Ep #209: The Trouble with Black and White Thinking

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With Your Host

Tobi Fairley

The Design You Podcast with Tobi Fairley

Ep #209: The Trouble with Black and White Thinking

You are listening to the *Design You* podcast with Tobi Fairley, episode number 209.

Welcome to the *Design You* podcast. A show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth and joy, here's your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey, hey, friends, I hope you are well. I am just amazing. My husband and my daughter went on a little daddy daughter trip out to San Fran to see our Arkansas Razorbacks play basketball this week. And they just love doing this together. It's their second year in a row to go to the Sweet 16 and the Elite 8, just the two of them which is so fun because I used to go to those as well when our team was good back when I was in high school and in college. So fun. And so, it was kind of feeling like a tradition for the two of them.

But I'm not sure I'm going to be okay with that long term. I may have to tag along in the future. But this time while they were away I stayed home with the pups, and the fish, and the snail, and the plants, and all the things. And just decided to take a little time for myself. So, my very own spring break. Now, I didn't totally do nothing. In fact, I did a whole lot of stuff but a lot of it was reading, and studying, and needlepointing, and watching basketball, and writing, and cuddling with my dogs, and napping, and some podcast writing but it was pretty amazing.

And I absolutely love nesting at home by myself sometimes. Isn't it the best when your own home is your happy place and you'd just as soon be there as traveling or doing other things? I think it's just the best. And to be really honest, spring break for me doing all of that stuff, the relaxing, and the hobbies, and the fun didn't really feel that different than my regular weeks anymore.

It would have felt drastically different a few years ago but in the last couple of years since I've really reimagined what success looks like for me and realigned how I use my time. And how it really fits in with my values, and my desires, all my weeks kind of look like that which is quite amazing and I highly recommend it.

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Okay, so today we are in between series because I just wrapped up the Value of Design series and I'm going to be starting the Creative Entrepreneur series in just a couple of weeks. But I wanted to talk about something today that is going to be relevant for the upcoming series. I'm going to be doing a lot more series this year. And just your own personal development work in your future because this is a really important topic.

And if you're listening to this in real time you might also even be going through Success Week with me right now. So that's five straight days of learning and Q&A with me where we're breaking down really the mindset work, the thought part of the equation and what it really takes to think on purpose to be able to go against the grain of what everybody else is teaching you, society is teaching you about success.

And it's this mindset work that allows us or helps us, assists us to be courageous enough to redefine success on our own terms. So, what I want to talk about today with you which is the trouble with black and white thinking is really going to help you with that work we're doing in Success Week too. So, it's no accident that I'm settling this podcast exactly right here in this schedule right where it is between our series and aligned with Success Week because it's really, really important.

Okay, so let's get into it. What is the trouble with black and white thinking? Well, here's one thing that I know for certain as Oprah says. But I really do know this. We humans love certainty. We love labels. We like to categorize things, and organize everything. And really we do this in a dualistic way like there's two choices. So, you're either in the group or you're out of the group. You're either male or female, rich or poor, old or young, gay or straight, introvert or extrovert, liberal or conservative. You're either healthy or you're unhealthy.

You're eight right or you're wrong. Things are either fair or unfair. You see where I'm going with this? There are for sure good foods and bad foods if you're a dualistic thinker. People are either lazy or they're productive. They may be smart or they're dumb. And as humans, not only do we think a lot of times in this black and white way but we also need to know which side

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you're on. We need to know, we think we need to know. What are you? Where do you stand? Which side are you on? Which team are you on? And what's the reason you're on that team? We need to know.

The reason we think we need to know stems from biology actually because there's a few biological needs that we have as humans including belonging and safety. So, our brain is wired to keep us safe. And one of the ways it does this is by categorizing people and things because we believe we can better assess whether you're a threat to us or not, if we know what category or group you're in. We're also wired for connection and belonging. We want to be in the group so we have to figure out which group or groups you're a part of so we can figure out if we align with that group.

And we just absolutely love aligning ourselves with people who share our values, and our beliefs, and our traditions but the flipside to that is that we also tend to other anyone who doesn't share those same beliefs. We consider them outsiders or outcasts or sometimes even foes. And conveniently, very convenient that for those foes, those others we can absolutely see every single thing that is wrong with them in their thinking, those outsiders.

But ironically we get amnesia when it comes to our own shortcomings, because the brain needs to be certain that we are good and they are bad. So, we only see our good stuff and we can absolutely only see how they are bad. We are on the right side of history, they're on the wrong side of history. We're on the right side of whatever, fill in the blank is. And they are on the wrong side. But the truth is almost nothing in the world or even in our personal lives is black and white.

There's rarely only one pair of polar opposite choices for you to choose from and not a single other option. This almost never happens. But to hear our brains tell the story, this is exactly what happens all the time. We believe it to totally be true. So, for example, a parent may create a lot of worry for themselves because they're thinking either my child can go to college right after high school and become successful as an adult or she cannot go to college and struggle all her life.

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That's it, those are the only two choices if we're worried about the fact that she said, "I don't think I want to go to college, mom." And we're freaking out in our head because of course it's black and white, either she goes and is successful or she doesn't go and she struggles her whole life. But of course, if we consider all the options or at least there's no way we could even consider all of them, but if we consider a lot of other options because there are many, we know that a person can go to college any time, at any age, or multiple times in their lives, or never at all, or take a gap year and then go.

We know there's all kinds of things that could happen with college, go a couple of years and quit, and logically we also know that just going to college doesn't mean you're guaranteed success, or that not going to college means you're guaranteed to not be successful because we have evidence that both of those things can be true and untrue. It also doesn't mean that successful people can't simultaneously be struggling in some areas of their life while being successful at the exact same time in other areas.

So, as I'm saying, it's almost never dualistic. It's almost never black and white. In fact, I would say and you might agree with me, that all of us are pretty much always being successful and struggling at the same time in different areas. But our brains want to make things so dualistic, so cut and dried as they say. And there is a biological reason for this too. Our brains love to be as efficient as they possibly can. And they love to use as little energy as possible.

They believe, and it goes way back to cavemen times when we were needed to run from a Sabre toothed tiger or something. But they believe that we – our brains do, they, that's the they, that we need to save up all our energy just in case we need it for an emergency later. So, let's not spend a lot of time thinking. Let's just break this down into two choices, black and white, conserve our energy, be efficient, which one do you pick?

We all know this trick when you're trying to get your toddler to get dressed, do you want this one or this one? Because if you just let them walk in their

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closet and choose you'll be there for six hours. So that's what our brain does, it thinks we're toddlers and we should only have two choices. Black and white energy or black or white thinking, rather, takes less energy. Shades of grey thinking requires a lot of complex thinking.

And here's the other part of the shades of grey equation, not only do we think a lot and it's very complicated and complex. A lot times at the end of the thinking there's no clear answer. So, after all of that thinking and noodling, then we have to manage our emotions and be okay with the fact that we're still uncertain because we didn't come to a resolution. And the brain wants absolutely no part of any of that. It's like, why would I think on something for that long and that hard if I'm not even guaranteed to have an answer at the end?

So, the brain likes to keep things simple, nuance, or shades of grey which are nuance is complex, it's not simple. But thankfully for our sakes life just doesn't work in black and white only most of the time. I mean how boring would that really be? I mean I love black and white for my tile in my entry, it looks beautiful. But for my thoughts, not so good, not so amazing. We've always heard in our lives that there are a million shades of grey. And some of us are more prone, maybe naturally, I don't know, I think it's really practice. But some of us are more prone to thinking in shades of grey.

But usually, people tend to think in black and white really, unless we know this other option, unless we've done some work on, and practiced being willing to be in the grey area and doing it on purpose. Because our brain, again, naturally wants to go simple, efficient, and this grey area is neither of those. Now, the biggest issue with black and white thinking in comes when we don't really realize that we're operating and thinking in this dualistic way. We aren't even aware of how black and white we view things.

So, lack of awareness is a problem. And the reason it's a problem, well, there's multiple reasons but kind of the result of all the reasons is when we think in black and white we create a lot of suffering for ourselves. Because suffering is a feeling and if we think a thought that creates a feeling, black and white thoughts create all kinds of suffering. And they may come in the

form of anxiety, or despair, or sadness. But a lot of times black and white thinking, at least has the emotions on the extreme ends really, because black and white really lives at those two extremes.

So not only is it extremes in thinking, either this or the polar opposite thing, it also creates extremes in our emotions, so either good or bad, life makes us either happy or sad. Most of us really have a belief around this too because most of us, if we're being honest think that we should be happy all the time, or at least think that's the goal. And even that, even the thought we should be happy all the time is black and white thinking. It's the perfect example because we believe we should be a 100% happy a 100% of the time, otherwise something's wrong.

I remember when my daughter was four or five and we still tease her about this and she's almost 17, but when she was little, if something wouldn't go her way, she would start crying and having a tantrum. And she would say, "Now, we have to start this whole day over." And I've thought that many times and I bet you have too, when things just go awry and you're like, "Oh my God, the whole day is awful." That's all or nothing thinking, that's black or white thinking in a nutshell, either the day goes great or we have to start the whole thing over.

But here is the truth for me. As good as that sounds sometimes on those days that are challenging, I much prefer to think of it like this. I like to think of everything as if it's on a continuum. Does that make sense? I call it a continuum, it's like on a sliding scale sort of, or a path. And at any given moment on any given topic, we're at a different point in that continuum at any given time with our beliefs on a particular thing. And we never actually arrive in this lifetime in my opinion, to the destination, we're just always moving along that path. And I think this is what we do as humans.

So, in this way, there's actually a whole lot of nuance to any and every situation but a lot times we practice black and white thinking even though there could be a continuum because we just like the certainty. And so, on the continuum in some areas we may have evolved and we may have grown, and we may have moved farther along. And maybe then we plant

our stake in the ground there and we set up black and white thinking again. I don't know.

But at any given moment we could be open minded and knowing we're growing or we could think, no, I'm firmly committed to this right or wrong black or white thinking on this particular topic. Now, it's all okay, even the black and white thinking is okay because that's what humans do. And I don't like to make things that we do naturally bad because that just creates shame and confusion. And it's just not really helpful. So yeah, we're all going to do it. I do it too. I love to think of things on a continuum until I don't want to anymore and I'm like, "You're wrong and I'm right."

It's what humans do but it's also important I think to realize that our brain is always kind of getting our options confused a little bit because it just wants to be efficient. So, it wants to think there's only two choices, right or wrong. It also a lot of times doesn't notice that our thoughts are not really facts. Our brain likes to think, and I talk about our brain like it's different entity because it kind of is in an essence. Your brain is not you but it's a part of you. So, the you that watches your brain, think if you've ever had that experience, that's the real you.

But our brain likes to think and even get confused sometimes that our thoughts are facts but really they're just opinions. They're really just our interpretations of the facts or circumstances a lot of times. And a lot of times when the black and white thinking comes in it's because we've gotten really rigid on those opinions, again, very, very normal.

But what happens as a society collectively, when we all go around believing our own opinions to be facts or maybe we even call it the truth, and we're rigid and black and white in that thinking because we think it's the truth, guess what happens? That means there's suddenly a whole bunch of different versions of the truth. In fact, I guess there could be – how many of us are there, seven billion? If we were all thinking about the same thing there could potentially be seven billion versions of the truth. Talk about confusing.

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So black and white thinking obviously in this kind of situation doesn't acknowledge the nuance. So, we think we know the truth. And they think they know the truth. We don't know that we're just comparing opinions to opinions most of the time and neither of us are really speaking in facts or circumstances. So, then we just start arguing about whose truth is the truth. Because again with black and white thinking either you're right or I'm right. We can't both be right in black and white thinking. And we can't also both be wrong.

And if we are in black and white thinking neither of us ever typically wants to admit that we are the one who's wrong. We really dig in when we think we're right. So black and white thinking creates a lot of polarization. It's this polarization we talk about a lot. We've seen it in society and politics. And many of us don't like that feeling in that situation of polarization. And there's things like Facebook and social media that creates confirmation bias, it confirms our biases, that's what that means, and makes us believe we're even more true.

And so, we get so firmly rooted in our black and white thinking and we become polarized from other groups on any given topic. The certainly of black and white thinking in those moments kind of feels good because we like to be right. We very much like to be right as humans. But here's the problem, even when the thinking feels good, the result, the polarization that it creates doesn't really feel that good.

And let me even take this a step further and say, it's not even the thinking that creates certainty that feels good. It's the illusion of certainty, the illusion that we think we're right, that we think our truth is the truth. Because here's the thing, nothing is ever really certain as we just found out. Anything can happen at any point. We just went through a pandemic for two years. No one would have dreamed of and we're still in it at some level. We had no certainty for a lot of that pandemic, especially in the beginning. And that's why we all hated it so much.

So, we go along all the time in black and white thinking and thinking everything's certain and we've got everything under control. And it's really

all an illusion because at any moment it could all change rapidly. And we could find ourselves in a whole lot of uncertainty, and again we just did that. But believing, even if for moments that we are certain with this black and white thinking gives us the illusion of control and our brain really likes that. Yeah, I'm in control, I'm certain I'm right, this feels good.

Now, the other interesting thing about the brain is that as much as we like to be right it would still prefer to be certain and it turn out that you're wrong than to just be willing to choose uncertainty. This is so interesting. Your brain would rather be wrong than expend the energy to consider the grey areas and all those other ideas, and potentially learn something new and not land at a resolution than to just go ahead and pick a side and be like, I'd rather be wrong than be out there doing all that thinking. That's what the brain does.

Here's why, learning feels taxing to the brain. There is this concept that I heard recently from a person named Andrew Huberman, he's a PhD and he's a neuroscientist. He works in neurobiology. And he has a podcast called The Huberman Lab. And I don't like everything on there but I like a lot of it. He talks about the brain a lot. And on one particular episode he talked about a concept that he called limbic friction. So, part of the brain is the limbic part or the limbic system, it's part of your brain.

And so, he says that any time we want to adjust our habits we have to overcome what he calls limbic friction, which is all this energy that we are required to expend to help overcome anxiety, and procrastination, and fatigue that comes up when we're trying to change something. So basically, what he's saying is all the resistance and the cavorting that we do when it gets hard to get ourselves to change a habit or a behavior, that we really want to change, even though we want to change it, it's hard.

He says that hardness is called limbic friction. And I was thinking about this concept and I was thinking, that's really similar to what happens in the brain I think when we start to consider shades of grey instead of black and white because it's not simple, and it's not efficient to do this work. And our brains have to work really hard and overcome the friction of thinking differently,

and of choosing uncertainty, and of weighing options, and of potentially not landing on a resolution. And so, most of our brains just don't, we just don't choose that.

That's why we would rather be wrong than feel the anxiety, or the procrastination, or the brain bending that happens. And I will say, as a major lifelong learner and someone who loves to think on purpose and consider options and play around with the grey area, and learning new things. My brain is tired a lot. I get a lot of resistance especially when I'm adopting new ideas.

A lot of the ideas I've written for all of the podcast series this year, those just don't come naturally to me. I go think and challenge things that are existing and think what's the opposite of that, or what else is possible. And when I'm doing that work and thinking critically, and creatively, and out of the box, my brain hurts literally. I would definitely say there's friction in my brain to create these new ideas and to unlearn old ideas. And when we give up black and white thinking we're essentially doing both of those things at the same time, unlearning and learning.

So, unlearning creates friction and learning creates friction, and when you're doing them simultaneously that's a lot of friction. And it really does sometimes give me an actual headache, my brain actually hurts. And you've probably felt that before and you know exactly what I'm talking about. It also sometimes gives me anxiety and it makes me tired. I would say the anxiety comes when I haven't landed on the resolution yet. And I'm like, "I kind of think I believe these new ideas and they're super exciting but I haven't finished thinking about it yet."

And I don't really know if I've thought of all of the pros and cons or if I've poked holes in it enough, or if I've really sort of settled on believing this idea. And so that gives me dis-ease, and an unsteadiness, and kind of the anxiety, those not good butterflies in my stomach. And I understand why, there's nothing wrong with me, I'm just moving through the process of going from black and white thinking into the grey area and that's how it feel.

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So, what I know now is that that's part of the process. So, I don't resist it, at least not on purpose. Sometimes I find myself clenching my hands, or gritting my teeth, or holding my breath. But when I recognize that I know that it's part of the process and I can take a big deep breath. And I can know I'm in basically limbic friction or something really close to that. And I can also take breaks because a lot of times I just want to keep thinking about it, and keep thinking about as if I do it enough I'll get to that resolution, that solution.

But that's not really how it works either. And there's what the law of diminishing returns, the more tired my brain gets the less likely it is to land on a solution. So, I have to do this in spurts and then come back to it. And it's really kind of like a practice and yeah, it's a lot of energy that I'm expending. And I can see why a whole lot of people don't choose to do this on purpose. Most of us much prefer to skip all of that brain bending and just find a group of people who agree with us on our black and white thinking, and who will confirm all our thoughts and beliefs, done.

Confirmation bias is amazing for black and white thinking, except it only emboldens us to dig in our heels even deeper and believe we are the ones who are right because we're like, "Well, I thought I was right." And then all these people confirmed I was right, so I must actually be right. But we don't understand we're only looking at people and checking in with people that already believed the same way we did.

I find it so interesting when, especially in politics, it seems like both sides, the democrats and the republicans because those you know in America are our two main sides, always say, "Do your research." And I laugh every single time because if they were actually going to do research on opinions that disagreed, okay, I agree with you, that's the grey area. But that's not what people do, 99% of the time, 'do your research' means look for confirmation bias.

Now, you may want the other group to do their research and come over to your side but you're certainly not really doing research, you're creating or looking for confirmation bias to remind yourself why you are right. But

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here's the thing that happens when we only surround ourselves with people, and groups, and information, that already agrees with us. Very little growth happens when we only spend time in likeminded places. Very little growth happens when we or the people around us are constantly validating our thoughts.

And since I'm committed to growth, and a lot of you would say, then I'm glutton for punishment, at least some of the time I actively choose to consider a lot of grey area. Now, I don't know if it's more often than not. I don't know if it's 50%. That's probably a stretch. That's probably me validating myself, maybe it's 20% of the time in the grey area, maybe it's 30, I don't really have any idea. But I do know that I stretch myself, and I question my own thinking. And I don't just confirm my own biases towards things all the time. Now, sometimes I do. And sometimes I want to. And that's something that's important to know too.

Some of our beliefs, we want to keep and we absolutely get to do that. We might not keep them forever but maybe they're the right ones for us right now. So, this is not to say that we should always be changing all of our beliefs. But when I find myself really arguing with other people or wanting to argue with other people, that's sort of my sign to think you must be in black or white thinking because you're thinking you're right and they're wrong. And that's when I start to do a little digging into the grey area.

Now, there are some negative effects of black and white thinking besides just this problem with it getting in the way of growth. There are some real reasons that you really want to. And that's one of them, and there are some others that you really want to think about when it comes to black and white thinking because there are a lot of negative effects, you might say, that black and white thinking creates besides just the fact that it keeps us squarely in our comfort zone and prevents growth.

So, one of the other problems is when we align with a certain group, what happens when people in the group act out of character of what we thought they would do or should do. Then we have a problem on our hands. We have a decision on our hands. Or what if you actually are the one who

wants to go a different way and then suddenly you have a problem because you have a lot of fear of being cast out of the group. We like to belong to groups. Brené Brown told us so, belonging and connection, those are the things we're wired for as humans.

So, either way, if someone else starts acting different than we thought they would or than we would have acted, or we want to go a different way, sort of mucks things up a little bit. We get confused because we don't know what to do. We're like, "Wait a minute, I thought we all thought the same." So, if you don't always just want to go along with the group think then a lot of uncomfortable emotions can arise, including and especially fear, especially if it's you that are thinking differently. You're like, "What if they find out, will I be exposed for being a traitor, for not being a legitimate group member."

So, when we get that aligned with our black and white thinking, at any moment, any of us in the group could veer a different way and it really throws the whole thing off. It confuses us. Another thing is kind of related but when we find people that we love and admire, and we've known them maybe for years, or maybe they're new to us but we really were excited about them.

Then we start doing a little digging about them and we find out they're in a different group than us in some area. Maybe their politics are different, or their religion is different, or there's a certain cause they really believe in that we vehemently disagree with. That can cause a lot of issues for us, a lot of emotional stress, a lot of sadness, a lot of worry, a lot of anxiety, sometimes anger.

And a lot of times it causes us to cut people out of our lives that maybe in the past have brought us a ton of joy. And maybe in the future they would still bring us a ton of joy. But we get fixated on a certain difference in our black and white thinking and so we decide we want to go different ways. Now, that's absolutely okay. And I do that too sometimes. But I just want you to be aware that black and white thinking is usually the cause of this.

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Black and white thinking also has us judging ourselves as not good enough a lot of the time because we decide and black and white thinking decides that there's a standard. There's a standard for the group or the situation. A lot of times we even make those standards about morality. And then we weaponize those standards against ourselves.

So, for example, we might say, "I'm not a good enough activist to really call myself an activist. I'm not a good enough mother. I'm not a good enough democrat or republican. I'm not a good enough feminist or antifeminist. I'm not a good enough Christian, or Jew, or Muslim", or whatever group we're in. We internally and sometimes externally, berate ourselves and really other ourselves because we're measuring ourselves against some idealized version of the group rules, all the mothers should act this way and we don't.

And this is really painful and most of the time the feeling that creates for us when we're in black and white thinking is shame. And shame feels horrible. It might feel the worst of all the emotions in my opinion. Now, on the flipside of this when we're not othering ourselves, black and white thinking can also have us othering other people in a way that we are coming from the perspective of superiority, or even supremacy over other people. This is where white supremacy comes from, or the patriarchy, which is male supremacy essentially.

And there's a lot of supreme, supremacy, superiority thinking can look like self-righteousness a lot of times that happens also from black and white thinking. So, this is also sort of the – there is a checkbox for what's right and what's wrong. But I happen to check all the boxes. I'm white. I'm male. I'm cisgender. I'm Christian, all the dominant groups in a society, if you fit all of those or even a lot of those, you can come from a perspective of thinking you're better than the other people who are not in that group.

And this is to me a big problem. Black and white thinking also creates a lot of no win situations for ourselves in just everyday life. And this can create so much misery. It's back to that dualism, the just two choices thing. Because when we decide there are only two options and we don't like

either of them then we're pretty much in a pickle and our brain's like, well, that's all you've got, either this or that. It's back to the either the college or not college. And so, we get really miserable if we don't like any of the options or they don't work for us.

And so, in those moments we truly believe those are our only choices. And I'm sure you can think of all kinds of situations where you just felt really upset or miserable because you're like, I can either do this or this and I hate both options. But your brain's not seeing any of the shades of grey. It might be either like I stay in this church that doesn't believe a 100% like me or I leave this church and feel alone and distraught, as if those are the only two options.

And it's really interesting, and that's the thing about black and white thinking, we thought it was going to create a connection, that's part of the purpose, this black or white thinking connects us to a group. But what we're starting to see is it actually often does the opposite, because when we start to see that we aren't completely and wholly like the group, maybe we can't imagine staying in the group. What if we're only 60% in alignment? That's when we're in the grey area and we like certainty. We like all or nothing.

And I've definitely made decisions, including this example about a church of not staying because I didn't think I was 100% aligned. Now, I'm a little more mature than that now. And so, I might make a different decision. But there were definitely moments where I was like, "No, this is not for me for me." So, I'm not saying there's a right or wrong. I'm not saying you have to stay even if you're at 60%. I'm just saying, notice that it's black and white thinking that creating the problem.

One of my favorite books that I've read recently is a book by Adam Grant called Think Again. I just love everything Adam Grant says. If you follow me on Instagram you've probably seen me share his quotes seven times a week. He is really, really an interesting person and I like how he thinks. And just to tell you a little bit about his book.

I like the online description. I think it's probably his own description but it says, "We listen to opinions that make us feel good instead of ideas that

make us think hard. We see disagreement as a threat to our egos rather than an opportunity to learn. We surround ourselves with people who agree with our conclusions when we should be gravitating towards those who challenge our thought process."

And he goes on to say, "The result is that our beliefs get brittle long before our bones do. We think too much like preachers defending our sacred beliefs, or like prosecutors proving the other side wrong, and like politicians campaigning for approval. And we think too little like scientists searching for the truth." Mic drop. Bam. And Adam says, "Really that intelligence is not a cure for this. It's not that we're not smart." He says, "In fact intelligence is no cure and it can be a curse." Because being good at thinking can make us worse at rethinking."

What he's really saying there is being good at thinking can keep you even more rigidly in your black and white, like you thought really good to decide on that decision but any time new information comes along you're not willing to rethink. So, he even goes on to say, "The brighter we are, the blinder to our own limitations we can become." Pretty profound. I highly recommend this book.

And even if that weren't profound enough, he has a quote or an endorsement on the book by Brené Brown. And they did a podcast together too which I really recommend listening to. And there's also a great podcast with him on the 10% Happier. So, anything that you can find with Adam Grant, I highly recommend. But Brené's talking about this particular book, Think Again because it's around this idea of getting rid of black and white thinking.

And she says, "This is the right book for right now. Yes, learning requires focus. But unlearning and relearning requires much more. It requires choosing courage over comfort. And Think Again, Adam Grant weaves together research and storytelling to help us build the intellectual and emotional muscle we need to stay curious enough about the world to actually change it. I have never felt so hopeful about what I don't know." So good.

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Adam does really give us courage to not know. And that's the thing about black and white thinking, it's not courageous. It's kind of the least courageous because even as I said, we would rather be wrong than be uncertain. So, I love this description of the book. I love the way Brené talks about it. And I love the book. And I think it's a great example of one more thing that's wrong with black and white thinking.

Because for those of us who really do want to change the world, or change something in our community, or impact our family, or even just ourselves, it rarely, or maybe even I might, could say never, I won't because that sounds like black and white thinking. I'm going to say it rarely happens in this kind dualistic thinking because we have to stay curious and think differently, in fact, really differently if we want to create change.

We have to be willing to challenge all our own thoughts and all the thoughts of everyone else to come up with the new solutions for world sized, or even just personal sized changes or challenges in the world. So, if we want to make change to those challenges we have to be able to think differently. So let me for a minute, as we wrap up, tell you the real reason I wanted to talk about black and white thinking today. And I think it's related to this concept of changing the world, and a lot of the work I've been been doing in my own life and in my business for the past few years.

And if you listen to me regularly you know already that I'm committed to a life in business that values rest over hustle. So, we call it anti hustle. And you also know I consider myself anti diet culture now and really pro body, pro body positivity. And you also know likely that I'm working to become more anti-racist, and inclusive every day. And I've made a lot of progress in all three of these areas. And I'm also really committed to being more inclusive and less oppressive in my marketing practices, and also in my life coaching work, and with the tools we use in our communities.

And then just in our communities in general. And I also consider myself a feminist which I think you know, but you might not totally have called me that. But I call myself that. But I'm committed to being a feminist in a way that benefits all women, not just white women. And these are just a few of

the areas that are important to me, that align with my values and that I'm always working on and learning about. And the exciting thing is doing this work is amazing a lot of the time except when it's not exciting because it's hard.

And I want to tell you that even though I'm very much committed to it and excited about it there is this thing that happens all the time with black and white thinking in these areas that I'm working on. And I think it's really important that I talk about this because any time I find something like this, I like to reveal it to you.

I like to share it with you because I think that possibly if you don't know about it and you're not expecting it to be hard like this or to maybe work in this way. And you start doing work to change the world or your own life and you bump against this situation, you might really struggle with it because I know I've really struggled with it a few times. So here is kind of how it works.

The moment we decide to be anti anything or pro anything for that matter, which again is kind of black and white, we're picking a side. Our brain heads out and it looks for examples and confirmation of people doing this work that we think are 'on the right side of the issue'. And we're always successful at finding confirmation for the thing we want to believe. It's just we can always find it and rarely do we go looking for the opposite. We rarely go looking for poking holes in our beliefs. We look for evidence of what we want to believe.

And when we do that we simultaneously find all the people that we encounter that are on the other side of the issue. So, for this situation, let's call that the wrong side of the issue. So, we've found all the people that are on the right side, it makes us feel better and we like them and they're so cool.

And all the people that are at the wrong side that we kind of vilify. And guess what? Our brain immediately puts the good guys on a pedestal and we want to believe that we are 100% like them. And that we for sure think like them in every way. Because you know our brain likes certainty. And so,

it makes all of those others on the wrong side also seem like they're 100% the opposite of us and a 100% wrong. And we couldn't possibly agree with them on anything. Our brain says, They're wrong. We're right."

But that's never actually the case because remember, nuance, and shades of grey. And that's all fine, and dandy, and wonderful until one of the people that you've put on the pedestal, because I've put them on there too, maybe you have me on a pedestal. And you're loving them and their work, and their ideas, and their thought leadership. And then they say something that you freaking don't agree with. And suddenly your brain has a fit, it freaks out because our brains perceive anyone disagreeing with us as a threat.

And remember back to the beginning of this podcast, the brain wants to know who's a threat. And he wants us to be safe. And he perceives people who disagree with us as unsafe. So basically, an alarm goes off in our brain. So, this discovery that you think differently from this person you've put on the pedestal, literally can rattle you to your core. And we don't know what to do about it if we're not expecting it. So, there's a few examples, I want to give you a few just so that you can see how this works.

And one that comes to mind is my DEI coach, Trudi Lebron. And Trudi told me, this is not an experience for me personally but she was telling me that it's just sort of assumed in a lot of the social justice circles, and DEI, diversity, equity and inclusion circles, the professionals that work in those areas are also not only anti-racist, but that they're also anti-capitalist.

But Trudi is not anti-capitalism, hence the fact that she has a brand new book coming out this month called The Anti-racist Business Book in which she talks about capitalism and she talks about some of the problems with capitalism. But she's very clear that she's not anti-capitalist and there are many people who follow her or who used to follow her, or who have come into contact with her that just don't know how to reconcile these two things. Because in their mind if your anti-racist, and you're a DEI worker, you're anti-capitalist and they don't know what to do.

So instead of black and white dualistic thinking, our brains in those moments when we encounter this new information, have to move from

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either or thinking which is the black or white thinking to both and. How can she be both anti-racist and pro capitalism? And our brain wants to explode. It requires our brains to be able to hold two contrasting ideas at the same time if we want to account for these nuances and make them make sense which our brain loves to do.

I see the same thing come up for me a lot in different areas, one of which is the coaching tools that I use in my work. And I used to have only one framework that you've heard me talk about, the model that I use pretty much all the time for my life coaching work. It was the tool I learned life coaching on. But over time I started to realize that it wasn't a cure all although it's pretty amazing. But to think it would work for every single person in every situation I realized was black and white thinking, even though that's kind of how it's promoted or exactly how it's promoted.

So right now, I'm currently in Trudi's Equity Centered coaching certification and I'm also in Kara Lowentheil's feminist coaching certification and both of these communities are giving me all kinds of new tools for my toolbox, new frameworks, new models, new ideas. And so, my toolbox is getting pretty varied and pretty diverse and robust. And it's amazing because depending on who I'm coaching with in any situation and their own personal stories and histories I can reach in and grab out the tool that I think aligns best.

But earlier this week I saw a person that I really admire and I really feel like I'm aligned with them in a whole lot of ways, speaking out pretty directly and pretty negatively about one of the tools that I use and about how much harm it has created for them. And then about 100 other people commented in agreement, that it's harmful, and awful, and terrible. And the person who created it is terrible, and dangerous, and all this stuff. And I have to admit for a bit this rattled me because the person that posted the comment publicly I really like, and I really enjoy them and I enjoy following them, and I agree with them a lot.

But I don't agree with them obviously now on this situation a 100%. And I love this in some ways because it does make me go back and question and be like, well, how do I feel about that tool? Do I really believe in that tool?

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But I really do. And even though he greatly dislikes the tool, and has had a bad experience with it, I know it to be true that it has helped me a lot. And that it's also helped a lot of other people that I have helped use with it to help and that other people have used it with to help.

So, there's many ways in which I believe this tool for certain people in the right situations it can be extremely effective. Now, I also simultaneously now believe it's not right for every situation just like the other tools I mentioned earlier. So, all of my tools in my toolbox now have various uses and not a single one of them are a 100% right all the time. Imagine, nuance, but this really kind of messed with me a little bit. It's been a little interesting.

So instead of throwing out the tool I am learning from two other teachers now how to adapt all the tools I use, including this one. And how and when to use it and how to know when I want to choose it, and when to use other tools. And it's amazing but it really does take a lot of courage and a lot of thinking to get clear and confident about openly supporting things that other people you admire don't agree with. Now, on this particular thread I did not go and stand up for the tool. There was no reason to.

Was 90% anti the tool and I don't need to convince, or coerce, or preach just like Adam said, because I don't need them to use the tool. I want everybody to use the tool that's right for them. But for me I wanted to keep the tool. So, I just thought about it and I decided I wanted to keep it and I'm courageous enough that if anybody asks me, I'm like, "Yeah, I use these tools." But it can be really hard when someone you admire throws you for a loop because you figure out they don't agree with something that you agreed with.

So, I can only imagine, I'm not in the group I'm about to describe but for me I was like, "Who else feels this way?" And I'm like I can only imagine that a pro-choice republican feels pretty uncomfortable. The bulk of the Republican Party, or at least it looks as if publicly, we don't know the real numbers. And this is the interesting thing about black and white thinking too because perception can be one thing but when I look at the Republican

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Party the bulk of the group looks as if it's pro-life. And if you happen to be a pro-choice republican I bet that's a really difficult value or belief to stand on.

And a lot of people in the group probably wonder how those two things can go together. They can't really comfortably hold space for both and. They move probably a lot of them to either or thinking. So, it's really interesting. I've also had this come up with some of the teachers that I'm learning more inclusive marketing from. And I feel this way sometimes with them too. I get uncomfortable because I love what they're saying but they're saying it in a very black and white way.

And I do this too sometimes, I even said earlier I was thinking black and white because when we first decide maybe we're against something we sort of present it as if it's bad in all situations because we've just come to this new idea about it. We're on the front end of it and we're like, "I used to think this was good. And now I suddenly think it's bad. And I'm going to take a stand." And I do this a lot.

And so let me say again, if you're trying to stop doing something like in this instance working to stop using bro marketing tactics, the people you're learning from are probably going to be pretty anti bro marketing tactics. But here's the situation, there may be 10 different people talking in 10 different ways about what's right and what's wrong about bro marketing, if not 10,000 different people. And so, here's the thing, how do we decide which parts are right or wrong for us?

And we can become a nervous wreck wondering if any of those experts that we admire, that we've put on a pedestal are going to be looking at our marketing when we're calling ourselves anti-bro marketing and pointing out that we're a fake or a fraud. We don't like that. It feels like a threat. It feels uncomfortable. But here's what I want you to know. It only happens if you or the expert are thinking in black and white. And trust me, a lot of times people will be, this happens in all the work I'm doing.

This happens at anti-racism work when people are like, "I think you're an ally." And somebody is like, "I don't think you're an ally. I think you're doing

this right." And someone's like, "I think you're doing it wrong." This is the thing, and I want you to know this.

It's really important for you to know this because I find that most podcasts, and most books, and most sources that I read when I'm trying to come up with a new thought or a move to a new belief, usually do present things very much black or white more often than not especially when they're trying to disrupt something that they believe is harmful, again.

So, bro marketing, racism, fat phobia, anything that people are trying to disrupt they're going to pretty much come down in a black and white way on why it's almost all bad because they want to make a point. And so, they're typically going to sound like they're a 100% against it. And I would say this is true for me in some instances. So even if they believe there are exceptions they're probably not going to lead with that. They might not even admit it for a long time because most of the time they're not focusing on the exceptions. They're focusing on the problems.

And the problem with this for you may be that if you're still currently doing that old said behavior and they say, "Don't do it, it's horrible, it means you're a racist, or it means you're a bro marketer, or it means you're a, fill in the blank." It can create a lot of shame for you because you feel attacked. And when I first started talking about the anti-racism work I was doing and a lot of the other things I was changing this definitely happened. And there were several people, not a ton but there were a handful of people, I'll say that, who said, "I think you're shaming me."

And one particular person I think left a podcast review. And it didn't upset me because I completely understood it, because I understand how thinking works. And I know I'm not capable of creating shame for her. I can't make her feelings. Her thought makes her feelings. But I know that if I'm saying, "Doing these behaviors is racist", and it happens to be something that someone else is doing then they absolutely can think the thought, she's making me feel like I'm wrong or bad.

And that can for sure create a lot of shame. I totally get it. It's not my intention. It's not the bro marketers people's intention to shame me. It's not

this guy who posted about, or this person who posted about the coaching tool that I use, that was trying to make me feel shame about it. Didn't even know I used the thing maybe, but I thought it and I got upset. So, it's really important that we understand this.

So, the dilemma is real. And I suspect this is what keeps so many people who could be changing the world from changing the world because we are afraid to speak up or take a stand because we don't want to be wrong. We don't want to make a mistake, we don't want to get called out by someone in our group that we're trying to align with or have aligned with. We don't want to feel shame. We don't want to take a stand because it feels risky. But there is a quote that says you can't set sail while keeping one foot safely on the shore.

And you may have heard me say this before. But if you really want to set sail and make change in the world, you can't stay safe, you can't avoid all the risk. And you can't change the world and also agree 100% or disagree 100% with people that you consider the in group and the out group. So, seeing people like Trudi for me, be anti-racist but not anti-capitalist gives me a lot of courage to make my own decisions and to be willing to stand behind them and defend them.

While also being open to rethinking any of them at any time if new information presents itself because I'm not rigid in black or white thinking. I'm like right now I'm at this spot on the continuum. But I might move to a different spot if I get different information. And this is really the epitome of living in the grey area and moving along that continuum as I call it, on each and every issue.

So today I am here on the continuum on this particular issue or belief. Tomorrow, or next week, or next year, I could be farther along. I might have taken a few steps backwards. I might have thought, I thought I was going to go here but the more I think about it, that doesn't feel right for me. And all of that is okay. And wherever I am at any given moment you can rest assured that I've thought about it. I've rethought about and I've decided

exactly why I'm there on purpose right now, because I take thinking about my thoughts and beliefs very seriously, it's really important to me.

So last week in my feminist coaching certification, real quick, I'm going to wrap up. But I loved what my small group leader, Brig Johnson, who's an amazing master life coach said in the group. She said, "You know what? Were here in this program to teach you a whole lot of new ways to think and give you a lot of ideas to try on for size. And once you learn all of them then you get to keep the ones you like and get rid of the ones that don't resonate."

And I would even say, you get to keep the ones you like right now, and get rid of the ones that don't resonate right now knowing that in the future you may circle back and get rid of some but adopt some other ones. Because it's always changing. But I love that she gave us permission because we do get to decide what we want to believe, and what we want to value, and what we want to use in our life as beliefs, or tools, or ideas. No matter what anyone else, even people we love and admire, or even people we can't stand, no matter what any of them believes we still get to pick our own beliefs.

So, I hope after this episode you will take a look at your thinking and you'll assess how much of your thinking tends to be black and white thinking. And I also hope you will assess whether you only feel comfortable embracing new ideas, if all or most of the people around you and that you admire are in agreement with you. It's an interesting one. And I want you to think about are you willing to make your own decisions even if they seem controversial? And are you willing to stand behind them? And do you know why you're choosing them?

One last quick story. I said the last story was the last story. But here's one more quick thing I want you to know. In the book, Think Again, Adam Grant talks about our two party political systems in the US. And how it's such a problem to him that you're supposed to either align with one party or the other's agenda entirely. And we see this, we see people voting all on the

party line. So, you're supposed to pick the party and stick with them a 100%. And I'm paraphrasing a little bit here.

But essentially he says, this goes against everything that's true for him and his values completely because he believes that he has a personal obligation to take each and every issue, every single issue regardless of whether the party has backed it or not, and objectively look at it and do some research if needed, and think about it, and rethink about it. And make his own decision again regardless if it aligns with the party that he has the most in common with. Because he wants to think for himself, not have someone say, "If you're in our group here's where you're supposed to fall on these issues.?"

And I totally love this and admire what he's saying. And you all, not only do we get to make your own decisions, I agree with Adam. I think we have an obligation to make the ones that are right for us with intention knowing why we feel that way. And that's not just at the voter box, that's just in general in our life, in our business, in our day-to-day, with our families. Pick the thing that's right for you to believe in. And know why you're picking it so you can be confident at least in that moment where you are on the continuum, that you know why you're there.

And I think we also need to have the courage to be willing to change our minds a lot and to admit that we change them, and that we got new information, so we're updating our opinion, and not believing what we used to believe anymore. Maybe we made a slight shift, maybe we made a drastic shift but it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's called growth. And a lot of people won't admit that they've changed their mind or won't even change it because they don't want people to think they were wrong, or they don't want to be embarrassed that they used to believe the other thing.

But here's the thing, I used to be pro-diet for years. I used to be pro-hustle for years. Now I'm anti-diet, anti-hustle. But I know why I felt the way I did and felt the way I did originally. And I know why I think and feel the way I feel now. And that gives me comfort. And I'm completely okay saying I changed my mind. And there's a million other places I've changed my

mind. So, I hope that you are not a 100% aligned with me across the board on all my beliefs because that might mean you're not thinking for yourself and that you've got me on a pedestal.

And I want you to think for yourself. And I think a lot of you are if you're here listening. But know this, we can disagree and still decide to be friends if we want to. You can disagree with almost everything I say and still listen to my podcasts in case there's something that you decide agree with, or some new information that you do agree with. We can also decide that we no longer are a match and that's okay too, or maybe just one of us can decide in a relationship that we're not a match and not even tell the other person.

But just start to pull away and maybe if you pulled away, later on you decide you like them again, or you resonate with each other all of a sudden again because maybe one or both of you has changed or grown. That happens to me all the time. Remember, it's a continuum, which means it's always moving. And there was a while when there was one kind of mentor, I was like, "I don't know if I agree with them anymore." And then all of a sudden they said some things and I was like, "That's actually really smart. I should listen to them again at least for a little while and try it back on for size."

So, there are no rules, you all, there is no right or wrong way to do this. It is not black and white. And our job isn't to convince each other to change, or to preach, or to coerce, or to strong arm each other into changing our minds. We get to decide to believe for ourselves exactly what we want to believe. And you know what? We don't even have to tell anybody if we don't want to. We can be open about some issues and some beliefs and keep others completely to ourselves.

We write the rules, they're ours, it's our brain, it's our beliefs, it's our rules. So having the courage to be true to ourselves, it's going to require us to be in the grey all day every day. And my grey and your grey might not even be the same shade of grey and that's all 100% okay.

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Alright, friends, have fun exploring the grey and remember, give your brain a break. Do some self-care when you've been thinking too hard for too long. After this podcast I'm ready for some self-care. So, I'm heading to do that now. But I'll see you back here next week with another episode of the *Design You* podcast. Bye for now.

Thank you so much for listening to the *Design You* podcast, and if you are ready to dig deep and do the important work we talk about here on the podcast of transforming your mindset and creating a scalable online business model, there has never been a more important time than right now. So, join me and the incredible creative entrepreneurs in my *Design You* coaching program today. You can get all the details at TobiFairley.com.