspect of your experience.

Let your focus linger on it so you can really absorb it.

Look for gratitude opportunities

A specific way to notice the good is to look for things to be grateful about. They don't have to be anything momentous.

Do a blessings review

Use your time in the car to review the blessings in your life. Start it off with, "I'm blessed that _____" and fill in the blank.

Positive word practice

Words carry a power with them. Try picking a word and focusing on it during your commute. Contemplate its meaning. Ponder where and how it shows up in your life. Repeat it out loud. Notice the sensation. Notice how you feel when you let yourself sink into the word. What impact does it have on your mind? How does it make your body feel?

Examples of powerful positive words include:

- Love
- Compassion
- Share
- Blessing
- Open
- Connection
- Acceptance
- Peace
- Delight
- Joy
- Success
- Giving

Feed your mind the good stuff

Use your commute to reinforce a positive, productive way of experiencing the world (for example, with personal development audiobooks, or audiobook biographies about people who inspire you.

HEART

Begin and end with a blessing

Before you start your car and when you turn it off, pause and give a blessing to your drive and everyone you will/did come into contact with.

Practice experiencing love

Take five minutes (more if you want) every time you hop behind the wheel to connect with that feeling of unconditional love. Focus on something that makes that feeling well up (for example, a loved one, an experience where that feeling came up unbidden, or a favorite pet).

Drive from the heart

As you drive, ask yourself, “How would my heart drive?” If your heart were in complete control of how you drove, the decisions you made, and how you responded to everything that happens, what would that look like?

Use HeartMath® techniques

The HeartMath Institute has developed numerous research-based techniques to help you use your heart to calm your mind. Here is a simple one called the *Quick Coherence® Technique*.

Step 1:

Heart-Focused Breathing

Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area. Breathe a little slower and deeper than usual.

Step two:

Activate a Positive Feeling

Make a sincere attempt to experience a regenerative feeling such as appreciation or care for someone or something in your life.

You can find more HeartMath techniques at www.heartmath.org.

Practice lovingkindness

In Buddhism there is a tradition of lovingkindness meditation, where you hold a person in your mind and remind yourself that “this person is just like me.”

“Just like me, this person wants to be happy. Just like me, this person sometimes struggles. Just like me, this person wants to be loved. Just like me, this person has less-than-shining moments, and probably feels bad about some of them later.”

Recognizing your shared humanity can be a springboard to seeing people through the lens of love and compassion.

Acknowledge the suffering of others

When another driver is behaving badly, remind yourself that they must really be suffering to be feeling that kind of negative emotion.

Rather than responding to it in kind, try feeling compassion for that suffering. Send them a silent blessing. Say a prayer for them.

Turn your negative judgments into compassion

When you find yourself judging people on the road, ask yourself, “Is there ever a situation where I’m like that?” If someone is driving too slow in the fast lane, are you ever lost in space and not paying attention? Or if someone goes speeding past you in a way that doesn’t feel safe, is there ever a time when things feel so urgent that you get self-absorbed and don’t take others into account?

Look for opportunities to give

One way of expressing love is generosity. Watch for opportunities to give to others. Maybe that is putting on your brakes so someone can

merge. Or maybe it is getting over to a slower lane when you notice someone wants to go faster than you.

Make your car a mobile blessing machine

As you drive, focus on sending blessings in all directions. Maybe blessings of peace, or love, or freedom from suffering. Think of it as a big blessing bubble that touches everyone around you.

Acknowledgement / recognition

When somebody does something kind or courteous, like letting you merge in front of them, acknowledge them with a smile or wave.

Practice self-love / self-kindness / self-compassion

When you find yourself treating yourself unkindly, or if you're just having a difficult time, pause and treat yourself with love and compassion.

Forgiveness

Instead of getting sucked into irritation when someone does something that feels like an affront, shift into forgiveness.

Love or fear?

As you drive, check in with yourself from time to time and ask, "Am I coming from love, or am I coming from fear?"

Shift your thought-habit to one of love

Pay attention to the thoughts that come up regularly. When you notice limiting thought-habits, use them as a reminder to shift them to thought-habits fueled by love.

Smile

Try putting on a smile for a while and see how it feels. Let it linger for a while. Let the feeling it brings up deepen.

Look for / create opportunities to love

Challenge yourself to keep looking for more opportunities to love. “How can I love during this commute?” is a great daily question.

LETTING GO

Let go of attachment

When things go south in your commute (like when there’s an accident up ahead and traffic suddenly grinds to a halt) and you find yourself having a negative response to it, that’s the perfect time to practice letting go of attachment. In that case, the attachment might be to having traffic flow freely, to being able to get where you’re going quickly.

When you notice that response, pause, take a deep breath, and mentally let your attachment flow out with the outbreath. Notice if there is any tension in your body, and let that go too.

Let go of aversion

Any time you feel the constriction of wanting something to be different than it is, aversion is hard at work. The best and most obvious place this shows up is that dreaded traffic jam. When you notice that aversion, take a deep breath and remind yourself, “Everything is OK just the way it is.” Think of it as training in feeling an internal contentment whatever your external circumstances.

Ask, “What am I trying to control?”

If you find yourself tense or irritated while in traffic, it’s a good bet you’re wanting to control something outside the scope of your control. When you notice your experience contracting, ask yourself, “What am I trying to control?” When you identify it, let go.

Control what you can. Let go of what you can’t.

Ask, “What can I control?” Do that, and let go of the rest.

Make a list of “things I can control” to have options to choose from when you notice yourself tensing up in your drive.

Let the thoughts flow

Use your drive time to let your thoughts come and go. Notice them, watch them, but don’t hold on to them. Resist the urge to feed them with more attention.

Let go of false urgency

When you find yourself impatient and feeling the urge to get where you’re going fast, even when you have plenty of time and aren’t running late, You’re creating a stressful false sense of urgency. Use it as an opportunity to practice letting go and being OK with where you are.

You might, for example, challenge that false sense of urgency by staying in the lane you’re in, resisting the urge to move to a faster moving lane. As you do that, pay attention to the habitual responses that come up. How does it feel? What is your knee-jerk reaction? What is the story you’re telling?

You can add another dimension to this practice by repeating the mantra, “Where I am is perfect.” See if you can actually start to experience that.

Let go of the instant gratification mindset

When you find yourself chafing under the desire to be there ASAP, use it as an opportunity to ask, “What if that’s not true? What if I don’t really need to be there quickly? What if it’s OK for it to take more time?”

Let go of being righteously right

If you find yourself consumed with the righteous anger (“That so-and-so! They should this! They shouldn’t that!”), let it go. Step back and ask yourself, “How is this making my life better? How might this be making my life worse?”

Stop setting yourself up to be the victim

When you let your happiness be dependent on your ability to control what’s beyond your control, you’re going to come out on the losing end.

Start paying attention to when that unsatisfiable desire for control comes up. You’ll probably start to see some common themes. Once you start to see those themes, you can be more aware of them so you can head them off at the pass. You can also explore how to work with them so they don’t come up as much to begin with.

ACCEPTANCE

Traffic – especially rush hour traffic – is the perfect opportunity to practice finding peace with what is.

Accept others' humanness

When someone irritates you, take a deep breath before reacting. Look at the person and say (out loud or to yourself), "You are not what you just did. I don't like what you just did, but I have done things that weren't ideal, too. That's just part of being human."

Accept the inherent messiness

When your commute goes sideways, use it as an opportunity to practice accepting the inherent messiness of it all.

Accept whatever you resist

Notice whatever you resist, and breathe acceptance into it.

SMALL SELF IDENTITY

What would it be like if my ego weren't driving?

Whenever you feel challenged, ask this question: What would it be like if my ego weren't driving? What would it be like if you weren't letting yourself be swayed by the stories and reactions of your ego? What would it be like if that situation that brings up your irritation, or anger, or impatience just had no story attached to it?

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Widen your perspective to the flow of traffic

Notice your point of view. You're probably very focused on what's immediately around you, but not so aware of what's going on outside your immediate sphere of interaction with other cars, the road, etc.

Keep your focus on your immediate surroundings enough to stay safe and start to expand your awareness. Widen your perspective. Instead of just what the cars around you are doing, expand your view to include the entire flow of traffic. Watch how it flows. Notice how one thing – a person changing lanes, perhaps – can have an impact on the flow of the whole.

Widen your perspective to the flow of people

Once you have played with widening your perspective to the flow of traffic for a while, try expanding your awareness to all the people in those cars. Notice how the people around you look. Are they singing? Do they look tense? Are they paying attention, or talking on the phone?

Then expand your awareness in your imagination. Each of those drivers is coming from and going to someplace. Imagine how that unfolds in your big picture awareness of the traffic flow. Their cars coming into the flow of traffic, merging into the whole. Their cars leaving the flow of traffic, making their way down streets, stopping at stop lights, turning right, turning left, and eventually getting where they're going.

Now take it down to a human level. Each of those drivers has a story. Each of those stories is interwoven with dozens, even hundreds of other stories. Each of them has hopes and dreams. Each of them is struggling in their own way.

Now imagine how all of that affects the whole.

CONNECTION

Practice the Golden Rule

A super-simple way to take your commute out of your isolation bubble and expand it to include others is practicing the Golden Rule. At any

point of interaction with others on the road you can reflect, “How would I like to be treated here?”

You can expand that to look at the different options and for each one, ask, “How would I feel if that happened to me?”

Create positive ripples

This practice is another spin on the golden rule practice. Your interactions with others create ripples. Sometimes those ripples are big. Sometimes they’re barely noticeable. But over time, they add up.

Make it a game to look for as many ways to create positive ripples as you can. For example:

- Letting someone cut in front of you.
- Smiling at someone.
- Waving at someone who was courteous to you

Expand to other perspectives

Look at the experience of any given moment from multiple perspectives. Your perspective is only one of them. There’s the perspective of the driver in front of you, and the one behind you. There’s the perspective of the collective whole, maybe seen from up above. There’s the perspective of the person who is annoying you and the person who – given the way they’re waving hello with their middle finger – you apparently just annoyed. Practice occupying each perspective objectively.

Deeply see the other drivers

See your fellow commuters more deeply than the surface level story based on what you see at first glance. Get past the caricature and see their humanness. Be aware that they too have a complex matrix of

positive and negative traits, hopes and fears, abilities and shortcomings. Maybe even see their divinity.

DOING WELL BY NOT DOING HARM

Be a safe and aware driver.

Refrain from instigating anger (whether by your driving or your action towards someone else) and not responding to and feeding the anger of others.

ADDITIONAL PRACTICE IDEAS

Create reminder questions

Play with ways to remind yourself of questions to help keep your awareness on your practice. For example:

- What's my story?
- What am I feeling? (Physically? Emotionally?)
- What am I resisting?
- Where is my mind (am I reliving the past or preliving the future)?

You could keep one question in mind for a period of time, like a week, or a month, or you could pay attention to a different question each day. If you decide on a daily question, try writing it on a sticky note before each commute and stick it to your dashboard as a reminder.

Again, the questions listed here are just to get you started. Keep adding questions to the list as they occur to you.

Pick a daily quote or passage to ponder

Use your time in the car as an opportunity to go deep into an inspiring quote, or a passage from a book. Look at it through the lens of questions like:

- What does this really mean?
- How does this apply in my life?
- What would I do differently if I really took this to heart?
- How would my life change if I took this to heart?
- What is it about this quote/passage that resonates with me?
- Is there more to it than my initial impression?

Ask questions that help foster a growth-oriented approach to commuting

Asking open ended questions that invite insight is another way to plant a seed and provide space for it to sprout. You can ask questions like:

- How can I _____?
- How can I relax into this?
- How can I let go?

Focus on an either/or

As you drive, pick an either/or to use as a lens to look at your reactions. “Does this leave me more _____ or _____?” For example:

- Expansive vs. contracted
- Receptive vs. reactive
- Relaxed vs. rigid
- Flexible vs. controlling
- Open vs. closed

ABOUT CURT ROSENGREN

Curt Rosengren is on a mission to change the world from the inside out. Since 2001, as a coach, writer, and speaker, Curt has built his career on helping people explore and answer these questions:

- How can I feel more energized and alive?
- How can I feel less stressed and depleted?
- How can I make a difference with my life?

There's a line from a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes that goes, "Alas for those that never sing, but die with all their music in them." Poetically speaking, Curt helps people free their music. More practically speaking, he helps people feel less stressed, more resilient, more energized, and more in their groove so they can make the impact they're here to make.

For years Curt's primary focus was career passion. His current focus, built on a framework he calls *The Aliveness CODE™*, has its roots in the work he often did with career passion clients around how to improve their here-and-now while working towards something new.

Curt has written several e-books, including *The Ripple Revolution Handbook*, *The Aliveness CODE First-Aid Kit: How to Bounce Back When Your Day Goes Splat!*, *The Drive to Inner Peace: How Your Commute Can Make You Happier & Less Stressed*, and *The Occupational Adventure Guide: A Travel Guide to the Career of Your Dreams*.

His insights have been featured in articles in a wide range of publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Seattle Times*. His first blog, *The Occupational Adventure*, was named Best of the Web by *Forbes.com*. He also blogged for several years for *US News & World Report*.

Curt loves languages, and speaks reasonably fluent Swedish, functionally ugly Spanish, and just enough French to get in trouble at a French restaurant.

More information on Curt's work at www.curtrosengren.com