

"Your Messy Brilliance is the medicine Western women need to feel whole and healthy at this pivotal time in history."

—CHRISTIANE NORTHRUP, M.D., OB/GYN physician
and *New York Times*-bestselling author

YOUR **MESSY**
BRILLIANCE

7 TOOLS FOR THE PERFECTLY IMPERFECT WOMAN



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FOUNDER OF WOMEN FOR ONE

CHAPTER 1

THE TRUTH IS...



“We can’t find our path without getting messy. Messy comes with the territory. We came in messy. We learn messy. We love messy. We leave messy. I never found my way to clarity without first befriending confusion, in all its chaotic forms. I never found a path that felt like home before falling into quicksand. I never established a new way of being without trying the wrong way of being on for size. I never found the light without stumbling around in the dark. I never tasted God before getting a little dirt in my mouth.”

—Jeff Brown, *Love It Forward*

So, let me ask you an honest question: How do you feel about that word “messy”? What is your immediate gut reaction when I tell you that the thing you absolutely want to get into contact with isn’t necessarily some magical remedy that will simplify your life and give you a “system” for getting things in order?

Be honest here. Seriously, it won’t hurt my feelings! I know that different feelings get triggered when people hear the word “messy.” For some, it might prompt associations with a filthy house, stacked with piles of clutter and dirty dishes. For others, it might remind them of how frustrating it is have one’s attention torn in so many directions, to be constantly swayed by distract-

tions. Or it might make you think of the pain of confusion, self-doubt, and the other shadows that lurk beneath the surface.

Messiness is all of these things, and it's so much more. As humans, we live in unpredictable territory, so messiness is a fact of life—one that often gets sidelined by our obsession with perfection. In order to come across as the perfect mother, lover, teacher, or expert, so many of us think we have to sacrifice the very thing that makes us so wonderful: our humanness. We think that in order to be loved, we have to be seen as “good”: as agreeable, orderly, nice, and perfect.

Embracing your messiness is not about striving for perfection. It's about opening fully to every aspect of your life.

So you might be wondering: *Well, how the hell do I do that?*

The most important starting point is exactly where you are. It is the place where you discover your truth. Where you acknowledge your innate wisdom and everything it has taken, from the scenic detours to the uphill climbs, to get you to this moment.

The truth can only be recognized in this moment. And the truth is, there is no magic bullet. There is no yoga retreat, self-help doctrine, perfectly enlightened guru, or one-size-fits-all formula that will put you on the fast track to peace and joy. If anything, we've got it all backwards. The tendency to escape our lives through spiritual detachment or a surefire technique that'll lead us to the future we only dream about keeps us from the marvelous, beautiful, complex truth of who we are *right now*. And let me tell you—that truth, just like your brilliance, is *messy*...in fact, way messier than you might have previously imagined.

The journey you will take through your own messy brilliance is the *journey of a lifetime*. It is one that will lead you to a more intact, positive, and empowering relationship with yourself—and by “yourself,” I mean *all* parts of you: from the aspects that are obviously brilliant to the qualities you may have pushed underground in an effort to be seen as more loveable, more feminine, more fill-in-the-blank-with-your-drug-of-choice.

In embracing your messiness, you will dive into your dynamic wholeness, and this is the very thing that will lead you to more aliveness and self-acceptance. As women, our messiness, our too-muchness, our wild and un-manicured emotional landscapes, are aspects of our beauty that we've been conditioned to be wary of. Let's come back to those untamed places and recognize how they contribute to our vibrancy and joy.

OWNING YOUR MESSY BRILLIANCE

Many of us are walking around in a state of self-delusion and guardedness, regardless of whether or not we have experienced trauma early in our life. In a twisted way, this is part of the human condition. We internalize the tragedy and shame of our experiences to such an extent that we end up locking ourselves behind iron fortresses. In our need to keep ourselves from being hurt, we deny the very parts of our being that most need our unconditional love and acceptance.

Part of my own journey into my messiness has been the willingness to pull all of the fragments of my life together. I am not simply a survivor of incest. I am a devoted mom, daughter, wife, and friend. I am a proud mother of three, and now, a stepmother to three additional powerful humans. I am a businesswoman who created a global community of women of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds to exchange authentic dialogue and support each other in creating a powerful new vision for our lives. And, of course, intertwined with all these aspects of me are others that I might not always like to admit to. Sometimes, I drink too much wine. I yell at my kids. I get angry and defensive, impatient, and judgmental with my loved ones when I feel threatened, betrayed, or hurt.

So, ask yourself: Who am I? What are the many identities I've accumulated? What are the qualities that make me who I am? What would it look like for me to embrace all of me?

In many ways, facing the truth about who you are is equivalent to treating your challenging circumstances as spiritual compost. Most of us end up shoving that compost into our bodies and subconscious minds and ignoring it for the rest of our lives. This can lead to a false sense of control ("I've got my shit together, so don't

even think of telling me otherwise”) or a mysterious tendency toward self-sabotage. But when we embrace the messiness of our lives, from the not-so-idyllic childhood to the painful divorce that broke our heart open, and everything and anything in between, these factors become fertilizer for the growth of our most inspiring selves.

Embracing your messy brilliance is about owning all of your stories, experiences, strengths, and weaknesses—and treating them with an enormous amount of compassion, and sometimes even a healthy dose of humor. This can only happen when you find yourself responding to both bliss and pain with a sense of fascinated curiosity. Like eager children, we walk through the dark house, opening all the doors we were taught to keep locked—even if, sometimes, it scares the shit out of us.

When we get curious, we leave room for self-acceptance. Unfortunately, most of us are taught to judge ourselves from an early age. When we judge aspects of ourselves, we hide from the full truth of who we are. Women in particular are masters of compartmentalization, of showing the world only what we want them to see and shoving the rest of it into the pile of skeletons in our mental closet. But the sad thing about this tactic is that hiding in order to keep ourselves safe or loved is just about the most dangerous thing we can do. Even if we experience validation from the outside world, our spirit knows the cost of accepting mediocrity over truth. The voices of self-judgment, doubt, fear, and loathing never fade—over time, they simply get louder and louder in the tiny space of a self-imposed prison.

All of us want relief from this pain, so let’s fling the doors of our lives open together and walk into greater expansiveness—by recognizing the beauty of our messiness.

Yes, I know that’s a tall order—but we can do it! You might be asking: How? Well, one way is to stop buying into the lies we’ve been told. We have collectively accepted the glossy magazines that show us how we are supposed to look and dress; the Hollywood fairy tales of passionate love affairs and beautiful people; and the news-hour talking heads who help perpetuate our guilt, fear, and sneaking suspicion that, no matter how fast we move, we just can’t keep up with the Joneses.

But when we realize that these idealized images are bullshit peddled by unhappy, unsatisfied, disconnected people, we can fully get that the most important relationship we can hope to have is the one that develops within ourselves.

Accepting our mess means that we stop buying into the damaging lies of “perfection” and the myth that we need to have control over everything, from our weight to our partner’s emotions to how the world sees us. The challenge, for all of us, is to simply sit in the eye of the storm as it whirls around us, and to muster the courage to stay present in the midst of the chaos. Here we are, just as we are.

Now let’s draw a clear distinction between embracing your mess and letting needless drama dominate your life and clutter your emotional landscape. There’s a big difference between messiness—which is all about acceptance, introspection, and the willingness to sit with your most intense emotions in a spirit of curiosity and self-love—and drama, which is about using your emotions as an excuse to throw responsibility out the window and remain in a state of perpetual victimhood. People who gravitate toward drama rarely embrace their messiness, because they’re too busy engaging in reckless behavior and blaming others.

Consciously embracing your messiness gives you perspective, so that you can then ask yourself, “What do I want to do about this?” and “How can I benefit and grow from this?” It creates a genuine response to the moment instead of flinging you toward another escape hatch.

On the other end of the spectrum from getting lost in drama is attempting to control everything, which keeps us conforming to a tight set of rules about who we can be, what we can do, and how we are allowed to present ourselves to the world. Drama and control may seem like opposites, but they are actually two sides of the same coin; both are numbing agents and defense mechanisms that buffer us against the potential pain of facing our messiness. For example, if we try to keep our life under control by counting our calories or keeping our family on a tight leash, we might end

up losing control by binge-eating or lashing out at the people we most love.

I totally get why we fall prey to this cycle. Most of the time, we might be striving to do whatever we can to make it look like we have our act together. But we are only human, and that kind of pressure is enough to bring any one of us down. So maybe we choose to suck it up and bury our gut feelings, eat an entire pizza, watch too much Netflix, buy an expensive pair of jeans we can't afford, or have an affair that sends our tidy little life careening out of orbit.

I know I have been there, and sometimes I still go there.

So, for now, consider how you've engaged with the swinging pendulum between drama and chaos. I suggest that you journal about times you've experienced either one, and then read your writing aloud to yourself.

Although I totally love journaling, diving into your messiness isn't about following a formula for getting the perfect answer. By simply asking the questions and being open to the answers, you're already taking the first step to encountering and embracing your messy brilliance.

GETTING TO MESSY

We all have our own way of dealing with our messiness. For me, it used to manifest as an attempt to exert control over my surroundings, and sometimes, to avoid full-body contact with the storm that brewed within me.

Many years ago, one of my teachers challenged me to get clear about that storm inside me with a simple exercise.

She taught me about what it meant to have a rigid defense system and how challenging this can be in acquiring the flexibility necessary for working with energy. One of my assignments was to deliberately wear clothes that didn't match, and generally do whatever I could to make my life less linear than I was normally comfortable with. At first, this felt like a ridiculous task, especially since one of the ways I maintained control was by cleaning my house, putting things in order, and doing whatever I could to man-

age the chaos. Doing this gave me a sense of calm and purpose, not to mention safety. You can imagine how irritated I was by the assignment at hand.

In other words, it was brilliant.

With the pristine mold of perfection shattered, what I discovered was simple. Our messiness isn't ugly or unmanageable. It isn't something that needs to be slicked down, bent into shape, or shoved into a dark closet. It is the very source of our beauty and power, our passion and strength.

Although few people actually live their lives in a constant state of transparency and self-acceptance, most of us are drawn to the ones who have relinquished the need to belong. There is something captivating about those people; they radiate a natural ease, grace, and wisdom that we recognize as a reflection of the deeper brilliance that lives within each of us.

Think about the kind of woman who turns heads effortlessly. You know the type: She might not have supermodel good looks or wear designer clothes, but the surface belies the power that radiates through her. Her glow, her genuine laugh, the sparkle in her eye, and the way she walks into a room—confidently and without pretense or self-consciousness—immediately command attention. She's the kind of woman you automatically respond to, precisely because she doesn't need you to.

Then there's another kind of woman—her profile will also be recognizable to you, as well. She's most likely beautiful, but perpetually insecure; adored, but constantly dissatisfied. When she walks into a room, you can see her immediately size up the competition and check out the prey. Her desperation for attention and approval is so overpowering that it oozes out of her pores. She wants it so badly that she can't sit back, relax, and enjoy herself.

We all have both of those women inside of us. We all have moments of feeling effortlessly confident and carefree in our skin; and we've had that experience of walking around with a mask plastered hard to our faces. We experience moments of crystal-clear, unself-conscious bliss every now and then, and on the bad days, it hurts to reveal exactly how confused and helter-skelter we feel inside.

Here's the cool thing I've discovered: Pretending perfection is not only unnecessary, it's also completely useless.

One of the deep truths that has informed my choices in life is that the people who strive to appear as if they have it all are often the unhappiest. For me, this also translates to those who might try to convince you that they've figured out the secret to happiness (all you need do is subscribe to their blog, buy their book, or join their course in order to get in on the goods). To paraphrase the Tao Te Ching, "He who thinks he knows, doesn't know. He who knows that he doesn't know, knows." Anyone with the humility to admit they are missing huge chunks of the overall picture—and to welcome curiosity rather than dogma—is on the fast track to embracing their messiness (and to embracing joy, aliveness, and passion—just to mention a few!).

When we claim our full selves, we give ourselves permission to be who we are without apology. I am talking about every single aspect of ourselves: from the flowy and light, to the angry, dark, messy, emotional, irrational, tumultuous, and everything else we might avoid or deny about ourselves.

The lessons you will learn from getting up close and personal with your emotional landscape—from oceans to landfill, mountains to craters—are invaluable. You don't need to be famous or have the perfect body or job in order to recognize your innate worth and to shine. For the first time in your life, you can be truly at peace with who you are. I couldn't think of a more beautiful consequence of embracing your glorious mess.

TOOL 1

CURIOSITY

Remember when you were a child, able to sit for hours on end, watching the clouds prance across the sky? Or admire a line of insects as they trudged across a blade of grass? Or savor the sensation of leaves and bark against bare skin and the taste of earth upon your tongue while climbing a tree? Most of us have experienced similar moments of being completely absorbed in the activity we are engaged in, whether it is as mundane as washing the dishes or as illustrious as dancing across a stage for a rapt audience.

The first of our tools, and in some ways the most important, is **Curiosity**. This is where your journey began many years ago when you first discovered your childlike capacity for wonder—and it's where you will pick up and continue.

At its core, curiosity is about seeking the novelty, meaning, and beauty in experiences both familiar and unfamiliar. Curiosity changes our relationship with our surroundings. It helps us connect with the present moment—not because the moment is “worthy” of our attention, but simply because we are choosing to fully use our faculty of observation, which makes everything more vibrant and fascinating. Just try observing one thing for several minutes, and you'll see.

The truth is, curiosity is just about the most vital—and vitalizing—quality we can cultivate. It is the springboard for true genius. Without curiosity, things like art museums, Newtonian physics, airplanes, Tesla cars, and pretty much any modern creature comfort you can imagine wouldn't even exist. Just as we are beings who are hard-wired to be creative, we are also hard-wired to be curious. Every single innovation you can think of—from agriculture to electricity to the power of the Internet and an increasingly global community—is the result of someone becoming curious.

Often, these moments of genius aren't the result of being “good” at whatever we are doing. Rather, they emerge from willingly immersing ourselves in our circumstances. Instead of making assumptions about what we know and how we feel, we let our-

selves be taken by a sense of pure delight, wonder, and mystery.

I believe that the next frontier for vital discovery isn't the external world; rather, it's our internal world. As human consciousness expands, we are learning that it is absolutely necessary for us to dive into the great unknown of our inner lives.

When we are willing to get curious about who we are and what we are capable of, we prepare ourselves for the greatest journey we will embark on. But this kind of curiosity isn't for the faint of heart. That's because it entails asking questions about behaviors and experiences that might be painful. It means that you are willing to turn the grueling journey of self-discovery into a beautiful adventure.

Curiosity offers us instant insight and meaning, which makes us more eager to embrace both beauty and pain in equal measure. It's similar to when you were a kid and the risk of falling out of a tree wasn't enough to curtail your desire to climb to its uppermost branches.

Despite the cautionary adage, "Curiosity killed the cat," I believe curiosity is absolutely necessary to a life well-lived. When we're curious, we're in the driver's seat in our lives because our minds move from being passive to being active—in fact, asking questions and searching for answers is like a cardio workout for the brain. When we're curious about something, we put ourselves in a state of expectancy that we'll find an answer—and often, we do. That's because we're open and receptive to new ideas—and without the aid of curiosity, those ideas might remain hidden in clear sight. And, of course, these new ideas allow us to see behind the curtain of a world we've taken for granted—and to recognize that there's an entirely different kind of drama playing out backstage.

Here are some exercises for practicing curiosity and allowing it to open your eyes, heart, and mind.

SIMPLE FIX

Make a Note of Your Passions

Take your journal and write down your answers to the following prompt: *What are ten things that I'm passionate about?*

These might be connected to yourself and your emotions, relationships with other people, the state of the world, and the universe itself. Whatever the case, these should be things (or people, places, and themes) that naturally arouse genuine curiosity, joy, and engagement.

Notice whether or not there's a thread that connects these different topics. What is it that prompts your interest and curiosity? Use curiosity to reignite your passions, as it can be a very powerful tool that connects you more deeply to whatever already brings you joy.

DIGGING DEEPER

Connect with Your Little Girl

Take a few minutes to reflect on one of your most joyful childhood memories. What is a memory that stands out to you as especially vivid? In bringing one to mind, gravitate toward what you naturally loved when you were younger—use it as a guide to locating a specific memory. It might be a special trip to the zoo that has remained with you since the age of five, or perhaps a single glowing moment filled with magic and wonder—such as the image of your first Christmas tree. No memory is too big or small. Close your eyes and allow the vision of your memory to fill your mind, until it is virtually life-like.

Next, take out your journal and respond to the following questions:

1. What is happening in my memory?
2. What are the specific sensory details in the scene (these might include time of day, sounds, sights, smells, other people in the environment, and the sensations in my body)?
3. What was my overall mood and emotional state at the time?
4. Are there any moments in my later life that are similar to this memory?
5. What feelings does this memory evoke for me today?

After you are finished with your responses, take that wide-eyed *feeling* of childlike presence and wonder into your day. In order to get into the spirit of curiosity, it's helpful to be connected to the little girl within you who is effortlessly engaged with the world around her. Notice how it feels to approach your life with both its joys and its challenges from this place.

DIVING IN

Who Am I?

Ask yourself at least five of the questions below on a daily basis for a week. Let yourself reflect on the answers and/or journal about it.

Don't worry if you don't have satisfying or complete answers to each of these questions. The object of this exercise isn't to come up with definitive answers, but to recognize that the simple act of asking these questions will lead to new levels of self-discovery. Over time, you will connect with the aspects of yourself that you most want to learn about and be connected with throughout the course of reading this book. Also, the act of asking questions helps to build valuable neural pathways that will most certainly aid you in any undertaking—similar to strengthening a much-needed muscle and ensuring that it is steady and robust.

Feel free to add your own questions to this list:

1. Who am I?
2. How do I most often describe myself?
3. How would other people describe me?
4. How has my past shaped who I am? How did my upbringing influence me?
5. How do my present circumstances reflect my sense of identity?
6. What are my hopes and fears about the future?
7. Where do I tend to “live” the most: in my past, my present, or my future?
8. What are my deepest needs and desires?
9. What are my most important values?
10. What am I most afraid of?

11. What do I love about my life?
12. What would I most like to change about my life?
13. What areas of my life need healing or self-compassion?
14. What kinds of people, places, subjects, and ideas am I most drawn to?
15. What is my life purpose?
16. How can I get in touch with joy, peace, and wonder more regularly?

You might have already mastered the art of asking questions, but the true magic lies in allowing yourself to remain curious—especially when you think you know the answer. Instead of taking anything for granted, allow yourself to explore alternate interpretations of your inner world, which is truly infinite.

If you decide to keep a running journal of your responses to these questions, be sure to come back to them as a whole after reading this book. Take note of the ways in which simple curiosity has expanded your self-concept and perceptions of your life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly McNelis is the founder of Women For One, a place where women from more than 50 countries share their powerful stories with the world. Over 500 Truthtellers have answered her call to action: Make life happen by sharing your messy brilliance. Their stories range from the devastating to the delightful, and everything in between.

Kelly is a mom, wife, friend, mentor, incest survivor, businesswoman, and a firm believer that there's no such thing as TMI.

Formerly a nonprofit and small-business consultant, Kelly now travels the world as a speaker, teacher, and workshop facilitator, empowering women to find their voices and discover their true power. She has interviewed global changemakers including the late Dr. Maya Angelou, Arianna Huffington, Dr. Christiane Northrup, Marianne Williamson, and Regena "Mama Gena" Thomashauer, on the importance of cultivating our own inner wisdom and truth-telling voices.

Kelly's first book, *[Your Messy Brilliance: 7 Tools for the Perfectly Imperfect Woman](#)*, will be published by Enrealment Press in Fall 2017.

Kelly's work, husband, kids, and brilliantly messy life are based outside Seattle.



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There is no magic pill. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to your problems. There is no guru coming to save you. And there is no personal-development program that will get you to “perfect.” The truth is, you don’t need any of those things. You are brilliant and breathtakingly powerful, exactly as you are.

The remarkable truth you are about to discover—one that you already know deep down in your bones—is that the idea of perfection can’t bring you the joy, passion, and purpose you are craving. What you are looking for, as author and Women For One founder Kelly McNelis will show you, is your messy brilliance. It’s the part of you that’s perfectly imperfect and that contains your wholeness: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Your Messy Brilliance offers an engaging, customizable roadmap to the authentic you. In this book, you will learn to reclaim your true brilliance by embracing your flaws as the key to unlocking your deepest truth. You will also learn how your stories shape your life—and harness your power to transform the stories you tell yourself and others. This will help you move past shame and self-judgment, and develop a stronger relationship to your body, mind, and spirit. Finally, by stepping into conscious, effective choices, you will commit to a life of radical openness, authenticity, and courage—so that you transform yourself and your world.

With a combination of personal experience, relatable stories from everyday women, and practical wisdom, Kelly will guide you into the most important journey you will ever take as a woman: the journey back home to your messy brilliance...and your ultimate truth!

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