



# CHAPTER 1

## The Burst

*What Happens When We Exchange Awkward for Awe?*

*“Learn the language of your soul’s voice, intuition.”*

—Unknown

### Slosh the Coke

I have a terrible memory. It’s one of my finest qualities: only the moments that matter stay.

One of them unfolded on a family trip to New York City when I was eight.

We were hurrying toward Central Park.

From where?

I have no idea.

To do what?

Still nothing.

I just remember the wind knifing between skyscrapers, the crowds of people scurrying everywhere, and how my little legs struggled to keep up as I gripped my dad’s hand beside my older sister.

That’s when I saw him.

A man sat on a red blanket, back braced against a stone building. His wheelchair sagged beside him like a collapsed tent. One hand rested on the blanket's fleece; the other rattled a dissolving paper McDonald's cup.

His clothes were torn, and his body was pretzeled. But his eyes were impossibly blue and bright, and they met mine as we walked by. I pulled back on my dad's hand, trying to gain his attention.

"Do we have any money?" I whispered.

My dad smiled the way parents do when they're counting seconds. "We're running late," he said, "but on the way back we'll buy him some dinner."

I waved and smiled as we passed the man, hoping to convey some hope that we'd be back soon.

I don't remember what we did in Central Park. I only remember the smell of hot dogs. Beyond that, my senses were caught up in the man with the blue eyes. Who was he? Where was his family? Would he talk to me when we returned? What would I say?

When we left Central Park, I reminded my dad about the meal. We headed to McDonald's and picked up a burger, fries, and an icy Coke. As we stepped back onto the Manhattan sidewalk, I began to walk with purpose, a burst inside of me that felt warm. The Coke was sloshing from side to side as my dad and sister hurried right behind me. The walk wasn't a long one, but it seemed to take longer than I thought it would. Finally, we turned the corner to the street where he was sitting.

I looked at the spot where I thought he'd be sitting. I looked around and up and down the street. No wheelchair.

No blanket.

No cup.

Surely, this was the right place. I looked at my dad; his face told me it was. Except, the man was no longer there. My knees buckled onto the oil-stained sidewalk. Tourists flowed around me while tears fell down my cheeks.

We missed him. We missed our chance.

The moment branded a lesson deep inside my young heart: when you have a burst to connect with another person, don't hesitate. If you do, the opportunity is often gone.

## Remember the Gift

As children, we embraced the burst without coaching. We saw a need, felt it in our guts, and acted before spreadsheets or safety lectures intervened. A four-year-old will hand over her last piece of Halloween candy without estimating blood-sugar levels or college savings.

But growing older rearranges the brain's hierarchy. Our left hemisphere (the accountant) begins driving, and our right hemisphere (the poet) slides into the passenger seat as life experience teaches us to avoid hot stoves, oncoming cars, and, unfortunately, messy people. Caution hardens into cynicism, and the sacred gift of intuition is muffled by the servant of analysis.

Albert Einstein called out this switch a half-century ago: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind a faithful servant," he wrote. "We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Whenever we cross the street to dodge discomfort, scroll past a cry for help, or excuse ourselves with data on panhandlers' statistics, we place another hand over that intuitive voice until it barely whispers. The good news is that neuroscience has upended the old dogma that adult brains are fixed.

Functional MRI shows neural circuits rewiring every day. When you obey one burst, you spark a brand-new pathway of possibilities; keep obeying bursts and you braid a highway of habit. This isn't age-specific. You can dial intuition up to full volume at any age. Or you can ignore it and shut down those synapses of greater possibility.

The truth is that healthy living isn't intuition versus reason; it's intuition-led, reason-guided. Picture that your phone pings and your friend's biopsy came back malignant. Intuition says, *Go now*. Halfway there doubts rise: *What if she's sleeping? What if she doesn't want visitors?* Reason quickly offers structure: *Call from the driveway; leave soup on the porch*. But intuition keeps the car pointed to her street. That's a sort of wise burst that's worth following.

A few years after missing the man in Manhattan, I had another opportunity to follow such a burst, and it changed the trajectory of my life.

## Look for Another Chance

I had known Allie since middle school. Her hair was rarely combed, she had a distinct smell, and she was prematurely developed. I had two classes with her that year—PE and art—but she was in a special class for everything else. I always tried to smile at her when I could, but I was not sure how to interact with her. My heart yearned to be kind, but the awkwardness of not knowing what to do got in the way.

Until one day in the cafeteria during our sophomore year of high school.

Allie approached two popular boys wearing their football jerseys and sitting at the popular kids' table by the windows. I was taking a seat at an adjacent table and noticed what appeared to be an unusual interaction about to occur.

I positioned myself out of the boys' line of site and partially shielded by a large trash can but close enough to hear what was transpiring.

Wearing her best velcro shoes and a striped shirt tucked into high-waisted jeans, she began to flirt with the boys. My stomach began to churn. I knew these boys, and I hoped they'd be kind. Then I overheard the word "prom" come from her mouth.

*Oh my gosh, no. She is asking them to prom!*

"Sure, I'll go with you," one boy said as tried to hide a smirk.

"Me too!" said the other, and then they looked at each other with sarcastic grins.

Allie missed the cues. She grinned back and went in for a hug. In her mind, she had scored not only one but two of the most popular boys in school as her prom dates. Just as her outstretched arms reached them, the boys turned their backs and burst into laughter.

She stood there confused. Then I watched as her look of jubilation suddenly turned to heartbreak.

That's when I felt it.

The burst.

No analytical reasoning stopped me. Despite the boys being my friends and the fact that the entire lunchroom was watching, my intuitive reasoning compelled me to act. Perhaps because I had missed the man with the red blanket and wheelchair nearly half a life before.

I stood up from my seat, grabbed the trash can in front of me, and smashed it against the boys' table. Food flew everywhere, including all over them. I forced back the lump in my throat and choked out, "You should be the ones embarrassed. I hope you remember this!"

I grabbed Allie's hand and walked her straight out of the cafeteria and to the principal's office. We both sat there and cried.

I did not eat my lunch that day. I didn't need to. My soul had been filled with a different kind of nourishment that was even better than food—perhaps more necessary too.

The truth is that Allie and her velcro shoes would have probably recovered without me. I am sure this was not the first time she was hurt by the social complexities that both life and high school offer. But I would have missed the gifts of a new friend and a new aliveness in my soul. I would have also missed an opportunity to meet a calling.

That same year, I began taking a course to complete a teacher-in-training program. They assigned me to a preschool special education classroom with a teacher ready to go on maternity leave, which allowed me to lead the class in her absence. If not for Allie and the burst, I would not have entered that room with a newfound perspective on people of all abilities. Listening to the burst opened me up to a community I knew nothing about. This was the real aha gift I received from leaning into an awkward situation.

Awkwardness is not the enemy; it is a radar. Sometimes it warns, *Danger—back away*. More often it invites, *Connection ahead—lean in*. Parents script this code for their children. Kids' bursts are loud: "Mom, can we give him my sandwich?" If we hush them with "Keep walking," they learn to muzzle compassion. But if we explore with "Let's talk to him together," they learn courage that outlives us.

The same is true for leaders. Intuition catches needs before words form. Think of a suddenly silent employee or a teammate's tear-glossed eyes. When leaders look away from these needs, teams copy. When leaders lean into them, cultures begin to change.

Author James Clear notes, "The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision."<sup>1</sup> Each time we obey a burst we plant a neural seed; seeds repeated become forests. Keep granola bars in the car and ask a name at the stoplight. Sit beside the co-worker who least resembles your mirror. Smile at the parent juggling a wheelchair and groceries. Little decisions, forest of joy.

Your role shapes the practice. If you're a student, invite the overlooked classmate into your project group; community is your native soil. If you're a parent, let your kids choose a charity, pack snack bags, FaceTime a lonely grandparent; their bursts can reignite yours. If you're a leader, pause the agenda when intuition spots discouragement simmering; the spreadsheet will wait, but morale may not.

Rational thinking should protect you, not imprison you. Avoid actual danger, yes, but don't confuse discomfort with danger. Often, mentally assigning labels like homeless, disabled, or opposite party to others flattens our curiosity into conclusion, which shrinks possibility's radius.

My friends with disabilities taught me a rhythm that keeps our intuitive burst alive: Notice → Pause → Approach → Exchange. Notice the person others overlook. Pause long enough for compassion to outrun convenience. Approach with a question; put names before needs. Exchange whatever you both have: a story, a sandwich, a laugh, a fist bump. When you practice this daily, common places like checkout lines and waiting rooms can become sanctuaries of joy.

## THE BURST



Bursts are like sparks. Habits are like kindling. New friendships that are formed are like bonfires that continually warm our heart. Culture so often chants, "It's awkward, I'm out." It's time for us as a society to let a louder anthem rise: "It's awkward; I'll lean in. I'm just one step from aha."

Whether you are 17 or 70, the burst still flickers. Fan it whenever you get the chance. Learn basic sign language. Say hello in the grocery aisle. Invite the neighbor whose accent stretches your ear. Expect awkwardness; it means you're stretching yourself in the most

important way. And remember that intuition is the gift; reason is the servant. When the gift leads, the world grows kinder, our minds grow wiser, and our stories grow brighter.

Today, if a voice inside you whispers, *Send the text. . . Offer the ride. . . Ask the name. . .*, answer quickly. One decisive act can reroute a destiny, quite possibly your own.

I missed an opportunity on a Manhattan sidewalk when I was eight. Now I fully comprehend what I missed. I don't want to ever miss an opportunity like that again. I hope you're starting to feel the same. Lean into those intuitive bursts when they come—awkwardness and all—and discover the joy exchange waiting on the other side.

