be bad, better

Also by Rebecca Seal

Solo: How to Work Alone (and Not Lose Your Mind)

be bad, better

How Not Trying So Hard Will Set You Free

Rebecca Seal

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To my daughters, Isla Mae and Coralie

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Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

– Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.

I cried when I read the first line of Mary Oliver's famous poem 'Wild Geese'.

I have been trying to be good all my life. Sometime in my earliest years, I got the message that to be good was to be lovable, to belong and to be worthy and, from then on, that idea ran like a thread through almost everything that I did. As I got older, my understanding of what it meant to be good only grew: it wasn't just that I needed to be nice, to be kind and to do well at school; it also meant I worried endlessly about how

I behaved everywhere and with everyone, that I bent until I broke, desperate to please everyone I met and convinced that doing so was the only way to be liked. I was addicted to pursuing success even though I had no idea what it would mean when I attained it. If anyone ever suggested I'd behaved imperfectly, or if I ever failed at something, I became physically and mentally unmoored – I'd breathe so hard I would unsettle the balance of oxygen in my blood for weeks at a time; at night, I'd lie awake replaying and replaying and replaying every embarrassment, every misstep, every moment where I got it wrong.

If being good all the time is the key to belonging, then you have to hide your badness very well indeed.

I wasn't stupid. I could stand outside myself, see my life and know that my goodness obsession served no one. I could see it damaging relationships, encouraging me to choose unsuitable partners and threatening my career by paralysing me with doubt, making me easy to exploit because I had so much I needed to prove. I was perpetually anxious, and perpetually at war with my anxiety, at war with who I was.

I'm not alone. Our need for self-optimisation may have reached a crescendo today, but it's been building up for centuries. Often, the drivers of self-optimisation stand to make money from us (we need more clothes, better cars and a bigger house in order to seem to be our best selves), and when it's not about money, it's about taking our power, or at the very least taking our time, our attention, our capacity, our creativity. If we're busy worrying about the length of our hair or how likeable we are, we're not going to pose much threat to the status quo.

In 2021, I was asked by my editor at the *Guardian*, Ruth Lewy, to write a feature that would come out on the first of January, 2022. Ultimately headlined 'Be Bad, Better', it was about why we shouldn't make New Year's resolutions, but should instead learn to accept our perceived worst bits cheerfully, whether our bad habits or our body shape, and it was published as part of a special issue titled 'New Year, Same You'. In it, I interviewed academics, philosophers, behaviour change experts and scientists about why we've been taught to think that so much of being a normal – angry, sad, messy, tired, soft and round – human is wrong, and why and how to overcome that message. In over twenty years of features and food journalism, and book writing, I had never had so many emails, DMs and messages thanking me for a single piece of work in such a short space of time. I had never published an article in which all the below-the-line comments were positive (almost no journalist ever has). I saw it being reshared and retweeted and gaining a reach that was totally unexpected, as well as completely joyful. Throughout my inboxes, people were letting themselves off the hook. They were letting themselves be themselves. No more diets that don't work. No more vicious inner voice. No more self-criticism. No more self-flagellation while enduring January's brutal weather.

And the thread that ran through all the replies? Relief. Relief that they were not an aberration, relief that other people feel like this too. Relief that it's not just them wondering why we spend so much time feeling bad, and being told to feel bad, about our lovely, beautiful, delightful selves.

All the major religions teach a moral code that is rooted in

ideas of goodness. There's good, and then there's bad. Humans like clarity and we like our stories to be easily understood: good vs evil; heroes vs villains; right vs wrong. These ideas underpin the narratives we tell about ourselves and about everything else, as well. The majority of us consume our news from sources that mirror our views of the world – our newspapers, magazines and social feeds confirm that the villains we think of as such are indeed monstrous; that the politicians we think of as noble are righteous, and those we think of as power-hungry are blinded by their greed. We try to be nuanced, to accept complexity and shades of grey. But really, we love it when things are binary. To be human is to be a storyteller and a story listener.

As will become evident, as well as with the stories we tell and are told, I am obsessed with what we see. Whether we intend to, or realise it, we see a hundred or more images created or curated by advertisers and marketeers every day (plus images of the actors in our TV shows and the sets within which they appear to exist, and then many more if we use social media).[1] Those images tell us a manufactured story about what being human looks like. They are almost impossible to escape, especially if you live in a town or city. They influence us, especially when we aren't paying particular attention to them, and especially when certain themes are repeated over and over again – like the possibility of straight white teeth, or long shiny hair; of a neat, elegantly designed and spacious home; of perfectly clean dishes, or of a germ-free bathroom; of a healthy body, diet or lifestyle; of a successful, good-looking life. Often, they gently weave together notions of beauty,

cleanliness and health with ideas about goodness and moral virtue. In general, the people in these images belong to a very particular aesthetic group: they rarely feature bigger or realistically varied bodies, older people, or much in the way of true ethnic diversity. Women are rarely seen in high-status settings – if they're at work, they're call-centre operatives, not judges, but more often they're at home, or laughing at salad or yoghurt. And they're often sexy, in a way that is much rarer to see among images of men. (There are a few exceptions, obviously, and interestingly they tend to be created by organisations that are selling something slightly different from product-based industries; Transport for London, for example, uses real and diverse Londoners in its marketing posters, but it's not selling something classically aspirational.) It's not that we never see marketing or media with 'normal' people in it, but the glossy stuff that gets repeated has a powerful uniformity.

But, stories are made up. What if some of the things society has taught us to think of as good are just social constructs? What if some of the things we've been told are bad are just as useful as the good, or even more so? What if our worst bits are not the baddest, after all? What if we've been taught the wrong things (for hundreds of years)? What if being angry is useful? What if being disorganised is creative? What if being negative is validating? What if being anxious makes us brilliant at moving our lives to where we want them to be? What if laziness is healthy? What if logic is restrictive? What if mess is reassuring? What if not holding our real selves in so tightly is actually good for our relationships? What if the science of body size isn't as clear-cut as we are told it is? What if the

standards we set for ourselves were always unmeetably high? What if being truthful about who we are and how we feel turns out to make us feel lighter and happier, less trapped? What if we don't need more stuff in order to feel complete? What if we don't have to be all the things we've been told we ought to be – and could just be our lovely, flawed, soft-bellied selves?

What if there is deep, satisfying joy in letting go? What if it is not about giving up, but about setting ourselves free?

The bad in this book's title isn't an invitation to start shoplifting or cheating. It's not about discarding morality. It's about taking what you think of as your worst bits – your inability to focus, your untidiness, your people-pleasing, your temper, your negativity, your selfishness, your flakiness, your daydreaming, your procrastinating, your worrying, your critical inner voice, your lack of self-love, your ageing body – and, instead of burying them so deep you hope no one ever sees them, you hold them up to the light and ask whether they could serve you, instead of living in fear of them.

Along the way, it might feel like you're running up against contradictions – why am I pro exercise, but against diet and fitness culture? Why am I OK with clutter, but broadly against consumer culture? As will become clear, this is a book about *being* human, not necessarily *how* to be human. It's about allowing ourselves to be who we *are*, not who we *should* be. We've been living this way for a long time, and there will inevitably be overcorrections, as there should be in any good dialectic. And being a human is complicated. The contradictions will come good … or, they won't: the questions raised are the most important thing.

We can even apply this point to science, which can be just as biased as politics. I'll use scientific research here to try to prove my points but, in the same breath, I'll say we need to question what science tells us too, and who is using its results. The data that writers and journalists like me rely on is as biased as the people and institutions that generate it – and I'm talking about independent academics as well as the more obvious bias inherent in studies paid for by drug, food or chemical companies. (As writer and doctor Ben Goldacre has pointed out time and again, pharmaceutical trials sponsored by drug companies are four times more likely to yield positive results for the company's drug than independent trials. Why is this still allowed?[2]) Every single one of us holds unconscious or implicit bias. This leaks into academia and lab-based research just as it leaks into everything else. If it didn't, we wouldn't need books like Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* and *Divided: Racism, Medicine and Why We Need to Decolonise Healthcare* by Annabel Sowemimo, or Pragya Agarwal's *Sway: Unravelling Unconscious Bias*.

A great deal of research, even now, is done on white men (and often by white men) and, if not men, then white people, with potential sex and ethnicity differences rarely accounted for. Ageism is another deeply held bias and, as we will see in the chapter Looking Bigger, anti-fat bias is so widespread in the fields of medicine, pharmaceuticals, dietetics and nutritional science that, until recently, it was practically unnoticed, which has huge implications for obesity research, and weight-and-health science in general. Women are listed as principal authors on only 18 per cent of articles in high-impact journals,

and those articles are less likely to be cited than articles with men as the lead author.[3] When articles are reviewed without the reviewer knowing the author's gender, women's articles are more likely to be accepted for publication; multiple studies have shown that male scientists find it easier to get funding than female scientists. When American university professors selecting for post-doctoral candidates were presented with identical CVs but the names on them were manipulated to suggest certain ethnicities, with all other things being completely equal, CVs that appeared to be from Black women and people with Latin American heritage were ranked lowest in terms of hireability.[4] Science is easier to get into for white men, it's easier to stay in and it's easier to be successful in. And that impacts what science gets done.

Data and expertise are vital as we tread a path through all of this, but we also need to guard against the tendency to treat them like sacred cows. Many fields of research and expertise are comparatively young – like nutrition, psychology and gut health – and, like all academic fields, their tenets change as more study is done. Yet we often treat their findings as though they are irrefutable. Andrew Wakefield's flawed and disproven assertion that the MMR vaccine is linked to autism gained huge amounts of attention in the late 1990s and early 2000s. His work should never have been published, much less by the *Lancet*, but for years the press repeated his claims. Twenty-five years later, parents still have worries about vaccinations based on his erroneous views. The way that scientific research is supposed to advance is by positing an idea, testing it and then building on the results with further and better tests, proving

and – crucially – disproving as you go. We lay humans – and especially journalists – tend to forget this, behaving instead as though we've reached the end of science whenever something new is discovered, or appears to have been discovered, even if the science is novel and needs more time and testing. I receive press releases containing absolutist terminology every day: 'The truth about diet and dementia' hit my inbox recently; a more realistic but less alluringly clickbait-y header would have been: 'Diet and dementia – what little we know so far'.

I'm a huge fan of data. But let's treat it with caution.

This is a book for everyone. Not every trait or behaviour here will chime with you – but most of us have a relationship with the idea that we have to be our best, good-est self, living our optimal, shiniest life. We need to start grappling with the things we've learned to think are good and bad, rather than fighting with who we really are. Maybe you have so-called 'bad' bits that I haven't addressed. Maybe your argument is with a different part of yourself. That's OK. Instead, let's ask the bigger question: who says I have to be different from who I really am, where did I learn it, and is it really true?

I don't think that what I'm talking about is radical. What I'm talking about is compassion – self-compassion and externally directed compassion. And I don't really think that is a wild or crazy thing to want or to aim for. (It might seem naive, at first, but I'm OK with that.)

What we are going on is a kind of anthropological quest. We get messages from culture that tell us how to behave all the time. Some of those messages are useful. Some are essential.

But some of them don't do us much good. They're so familiar that often, we don't even notice that they are there. I want to make the familiar unfamiliar. I want to try to step outside some of our social norms and say: wow. How did we get here? And is here – where we give so much status to being impossibly beautiful, skinny, happy and rich – where we want to be?

Some of what I want to explore is about shifting our mindsets. Some of it is about practical change. Some of the forty experts whom I've spoken to offer clear solutions. In some cases, rather than practical actions, it's more about noticing how weird, broken or messed up certain things are, in order to get to a point where we can re-make them. The current set-up isn't doing many of us much good. And the more of us who feel that this isn't how we want to live – that some of our cultural and political choices marginalise and harm people, that even the most privileged in society are damaged by the way that our happy-or-else society is structured – then the closer we will come to figuring out a more equitable way to exist.

What if we are all, in fact, enough? What if we could let go of being good and just be bad, better?

*

A quick note on terms. When I talk about the patriarchy – and I will, a lot – I'm talking about the patriarchal system in which I live, which was historically created by white men with power. It's not an uncontroversial word, and there is no single agreed definition for it. The reason it features a lot here is that many of the things we are taught to consider 'bad' about ourselves emanate from this patriarchal system and we can't unpick the

structural, cultural, political and philosophical reasons why we think certain things about ourselves without reference to it. (You don't have to be a woman to be impacted by living in a patriarchy.)

The idea of a patriarchy as a societal structure emerged in the 1860s, around the same time as *Das Kapital* and *On the Origin of Species*, although its literal meaning is 'rule of the father', from the ancient Greek. Patriarchy was much discussed among feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, before falling out of favour. When the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2017, it wasn't a particularly popular word, but since then the idea has, in some circles at least, become more of an accepted and acceptable catch-all to describe the continuing sex and gender inequalities we all experience. (It often – but not always – comes with a side-order of white supremacy and a belief in personal responsibility so strong that it manifests itself in economic discrimination and a dusting of aporophobia.) I can't give you a perfect definition for it – I can only tell you why I believe it's real, and why I think it's a useful concept here.

For much of recorded history, most humans have lived in social systems that were designed and run by men. Patriarchy is not necessarily a given; a 2019 study identified and examined 160 communities around the world that are run matrilineally, in an attempt to discover commonalities, and why past matrilineal groups might have shifted to patrilineal arrangements. (Most anthropologists say that there are no matriarchies in operation today. Where women do have significant power, it tends to be shared with men, rather than being the direct opposite of a patriarchy.[5])

The most recent iteration, the one we live in, was designed by and for cisgender heterosexual white men, mainly older white men who already held power, whether political, economic, inherited, or all three. (Obviously, it wasn't designed on a drawing board. It developed over time and, naturally, to the advantage of those already in a privileged position.) The primary beneficiaries of our patriarchy are older white men with power. (Nothing against older people here – see the chapter Looking Old – it's just that power accrues as time passes, for this very select group.)

The people who gain the most from this patriarchy are therefore part of a small, rarefied cohort. For the rest of us, the patriarchy represents a mostly crappy deal. Living in a patriarchy hurts all of us, in different ways, to a greater or lesser extent. However, some of us benefit from it, too. As a white, cisgender, smaller-bodied, able-bodied woman, I absolutely benefit from how the world is currently arranged in certain specific ways and it's disingenuous to behave otherwise.

It's a construct within which we all operate, and we're all in hock to it. The internalised misanthropy of our particular patriarchy means that all too often we jostle for status within the system, rather than noticing that the system in itself is the flawed and problematic thing that we could and should all be fighting against. We fight between us, within it, group to group, privilege to privilege, inequality to inequality.

Our patriarchy is a system of control, of all of us, and it controls men just as much as women. It has quite specific ideas about exactly which few men (and even fewer women) get to access power. It has specific ideals of masculinity (and femininity).

However far we might have come, it still makes life very hard for those of us who will not or cannot meet those ideals. And right now it feels like we are backsliding, particularly in terms of trans and queer rights, and in terms of fertility healthcare. It is difficult – and sometimes dangerous – to be a man, woman, non-binary or transgender person who doesn't match up to the gendered stereotypes created and perpetuated by our patriarchy.

There are other less philosophical reasons to believe we live in a patriarchy. Violence against women – particularly sexual violence – is one. In the UK, only one out of every hundred rapes reported in 2021 resulted in a charge by police, let alone a conviction. In the twelve months from September 2021, 70,633 rapes were recorded. Only 15 per cent of people who experience sexual assault go to the police, suggesting the actual rates of sexual violence are far, far higher than official stats suggest.[6] Half of all rapes against women are carried out by their partner or ex-partner. One third of all rapes against adults happen in their own home (which is why telling women not to walk home alone in the dark isn't going to fix the problem, but does frighten them out of living in freedom). Five out of every six rapes against women are carried out by someone they know. One in four women have been sexually assaulted, compared to one in twenty men.[7] And that's before we start thinking about the institutional misogyny and sexism in certain branches of the police, which has meant murderers and violent sexual predators have been allowed to continue working as officers for years.[8] We cannot look at a criminal justice system and call it fair if a whole class of people is at risk of a specific type of crime, which is almost never punished.

A woman is killed in the UK by her former or current partner every four days, a stat that has remained unchanged since monitoring began in 2009.[9] (In 2020, the UN released data suggesting that six women are killed by men, mainly former or current partners, every hour.[10])

The gender pay gap is another obvious reason to believe we live in a patriarchy. The UK's gender pay gap for full-time workers stands at an average of 8.3 per cent, and gets progressively worse as we get older – hiking up to 10.9 per cent for workers aged 40–49, 11.7 per cent for those aged 50–59, and 13.9 per cent for workers over 60.[11] The averages are misleading, though. In some sectors of the economy, the situation is much worse: among waste disposal and environmental services managers, for instance, men get paid £20.54 an hour, while women doing the same job get £13.55 an hour, a difference of 34 per cent; female financial managers and directors earn £26.86 an hour, while their male counterparts get £37.25 per hour.[12] (There are a few pay gaps the other way around, in much smaller sectors: female medical secretaries make £11.84 an hour, versus men making £10.29, a 15.1 per cent difference. But where women make more, the pay rates tend to be lower. There are twenty-six sectors in which men get paid 20–36 per cent more than women, and only two in which women get paid 20–36 per cent more than men.) We cannot look at an economy that routinely pays one gender less than the other, for doing the same work, and call it fair. (And that's without discussion of the burden of unpaid and care work, and where that falls …)

How about women's healthcare? A Freedom of Information

request in 2021 showed that 41 per cent of British medical schools, where GPs train, do not include the menopause on the curriculum, even though it is formally required to be there. This is despite the fact that every adult woman who lives long enough will go through both perimenopause and menopause – 13 million people in the UK, at any given time. The symptoms can be debilitating, such that the highest rates of suicide among adult women are in the 45–54 age bracket, i.e. the years most likely to involve perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause.[13] If a GP wants menopause training, they often have to self-fund. In 2023 the UK government once again rejected calls for mandatory menopause training, this time from Parliament's own Women and Equalities Committee.[14] From 2024, all new doctors will have to undertake mandatory women's health training, per the UK government's first ever Women's Health Strategy. This is a good thing, but begs a couple of questions: why hasn't there been a health strategy for women before, given that women's health is so different from men's health? And what about all the doctors who are already practising and haven't ever had women's health training?[15]

The reason a men's health strategy isn't necessary is because healthcare is primarily designed for men. Men are more often used in studies and their bodies are used as the reference point for healthcare in general. The following stats, which back up this point, are all taken from the excellent *Invisible Women* Substack newsletter by Caroline Criado Perez, author of *Invisible Women*, the book. (If you subscribe, you'll finish reading each instalment with steam coming out of your ears.)

- Academics who want to look into menstrual pain find it impossible to get grant funding for studies.[16] Even though, at any given moment, 300 million people worldwide are menstruating, in most countries there is little to no legislation around what chemicals can be used in period products like tampons and absorbent underwear, despite the high permeability of the vulval skin. Which is why when a New York medical school tested period products from a local shop, they found endocrine disruptors including 'three bisphenols, five parabens and five phthalates'.[17]
- Sex differences are rarely taken account of in scientific studies of drugs and medical treatments – as with the recently lauded new Alzheimer's drug Lecanemab, which has a far less significant impact on women (a 12 per cent improvement) than on men (a 43 per cent improvement), a fact that was hidden in an addendum to the main article about the drug's trials, and which was completely overlooked in every piece of media reporting, where it was hailed as a miracle drug. Which it almost definitely won't be, given that a two-third's majority of Alzheimer's sufferers are … female.[18]
- Women are up to 73 per cent more like to suffer death or serious injury in a car crash, because the majority of car crash tests are done with a male dummy, and even where an apparently female dummy is used, it's actually just a scaled-down version of the male dummy, and one in which differences in bone structure, especially pelvic, have not been replicated, meaning seat

belts are highly likely to ride up a female torso and crush internal organs during a crash.[19]

- If a woman is injured in a crash, she is less likely than a similarly injured man to be given a potentially life-saving drug, tranexamic acid, a drug that it took twelve years from the initial study to prove was any good for women at all (because sex differences are so rarely examined). It *is* good for women, but women, and especially older women, are less likely to be given it in the crucial first few hours after an accident.
- This is probably related to a broader problem, which is that women's pain in general is taken less seriously by medics, and is less well medicated, than pain for identical causes in men.[20] For instance, female heart attack patients, especially younger ones, are much more likely to die than men. There are a number of known and possible reasons for this: female heart patients are more likely to die if their doctor is male (which is unfortunate, as only 13 per cent of cardiologists are female, in both the US and UK); commonly used treatments are less useful or actively harmful when used on female patients (but these effects are rarely studied, because women are often not included in study samples or form a small proportion of a cohort and, if they are included, sex differences are not taken into account). Aspirin, for example, doesn't work as well when used as a heart-attack preventative in women, and regular doses may even be harmful. Heart attacks present differently in women than they

> do in men, but diagnostics and predictive models were mainly developed using all- or majority-male sample groups.

Many, *many* vitally important items are not designed to fit female bodies, hands or faces, including motorbike helmets with visors, and medical grade PPE. Gloves, masks, gowns and aprons are often too big, which is at best a hindrance and at worst means they offer little or no protection to the person wearing them. The same goes for surgical tools, which sometimes don't fit women's hands, and even operating theatres, in which women, often shorter than their male counterparts, may have to balance on a set of steps in order to reach the operating table and their patient.[21] As Criado Perez suggests, all this could contribute to the fact that many early-stage trainee surgeons drop out, leaving us with a profession dominated by 86 per cent men (and thus very little motivation to adjust surgical equipment to fit women).

I could go on, and on *and on* – there is so much distressing data about how science and medicine ignore male–female sex differences in everything from metabolism to heart health to hormones to hand size.

You almost certainly know everything I'm about to say, but in the context of trying to release ourselves from much of what we've been taught to think about personal responsibility and personal worth, it's worth setting out how grossly unfair our political system is, too. Political inequality – the degree to which certain groups retain access to political power and how other groups are marginalised and cannot or will not participate

in or influence the political process – goes hand in hand with our particular patriarchal system. As the Institute for Public Policy Research, among others, has found, political inequality is 'ingrained' in British political and public life.[22] Women make up just over a third of MPs in the House of Commons, and take 29 per cent of seats in the House of Lords (female MPs are more likely to be from the Labour Party than the Conservatives[23]) ranking us forty-eighth in the world for proportion of female political representatives.[24] While things have improved in recent years, the UK's parliament still does not reflect the ethnic make-up of the UK as a whole, where only 74 per cent of people describe themselves as white British (according to census data) but 90 per cent of MPs are white; it's worse in the Lords, where 93.5 of members are white.[25] Only 5.7 per cent of MPs are women with Global Majority backgrounds.[26] Sixty-five per cent of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's cabinet appointees went to private school, compared to 7 per cent of the general population. If you look at the educational background of each of the various cabinets chosen by both main parties over the last twenty or so years, they have all contained between one third and two thirds MPs who have been privately – for which read expensively – educated.[27] Around 20 per cent of MPs studied at Oxbridge, compared to less than 1 per cent of the general population,[28] and not far off the 26.4 per cent of British adults who hold a degree from any university.[29]

While I'm sure there are a few politicians from privileged backgrounds who can transcend their personal histories and genuinely understand – or at least attempt to understand – what it's like for people less advantaged than them, I also think it's

clear that there's a trickle-down impact to this kind of unequal representation, manifested by policies like former chancellor George Osborne's austerity plan, chronic underfunding of the health and social services that become more essential the less money you have, and the hostile environment to immigration. These are not, in general, people who have lived on benefits or in poverty, or even know anyone who has. They are, however, people who will paint over the cartoon character murals decorating the walls of an immigration asylum centre for children, because they were deemed 'too welcoming'.[30] (This by Robert Jenrick, immigration minister, alumnus of St John's College Cambridge, pupil of fee-paying Wolverhampton Grammar School, corporate lawyer and former director of Christie's international auction house and who, as it turns out, in 2008 gave free legal advice to the same Rwanda government that stands to profit from his department's migrant removals policy.[31] A real man of the people. If those people are rich, blinkered and horrible.)

I have always thought of myself as aware of social justice issues. But I just didn't realise how bad things were until my thirties. I grew up in a middle-class family. We didn't have a lot of money, but there was enough to send me and my sister to university. I existed in privilege without realising how privileged I was. It wasn't until I had children that I really began to get how unequal our society is. (One precise moment: arguing with a consultant about how I should give birth to my second child and realising I had no power whatsoever over whether I would be able to have a second C-section, which was what I wanted. As a white, middle-class woman, I took

the power I held for granted. Suddenly holding none was an abrupt and necessary lesson.) And it wasn't until I started to think about how internally misogynistic my relationship with my body had always been that I realised what a mess my relationship with the patriarchy was. And then I started to realise – really realise – what a mess it is for *everyone*, not just for women.

Once you look under the corner of this particular rug, you can't un-see how inhumane this system is.

Unless we see clearly the structures within which we are forced to operate, we cannot change them, or how they make us think.

To start with, I got angry. And then, as I got further down this road, I realised that anger can coexist with joy. I am more free now than I have ever been, even though I see more clearly how boxed in we all are. It sounds paradoxical, but I am happier – or perhaps more contented, more satisfied, more peaceful – more of the time, with who I am, and how I look and love and live, than I have ever been, even though I am also more furious and more frustrated, louder and more enraged. Because, now more than ever, I see how much of what we are told about how to live – what it is to be a good, worthy human and who gets to be considered one – is manufactured.

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The book is divided into three sections. Doing Bad busts myths about the badness of our behaviour, and looks at things like laziness, clutter and being disorganised. Looking Bad lights a firecracker under beauty culture and fat phobia, and asks

whether getting older is really as bad as we're told. And Feeling Bad is all about why the emotions we are told are negative are anything but.

Let's stop trying so hard. Let's set ourselves free.

*

A quick disclaimer. I'm a journalist. I'm not a medically trained professional nor do I have any training in mental health care. This book is designed to encourage all of us to question and be critical of the messages we are given by society as a whole, some of which are about how we treat our bodies and some of which are about how we treat our minds. This book contains my conclusions, based on huge amounts of research, on topics ranging from fatness to anxiety. You should be as questioning of me as of anyone, and if you have medical diagnoses or prescriptions, you definitely shouldn't change anything based on what is in this book without talking to your healthcare provider first.

DOING BAD

Being Lazy

We live in a society where many of us are taught to think that everything we do is important and that leaving things undone is bad. Anything else is lazy, and in an always-on culture, laziness is bad. The idea that laziness is a bad, bad thing is strongly connected to our general inability to rest. It's tightly bound up with the cult of productivity, hustle culture and our busy-ness complex – all of which tell us that we should, at all times, be maximising our lives and our incomes, always YOLOing, never having FOMO. It can extend to how we spend our leisure time (Get a hobby! Get a squad! Film or photograph everything you do for socials!), how we parent (Kumon maths for pre-schoolers! Wooden toys and minimal screens! Be present and loving for your child at all times! Completely subsume your own needs to those of your child!), how we work (Long hours! But be passionate about it!), how we partner (Be sexy! But also best friends!), and how we think about our bodies (Exercise more! Eat less! Be smaller but leaner but stronger! Whatever you do, don't be fat! Don't rest!). Research shows that believing leisure and rest time to be wasteful makes us

less likely to enjoy leisure when we get it.[1] Even the clothes we wear to schlump about in our homes have been commodified into being *loungewear*, where before an old T-shirt and a pair of shapeless tracksuit bottoms would have done the job. We've succeeded in commercialising even how we look when we're supposed to be doing nothing.

All of that means we think *a lot* about tidying up, sorting out, the state of our windowsills, the welfare of our roast chicken, the colour of our sitting-room walls, the provenance and seasonality of our vegetables, getting fit, our health, everyone else's health, global politics, local politics, whether the gravel from the driveway is getting in the gutter, climate change, school catchment areas, inflation, our skin, our clothes, our hair, our work, whether we are happy, whether our children are happy, our safety, our children's safety, if we live too close to a main road, governmental corruption, rental rates, what brand of cleaning spray to buy, whether the kids should start swimming lessons, if our house plants are dying because they're over-watered or under-watered, whether this fever will turn out to be meningitis, what that rash is – or is it an allergy? – what to serve when friends come for dinner, whether we should become vegetarians, energy costs rising, whether to put on another load of washing, mortgage rates, whether to start volunteering … and we tend to give it all pretty much the same weight. It's exhausting, so it's no wonder we (OK, I) spend half the time feeling knackered and the other half feeling insane.

If you find it hard to sit down until all the jobs are done (friends, they will never all be done) and/or you find yourself awake far later than you should be, in the deep quiet peace of the

late evening where no one can ask anything of you and there's nothing to do but watch YouTube, or if the jobs remain undone but weigh heavily on your shoulders, then this chapter is for you.

The thing is, in the cold light of day, you actually get to decide which of the many possible things matter to you, and you get to decide which you cast off and leave undone (so that you can do things you do want to do, like rest). I'm so bored of the rat-a-tat-tat of my inner to-do list and all the ways in which it tells me to keep moving and keep doing and keep buying and keep achieving and keep worrying.

Shutting it up involves taking an extremely deep breath and deciding to care less about what we think other people think and more about our own well-being. To do that, we need to reframe our relationship with the idea of laziness.

Laziness is very often used pejoratively, but its *Oxford English Dictionary* definition is more neutral than we might expect:

the quality of being unwilling to work or use energy; idleness

It is absolutely fine to be unwilling to work, some, most or all of the time. It is equally fine not to want to use your energy, especially if you don't feel like you have any. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with idleness (definition: *the state of not working or being used*). During the Enlightenment, being able to be idle was a badge of honour among male aristocrats, before laziness was reframed as a negative by the Industrial Revolution (one of many hangovers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that we could do with getting over).[2]

A growing body of evidence now shows that our brains benefit from time spent not concentrating on active tasks, because this switches on the brain's 'default mode network', the part of the brain that is most active during daydreaming and mind wandering, and which is inextricably connected to creativity and problem solving, a system that whirrs along while we are staring into space.[3] As Alex Soojung-Kim Pang points out in *Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*, hitting pause – aka idleness – counter-intuitively leads to higher productivity, better decision making and lower levels of stress and burnout. The Elon Musk model of human-ing – go hard or go home (and don't come back to work if you do) – is deeply flawed. If you're a billionaire tech bro with a limitless supply of young engineers to burn through and burn out, perhaps you can get away with it. But the pervasive belief that we. must. not. stop. is really detrimental for the rest of us.

Kendra Adachi, host of the *Lazy Genius* podcast and author of *The Lazy Genius Way* and *The Lazy Genius Kitchen*, is a productivity expert who isn't actually into making people more productive. Instead, she's interested in helping us figure out exactly which things in our lives matter to us (rather than to anyone else) and how to do them well, and then how to be lazy (although intelligently so) about all the others – whether that's laundry, morning routines or cooking. 'We just want to be still and present in our lives,' she tells me. 'But we don't know how to do that and get things done.

'We all have different stories as to why our particular brand of optimisation is important,' she continues. 'I am a recovering perfectionist – I grew up in an abusive home and I thought

that if I got everything right, everything would be OK. Part of the work is parsing out not necessarily what is true and what is false, but what is rooted in our identity and what is not. That's lifelong work – maybe with a therapist – and there's not a hack for that.'

Even so, we can begin to think about organising our lives in ways that reflect what's genuinely important to us – rather than to our parents, colleagues, friends or neighbours. We can try to let other, often socially visible things go. For Adachi, one early Lazy Genius moment was accepting that she wouldn't be the kind of mother who volunteered in her young children's school. 'I live in the southern part of the United States,' she says. 'And in the South, typically, there is a very specific idea of what a woman's place in the home is, and that place almost certainly involves children, and busying yourself with every element of your children's lives. And one of the areas where I realised very early on that I was going to be a cultural version of lazy was my involvement in their school. Not in a flippant way, but I knew that with my personality and a full-time job, I could not be a parent who is on the PTA. I could not be a parent who makes individual goodie bags for a preschool Christmas party. I could not be the parent who volunteers for all of the fifth-grade class events.' That didn't mean she did nothing; it meant she did what her personality, lifestyle and capacity allowed for. 'What I *can* do is donate supplies any time they're asked for. I can give money to the fundraisers for the school. I can sign up to help with the preschool party, but I do plates and napkins. I can sign up for something that is very simple. You need a parent who can give pencils to the classroom, just

as much as you need a parent who can stay in the classroom and sharpen the pencils for the little kindergartners. I always thought that the more involved parents, who were physically present in the classroom, were the ideal, and that my choices were settling below that. I have now come to realise that that is not true. It is absolutely being a good parent to invest in my kids' classrooms financially, just as much as someone else is being a good parent investing in their kids' classrooms with their time and presence. Both are valuable.'

Adachi's point is that we need to choose our battles – and whether you're a parent or not is irrelevant – rather than trying to fight on all fronts, meaning we get to be 'lazy' about whatever feels unimportant or impossible to us. 'It is possible to be a genius about the things that matter to you, so that you can be lazy about other things that don't matter as much to you,' she says. 'For example, if you care a great deal about putting delicious food on the table, you could take a couple of different paths to that end: you could become [chef] David Chang and make all of the things yourself. Alternatively, you can also get there by relying on people who have already done the work for you, and you dump 'n' stir and have a meal that still fits the bill of everyone around the table eating delicious food. We can take different paths to the same destination. The problem is that we are told there is only one path to one destination.'

KC Davis is the founder of Struggle Care, a mental health platform for people who have functional barriers around care tasks like self-care and home care, author of *How to Keep House While Drowning*, and the creator behind the TikTok account @domesticblisters, which has 1.5 million followers. She has

ADHD and, for most of her adult life, wrestled with her innate messiness, believing it to be a moral failing. Now, she is still messy, but has created systems and processes that prevent the mess from becoming overwhelming, which she shares on TikTok and in her book. (If you find yourself overwhelmed by any sort of care task – from tidying to how to wash yourself properly, which are things not every child gets taught and not every brain can easily master – Davis has covered it, and gently.)

She now sees care tasks like housework, and whether you do them or not, as completely morally neutral. Unlike me and Adachi, she doesn't actually want to reclaim laziness. 'Laziness doesn't exist. Laziness in a positive light is just rest. That's all it is,' she tells me, and I feel my shoulders drop in relief. 'People tend to think that the difficulties you're having with cooking, cleaning, caring for yourself, doing your laundry or dishes and generally staying on top of everything are because of laziness, irresponsibility and immaturity. They are not. They're typically societal – meaning you lack support. People who have a chronic illness are not going to have the same amount of energy as somebody who is 20. A mother with three children who's working two jobs doesn't have the same twenty-four hours that Kim Kardashian and her army of assistants do. Then there are all the mental health things that can happen: depression, anxiety, executive dysfunction, or just being overwhelmed and stressed going through a period where someone has died or you've been fired or you moved or you've lived through a pandemic.'

The behaviours we describe as lazy are anything but – we stop either because we've run out of capacity or because we've

decided to. Both are legitimate. 'It's powerful to realise that laziness doesn't exist. It's just rest. It's priorities. It's boundaries. And they're very life-giving things.'

Davis thinks that we use the idea of laziness as a negative to blame and oppress others. 'Laziness is one way that we justify oppressing the lower class. Like with food stamps – "If people weren't so lazy, they would just work and they wouldn't need food stamps … Why do we need universal health care – if people weren't so lazy, they would just work and then they would get good health care … What do you mean, we need fair housing and rent control? If people just weren't so lazy, they would work hard and make more money." We continue to perpetuate the absolute myth that your success is wholly within your control. "Laziness" is the tool that we use to feel better than other people, and to excuse our lack of compassion for other human beings. We need a reason to say to ourselves: "I don't want to help that person; I don't want you to take what I have to help that person." We need a way to believe that somebody's misfortunes are their fault.'

This has two major consequences. First, that society becomes less humane, and second that laziness becomes something to fear and avoid at all costs. If you believe that everyone else's position in life is down to their hard work or lack of it, then your own position feels just as precarious, meaning more hustle, less rest. And when we do rest, we call it laziness and consider it a bad thing.

The behavioural scientist Paul Dolan, a professor at the London School of Economics, unpicks this in his book *Happy Ever After: Escaping the Myth of the Perfect Life*. He points out

the many random factors that are just as, if not more, influential on how our lives pan out, as how hard we do or don't try. He cites research into things like where in an academic year a child happens to be born and how summer-born children do less well in school years that start in September; how financial scarcity negatively impacts our cognitive capacities – that is, if you're frightened about how you'll pay your bills you're more likely to struggle with decisions in other areas of your life; the accidents of birth that mean you land in a body predisposed to healthiness, or not, and whether you're born into a working-class, middle-class or upper-class family.[4] These are all powerful determinants, but we humans love a narrative that puts us in the centre, and in control. As he says: 'Your place in society is determined almost entirely for you and not by you. And so is mine. None of us should ever forget that when we heap praise on those who succeed and scorn those who do not.'[5] Dolan has lived experience of these social determinants. He grew up in Hackney, a historically working-class suburb of east London, and has the accent to prove it. A keen body builder, he does not look, dress or sound like what many would expect from a professor at the LSE. Often, he enjoys confounding prejudiced expectations, and he remembers one PhD student telling him the reason they wanted Dolan as a supervisor being 'that I was the first person they'd ever heard use "ain't incumbent" in a sentence'. But more seriously, 'On a personal level, I get tested all the time, like when I've had experiences in hospitals or if the NHS has had any interaction with my kids or me. When I turn up, baseball cap on, tattoos out, talking like I do, I get spoken to like I'm five years old and I'm stupid. Then I find

a way to segue into the fact that I'm a professor at the LSE. And you get this moment where their faces show they can't compute that. And then they start talking to me like an adult.'

KC Davis started documenting her mess-management methods online during the pandemic. 'I had my second baby right as the pandemic started, had always been a messy person, and had undiagnosed ADHD at the time. It really was just me, a newborn and an almost two-year-old, locked in the house, seven days a week, all day, every day, for months and months on end. I had nothing to think about but my house and how messy and un-functional it was. I started posting TikToks about it, and people started responding, saying, "It feels so great to see someone with a house that looks like mine. I always felt like I must be the odd man out, and I felt so ashamed." And that got me talking about how interesting it is that we feel shame for having a messy house, when for the vast majority of people that's just what it looks like to live in a house. Particularly if you have anything going on in your life that makes life not easy.'

The more she thought about it, the more she felt like she needed to share the idea that not being able to do the so-called basics wasn't a moral failing. 'The bigger picture about why the idea of moral neutrality is such a big deal to me is because I had a bad drug addiction when I was a teenager. After rehab, I was in a 12-step group and there's a big part of the addiction recovery industry here [in the US] that is really moralised. It's very much an approach of: we need to look at your defects of character, and you need to learn how to be honest and responsible, not be selfish and self-centred. We need to fix these antisocial behaviours, you need to grow up. There's a

focus on maturity, morality, responsibility, being a productive member of society. And a lot of it is therapeutic-community style, where there's a lot of shaming – which they call positive peer pressure, but it ends up being shaming.

'The things that got moralised were wild to me. They made a huge deal out of the fact that I didn't brush my hair – for them, it wasn't just about you not brushing your hair, it's that you don't take pride in your appearance. And because you don't take pride in your appearance, you're being lazy. And because you're being lazy, you're going to be a drug addict again. So you have to learn how to do your chores, because if you're not being responsible, then you're going to be a drug addict. And [the programme also taught] that I needed to monitor every thought for whether or not that thought was healthy. Because if it's not healthy, you're a bad person. And then you're going to use drugs again. At the same time as all this, I also joined an evangelical church, and it was honestly a lot more forgiving, but there was still that over-emphasis on every decision and every thought: am I doing this – whatever it might be – to the glory of God? Or am I doing it for my own selfish validation?'

As a result, everything Davis did took on an intensely moral dimension. 'I really, really related to the idea of health and wellness being moral imperatives. Like, we feel guilty when we eat fried food, and not just guilty in the sense that this might be bad for my fatty liver or that it isn't good for my cholesterol, but guilty as though we are failing in some way. We think: "I'm not a good person, I should be ashamed of myself"; we think that out there somewhere, there are real good people who have the self-restraint and self-respect, frankly, to eat healthy

foods, to get enough sleep, to not be addicted to their phones, and to exercise every day. And I'm just this defect that can't get it together.'

In the end, she left the church and the 12-step programme. 'And it was very, very difficult. But one of the things that happened was that I had this idea that maybe God doesn't give a shit what we're like, where we live, what we are wearing, or what thoughts we had today.' She realised that what she'd been surreptitiously taught was a version of healthiness 'whether it was emotionally healthy or physically healthy, which was never about me as a person who deserved a long life and the ability to have joy, but was instead about whether or not I was good enough to be acceptable to society, and whether I earned the right to not hate myself.' All of which had driven her, among other things, to feel like a failure for not learning to be tidy.

'The more I began to talk about the idea of care tasks, the more I started realising that this is very much an epidemic in its own right: an epidemic of shame,' she says. 'So many of us are running around, trying to exercise and eat right and parent right and have a clean home and a successful job and keep to a budget, and be environmentally friendly. But driving all of that is this grand performance of worthiness and acceptability, which is exhausting and creates a lot of shame and really shatters your self-confidence and your self-concept, and makes everything very externally focused. Being healthy and having your shit together are the two categories that get moralised. They are what makes a worthy, worthwhile person and any deviation from that must be from moral failure.'

Kendra Adachi agrees. 'The way that productivity culture

and the business world are set up is that everything needs to be quantifiable.' This bleeds into the rest of our lives. 'We focus on the visibility of productivity, of organisation, of our physical bodies. Because if other people cannot see the tangible, quantifiable, categorical measurements of our lives, what good is the measurement? But we are measuring the wrong things. We are measuring the morality of food, the morality of organisation, of order, of time management. If we focus so much on visibility, on the presentation of what we are working so hard to achieve, then actually the achievement itself becomes hollow, because we're doing that work for the sake of visibility and affirmation, as opposed to the human work of just being a person.'

What Davis wants to cultivate instead is, 'The really grounded [belief that]: I'm a person who deserves to function and to have a sense of communion with the community of humans as a whole; I want to treat people with respect because I like getting respect; I like the person I am at the end of the day when I know that I've done my best to not harm people; and I know that there's a lot of good to be done, but that a person can't do all the good things all the time. I think that's where it all starts because that's where you start to reclaim some of that humanity. I'm just a person. It's not about being right, wrong, good or bad.'

The foundational principle of Davis's work is that all care tasks are morally neutral, as is being messy, neat, tidy or even dirty. As she puts it: 'Being good or bad at care tasks has nothing to do with being a good person, parent, man, woman, spouse, friend. Literally nothing. You are not a failure because you can't keep up with laundry. Laundry is morally neutral.'

(As we talk, she also points out that the reason laundry is such a monstrous task even in the age of washing machines, is that we have so many clothes. 'In the past, you had to wash your clothes in the river, but you owned three items of clothing and you hardly ever washed them.' Whereas now, we have acres more clothing and it is progressively more likely that in any household set-up, the adults also have jobs alongside their home responsibilities.[6])

Her other five principles are equally valuable: 'Rest is a right, not a reward; you deserve kindness regardless of your level of functioning; you can't save the rainforest if you're depressed; shame is the enemy of functioning; good enough is perfect.'

What I find striking is that so many of the things that Davis and I discuss – we talk about skincare (she rarely washes her face, usually wipes off yesterday's make-up each morning, and finds it hilarious how often she's complimented on her skin) and things like brushing teeth and washing up – are completely private. Outsiders rarely see our bedrooms. Nobody sees what my skincare routine looks like or how I brush my teeth; very few people see my kids' bedroom, which usually looks like something's exploded in it, except the other kids who visit and make it look even worse. These are personal activities or experiences that don't matter at all at the macro level, but they don't matter at the micro or social level either. Really – because most of us don't put our messy kitchen on TikTok as Davis is brave enough to do – it's just us, judging ourselves for our untidy, grubby homes, our chaotic cupboards or our unwashed dishes. If that's not you, cool – but as Davis says: 'I get plenty

of people that say I'm lazy and shitty and a bad mom, but I get far more people that comment, "Oh, thank God, a normal person, I'm normal too."'

How do we dig ourselves out of this? How do we make it possible for ourselves to decide we don't need to do everything, and to embrace laziness or rest, however we choose to define it. For Adachi, it's to ask ourselves: 'What matters to me – not in a selfish way, not in a way that is dismissing the other people in my life, but in an identity-value way, in a way that is for me, not for other people?'

This is not easy. 'There are so many cultural messages that say, no, there is one path, there's one way, there's one end. To step out of that and say, actually, this or that doesn't matter to me, is risky, and can be socially uncomfortable. And there aren't tools necessarily for you on this subversive path of being a person, which makes it difficult to stay there because it's not as well worn.'

Even if it's hard, it's surely harder to try to think about all the things, and to do all the things, all the time. Most of the humans in history have not tried to do so. We don't have to either. It's breaking us to try. Giving up on doing everything isn't mad, it's sensible. Laziness – if it exists at all – isn't bad.

Being Cluttered

'I'm someone who collects a lot of stuff,' says the maximalist fashion and interiors designer Bethan Laura Wood, who makes fantastically colourful pieces of furniture, art and fashion, and lives in an art deco flat in east London. Her small space is very, very far from minimal – there are handbags on Murano glass hooks in the hallway, gigantic mobiles and lampshades hanging from the ceilings, tapestries above the bed, and vintage furniture and *objets* everywhere else (many the result of swaps with other artists, or flea-market finds while travelling), all somehow pulled together by pastel-painted walls and woodwork. Wood generally has short, pastel-coloured hair topped with a multicoloured hat or headpiece, bleached brows, black-rimmed eyes, a small, coloured dot of make-up on each cheek, and she draws in tiny rosebud lips using blue or turquoise lipstick. She is fabulous. 'For some people, my home, which has a lot of objects in it, feels uncomfortable. I find being in a space with less stuff in it uncomfortable – it's about what brings joy to you.'

While there are strong arguments for us all to consume less, that doesn't necessarily mean you have to get rid of everything