

WHY BEING
Good CAN BE
BAD FOR YOU

HOW TO GET CLARITY, CONFIDENCE AND
COURAGE TO STEP OUT OF STUCKNESS

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Testimonials

What a powerful, authentic, and raw book. Beautifully and professionally written. I feel that this book was written about me. If only I knew of Kate years ago, I could have saved so much time on these things she talks about. I'm going to have some in my yoga studio library for clients to see. This is a must read.

Trudy Vains,
Yoga Teacher and Birth Doula, Author of *Fused*

Kate has presented an inspiring journey of becoming unstuck from the pain of guilt, fear, frustration, and people pleasing. Kate is not only giving insight into the blocks, beliefs and behaviour patterns created as a result of perfectionism, but she depicts a wonderful and powerful journey through her own experience, that paved the way to personal growth, finding healthy boundaries, and returning to herself. Kate guides you through reconceptualising the way you think about yourself, from neutralising fear and releasing guilt to developing acceptance from within.

**Shelley Maree Hunter, Disability and
Mental Health Worker, Author of *Face of Faith***

I loved Kate Witteveen's fresh and invigorating writing style. I was captivated by her ability to weave strategy, empirical research, and heart wrenchingly relatable storytelling into a beautiful book, sprinkled with wit and charm, that will leave the reader feeling confident about positive immediate action they can take in their own lives. A fantastic read!

**Nikki Langman, International Speaker and
Author of *How to be a BADASS***

Kate's journey and her powerful transformation into her authentic self was incredibly relatable for me, and I suspect many others who reach middle age and really start to wonder who they are. She is highly perceptive and writes with such empathy that I immediately felt connected to her story, and ready to sign up for her coaching! An important book for anyone who is ready to let go of pleasing others at the expense of their own satisfaction and fulfillment.

Fleur Hull, Career Strategist and Author

A phenomenal, refreshing and unique insight into the human psychology and character! Definitely a "must read" personal approach that is powerful, explicit and relatable to everyone!

Kate Witteveen has captured the essence of what it means to break free from our high expectations, judgements, criticism and demands, in order to create a magnificent life of courage, intention and alignment to core values and connection!

**Taloe Walters, Author of *Spirit Freedom*,
Co-owner of New Economic Evolution
of the World/Evorich**

Dedication

For Dad – who told me I could do anything.

For Mum – who never let me forget it.

For Michael – my only.

For Madelyn, Baxter, and Hugo – my everything.

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Preface

Adodgy GPS as a metaphor for life

On 16 March 2012, three Japanese tourists visiting Australia made headlines when they drove their Hyundai Getz hire car into the ocean whilst attempting to drive to North Stradbroke Island¹. Unbeknown to them, North Stradbroke Island is only accessible by boat.

When these hapless travellers programmed their destination into their GPS device, the device did not take into account the 14 kilometres of water between the island and the mainland. Instead, it directed them straight into the tranquil waters of Moreton Bay.

Thankfully, none of the adventurous trio were harmed. Their hire car, however, was considerably worse off after its foray into the ocean. Apparently undeterred, the tourists expressed their intention to return to Australia, specifically to visit North Stradbroke Island (via ferry).

¹ Fujita, A. GPS Tracking Disaster: Japanese Tourists Drive Straight into the Pacific. www.abcnews.go.com

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When the story was broadcast, responses ranged from complete bewilderment ("*How can you drive into the ocean??*") to outright mockery ("*Surely they knew their car couldn't swim??*"). In lunchrooms and at office water coolers throughout the country, many had a chuckle at the tourists' expense.

For me, though, there was something different. Reading that story gave me a visceral sensation that I associate with something I have dubbed "empathic mortification". That feeling arises when I feel desperately sorry for someone and recognise that their misfortune could easily be mine.

It feels exactly like mortification: a hot, burning sensation in my hands and a churning in my stomach, accompanied by a strong desire to disappear, at least until the situation is resolved (i.e., nobody is looking anymore). Alongside the mortification is a sense of relief. A "thank God that's not me," coupled with the recognition that it could have been.

For the record, I have never driven my car into the ocean. My car mishaps are limited to temporarily misplacing my car in the shopping centre carpark (albeit, on numerous occasions) and driving the wrong way up a one-way ramp at Pacific Fair Shopping Centre (ONCE, and under directions from my navigator!). However, I can understand how such a situation arose.

Quite simply, they were following the instructions that they were given, in good faith. They had identified that they didn't know how to get to North Stradbroke Island, and they trusted that the best way to get there was to follow the GPS device. At some point, they probably had doubts about the accuracy of the directions, but they didn't trust themselves enough to deviate from the prescribed course.

I understand their compliance completely. It is how I have lived most of my life, and it is why I wrote this book. Just like following

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a GPS that has been incorrectly programmed, I have found myself following a path that wasn't correct for me. Trusting that others knew more than I did has gotten me into trouble on more than one occasion, and it is a habit I am actively trying to change.

Living according to what I thought was expected of me, or what a good girl, wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, employee, would do, had me stuck on a path that was leading to my version of driving my car into the ocean. Except, instead of being knee-deep in water, I found myself burnt out, overwhelmed, and feeling like I was failing in every aspect of my life.

My journey from compulsive good girl to burnt-out academic didn't happen overnight, but it did happen. Whilst many factors contributed to my burnout, many of the decisions I made that led to that outcome stemmed from my desire to be good. The problem was that my definition of good was bad for me.

This book is about muting the external GPS that is no longer working for you. It is about finding the clarity, the confidence, and the courage to emphatically overrule that annoying voice telling you to go left when left leads to the ocean. And to be proud of yourself for doing so.

DISCLAIMER

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Introduction

Untenable

"You have a strong case, but it's going to cause a whole lot of trouble. I don't think that is what you want, is it?"

Those words were kryptonite to my client, Walter. They also sealed the fate of that chapter of his career. The person sitting across the table from him didn't know Walter very well, but they had found and exploited his greatest weakness with apparent ease. The depressing ambience of the soulless office in which he sat seemed apt for this conversation. He felt utterly defeated. It had taken a lot of courage to share that story, and he had done so for no quantifiable reason.

Of course, he didn't want to cause any trouble. Like me, Walter was a lifelong devotee of being good, and thus averse to causing trouble. To even contemplate causing trouble made him feel nauseous. He liked doing what was expected of him. Sadly, though, his unwillingness to cause trouble meant the career he had built over many years had become untenable.

The trouble Walter was discouraged from causing was the type of trouble that needed to be caused. It was a version of the “good trouble” that Civil Rights leader John Lewis dedicated his life to causing. Good trouble that spoke out and stood up against injustice, unfairness, and inequality. In this case, the issues were workplace bullying and professional sabotage, which culminated in Walter seeking assistance from his organisation and being advised that taking action was not a feasible option.

Regrettably, Walter did not cause good trouble. Like many of us would have done in his situation, he complied with the advice he was given and shut up. And then he walked away from his career because the cost of staying was his health and his well-being. He had reached his pivotal point, and there was no way to stay.

When listening to Walter recounting that fateful conversation, I had a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Like Walter, I could recall a defining conversation where everything changed. My pivotal point may have been borne of different circumstances, but the theme was common: reaching a point at which you know you have no choice but to walk away from what is familiar. Recognising that you are confusing familiar with safe, when in fact your familiar is toxic.

Walter and I both experienced a significant burnout. We had a shared tendency to be exemplary organisational citizens, which unfortunately translated into being crappy stewards of our health and well-being. It can be devastating to realise that doing all the right things, ticking all the boxes, and saying yes to everything, has not delivered the outcome you desired.

Recognising that you have followed a script you thought was written for you personally, but was actually your interpretation of societal expectations, is confronting. However, the cost of continuing in that lane is hard to quantify. For Walter, and for me, it was burnout. For others, the costs have included relationship

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breakdowns (or staying in unhealthy relationships) and mental, emotional, and physical health challenges.

Being good was, in fact, bad for me; just as it has been for many of my clients, and perhaps for you too. In this book, I will share with you the challenges I have experienced, the lessons I have learned, and the gifts I have received on my journey back from burnout. That journey has required a significant amount of soul-searching, an unflinching look at how I created my own suffering, and a reconsideration of many beliefs I have held since childhood.

My burnout resulted in more than a career pivot. The impact was an existential crisis. Figuring out who I was when I wasn't an academic was painful. Even harder was acknowledging that the framework I was using to make important decisions was flawed. There was a misalignment between my intentions and my impact. Whilst I was always trying to be good and do my best, I was forgetting to be kind to myself in the process.

Thankfully, the outcome has been a life overhaul. But I'll be honest—it's still a work in progress. This is not my autobiography, but it does contain stories from my life. It isn't a chronology either. Rather, it is an amalgamation of stories that have contributed to my understanding of my over-reliance on being good to be accepted, and what assumptions I needed to question. Some of them are mine, others have been derived from the journeys of my clients.

I won't be presenting an empirically supported theory (although I will draw from some of those), and my conclusions are entirely lacking in statistical significance because they are based on anecdotal rather than empirical evidence. However, I have come to realise that there are different ways of knowing, that don't require a gold standard in research design. It is my hope that by sharing what (I think) I have figured out about the traps of

striving to be good, I might save at least one of you some self-imposed suffering.

There are many ways in which being good can be bad for you. I have chosen three to focus on, because they are the recurring themes I have encountered in my own experience and with my clients. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and history is overflowing with heartbreaking examples when individuals and groups did as they were told rather than what was right. Those stories are beyond the scope of this book.

For the sake of simplicity, my premise is that being good can be bad for you because it contributes to faulty judgements that lead to negative outcomes, including:

1. Perfectionism (self-judgement);
2. People-pleasing (fear of judgement from others in close proximity); and
3. Puritanical perspective (fear of judgement from society at large).

In Part 1 – Calculating the Cost – Uncomfortable Truths about Being Good, I will share some of the ways in which these faulty judgements can cause negative impacts.

In Part 2 – Pondering the Possibilities – Breaking up with Being Good, I will outline the three attributes that will provide a foundation from which you can begin the process of de-emphasising the need to be good, in favour of other metrics that may serve you better.

Finally, in *Part 3 – Stepping out of Stuckness – Adopting an ASTUTE Mindset*, I will describe a framework that is helpful for getting beyond the constrictions of being good and embracing the opportunities that exist beyond that schema.

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Recognising that being good can be bad for you was hard for me, but it helped me redefine my criteria for success, and provided the impetus to improve my health and well-being. I hope that by relinquishing my need to be good, I can become better. Ironically, that requires lowering my expectations of myself, and cultivating the courage to be bad at new things. As I said: it's a work in progress.

If you can relate to the tendency to be good at the cost of being kind to yourself, you may be interested in the guide I have created to accompany this book: "*The Definitive Guide to Breaking Free from Being Good*". It contains self-reflective exercises intended to help you examine your own beliefs and habits that may be contributing to your tendency to be good, and how those tendencies may be detrimental to you. It also contains exercises associated with the ASTUTE Transformation Framework, which is described in Part 3. You can download it for free here: www.katewitteveen.com.

Part 1

**Calculating the Cost–
Uncomfortable Truths
About Being Good**

Chapter 1

Gotta Be Good

“Then I came face to face with the realisation that disappointing people is the greatest fear of the nice girl.”

Lynne Hybels, “Nice Girls Don’t Change the World.”

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to follow the rules. I have never liked to get things wrong or do things that would draw attention. The thought of breaking rules or causing trouble makes me uncomfortable. Equally, the thought of making mistakes in front of others has, historically, been a cause of extreme angst. In his research, social psychologist, Professor Matt Lieberman, has found that people would prefer to be hit by a car than to make a mistake in front of others². I can totally relate to that finding.

²Lieberman, M.D. (2000). Intuition: A social cognitive neuroscience approach. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(1), 109-137.

I grew up in a small regional town where almost everybody knew each other. My father was the principal of the local Catholic primary school, so we were somewhat visible in the town. We were frequently reminded that we should not misbehave in public because it would reflect poorly on Dad. I took that warning to heart, and rarely got into trouble at school. However, on one memorable occasion, my Year 8 class, which had the dubious honour of being the most notorious class in our year level, received a class detention. We had to pick up rubbish for the first 15 minutes of our lunch break.

It is not an exaggeration to say mortification had me in its grip for the entire duration of that detention. As I picked up rubbish, I felt the searing burn of shame coursing through my body. I remember looking at the troublemakers in disgust and disbelief at how completely unaffected they were. I understand now that I felt shame because this punishment challenged the very essence of my identity. But at the time, I didn't have that insight. Instead, I had a strong desire to curl up somewhere and become invisible.

It wasn't about the rubbish or that the punishment cut into my lunch time. It also wasn't the injustice that I, along with many other innocents, were being punished for the actions of a few. It was the exposure, the visibility, and the intense scrutiny I felt during the detention. My self-conscious 13-year-old brain believed that everyone was looking at me and forming judgements about who I was. Getting into trouble cut to the core of my identity.

Decades later, I have compassion for my younger self. Whilst it is easy to dismiss this experience as a minor blip on an otherwise unblemished behavioural record, it was much more than that for me. Even though the punishment wasn't aimed at me as an individual, it usurped my need to be good, and it hurt more than it should have.

<https://bit.ly/whybeinggoodcanbebadforyou>