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# 1

Step

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## **Go Fishing for the Real You**

**Fearless Fish Out of Water  
Accept Who They Are**

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- Open up to your authentic self.
- Free yourself from the desire to conform.
- Make a great first impression.
- Bust the myths about you.
- Accept yourself and others will follow.

*Back in the day, I used to talk way too much (some would argue that I still do!). The more nervous I got, the more I would blabber on. Because this habit didn't come from a place of strength, others would see me as inauthentic—and, let's face it, exhausting. This need to be heard was just one of the self-protections that had become part of my identity. I grew up entertaining my single father after dinner by performing song and dance shows for him in the living room. Getting his attention was getting his love; and nothing meant more to me. Years later, on a second date with the man I would one day marry, he interrupted me as I regaled him with stories from my youth. "Will the real Robin Fisher please stand up?" he asked. I burst into tears. No one had ever called me on my act before! I felt exposed, unsure of what to do next, where moments earlier I'd felt confident and charming. I wanted to secure his interest, and I didn't know how else to get it. This experience was the turning point that showed me that I don't need to entertain to be appreciated. Friends helped cement the message, telling me how happy they were to finally feel I was letting them get to know the real me; and I, too, enjoyed our friendships more.*

So many of us continue our childhood roles into our adult life, only to find that they don't work anymore. Maybe you've been knocking yourself out to earn approval or worrying obsessively about money because growing up your family always felt the lack. Sometimes it takes a wake-up call like mine to realize that operating as in the past or out of fear is a failed strategy.

None of us comes into this world with a handbook to guide us in developing our personalities. We simply jump into life and do the best we can. But what if you feel different—that you somehow don't fit in with the norm, that you aren't truly recognized and accepted for who you are?

Trying to retrofit yourself into society and work life can be daunting, burning you out before you've even had a chance to shine. What do you do? In my case, I got caught in the act that I was using to hide behind. I was fortunate that my future husband was perceptive enough to see through my facade. It allowed me to realize that we fish out of water need help; and who better to write a guidebook than someone who has been a fish out of water her entire life?

Humorist Erma Bombeck wrote a book titled *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* Funny as that is, it inadvertently highlights a truism about life: It's all about perception. You might ask, "I'm a fish out of water. What's the good in that?" Well, it's a matter of perception. You either believe you're "in the pits," or you realize you're at the intersection of discovery and opportunity. How you come to understand that being a fish out of water is the best thing that could have ever happened to you is what this book is all about. And it may mean shifting your perception so that you absolutely *know* you've been dealt the best cards life has to offer.

Let's start with a description of what a fish out of water is. It literally refers to a living creature having been removed from the setting in which it's able to survive. So if you're a fish out of water,

you've been taken out of your natural environment. You attract attention, usually because you're different from the people around you. You are perceived as someone who doesn't fit in; you're outside the norm, you think and dress differently; some may feel that you're too controversial. Many times, you're considered ahead of your time, maybe even an iconoclast. Whatever you are, you don't run with the pack; instead, you march to the beat of your own drum.

If I've just described you, count your blessings. You are indeed fortunate. Your natural characteristics are what will—and likely, already have—set you apart in a positive way. You may not feel very positive about those differences right now because you've been busy trying to wish them away or cover them up. The truth is, you will stand out not because you're different, but because you're solidly grounded in who you are—with no apologies. People will gravitate toward you because of your energy, confidence, and flair. But before any of that happens, you need to come to terms with being a fish out of water—and a Fearless Fish, at that!

I had to come to terms with being raised by a single father. I longed to have a mother like the other kids in my school. I wished for our family to have more money like my wealthier classmates, all of whom seemed to receive a credit card the day they became a bar or bat mitzvah. When I moved from Ohio to Alabama for college, I was not only seen as a Yankee, but I ran into prejudice as a Jew—one of 150 in a student body of 10,000. There, I came to realize that my differences sparked curiosity and, as a result, created opportunity. I had to come to terms with the fact that there were things about myself that I could change and others I was simply going to have to accept.

Being a Fearless Fish means *not* doing any of the following: hiding who you are; compromising your personality just to fit in; short-circuiting opportunities because you're afraid of what

others will think; overemphasizing characteristics so others will think you're in the groove and on target; or letting others tell you how to think, feel, and act—just so that they'll feel comfortable and safe.

If there is one thing I've learned, it's that acting out of fear and living according to other people's needs will definitely pigeonhole you into being someone you're not; and that's not what life is about. The universe offers a myriad of ways in which we can express ourselves and find success on so many levels, both personal and professional. Our job is to be open to those possibilities and see how far we can go. Life truly is a journey; so why not make the most of it?

So, let's begin the journey of celebrating your distinctiveness. From my own personal experience of being a fish out of water, I've put together a series of steps to help you realize your full potential as a unique individual. They are:

- Step 1: Go Fishing for the Real You
- Step 2: Use Your Differences as a Lure
- Step 3: Find a Few Fish Like You
- Step 4: Swim in Their Ocean Your Way
- Step 5: Put Yourself Out on the Line
- Step 6: Evolve by Casting a Wide Net
- Step 7: Reel in Your Unique Power

Step 1 to becoming a Fearless Fish out of water is to peel away the layers you've piled on in your attempts to fit in, uncovering the power of your authenticity. Shedding old habits is often essential to opening up to your authentic self. It's about being comfortable in your own skin and accepting yourself. Easier said than done, I know! It takes real courage to dispel the myths about you and find out how to be yourself honestly. *This* is fearlessness.

As CEO and chief creative officer of Big Fish Marketing, one of the entertainment industry's preeminent brand marketing and digital advertising agencies, I lead as a woman in a highly competitive, male-dominated field. I started my own ad agency at the age of 30 and 15 years later, I was named one of the top 10 digital advertising strategists in the country. My client list includes some of the most high-profile brands in the world: dozens of television networks, several motion picture studios, and even a hot cosmetics company. Having this kind of presence in the business world takes talent, but it also takes confidence and confidence didn't come naturally to this fish out of water.

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Getting to know ourselves is a lifelong process.

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Getting to know ourselves is a lifelong process. One of my closest friends recently said to me, "What if I've come this far and I still don't know who I am?" As much as we want to quickly understand ourselves, there are no shortcuts to the truth. We're deep and multifaceted, and we're changing all the time. But at our core—in our souls—we are stable, vibrant beings with philosophies, values, and perspectives that travel with us throughout our lives.

*Open up to your authentic self.* Sounds scary, huh? "The *real* me?" Sometimes we're not quite sure who that is. When we're used to feeling distant from the group, we tend to submerge our true selves in an effort to be accepted. The real movers and shakers in this world live their lives with conviction; they never hide who they are. They accept that they were born different or landed in circumstances that make them different, and they embrace the opportunity to stand out from the pack. We all have that same opportunity.

A friend of mine and a true Fearless Fish, Monica Halpert is one of the most creative people I've ever known. She is an idea machine who's totally tapped into pop culture. It's exciting just to be around her and see what she's into. The trouble is employers always want her to be *more* than the one with the big ideas; they want Monica to mold herself into a marketing role where she has to pore over research, crunch numbers, manage staff, and write strategy. Her managers waste her innovative, multimillion-dollar mind with administrative duties rather than letting her flourish in a corner office as a tastemaker, thinking up one great concept after another and doing the stuff that *really* builds world-class brands. Monica has realized this and is repositioning herself as someone who could take on the role of chief creative officer—a relatively new title many companies are adding to their organizational charts. Being the first in a position that's essentially just been invented is the ideal next step for someone like Monica who likes to work on the cutting edge.

Nathalie Lubensky, senior vice president of Disney and ESPN Media Networks sees herself as a fish out of water. That strong outsider feeling came to her early on in life—so much so that being different has become second nature to her. No matter where she is, she knows she stands out and uses that to her advantage.

*I've felt like a fish out of water for so long that it's now a natural state. There hasn't been a time when I've walked into a room and felt accepted. I have never had the acceptance my son does (he's biracial). I never fit in with African-Americans because I'm Haitian; my parents were prejudiced against them. It was all about class not color. Class and race issues follow me everywhere.*

Despite these class and race issues, Nathalie has gone on to hold a hugely impressive and demanding position. As a woman of color in a predominantly white, male environment, she is sensitive to the need for greater diversity among the staff; she knows what value diverse perspectives can give to a company. She puts her values into practice by being an agent for change, helping create a culture she can embrace, and by doing so, positively illuminates her differences.

It's time for you to close the book on other people's stories and ideas about who you are so that you can finally introduce yourself the way you want to be known. If you've been pigeonholed as rigid, break out and show that you're someone who shapes his or her environment to allow for a flow of fresh ideas. If you feel that no one really "gets you," stop worrying about it; accept yourself as being ahead of the curve. Your personal perspective about yourself is key to being a successful fish out of water.

Anybody can be fearless when things are going great. It's in times like these that you have to search yourself and be brutally honest. One of the reasons we sometimes feel that we don't fit in with others is because we actually don't like ourselves. Consider whether this might be your situation and think about *why*. It could be that you're judging yourself according to other people's standards. Did Eleanor Roosevelt hide herself because she was a strong, intelligent woman who understood people, business, and politics? No. She knew she had a voice and demanded that people listen, in spite of the fact that she was operating in arenas largely considered to be "men's territory." She famously once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Did Wilma Rudolph decide to remain in the shadows just because she had polio? No. She became a basketball star in high school, and then she became the first American woman to win three gold medals in track in the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome.

Eleanor was immediately categorized by others as an outsider trying to break into a man's world, while Wilma was ostracized for her disability and for being an African-American woman. But neither one let these obstacles stop them from doing amazing things. Both women used their innate talents and personalities, as well as their obvious differences from those around them, to overcome personal and public challenges.

As a fish out of water, do you feel that part of your life is based on other people's assumptions of who *they* think you should be? Do you internalize their opinions and try to meet their expectations? Are you living your life for them instead of you? If so, then it's time to bust out and time for you to be yourself—all the time.

Many people who want the world to be safe and comfortable might wish that you would look, act, and think just like them. And as much as they don't want you to be distinctive, they don't want to be seen as different either. So they hide behind masks, afraid that the world might one day find them out. That behavior is based on fear of the unknown, of what is different, of what isn't immediately understood, and of being judged by others.

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To live your life in fear is essentially not to live.

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Then there are the times when you *know* you aren't being the real you. This, too, damages your relationships in the long term; how can someone truly know you if you aren't being authentic? You can probably remember moments when you caught yourself wondering why you were acting or saying things that felt unnatural. You immediately knew that you were not being yourself. What do you do when this is happening?

The phrases "get real" and "reality check" both apply at a time like this. Think about how you dishonor or disrespect yourself, the other person, or your organization when you're not authentic.

The best relationships are based on honesty. The best relationship you can have with yourself is one where you acknowledge every part of yourself, understanding both the good and bad.

Graciela Meibar, VP of global sales training and global diversity at Mattel, knows this firsthand: “You have to be authentic. You will always have to accommodate the overall culture to some degree, but never stop being who you are,” she says. “If we are not true to who we are, or we pretend or please, we lose who we are.”

*As a woman, as a Latina, I have to establish myself by the way I dress and how I express myself. I look professional, but with style, which is authentic to who I am and very different from other women in the company. I like to stand out. I'm a good storyteller, using stories from the past to make points so I don't sound like fluff. I am unique, and I don't want to blend in.*

*Free yourself from the desire to conform.* Fish out of water are nonconformists. They are the rule breakers simply because they don't fit in with the norm. They know—like Patagonia's founder Yvon Chouinard—that you can't compromise your values to fit in. Chouinard has said, “Everybody tells me it's an undervalued company, that we could grow this business like crazy and then go public, make a killing. But that would be the end of everything I've wanted to do. It would destroy everything I believe in.”

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Authenticity means saying what you do and doing what you say. It's about being genuine.

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As Chouinard illustrates, authenticity means being genuine. You aren't a chameleon changing with the scenery, or an actor slipping in and out of costume. You're an individual with a wealth of ideas, skills, and talents. It's up to you to show what you can do with them. It can be frustrating and lonely to think or look differently from everyone; but when you give the best representation of who you are from your core, you can really shine.

Reshaping or hiding who you are will not only provoke negative impressions of you; it will cheapen your own experience. I see so many businesswomen trying to underplay their femininity because in their minds, becoming less of a woman is the only way to be taken seriously in the corporate world. I just don't buy it. Being a stunner with a sharp mind is an unbeatable combination.

Playing down your best assets so that others will feel comfortable around you isn't real, it's self-absorbed. I'm a very feminine woman who sits at the table with some of the most powerful men in business. I don't try to be cute, and I don't try to win them over with sex appeal. They pay attention to me because I'm professional, directed, self-assured, and have ideas that are appropriate to the project.

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Timing is essential with emotion and its expression.

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Timing is essential with emotion and its expression. Not everything has to be expressed the moment it's occurring. Balancing your intellect with your emotions is key in business. Years ago, I had a client who was like a human chainsaw. Everything that came out of her mouth was cruel and insensitive. She said something once during a meeting that struck me hard, and I felt myself choke up. Knowing that my tears would only escalate the tension in the room and prevent the

outcome we needed, I controlled my emotions and excused myself. After a short break, I calmed down and returned to the meeting only to sit down to the kindest words I'd ever heard her say. She wanted to know if everything was okay. I assured her that I was fine; and she was pleasant for the rest of the meeting. I had disarmed her by maintaining my dignity. It was about holding my own and not letting someone else break me. Containment, when it is needed, can be the most powerful expression of your authenticity.

You may think that showing your emotion is being authentic. As I said earlier, though, being emotional in front of others can be perceived as manipulative and weak. Many times, an emotional outburst will change the workplace dynamic. Coworkers will often decide, unconsciously, that you see yourself as the victim or a martyr. Such a label causes you to lose your personal power and makes your coworkers feel that they need to take care of you. You've established a dependent/codependent relationship dynamic—a very dangerous scenario for a fish out of water. Just like a betrayal of trust in a romantic relationship, it's an uphill battle to put things right after that.

Let's talk about an important subject: passion and emotions. Some people might describe "being emotional" as simply showing how passionate you are about your job or another specific subject. I see a difference between *having* passion and *being* passionate. In corporate America, having passion means that you're dedicated to seeing something be successful, understood, and recognized for what it truly is. Having passion for something is attractive; people will gravitate to you, and they'll become energized and engaged with you. However, *being* passionate may very well have the opposite effect on coworkers. They may decide that you're emotionally out of control and unbalanced. They'll be focused on your behavior rather than on what you have to say.

To avoid this, it's important to unearth your passion, and move in a direction that resonates with your soul. If you love what you do, the work and money will come, as will happiness. We often choose a course such as finance, law, or the family business because our parents want us to, or our friends have, or because it just seems like the right thing to do. But what if that's not where your passion lies? You'll end up in a career that doesn't fit, especially if you're a creative type. So what do you do to get off the track you're on? If you've been on a specific career track for some time, this will most likely seem an impossible move and fear is going to get a grip on you.

Not to worry—completely turning your life inside out is not what's being asked of you. Instead, you need to explore how you can take your skill sets and your passion for something and combine them. Let's say you've been an actuary for years. Outside of work, you love animals. Why not be CFO for a zoo or a business manager for a pet retailer, or put your talents to work at a bird sanctuary? If you've been a lawyer, but are drawn to cases that advocate for children, how about becoming a family law mediator? The idea is to take your skills and see where in the *overall* industry you can fit.

My father, for example, sold advertising for radio stations and newspapers and for a short time had his own ad agency. He was fantastic at it, but he eventually wanted to slow down and do something for the greater good. He now substitute teaches, sharing his accrued life experience with middle school and high school students. He is living proof that we can all wear many different hats and have several careers, if we have the courage to change direction.

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We can wear many different hats and have several careers during our lifetime.

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*News flash: You must find a place to work that suits your personality.* Though you may initially disagree with this statement, it's something to really think about. Life is not just about survival; it's about thriving. Where you live and work has a lot to do with how happy you're going to be in life. Consider your location. Are there places that are more aligned with your chosen field, your interests, your personality? If the location needs to change, then make it happen.

No matter where you are, if you are authentic, people will automatically open up to you. You will engage people. When I moved to Los Angeles from Atlanta I was seeking to make my dreams come true. Fortunately, so were all the people I met. L.A. is a city of dreamers and dream makers. By revealing what I wanted, I connected with people. Now I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, because I'm seeking balance and enlightenment. In Santa Fe, the people I meet are very real and deep; they connect from the heart and engage the mind. I can sit and converse with people, disagree with them, and still be liked for who I am. I can simply be myself.

No matter what environment you are in or how carefully designed your life may be, challenges will occur. When your best-laid plans fall through or you make a grand mistake, you need to set aside your emotions, take responsibility, state how you're going to resolve the issue, and then offer options for resolution. You're going to make mistakes at some point; it's inevitable. The best option is to be mature in your response, take your punches—this is business, after all—and learn from the experience so that you can move forward in a positive manner.

Getting the place where you live right is one thing; learning how to interact with the people there is another. All relationships are charged by one or more emotions. One of the trickiest relationship dynamics to navigate is when you hire or work closely with a friend or family member as either an employee

or partner. This scenario is ripe for abuses of all kinds, and emotions come easily into play. I can speak to this from experience since my husband is my business partner, my sister handles creative work for us, and I've had two of my closest friends work for the agency. Essentially, it's about remaining professional, setting boundaries as to what is appropriate and what isn't, and being respectful of each other.

When you're a fish out of water, the norm isn't going to be normal for you. So everything we've covered up to this point will require greater attention on your part than it might for your peers; all the more reason to spend time finding your passion, determining where you fit best in the workplace and in your current job, and being authentic.

*Make a great first impression.* Over the years I've become close to several people who, for better or worse, make a great second impression. They like to shock others and amuse themselves by pushing the envelope when they meet someone for the first time. It's kind of like saying, "Hey this is absolutely the *most* hideous I can be. If you can take it, we can be friends." Obviously, I'm someone who gravitates to people who are different, and I'm not put off easily.

Most of the world, though, lives in fear of being embarrassed. So it's important to show yourself honestly the first time, then gradually let people see all of you once they've earned that privilege. To start, share what you have going for you instead of talking about what you're missing. There's no need to blurt out your list of wounds because you think that revealing them will somehow make others understand you. True alliances cannot be formed by manipulation or by using sympathy. Choose what to bring forward in a way that celebrates who you are and not in a way that's designed to pull heartstrings. Oprah didn't get where she is by complaining, as she could rightfully have done, that she didn't have good role models—instead, she became one.

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Choose what to bring forward in a way that celebrates who you are and not in a way that's designed to pull heartstrings.

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Here's a personal example of someone who made a behavioral choice that went south and changed my impression of her forever.

*I hired a young lady who had a pedigree resume and who literally looked the part of a marketing coordinator. She was articulate, had great schooling, and terrific job experience. The position was difficult on many levels with lots of stress. Her experience showed that she would be perfect for the position. My mistake was in not calling her previous employer.*

*After two months, I noticed that she wasn't getting the job done. I brought her into my office to discuss my observation. She immediately started crying—like a faucet turned on. This went on for 30 minutes. I've never seen so much water come out of a person. Seeing her distress, I shifted into caretaker mode instead of keeping the meeting on a professional basis. Well, I left the room so the young woman could collect herself, but was feeling at a loss with how to deal with her.*

*While she was in my office, I called my business coach. She suggested that the woman needed to go home and determine if this was the right job for her. I didn't follow her advice.*

*Days later, I got a call from a client complaining about the young woman not having handled something*

*appropriately. I went to talk to her, but she wasn't at her desk. I searched her desk to find the client's materials so I could resolve the issue. Her desk was in shambles; nothing was organized. I couldn't find what I needed, which really hampered my ability to work with the upset client.*

*The first chance I could, I called her into my office to confront her with the client's distress and what I'd discovered. It was déjà vu. The young woman did an exact repeat of our last meeting—30 minutes of crying, this time stating that her father had cancer and that she couldn't do the work assigned her. I told her to go home and decide if this was the right job for her. She went home . . . and I never heard from her again.*

*I called her former employer, and guess what he said? "She's a crier."*

Contrast the previous story with that of Erica Huggins, senior executive VP of Imagine Entertainment, who always knew she would succeed. Her mother was a huge proponent of the idea that "You can do anything," and her father would give her validation for things she did that were outside the box. He would say about his daughter, "You can drop Erica anywhere in the world and she can find her way back." A true Fearless Fish out of water, Erica quickly learned to feel comfortable making decisions that were right for her, not someone else.

*You have to choose the path that suits you, unlike so many people who go down the programmed path.*

*I felt like a fish out of water in high school in Los Angeles. When I was a sophomore, I was sent to the*

*Stanford summer program in theater, after which I was expected to go back to my high school life. I realized this wasn't working; I wasn't fitting in with the girls and all the high school stuff. I couldn't be part of the group; and I had to make choices that were right for me.*

*I ended up going to Hampshire College, a small, alternative college in Amherst, Massachusetts. That was considered weird, not a normal choice for a kid from the Valley. Hampshire had no grades, all mentoring. Not at all like UCLA, where all my friends were going.*

*My dad was a professor and there was a lot of academia around me. I wanted to be away from my folks to be who I was going to become. I felt like an alien in L.A.*

*It was a great feeling being at Hampshire College. I felt like I was a part of something. The school attracted a lot of creative, out-of-the-box thinkers—like the guy who created Ultimate Frisbee. I spent every summer in New York and traveled abroad a lot back then. I had started making documentary films when I was in college, so in order to make money while doing that, I moved back to L.A. to apprentice as a film editor at Cannon Films. My boss was an old, drunk film editor. I turned that situation to my benefit and learned how to do what he was supposed to do—my boss's job! It was fun and I felt really good inside.*

In trying situations, there were doubtlessly times when Erica wanted to be a crier; but she wasn't. Instead, she took bold steps and made choices that were initially frightening but ultimately rewarding. The bottom line is, tears have no place in the office. Yes, sadness or frustration may be authentic, but the expression of these feelings can have a manipulative effect, and manipulation does not lead to authenticity. Tears can often influence a response;

they beg for sympathy, and that's not appropriate or helpful in a business environment.

Erica's experience is a testament to the fact that it's best to know your boundaries, and take responsibility for your reality and your choices. Be aware of the behaviors you use to stand out. Some women may use crying to manipulate and some men can allow their tempers to flash or turn an argument around to deflect blame. You can break these stereotypes by understanding who you are and what it means to just be you, without using your emotions to shock and force people to see you. Otherwise, all you're doing is using a defense mechanism to define who you are.

Revealing yourself involves making careful choices and having patience. It's like peeling and eating an artichoke. Peel one leaf at a time; don't shed all your leaves at once and reveal your tender heart before your relationships have a solid foundation. There is a lot of good taste in the smaller bits along the way.

*Bust the myths about you.* Let's face it: You're branded the day you walk in the door. Conclusions are instantly drawn about you, myths based on assumption and impression. Any of those myths could be negative. Instead of standing back and pointing fingers—and carrying a chip on your shoulder, which encourages exclusion—change perceptions of you by fearlessly showing yourself. Bust the myths.

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Change perceptions of you by fearlessly showing yourself.

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Andy Warhol did that by boldly being himself as have many other artists and industry leaders. Warhol was one of the first major American artists to be open about his homosexuality; and he was criticized for it. He wrote in his book *Popism*, "I decided I

just wasn't going to care, because those were all the things that I didn't want to change anyway, that I didn't think I 'should' want to change. . . . Other people could change their attitudes, but not me." And lo and behold—people *did* change their attitudes.

I had a similar experience while attending the University of Alabama. I found myself confronted by a lot of people who didn't know anyone Jewish, or who had a negative impression of Jews because of prejudice they'd learned at home. In my four years there, I worked to dispel the myths about myself and others like me by joining the Jewish sorority and developing its presence on campus in a way that had never been done before.

Greg Clark, affiliate marketing manager at Comedy Central and Spike, is another myth-buster. At 25 years of age, he's the youngest member of a nearly all-female staff. Instead of acting like the young guy hotshot, he broke the stereotype by being disciplined about his work and agreeable to his superiors. He knew he needed to listen and learn and not come in acting like a know-it-all. And his attitude is opening minds and doors.

*When I came into MTV Networks, most people working here were women. I asked them, 'Why me?' They said, 'To bring in someone different.' But I was a young white man. I've learned more about women through this experience; there is a man's world and a woman's world. In a man's world, men say how things are. Women, on the other hand, take feelings into account—there's more compassion. That's the culture. They make the worker feel wanted. So we feel accepted. No matter what our gender or skin color.*

*My hurdle is that I'm in my mid-20s, and I can be goofy. But in the end, I mean business. I just use humor to*

*defuse the situation. What people don't get about me is that I really am serious. I show them by dressing up and making presentations at staff meetings in a professional manner. It throws people off, and lets me be seen for my talents.*

When attorney Kim Deck started out at JAMS—the largest mediation firm in the country—she was up against a lot of resistance; both because she was a woman in a man's field and because her father was the chairman. To prove it was her talent and skill and not nepotism that got her where she was, Kim worked harder than anyone else in the firm to make things happen. Everyone benefited. Recently, Kim was voted one of the Top 40 Mediators by the California Bar Association.

*At the beginning of my career, I felt like a fish out of water. When I was starting out in my early 30s, I was competing with retired judges for cases. I was one of the few lawyer mediators and one of the only female mediators in California.*

*I had a mentor say to me, "If you want to be something, say you are that—you have to embody what you say." I just said, "I'm a mediator," and reinvented myself.*

*I use being a woman to my advantage; most of my clients are men. I've always gotten along with men and have a lot of fun with them. I play up my great sense of humor and my warmth. Warmth, understanding, and compassion get the deals done. I'm dogged in my commitment to helping people. I do everything humanly possible to make things happen. The stakes are high—*

*it's a lawsuit, so it's serious business. It takes analysis, great listening skills, and a memory for facts.*

*To dispel any myths around being a female mediator and a lawyer, I really sold the fact that I was the kind of person clients could relate to. They were mostly young women, so I played that to my advantage and it was a game changer.*

*When I was a kid, I had to change schools every year. I guess that's why I'm actually comfortable with trail blazing.*

To blaze your own trail, it's important to bust any negative myths about you. However, if those myths are positive, you may choose to play them up and create a mystique. During my career, I've known people whose great reputations were built on their past or pedigree. Whether you're an ex-jock, whiz kid, military man, or from a powerful family, playing up rather than playing down, what sets you apart can take you a long way on your road to success.

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Apologize for who you are and others will see you as someone to pity.

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*Accept yourself and others will follow.* Apologize for who you are and others will see you as someone to pity. Saying you're sorry for your imperfections puts doubt in people's minds about your value. Schoolmasters worried about young Albert Einstein—he wasn't like the other kids. He felt out of place growing up, victimized by an educational system that stifled originality and creativity. He didn't begin speaking until he was three years old. He didn't fit in with his classmates and, because of what looked

like learning difficulties, there was some talk that he was retarded. The headmaster at one of Einstein's schools told him that he would never be a successful professional and recommended he attend trade school. A teacher told him he wouldn't amount to anything.

When you're different from the norm, you already attract attention; but the good news is that attracting attention may be the best thing that ever happened to you. Einstein followed his path, and the world paid attention. The same is true for everyone who lives their truth with conviction.

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I think the people who are fish out of water are the ones to admire. Imagine what would have happened if Tiger Woods' father hadn't dared put his child prodigy in the limelight or encouraged a record-breaking career in golf because Tiger is multiracial and most professional golfers are white. Woods is gifted, he performs brilliantly, and he's an inspiration to golfers and non-golfers everywhere.

Feeling that you're a fish out of water can happen anywhere in any type of business. Jason Heller, former managing director of Horizon Interactive, started out in the hip-hop industry and now circulates throughout the corporate world with his own Internet-based business. When Jason was in the hip-hop world, he hung out with graffiti artists and break-dancers, even though he had grown up in a stable middle class home, not the projects. For him, if life is a circle, he would be standing with one foot in and one foot out.

*I was a white kid born and raised in the Bronx. I started in the hip-hop industry as a DJ at age 16 in the New York City nightlife scene. It was exhilarating. I've always felt like I was different from other people. I have little tolerance for mediocrity.*

*At age 18, I ended up dropping out of college. It seemed like a waste of time. I butted heads with teachers who never had any real-world experience. I wasn't about theory, I was about practice. So, I went full time into the music business. I felt like I was accomplishing something with my life by working.*

*My first record was recorded in the early '90s, and it was a huge success. My partner was DJ Shok, who has sold 20 million records to date. The New York City underground sound was our thing.*

*In 1995, I used the advent of the Internet to create a web site and started infiltrating chat rooms, pushing our artists. We started a grassroots marketing firm trying to promote our artists—putting stickers everywhere. My record company was called Mass Vinyl Recordings. I had a No. 2 Maxi Billboard Single for an artist of mine called Hi Tech.*

*I left the music business with a thirst for the Internet, and I went to work for a traditional direct marketing company to help them establish an Internet marketing division. My partner, Jason Burnam, and I knew we'd start our own agency shortly thereafter. Eight months later, in 1998, we left to start Mass Transit out of a three-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. I translated what I had learned as an independent record company producer into cheap guerrilla marketing. We found clever ways to get the word out for companies like Bertelsmann and Doubleday Direct Book Clubs.*

*Now I'm a hip-hop kid from the Bronx in a corporate world. I'm more successful than most MBA-educated types, and I have more fun. It has been both liberating and uncomfortable, because people in corporations are not like me.*

Heller is a prime example of why it's vital for you to embrace yourself as you are; to understand that the universe is ready to support those who accept themselves, pursue their passions, and contribute to the greater good. It knows that diversity is essential, and it doesn't need everyone to be alike. There are scores of successful fish out of water who have found alignment with that spiritual truth as they uncovered the meaning of self-acceptance and lived it fearlessly. They have also made an important determination in figuring out whether the company or organization they're in is a good fit.

Sometimes, you or those who have hired you really, *really* want the job to work out. But there are times when no amount of effort on either of your parts is going to help. Being a fish out of water is just something that can't be contained, retrofitted, suppressed, or managed in a way that is workable. When you need to soar, break out, or be the original thinker, then that's the only thing that will work. Not every company or organization can handle that; and that's when you need to channel your energies elsewhere. The clearer your perception of yourself is, the more readily that job will appear.

A great example of this—from a world where being a fish out of water is actually commonplace—is dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharp. Twyla became a superstar in the dance and film world, first with her own groundbreaking company and then as a choreographer for many major dance companies in the world. She's created more than 125 dances; choreographed five

Hollywood movies; directed and choreographed two Broadway shows; written two books; and received one Tony Award, two Emmy Awards, 17 honorary doctorates, the Vietnam Veterans of America President's Award, and the 2004 National Medal of the Arts.

Twyla, from a Quaker background, is described as being brash, uncompromising, unwilling to submit to authority, highly intellectual, totally lacking in humor, and defensive to a fault. Ballet was too restrictive, and modern dance was still somewhat claustrophobic. After a stint with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, she struck out on her own. Critics weren't sure what they were looking at when Twyla's routines first arrived on the dance scene; but her perseverance and passion over the years overcame critical scrutiny, and her vision as a choreographer has now become legendary. She says, "They called it vision; I call it analyzing what my strengths were. It just so happened there was no market whatsoever for my strengths."

Twyla continues to question and explore, and her trajectory through the heavens of life and dance remains bright as ever. She truly dances to her own drumbeat, having accepted her difference as the base structure from which she carves her future.

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The key to developing self-acceptance is acknowledging what is in place, what is working—*having gratitude*.

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The key to developing self-acceptance is acknowledging what is in place, what is working, and *having gratitude* for that. It's about turning your focus toward what you have instead of harboring a sense of scarcity and always focusing on what seems to be missing. When you live with the constant feeling that you don't have enough, you'll be seen that way, too; and you'll

cultivate more of it. It's not attractive to others, and it doesn't attract more of anything to you except more scarcity. (A good way to attract scarcity is to walk around thinking, "But I'm so different from everyone. I just don't fit in.")

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There's usually a gem inside even the most difficult of experiences.

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You may say, "But it's been so hard! My glass is more empty than full." But I'm suggesting that you take a closer look and review those hard lessons with an eye toward the good they've given. There's usually a gem inside even the most difficult of experiences. I woke up to this realization a few years ago, after spending most of my life bemoaning that I'd moved seven times between the ages of three and six. What a shift came when I recognized what I'd gained from that early rootlessness. I've grown into a flexible, spontaneous, adaptable, and resourceful person who is unafraid of change, all valuable attributes in navigating the adult world. The glass is fuller than I once thought.

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Gratitude is essential when you're a fish out of water.

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Gratitude is essential when you're a fish out of water. Asked once if she had a good luck charm, comedienne Ellen DeGeneres said her good luck charm was her gratitude. Entertain gratitude, review the gifts of your life—including the diamonds in the rough—and list them. Then, keep this list handy. Refer to it. Add to it. Read it over every night before you go to bed or first thing when you wake up in the morning. It's easy to incorporate into a morning or evening routine. I occasionally ask others close to me—my daughter, my husband, my staff—what's making them

happy, what they are satisfied with, what they are grateful for. Listening to their answers adds to my feeling of gratefulness.

Having gratitude keeps the focus on the half-full glass. And from that place of feeling fulfilled in your work and personal relationships, more fullness comes. As a fish out of water, you can lead with this sense of fullness. Before long, others will want to join you so they learn how to fill their glass. Where you once felt scarcity outside the circle, you will feel rewarded right where you are.

Gratitude also allows you to see where you currently are. I've noticed that a lot of young people just coming into the workforce arrive with some unrealistic expectations. Never having spent 40 hours a week in a closed work environment before, they don't always want to accept that corporate culture is not exactly like one's family scenario; though relationship dynamics often do come into play. In the business world, you have to learn to make your own way; something that can take time, depending on a number of variables. I've watch many of my clients put their bosses in parental roles and look for approval and handouts. A complaint I often hear is, "I've been in this position for years. I should have been promoted by now."

*News flash: Management's timetable for advancement and your timetable are two different things.* In a tough economy, it's going to be more difficult to advance, and you will be required to be more present, productive and inventive. It's not only about doing your job to the best of your ability, as stated in your job description; it's also a time for you to discover where you fit best in the organization considering your interests, skill sets, and ambitions. First, as we covered earlier, you need to determine if the company you're working with is a good fit. Second, you need to take into account the other employees, the direction the company is going, your focus versus the company's focus, and whether you have the experience that says you're ready for advancement. I know a guy

named David who worked as an airport shuttle driver for a company in San Diego. He got up at 1 A.M. every morning, got to work by 3 A.M., and was on the road picking up his first passengers by 4 A.M. The crew he worked with covered the gamut of men and women from varying backgrounds. Most of them were, as he put it, “Pigpens”—sloppy folks who wore whatever they were eating and handled their clients like sheep. Many were obsessed with how much they made each day in tips. David is a 180-degree turn from these people.

*The shuttle company has a limousine division, something you can apply to join after you've been driving airport shuttles for at least six months. You apply, your driving record with the company and client comments are reviewed, and you're either asked to join or not.*

*I was asked to join the limousine division after driving shuttles for three months—and I hadn't even applied. I was so grateful for having a job in the first place that I'd always dressed impeccably and looked just as together when I finished my day 10 to 12 hours later as when I'd arrived at work at 3 A.M. My attitude was that I was transporting people who deserved the utmost respect and consideration. I watched my language and was sensitive to my guests' needs.*

*Looking back on that period, I don't know how I got up at 1 A.M. and did that job for three months; but my gratitude and integrity was apparent to the powers that be. Not only was I asked to become a limo driver for them, I was asked to develop two training courses: one for the shuttle drivers and one for the reservations department. That was total icing on the cake. And the tips driving the limos were incredible!*

Gratitude is a key virtue to cultivate. As David discusses in his story, integrity and respect are two others that go a long way in your relationship with yourself and with others. Another virtue that works well in all facets of business is a creative imagination. Creativity is what keeps everything evolving and interesting. Nothing works like a new idea to open minds and hearts and instigate more new ideas. Those with whom you work will immediately recognize all of these virtues, as they are integral components of the package we've covered: authenticity.

One more important business virtue is managing your perceptions and expectations. Let both get out of hand and you'll find you're a fish out of water swimming not only against the current but up a waterfall. We all want to be successful at what we do, and we all want recognition for our accomplishments. If you focus on doing the work at hand to the best of your ability—and go beyond what's expected—then you'll get noticed. If your focus is simply on climbing the corporate ladder and attaining kudos, then you'll begin missing important details and your work relationships will begin to reflect your lack of authenticity. Accept the person that you are and manage your expectations. Otherwise, you're in for disappointment and a work situation that is less fulfilling and enjoyable.

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Key business virtues to cultivate: integrity, respect, creative imagination, managing your perceptions and expectations.

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*News flash: Coworkers see right through people who aren't being authentic.* That's why the first step in coming to terms with being a fish out of water is dissolving the layers you've piled on trying to fit in and discovering the power in your authenticity.

This life takes courage. It takes courage simply to show up every day when you're a fish out of water. You can be proud of that. Courage comes from confidence, and confidence comes from believing in your worthiness. And developing that sense of worthiness begins by actively practicing belief in yourself (I'll go more deeply into ways of practicing belief in Step 7). To begin, look at your track record—all the times you got it right—and then recite an affirmation several times a day, using words that describe you like someone who loves you dearly would. Try on “I'm talented”/“I'm inspiring”/“I'm creative.” It helps to hear it, because when you believe in yourself, others will, too.

We've covered a lot of material, so now it's time for you to do some work that will really help you to identify your unique gifts. By the time you complete this book, the exercises you'll find at the end of each step will have helped you come to terms with and capitalize on being a fish out of water. This step involved opening up to your authentic self, letting go of the need to conform, busting myths about yourself, figuring out how to make a great first impression, and learning to accept yourself. You are definitely on your way. Step 2, “Use Your Differences as a Lure,” will show you how to go about capitalizing on your uniqueness.

### ***Step 1 Exercises***

Because you are a fish out of water, your path has not always been easy.

List one big challenge you've encountered.

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Is there anything positive that came out of that challenge?

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Describe what is unique about you.

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Do you look different from others? How?

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Do you think differently than others? How?

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Do you act differently than others? How?

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What do you wish others would accept about you that you simply cannot change or do not want to change?

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List why you feel that these unique qualities are advantages to your company and/or industry.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_

How are you being pigeonholed? For example: You are thought of as rigid, quick tempered, too sweet, and so forth.

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How can you turn these perceptions about you into positive attributes?

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Create a daily mantra to quietly say to yourself that turns your unique qualities into a positive. For example: "I am talented, inspiring, and creative."

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Give gratitude every day. What are you thankful for in this moment?

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What are you satisfied with in this moment?

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Who can you thank for these blessings?

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