

WANT YOUR SELF

Shift Your Self-Talk and
Unearth the Strength in
Who You Were All Along

KATIE HORWITCH

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Chapter One

THE MISINTERPRETATION

Isn't it funny—not *ha-ha* funny, more like *hmmm* funny—how our very first memories hold little pieces of buried treasure, often telling our story before we've begun?

It's 1991: I'm four years old and I'm standing in the center of my preschool classroom. I'm looking up at the newly created corkboard of student art that's just been unveiled before outdoor playtime. My arms are bare. My hair is tied half-up-half-down. My thick bangs skim my eyebrows. And I'm obsessed with all things Ariel.

The Little Mermaid is a cornerstone piece of cultural content for any baby-of-the-'80s, child-of-the-'90s. A seminal piece of work. A pièce de résistance, if you will. And I'm definitely not talking about the terrifying 1837 Hans Christian Andersen version that your great-great-grandmother read. You know, the one where—spoiler alert—the mermaid dies of a broken heart, dissolves into sea foam, and turns into literal air until she does good deeds for 300 years and can go to heaven. Do three centuries' worth of selfless acts or die and blow away forever. A fun bedtime story about blackmail for the kiddos of yore.

Nope—I'm talking about the G-rated Disney version, where the mermaid is named Ariel, and she's got a talking fish named Flounder as a BFF, and there's a worrywart crab named Sebastian who doubles as a glorified babysitter. In this more uplifting, more hopeful 1989 tale, Ariel gets her prince, gets her legs, and has a killer singing voice to boot. She

sings of longing for more, and then she gets it. The walking, the running, the play-all-day-in-the-sunning. Ariel wants it all. And Ariel gets it all.

Just like almost every other stereotypical little girl in 1991, *The Little Mermaid* is my obsession. And Ariel, the one who gets it all, is my *icon*.

You know how people talk about getting back to who you were “before the world told you who to be”? That time during childhood when you felt wild and free and unaffected by society?

I never experienced that. I have no recollection of being wild and free, and none of being unaffected by society. I never really cried as a baby, or so I’m told. I don’t think it was because nothing affected me. It was more like *everything* affected me. I was too busy observing and soaking in every little detail of the world to waste time on tears. My childhood wasn’t notably traumatic or burdensome—I was just born with a head and heart that cared intensely from Day One. If my default was ever wild and free, I certainly don’t remember it.

I was also born with what a yoga teacher once told me is called *high proprioception*, which means that I can literally feel my body in space. I can *feel* my skin on my muscles on my bones. I can *feel* how much space I take up just by standing still. I don’t need to gaze into a mirror to know how I look, and I notice sensations in my body before any signs or symptoms bubble up. Psychologist Elaine Aron calls this being a *Highly Sensitive Person*, which essentially means I see things others can’t and feel things others don’t.¹ I can feel your emotions without hearing a word. What kind of day has it been? I’ll know before you even say hello. Bright lights send my nervous system into overdrive, and a motorcycle revving its engine outside my window leaves me rattled for a good ten minutes. Crowded subway cars aren’t just annoying; they’re aggressive to every single one of my senses. I notice how the world affects me before I have words to describe what’s happening. I am, essentially, a Professional Noticer. Always have been. Always will be.

My main outlet to interpret all my noticing as a child was art. I started drawing full faces and figures before most kids learned that

crayons are for holding, not chewing. Grown-ups were in awe, marveling at my “creativity” and “talent.” They often asked me questions like:

How did you know to draw her arm around him like that?

How did you know to draw her hand resting on his shoulder in that way?

How did you know to make them look at each other with that specific look?

I didn’t understand what the big deal was. It all felt so obvious . . .

*I notice how your hugs linger with me way after you’ve left,
I thought.*

*I sense how your arms wrap around me tightly and how that
makes me feel inside.*

*I see how you look at each other, and at me, and at the world,
and I know what it all means, whether you say it or not.*

I’m not being creative.

I’m being truthful.

Cut back to my preschool classroom in 1991. My teachers have been admiring my artwork for the entire year and have bestowed upon me the highest honor: the duty of creating the *Classroom Art Corkboard*.

For those of you not familiar with the deeply revered Classroom Art Corkboard: In most classrooms from preschool to sixth grade or so, there’s an oversized corkboard hung on the wall displaying students’ work. When you’re almost a teen, it showcases book reports and math equations. When you’re old enough to put writing to your daydreams, it’s poems and imagined landscapes from prompts given to the whole class. And when you’re in your first few years of life, it’s doodles and drawings all set to a theme.

No matter the age or stage, teachers take great care to decorate each corkboard with colors and cutouts to represent whatever's being featured. The Classroom Art Corkboard doesn't always display art per se, but is always a piece of art itself—a shape-shifter, changing by the month, if not the week—and a well-executed corkboard can signal to both students and parents that *this* is the class to be in. This class is *special*.

Our art project's theme for this particular week in 1991 is “Under the Sea.” My class will be creating an oceanscape together by drawing, splattering, and finger-painting our way to a crowd-sourced Pacific Ocean. And, as both my class's top artist and biggest Ariel fangirl, my teacher has asked if I'd be interested in creating the official themed adornment to decorate the corkboard. She would love some sea creatures to be floating around in the ocean, she says. Would I like to draw the characters from *The Little Mermaid*?

Would I ever!!!

This is a four-year-old artist's equivalent to being offered a residency at The Met or the Louvre. This is my *moment*.

I sketch, I color, and once I'm done, my teacher whisks away the oversized piece of butcher paper I've been using as my canvas to cut out each individual figure from the sheet, making sure not to lop off an arm or a fin or a meticulously drawn finger.

A few days later, I find myself looking up at the newly created “Under the Sea” corkboard that's just been revealed before recess. My arms are bare, free of the long sleeves that make me squirm because I can feel wisps of my arm fuzz get tangled each time they're shoved into a fabric prison. My hair is tied half-up-half-down, accented by a purple scrunchie I love because it's 1991 and of course I do. My thick bangs skim my eyebrows, blocking my upper periphery vision, so all I can see is what's ahead and below.

And so I cock my head up, and I see it. Two feet above lives my work: a life-sized-to-me Ariel, Flounder, and Sebastian alongside a seahorse and a turtle, plus a smattering of orange cardboard fish and tissue-paper seaweed strands the teacher has added for ambience. The class-made

ocean flows below my hand-drawn creatures. A cacophony of finger smudges and scribbles and glitter glue stand in as sand. My teacher has written “Under The Sea” in brown Crayola marker in the corner.

I walk slowly toward the corkboard. The water is so beautiful. And I can’t help but notice if it wasn’t for the seaweed, and if it wasn’t for Ariel and Sebastian and their marine-life friends, it might just look like a page of blue-green glitter scribbles. But all together, it creates an ocean.

I feel pride in my work, awe that I was “chosen,” and a sense of purpose that I helped it all come together.

“KATIE.”

Snap. My trance is broken. The teaching assistant is standing over me sternly.

“We’re leaving. GET BACK IN LINE.”

We’re told the big, sweeping moments are the ones that will define our lives: the school we attend, the subject we major in, the person we marry (or don’t), how many kids we have (or don’t). We’re told there’s a dream plan with dream boxes to check off, and that those dream boxes all checked off are what make a dream life.

But I don’t believe in a life made up of checkboxes. I don’t believe it’s the big things that tell our story. I believe it’s the small, everyday occurrences that make us who we are. In the tiny micro-moments, we’re presented with our biggest life choices. And in our interpretation of them, we decide not only who we are, but who we’ll be.

The teaching assistant’s four-second scolding in that early memory rattled me like a motorcycle crashing through my consciousness. I could have told someone and smashed that shame right away, but this was my first experience with shame, and I didn’t yet know that shame cannot survive being spoken (I would learn that about three decades later from Brené Brown and her book *Daring Greatly*).²

And so I stayed silent. Those four seconds would lodge their way into my head and heart, revving over and over again on loop. The reverberation would last a lifetime.

Here is what I remember: I remember shrinking back and scurrying toward the door, holding back tears. I remember wanting to cry but not wanting to look like a whiner (no one likes whining). I remember feeling foolish. Because in my moment of awe and self-appreciation, I hadn't realized the class was filing into a neat and tidy line to go out onto the playground. I remember noticing the teaching assistant's energy—exasperated, angry, sharp like a knife—and the way she talked *at* me, not *to* me. I remember feeling deep shame for looking as if I'd intentionally ignored authority. ME! I, Katie Horwitch, a cautious and considerate over-feeler, hyper-noticer, and rule-follower, was scolded for getting swept off my feet by my own art, for not noticing that my class was leaving without me, and for being very, very bad at following the rules.

On that day, in that micro-moment, I decided my talents and strengths were for others to enjoy and benefit from, not for me. I decided it was wrong to take pride in myself and my strengths, and that doing so would get me in trouble. I needed to create, create, create, but only for others. Never for myself. My currency was my extraordinary-ness, I deduced—and just like Ariel would sell her voice to the sea witch for a chance to have it all, I would need to give my gifts in order to be loved. I needed to stay in line and move from one success to another, leaving them in a trail like breadcrumbs for others to follow in case they wanted more from me. And, of course, I needed to always follow the rules, so I'd never get left behind.

I didn't lose my confidence in that moment, but the lens I viewed that confidence through became scratched and dusty. Looking through that blurry lens, my self-image began to form. My highly sensitive Professional-Noticer-In-The-Making began to see proof around me that reinforced my new thesis: that confidence was synonymous with vanity, that power was synonymous with pettiness, and a potential mistake was always around the corner. I saw it in the TV shows I watched, the magazines I stole from my mom's monthly subscription stash, and most of all, the conversations I eavesdropped on between family members, friends, and total strangers.

Things like:

- Hearing the word “selfless” used as a compliment to describe women who sacrificed who they were for the sake of other people’s comfort and success—women who were less of their Self so someone else could be more of theirs.
- Overhearing people gossip about powerful women in the media, referring to them as “bitches” or “full of themselves.”
- Glancing down at a neon, seemingly progressive-for-the-90s magazine sitting in the waiting area at my mom’s hair salon that made the bold move of using the word “ambitious” on its cover. A small mention buried by inches of talk about fixing trouble spots, making good impressions, and formulating yourself into someone who was meant to please men. (Confidence was fine, as long as it was a means to pleasing someone else.)
- Hearing so, so many iterations of “I’m sorry” scattered throughout my day as I racked my brain trying to figure out what exactly had been done by the sorry-sayers to warrant an apology.

These were not just one-off occurrences, I realized. This was a way of life.

The story I wrote for myself starting at four years old was that I had to be the most talented, the most beautiful, the most extraordinary, and the most perfect—but could never stop to smell the proverbial roses in my own garden. I became humble out of fear of being wrong, not out of faith in the fact that I was right all along just by being Me.

I would continue to build that story, sentence by sentence, moment by moment, by my own internal narrative: my self-talk.

Self-Talk

Self-talk is how we tell our story.

It's the narrative we've got on loop 24/7 that tells us who we are and who we should be. Think of each thought, each epiphany, each question and conclusion like rules of linguistics. When used over and over, they form patterns that shape our communication. Our self-talk patterns are like mental muscles that are constantly being strengthened by each aspiration and each inspiration. Together, those muscles form a language in which we are constantly becoming ever more fluent.

Negative self-talk is where the story takes a dangerous turn: our self-narrated autobiographies become a stream of chapters telling us we're not good enough, smart enough, kind enough, or *enough* enough to be ourselves out in the world. Negative self-talk is the story we tell ourselves, and tell others *about* ourselves, that belittles who we are or what we do. The scariest thing is that talking negatively about ourselves has become so common and such a standby for many of us that, many times, we don't even realize we're doing it.

The repercussions of a language built on negative self-talk are harsh and long-lasting, although sneaky and barely noticeable in the moment. It's a cultural virus that spreads under the radar and affects everything we do: we limit ourselves, our relationships, our bodies, and our worth by latching onto these default phrases that leech their way into and onto our minds—a vernacular that keeps us in a safe zone of stagnation. It sneaks up and distracts us, convincing us we're doing something to activate positive and permanent change in our lives.

Dwelling on our self-perceived flaws, shortcomings, and everything that's "holding us back" feels like a safe-enough step to take toward living the life we envision. We're thinking about it, so that counts for something—right?

The problem is that *thinking about* doing something is very different from *literally* doing something. Getting caught up in the drama of it all requires a finite amount of investment, without requiring us to do anything differently at all.

And so we *don't* change. **We get addicted to the problems instead of freed by the solutions.**

It's not like we mean to be so mean to ourselves. But it's become easy. It's become normalized. And hey, *everyone else does it*. We've created a norm where sharing our negative stories is how we bond. It's how we connect. Over our problems. Over our limitations.

What if, though, negative self-talk isn't all that we perceive it to be?

What if self-talk isn't even inherently good or bad?

What if it's all simply . . . information?

And what if noticing and deciphering that information holds the key to not only finding, being, and staying yourself . . . but also actually *wanting* the Self you've been granted in this lifetime, instead of constantly striving to be someone else?

What if all this time, we've been misinterpreting the language of the land?

We are who we believe ourselves to be. That belief system is based in and around our internally told story. My theory is that self-talk is what we make of it; we're just taught to make it something that ultimately doesn't serve us.

I have spent so very long in a battle between beliefs. All you need to be is a human in the world to know what it means to walk through that battle every day. You collect your armor, you study your strategies, and if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. All the while, the reverb keeps buzzing in your head and heart like a passing motorcycle. The TV shows. The social media feeds. The whispered or yelled conversations. Threatening to steal your power and your purpose word by word, because the world would prefer you to stay small and silent.

Sometimes the voices and the pages and the screens that shrink and scapegoat you win. Sometimes they control your belief-du-jour. Sometimes you might feel yourself turning into evaporated sea foam, disappearing into the air, bound to lifetimes of serving others as you remain invisible.

But through it all, you can feel a tug.

There is a voice inside you that knows who you are.

We all have that voice.

I am a product of the women who came before me, the women who walk around me, and the woman the universe designed me to be.

I am my mother—my first physical link to the world—and my two grandmothers, the links tying me to my lineage. I am my college professors, I am the cool girls who sat at the back of the middle school bus, I'm the bullied girls who cried their way home. I am my preschool teaching assistant telling me to get back in line. I am each friend, each colleague, each client, and each coach. I am the amalgam of so many who have come before me and sat beside me. And you are too. We are all not just one, but so many in disguise.

Yet with all the misinterpretation—all the noise, all the voices, all the people you've met and people you didn't even know left their mark—there is a voice inside that *knows*. And that knowing is not who you were before the world told you who to be (because even *that* interpretation assumes you're some kind of before-and-after project). That voice, that knowing, is the You *you* know you're meant to be, right now and always.

You must be brave enough to do the work that lets your Self live out loud.