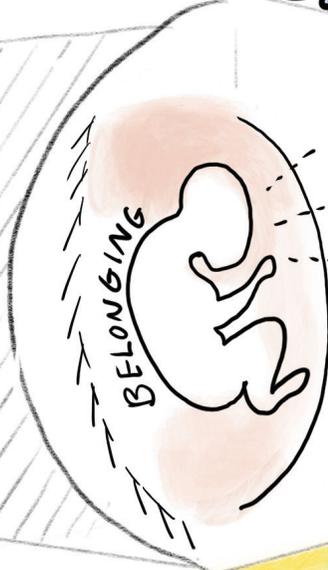


GENTLE SELF-AWARENESS



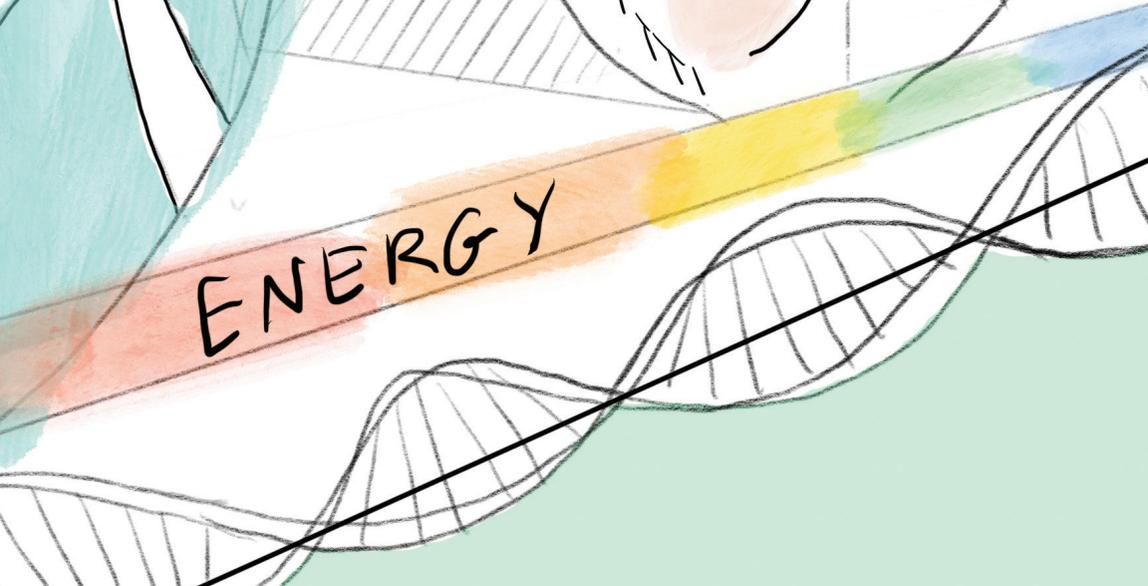
INTENTION



BELONGING

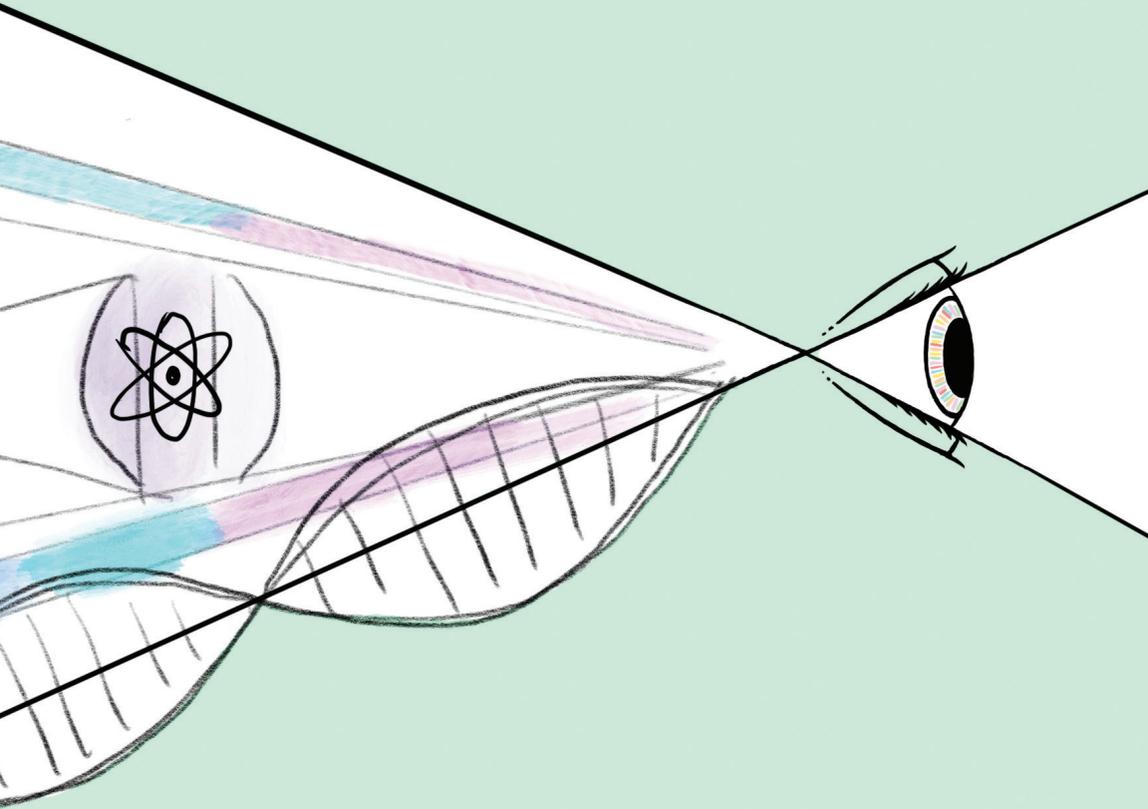
SURROUNDED  
SAFE  
SUPPORTED

ENERGY

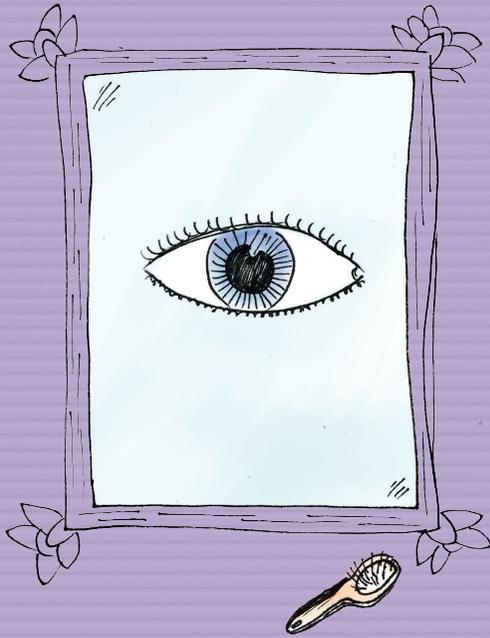


PART I

# GOING IN



We are born in community—fully connected to another human. Without connection, we cannot survive. It's in our DNA to belong.



I didn't always understand  
the importance of community.  
My epiphany came at age thirty.

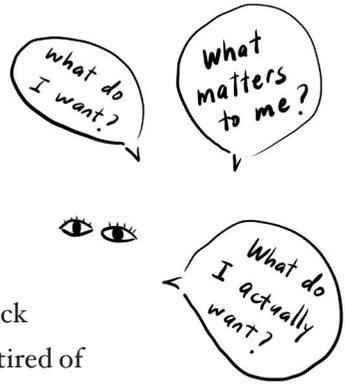
# My Epiphany

## How Community Changed My Life

**W**hen I turned thirty, I realized I didn't belong. I was in my bathroom on a snowy Saturday in January in New York City, brushing my perpetually knotted hair and getting ready to go out, when I had an epiphany while looking at myself in the mirror: I didn't look happy.

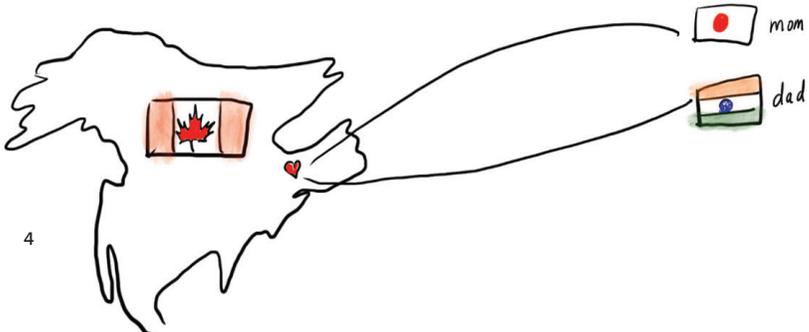
Other than with my identical twin sister, Miki, and a small group of friends whom I loved but rarely saw because they were scattered around the globe, I didn't really feel a strong sense of belonging anywhere. I found myself stuck at the same sports bar every Saturday with friends who talked about stuff I didn't care about, and I frequently drank until I blacked out. I had just broken off an engagement, and I was not respecting myself or my body. And I was about to go out and do it all over again that night.

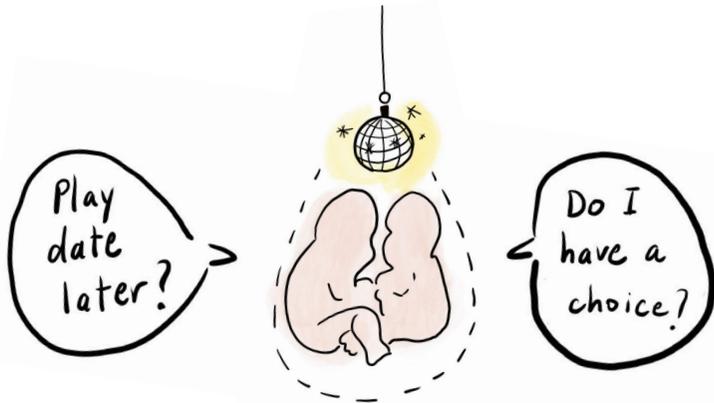
In that moment I knew something had to change. “What do I actually want?” I asked myself. “What matters to me? Is this what life’s all about? Am I just a weekend warrior getting drunk with people who don’t inspire me? Am I spending my time the way I want, or am I just numbing my loneliness and lack of deep connections?” I realized I was so tired of just c o a s t i n g .



Growing up, community had been at the center of my family’s values. My parents immigrated to Canada in the 1970s—Dad is from India; Mom is from Japan. After meeting and falling in love in graduate school, they married and raised my sisters and me with little support from their families, who were thousands of miles away. Looking back, I now see how much they taught us about the importance of community, and how vulnerable and courageous they had to be to build their own community from scratch, especially with English as their second language.

You could say I’ve been part of a community since I was in my mother’s womb, splishing and splashing around with my identical twin, Miki. My older sister, Yuri, was less than a year older than Miki and me (363 days older, to be exact), so from the very beginning I had





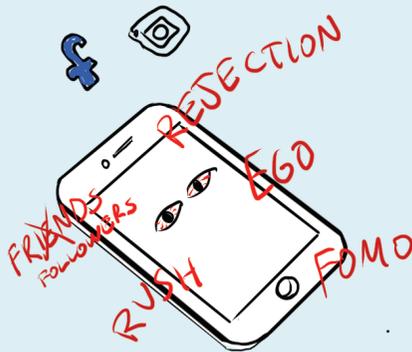
two sisters to play with, learn from, fight against, and make up with every day. It was always exciting—traumatic when we ganged up on one another and empowering when we stuck together.

Even when finances were tight, our parents threw the most amazing birthday celebrations and dinner parties, where we invented games for our friends and designed a signature fruit punch every year. I remember going downstairs to our basement during a party my dad threw for his engineering team and everyone was laughing at the dramatic poetry readings led by his British colleagues. All this stuck with me. Fun was very important in our family (once the copious amounts of chores and homework were completed, of course), and community organizing, including throwing events, has always been an integral way of life.

So when did that all change? How did I end up at thirty feeling like I didn't belong? I knew there had to be more to life.



Thinking back, I realized that for the past decade, I had placed making friends in the “if I have time” category. Work always came first and canceling on friends became normal. I spent time with people who were fine but not inspiring, just because it was easier. I would often delay or avoid the opportunity for a deeper connection with someone in real life because I wanted to catch up on social media. With Facebook and Instagram, I thought the more “friends” and “followers” I had, the better and more full my life would be. But it was more of an addiction, a rush, driven by ego, with insecurities bubbling up everywhere and offering very little satisfaction in the end. I was too proud (aka insecure) to reach out to potential new friends to see if anyone wanted to hang out, for fear of rejection. And I know now that I’m not alone in feeling these things. Being a thinking, feeling human is challenging—especially in the digital age!



**MAYBE TURNING THIRTY WOKE ME UP**, but it really wasn't an "event" or a "low point" that I hit. It was a simple recognition. A realization. And I had to do something about it.

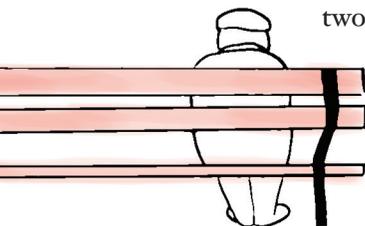
That night at the sports bar, I looked around and realized that almost everyone was avoiding their feelings the same way I had been.

People were looking around the room and not at one another. Half the bar was buried in their phones, and the other half was belligerently drunk and shouting at one another, grossly making out, or doing shots. I couldn't believe I had been a part of this and let it go on for so many years! I had nothing in common with these people! What was I thinking? I left my untouched beer and ran home with my head spinning, determined to make a change once and for all.

For the first time in my adult life,  
I was going to be intentional about  
my people.

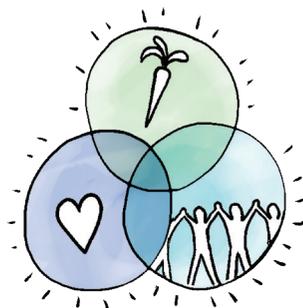
## As I grew more passionate about creating a community, I learned that isolation and a lack of belonging were becoming **A CRISIS:**

- One in four Americans report that they have ZERO friends to confide in and discuss important matters with; this number has tripled in the last thirty years, according to a 2006 study published in *American Sociological Review*.
- One in three Americans over the age of sixty-five is socially isolated; for those over the age of eighty-five, the number increases to one in two. This was heartbreaking to learn. The people who worked so hard to create the world we currently live in are being shoved into isolation instead of being celebrated?! I couldn't believe it!



- Another study found that having weak social ties is as harmful to our health as being an alcoholic and twice as harmful as obesity. Sit with that for a second: *Having poor social connections is as bad as being an alcoholic and twice as bad as being obese.*
- Another study found that isolation sets off a cellular chain reaction that increases inflammation and suppresses the body's autoimmune response to disease. We are sick from loneliness!

● But then I learned about the “Blue Zones,” the communities that live the longest—Okinawans in Japan, Sardinians in Italy, Costa Ricans, and Seventh-Day Adventists. They attribute their health and longevity to strong family ties, enjoyable social engagements, regular exercise, and eating mostly vegetables, usually in community.



This was a huge wake-up call. I had never realized how vital community was for my health and happiness. . . .

Becoming a social entrepreneur—a term used for people interested in creating a business that solves social, cultural, and environmental issues—is what ultimately opened my eyes to the importance of in-person communities. In 2010, I launched a children’s nutrition education media company (à la *Sesame Street*) called Super Sprowtz to inspire kids to eat their vegetables. I wrote four children’s books, produced fifty educational videos with the best puppeteers in the world, launched salad bar programs in underprivileged elementary schools across the country, and worked with some of the finest educators to create a comprehensive curriculum to make healthy eating fun, and we were impacting



hundreds of thousands of kids around the world over the five years that I ran it. While we were making exciting strides, it was also the first time I saw how technology impacted the way kids connected with one another, as well as how it made them more sedentary and isolated.

During that period, in 2013, Miki, our friend Antonia, and I also launched THINX, an underwear technology company, with the intention of disrupting the market for feminine hygiene products. Our mission was not only to invent a new way to deal with menstruation (and serve the planet and the women in developing countries who lacked convenient solutions) but also to unify women and create a platform for women's empowerment. We spent three years tinkering with and developing our first prototype, and since our Kickstarter campaign in 2013, we've amassed an incredible community of hundreds of thousands of women who support THINX and our mission—which in turn has helped to reinforce my belief in the strength and importance of relationships across every aspect of life.

That same year (2013 was the year I kept saying YES!), my friend and conspirator Matt and I came together over falafel late one night. Frustrated by how nightlife had become overrun by mean bouncers, too much alcohol, and digital divides, we wanted to get back to the basics of dancing and good, clean fun. What started out as a social experiment in which we gathered good friends in a basement lounge for early-morning yoga, dance, and merriment before going to work (several friends initially thought we were nuts!) has grown

into Daybreaker, a mischievous movement that can now be found in twenty-five cities across the world and a dozen college campuses—with over 450,000 community members—and we’re just getting started.

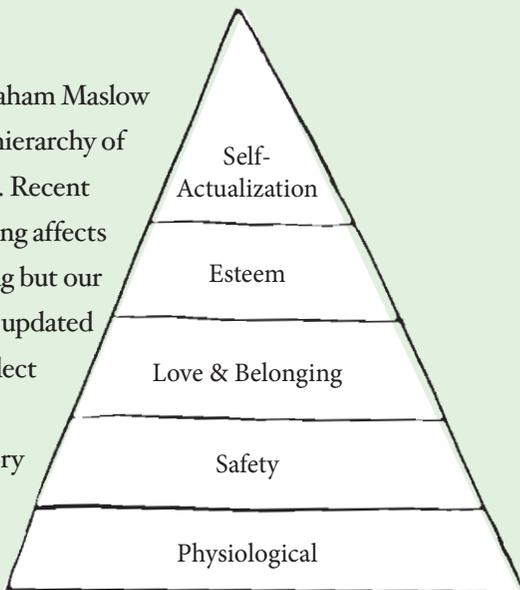
I now spend my days working as a Community Architect, a term I coined for myself and for all those who spend their days bringing humans together. The best architects think about materials, design, light and space, and Community Architects are no different. Communities are built, person by person, through thoughtful design and authentic, energetic connection points.

I’ve traveled all around the country and the world to launch Daybreaker, and throughout these travels I’ve sought out all sorts of people to talk to—students, teachers, engineers, hair stylists, entrepreneurs, psychologists, retirees, kids, taxi drivers, CEOs, you name it—in order to learn from the different communities that exist. I learned that many people think it’s almost shameful to want to belong—they view it as “needy.” Of course it’s needy . . . it’s a fundamental human need! On Maslow’s hierarchy of basic human necessities, belonging sits right alongside the need for love.

The need to belong is fundamental!



That said, since 1943, when Abraham Maslow first shared the concept for his hierarchy of needs, a lot has been discovered. Recent studies have shown that belonging affects not just our emotional well-being but our physical well-being too.\* So I've updated Uncle Maslow's hierarchy to reflect that belonging is in fact a **basic human need** in the same category as food, water, touch, love, and shelter. I've also updated his hierarchy altogether to reflect our current belief systems and new research findings. Here they are from the bottom up:



*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, 1943*

**Basic Human Needs:** Food, Water, Shelter, Belonging, Love, Positive Touch\*\*

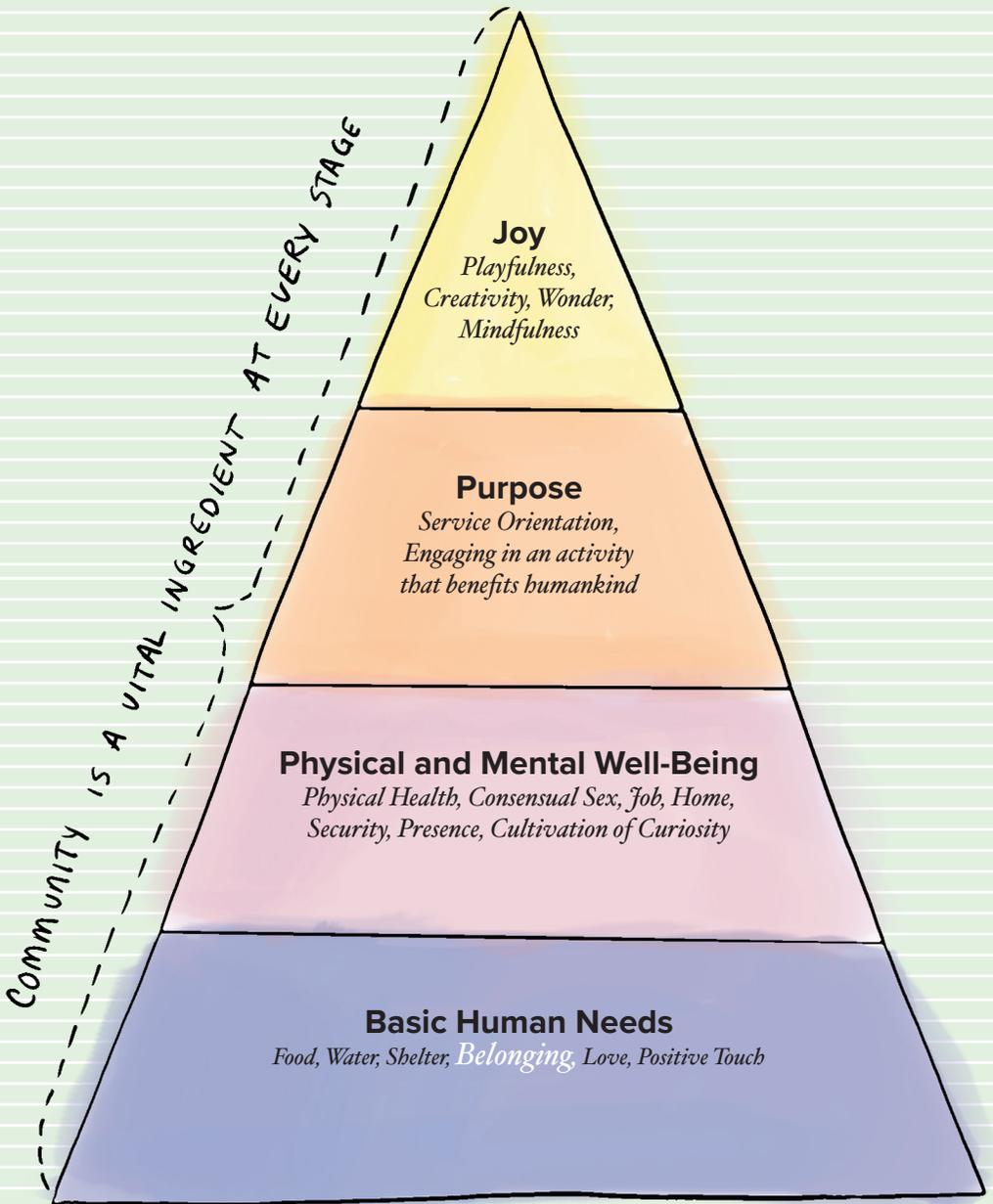
**Physical and Mental Well-Being:** Physical Health, Consensual Sex, Job, Home, Security, Presence, Cultivation of Curiosity

**Purpose:** Service Orientation, Finding Your Purpose on the Planet That Benefits Humankind (Parenting, Community)

**Joy:** Playfulness, Creativity, Wonder, Mindfulness—you have the satisfaction from a life of purpose to return to play, creativity, wonder and end suffering.

\*The Harvard Study of Adult Development—80-year study, 1938–present.

\*\*Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).



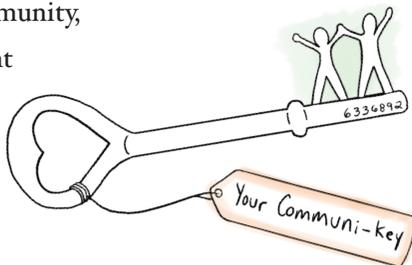
*Agrawal's Hierarchy of Needs, 2017*

Across all four levels of my updated hierarchy of needs is one unifying ingredient: *community*. Without a community supporting you at each level, it's nearly impossible to move up the hierarchy. As psychologist Noam Shpancer wrote, "Human beings, fundamentally, are distinctly, spectacularly social. Lonely and isolated, we cannot survive, let alone thrive."

People often ask me, "How did you do it? How did you build these thriving communities?" These questions, along with my desire to synthesize what I learned through my personal and professional communities, inspired me to write this book. Sure, community and belonging can be squishy concepts, but I've identified several key principles and practices—all of which I continue to work on, both for myself and for the organizations I'm involved with—that have served me and hopefully will serve you too on your community building journey.

It took me two years to finally find my people, but when I did, every aspect of my life became more energizing, exciting, and full of possibilities. Of course there were (and are) many moments of learning along the way, but for the first time I felt safe to be fully me and to be celebrated for my individuality within a collective.

Once I saw the power of community, and felt the deep joy it brought to me personally, it became my mission to help create community for others too.



Ultimately, my goal is to give you the blueprint to build and nurture your own community from scratch so that you find happiness, fulfillment, and success.

Let's GO!

# WHAT DO BELONGING AND COMMUNITY ACTUALLY MEAN ?

To be human is to belong.

We were literally born in community,  
attached to someone else.

I know, I know, we're frequently told to seek individuality and to be independent and strong, or to "go against the grain." This is all great—to a limit. Recognizing and honoring our unique qualities and authentic gifts is key to developing self-confidence. But *sharing* our unique gifts with the greater whole is vital to our humanity. Ultimately, humans are at the top of the food chain not because we are the strongest or fastest *individuals*—bears and cheetahs are much stronger and faster. We are at the top of the food chain because we are the best at *collaborating*, whether through storytelling, skill sharing, or community building. So let's honor our individuality and our authentic gifts by sharing ourselves with the world!

**I define [BE•LONG•ING] as: a feeling of deep relatedness and acceptance; a feeling of "I would rather be here than anywhere else."**

Belonging is the opposite of loneliness. It's a feeling of home, of "I can exhale here and be fully myself with no judgment or insecurity." Belonging is about shared values and responsibility, and the desire to participate in making your community better. It's about taking pride, showing up, and offering your unique gifts to others. *You can't belong if you only take.*

**I define [COM•MU•NI•TY] as: a group of three or more people with whom you share similar values and interests and where you experience a sense of belonging.**

Take a moment and sit with these definitions. Then let's move on.