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# TRY A NEW PATH

Breaking Free, Growing Beyond Comfort

COMPLIMENTARY EXCERPT

Chapter 1

## Shaped By Society: The External Pressures of Conformity

A standalone preview from Shanelle Porter-Simmons's book, designed for readers who want a first look before stepping into the full journey.

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Website excerpt edition

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## CHAPTER 1

# SHAPED BY SOCIETY: THE EXTERNAL PRESSURES OF CONFORMITY

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*We were born free and then put into chains by our training and society.<sup>1</sup>*

—ADAPTED FROM ERNEST BECKER'S DISCUSSION  
OF OTTO RANK IN *THE DENIAL OF DEATH*

### **BAPTIZED INTO CONFORMITY**

It was Sunday, 1982. The sanctuary of a mid-size church in the little city by the bay of Vallejo, California smelled like old hymnals and polished wood. The red carpet was oddly soft, and the pastor's cologne could've done the baptizing itself. I stood tenth in a line of twenty other kids, all of

us decked out in stiff white robes, looking like a choir of nervous marshmallows waiting to be dunked for Jesus.

The pastor had his rhythm down. One by one, he leaned in, gave a kind nod, and asked the same question: “Child, why do you want to be baptized?”

Each kid gave their answer—some mumbled, some shouted with confidence, and a few cried, and I most certainly wasn’t about to do that. Then, the ninth kid answered. Finally, it was my turn.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, as if I were in a salvation assembly line.

The pastor smiled down at me with his deep voice rolling through the microphone. “What is your name?”

I cleared my throat and answered like a panicked ten-year-old who forgot how words worked and that I was ten. This came out in a baby voice, “Shuh-nel.”

He nodded with a smile. “Hi, Shanelle. Why do you want to be baptized?”

Oh. Right. That part.

I turned toward the congregation, scanning the crowd like I was looking for an escape route. That’s when I saw her—my grandmother on my mother’s side, Evangelist Wilma Hill, sitting front and center in her perfectly perched

Sunday hat as she watched me with that grandmotherly mix of pride and expectation.

My heart quickened. My brain screamed, *Say something—anything.*

I did.

It came out in full *b* mode: “I love Jesus *berry, berry* much.” To this day, I can still hear the echo of those *b*’s rolling off my tongue.

Silence.

Then? The church exploded.

“Amen!”

“Hallelujah!”

“Oh, bless her heart!”

Folks were clapping, stomping, praising as if I had delivered the Sermon on the Mount. My grandmother beamed. The pastor chuckled.

Me?

My shoulders dropped. The pastor smiled, the congregation continued cheering, and my chest lifted with the strange warmth of being right. I thought, *That was easy.*

I had done something right. I had said what I was supposed to say. I had hit the spiritual jackpot.

That's when it hit me—this was the formula. Give the correct answer, get the applause. Do what's expected, feel the love. Validation unlocked.

That day, I wasn't baptized in water. I was baptized into the lifelong pursuit of approval.

That lesson? Oh, it stuck.

### **VALLEJO RAISED ME**

Growing up Black in Vallejo, California, was like being raised in a gumbo of rhythm, rules, and unspoken expectations. Vallejo had that Bay Area cool with a side of blue-collar grind—church hats on Sunday, hustle every other day, and folks who knew your whole family tree whether you liked it or not.

My family landed there, chasing steady work at Mare Island, like many folks who left the South in search of something better. Vallejo had opportunities, but it didn't hand out anything—you had to earn your keep.

My dad was twenty-six, fresh from Vietnam and carrying more than a duffel bag of trauma. At seventeen, my mom was figuring out who she was while she raised me. After they split, I stayed with my dad, who did the best he could with help from my grandparents and my Aunt Carolynne, the MVP of the whole operation.

We moved a lot, and I got promoted to assistant parent pretty early. As the oldest, I tried to act grown—even though my brothers mostly ignored me. I copied what the women in my family did: cooking, cleaning, and bossing people around. That seemed like the job description.

Being tall didn't help either. Strangers thought I was older and expected me to act like it. I got attention—some sweet, some... let's say *character-building*. Either way, it taught me how to move through the world with one eyebrow raised and both feet ready.

No one sat me down and said, “Here's how to be a woman.” I learned by osmosis. At thirteen, I was already in the pulpit giving sermons—well, one sermon I copied straight from my granddaddy's notes, but still. I delivered it like it was mine, complete with a side-eye to my cousins giggling in the front row.

At church, I learned to project confidence I didn't feel—chin up, voice steady, pretending the butterflies were praise. It is also where I knew what it meant to be “seen”—not noticed, but expected to carry something bigger than me.

When I faced my baptism—little me in a white robe, trying not to slip in the water while the choir went full Broadway—I didn't feel reborn; I felt wet and awkward. Everyone clapped. I called it mission accomplished.

Looking back, all of that—church, small apartments, being a mini-mom, growing up too fast—it shaped me. I didn't have a roadmap, a whole bunch of hand-me-down lessons.

Strength was something I grew into, like a coat two sizes too big.

In my house, compliance wasn't optional. I got in trouble for things no one even told me not to do. The logic? "You should've known better." After a few soul-stinging whoopings, I made sure I did.

We didn't do time-outs. We did belts, slippers, or whatever was closest. Today, folks call it child abuse. Back then, it was Tuesday.

So yeah, I came up tough, respectful, and aware of how I was perceived. I didn't question the rules; I followed them.

Here's the thing: when you spend your whole life performing excellence, chasing approval like it's currency, you start to wonder...

*Who am I without the applause?*

*What happens if I stop playing along?*

My parents gave me lessons, but not a map. School, church, the military, technology—they all took turns shaping the road I walked. The problem is, you're halfway down the path before you realize... It's not even yours.

As philosopher Vernon Howard said: "You can't escape from a prison if you don't know you're in one."<sup>2</sup>

Realizing you're trapped? That's step one. Step two is to look around and notice you're not the only one in the cell. That hit me hardest years later, sitting in a government office surrounded by beige walls and even bigger dreams. I felt others wrestling the same weight of "supposed to." The air held people carrying scripts they didn't audition for. Lunch breaks became group therapy, where participants confessed to the gap between the lives they had and the ones they wanted.

That's where Ali comes in.

### **ALI, BEIGE WALLS, AND BIG DREAMS**

Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*<sup>3</sup> is a mic drop on how society sets us up to live lives we didn't actually choose. We're handed the standard checklist: get good grades, land a job, get married, don't cause too much trouble. Then, we're all shocked when we wake up one day like, *Wait... is this it?*

I was living that checklist when I met Ali. We both worked on the fifth floor of a government building that smelled like fresh paint and regret. The job offered steadiness and predictability.

The real value wasn't in the paycheck. The value was in the conversations. Ali was twenty-two, fresh out of college, and still figuring things out. I was fifty-two, newly retired from the military, and pretending I had it all together. We were an unlikely duo, but we clicked.

He asked, “Why are you here?”

I said, “I retired, I thought I’d explore policy writing.”

The truth? I wanted something safe. Something that didn’t challenge me to be more than someone who showed up and got a paycheck.

Ali had a similar story. He thought he’d be a doctor—stable, respected, the whole thing—but as time went on, he realized his real strengths were in reading and writing; therefore, he pivoted to policy work. Still, he played it safe.

“I didn’t think I had what it took to work in a big city like D.C.,” he told me. “So, I stayed local. I’m grateful, but I do wonder... what would’ve happened if I had believed in myself?”

Later, he said, “If I could do it all over again, I’d go to grad school abroad and work in international relations. What’s stopping me? My own inaction. Comfort. Honestly... fear of failing.”

He never did. The dream stayed a conversation instead of a plane ticket.

Listening to Ali wrestle with what he wanted felt like Goodman’s book came alive—society teaching us to play it safe, even when it costs us the dreams that once lit us up.

Goodman wasn't venting—he wanted us to wake up. To stop running on autopilot and start asking, “Do I even like where this is going?”

I wish someone had handed me that book when I was younger. Maybe I wouldn't have spent many years checking off someone else's list. Hey, now that I know better, I get to pass it on, and hopefully, someone out there gets the wake-up call a little sooner than I did.

Listening to Ali wrestle with what he wanted made me realize how easily we all do this—trade our instincts for approval, call it stability, and pretend we're content. It's not personal. Entire rooms, organizations, even cultures do the same thing—nodding along to expectations we stopped believing in a long time ago.

### **MEETING OF THE POLITE ZOMBIES**

Ever been in a meeting where everyone's nodding politely, nothing changes, and you start wondering if you've wandered into a convention of well-dressed zombies? That's not harmony—that's groupthink wearing business casual.

Social scientists Vicki Helgeson and Heidi Fritz call it unmitigated communion—caring much about fitting in that you forget to think for yourself.<sup>4</sup>

When that mindset dominates a room, creativity flatlines and conformity grows like mold. Nobody questions anything. Everyone smiles, agrees, and prays someone else will be brave enough to speak first.

Conformity hid not through oppression, but through politeness.

Watching that kind of silent agreement again and again made me wonder if this need to follow is built in. Maybe conformity isn't social but biological. Once it takes hold, it can lead us in circles without us even noticing.

### **MARCH OF THE CATERPILLARS**

This blind following has consequences far beyond career choices.

Take the pine processionary caterpillars, for example. They march in a single-file line, following the leader before them, relying entirely on the pattern they've always known. Once, a scientist named Jean-Henri Fabre conducted an experiment where he arranged these caterpillars in a continuous circle around the rim of a flowerpot.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of breaking the cycle to find food, they continued marching in circles for days—until they died of exhaustion.

Think about that. They died because they followed blindly; they did not question if they were going anywhere. If only they veered off that path.

Now, let's be honest—we're not much better. We follow trends, job expectations, social norms, and life paths without asking if they lead anywhere meaningful. We prioritize what looks good over what feels right. Like

those caterpillars, we risk walking ourselves into oblivion because questioning the path feels too uncomfortable.

This isn't a caterpillar problem—it's a human one. We walk the path built for us, trusting stability to mean success, even when it feels like we're suffocating in place. We don't push back because pushing back feels risky, reckless, and ungrateful.

I knew that feeling well—the fear that rocking the boat might sink it.

We keep marching forward, convincing ourselves that this is how life works.

What if it doesn't have to be?

As Speaker Ryan Hanley put it in his TEDx talk, “Overcoming Societal Expectations,” many of us follow a script we didn't choose until we finally ask if it fits. He said, “I was living a life I didn't choose, following a script handed to me by society.”<sup>6</sup>

This realization led him to challenge the expectations imposed upon him and seek a more authentic path.

By not stepping off, folks endure unforeseen costs.

The scariest thing isn't leaving the circle; it's staying in it until you realize it's too late to change. So, if you've ever sat at your desk, staring at your computer screen, wondering,

“*Is this it?*, maybe it’s time to stop following the path and start asking, “*What if I stepped off?*”

## **THE PRICE OF PLAYING IT SAFE**

The thing about following the script is that it works—until it doesn’t. You do everything right, yet you end up exhausted, unfulfilled, and wondering how you got here.

At first, it’s easy to brush off. You say, “This is how life works, right?” But later, the doubts creep in.

I’ve seen it firsthand. People who looked like they had it all together, but behind closed doors and over half-eaten lunches, they whispered confessions of trading it all in if they knew how.

That’s the real cost of playing it safe—not danger avoided, but possibility abandoned. It’s the *coulda, woulda, shoulda*. People pack away dreams in the name of practicality. They skip risks because taking risks wasn’t “responsible,” but regret still whispers, *What if I had gone for it?*

Playing it safe doesn’t stop at careers. It bleeds into everything—mental health, relationships, self-worth. It’s waking up with a heaviness you can’t quite name, knowing you’re capable of more but stuck where you are. It’s the slow realization that, while you were following the path laid out for you, your life kept shrinking to fit the box it required.

So, what happens when you wake up and realize you don’t even like the role you’ve been playing?

Some people tear up the script. Others keep marching, hoping the feeling will pass.

Deep down, we all know—it doesn't.

### **LAND OF THE PROFESSIONAL ZOMBIES**

Have you ever walked into a workplace and felt the energy of a thousand souls who gave up on their dreams? That's what happens when people stop striving and start surviving. Offices full of people who clock in, zone out, and collect a paycheck—not because they're lazy, but because somewhere along the way, they stopped believing their work could be more than a means to an end.

I saw it firsthand at my state job. Daily, I was surrounded by competent, intelligent people who looked like fluorescent lights and bureaucracy were draining them. When I asked them about their work, I got a lot of:

- “I don't know. I do what I'm told.”
- “I used to have ideas, but I learned it's easier to go with the flow.”
- “Eh, only five more years until retirement.”
- Finally, my personal favorite: “I'd care more if caring changed anything.”

That's what can happen when we follow the script for too long. Little by little, the questions fade, creativity stalls, and motivation starts running on fumes. Before long, the workplace can begin to feel like a slow-moving parade of busy people doing all the right things—sending emails,

attending meetings that should've been emails—while their real ambitions wait in the background, wondering if they'll ever get called up.

Here's the worst part: we normalize it. We act like this is what adulthood looks like—trading passion for stability, ambition for a steady paycheck, and creativity for compliance. We laugh off the misery like it's part of the deal. “That’s corporate life for you!” “It is what it is.” “Gotta pay the bills.”

Does it have to be?

Goodman said it best: when people aren't given meaningful work, they disengage.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, companies become a wasteland of untapped potential. People sit on brilliant ideas they won't share, stay in jobs they secretly hate, and go home wondering why they always feel drained.

If you've ever walked into work, looked around, and thought, *Is everyone here waiting to retire?* The answer is yes—and the real question is: Will you be one of them?

## **COPY-PASTE CULTURE**

Let's be real; we live in a world full of exhausted, uninspired people trying to make it to Friday. Blank stares on the commute, phones getting scrolled like it's an Olympic event, and meetings where everyone's pretending to care.

We're busy fitting in and following unspoken rules; we don't even realize we're stuck.

Those “unspoken rules” don't come from nowhere—they come from the culture around us, nudging us toward sameness before we even notice.

That has consequences.

First, we're too burned out to lead. Leadership takes creativity, energy, and courage. Many of us are trying not to cry over Outlook. You can't challenge broken systems when you're barely holding it together. We keep our heads down, and hope no one assigns us another task.

Then there's the fear. Somewhere along the line, we learned that rocking the boat is risky, asking questions is dangerous, and standing out might cost us everything; so, we play it safe. We agree when we don't believe, stay silent when things are broken, and call it “being professional.”

Worst of all? We've replaced innovation with imitation. We don't stop to ask, *Do we even like any of this?*

Nothing fuels copy-paste culture like social media. One trend drops, and suddenly everyone's doing the same dance, chasing the same validation.<sup>8</sup>

Originality barely gets a breath before it's turned into a hashtag and sold back to us. The internet was supposed to make us more creative, but mostly, it made us better at copying.

The sneaky part? Many of us don't even notice it happening. Algorithms don't show us what we like; they nudge us toward what keeps us scrolling, clicking, or buying. We tell ourselves we're exploring, but we're being guided one "recommended for you" at a time.

Goodman warned that a passive society can't produce meaning, and our screens prove him right.<sup>9</sup>

Here's the real question: Are we using technology, or is it using us? At this point, we're all on autopilot, waiting for someone else to wake up and shake things up.

Are you waiting too, or will you be the one to pull the plug and build something real?

That's how you wake up with trophies and no map.

### **WHOSE LIFE IS THIS ANYWAY?**

That's the sneaky part of conformity; it doesn't disappear when we grow up; it changes costumes. We swap childhood rules for adult approval. Instead of *be a good kid*, it becomes *be a good employee*, *be a respectable parent*, and *be the one who looks like they have it together*. We keep modeling ourselves after new people—bosses, influencers, coworkers, even friends—and somewhere in the shuffle, we lose track of who we actually are.

If you've ever looked around and thought, *Dang, I broke out of one box only to end up in a prettier one*. You're not alone. That's the trap. The applause, the expectations, the

beige walls—they shape us until one day we wake up and realize we've been walking someone else's map.

That's where the story begins.

When we follow the script long enough, the world doesn't have to police us; we start policing ourselves. That quiet shift is where the next trap forms: the moment conformity moves inside and begins to shape our choices.