

Full transcript of author Marianne Cantwell's TEDx Talk: **The Hidden Power of NOT (Always) Fitting In** @ TEDxNorwichED conference. She is the author of the book **"Be a Free Range Human"**.

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Marianne Cantwell - Author

This talk is for those of us who are good at looking like we fit in the different worlds we move in, so be it your industry, your social group, different interests you have, or just the stage you stand on.

It's like from the outside, it looks like you fit. But secretly, a little piece of you never feels you are a 100% fit into any of them.

Now if you've ever had an inkling of feeling that way, you are not alone. I mean, I felt the same. So there are definitely two of us.

And I spent the last 8 years helping thousands of people get paid without compromising their personality. And in doing that, I discovered a few things that surprised me about being this way.

You see, for me, not quite fitting into any one identity, started from the moment I could talk. See, I was born in Australia, but my father is English and my Mom was from a little island of Mauritius. So I grew up speaking English and French, with this sort of weird accent that didn't really fit anywhere in the world, especially not where I grew up.

But the first time I really thought about this topic, was one day when I was

16.

So being a lifelong nerd, at 16, I was at the top of my class along with this other boy. And one day my teacher took me aside and said, "*Marianne, you and I have something in common: We are both generalists.*"

In which part I thought: "*Great, that sounds like a good word!*"

And then he continued, "*Now, the other boy, he is different from us. He is a specialist. And the one thing I've learned is that the world rewards specialists, not generalists. That's why he's going to do really well.*"

Hearing these words, 16-year old me just thought, "Well, he's right." You know, my teacher must be right. If I want to fit and thrive as an adult, I'm going to have to focus on one thing. You know, really make it my mission to fit cleanly into one identity and leave old the messy me behind. And so that's what I did.

I went to University. I graduated. Moved across the world to London. Started to rise in the work world. And I mean, fitting in it kind of worked. Like on the outside, I was all right at playing the part, you know, sometimes.

But to be honest, on the inside I was stuck, like feeling sort of smaller and smaller. By that point I was *googling* for better options, like every night. But there were no ideas on how to fix this.

All the advice was the usual clichés like "*Find your one big passion*", or "*Find your tribe*". Seriously?

What do you do when you've never seen a place that you completely fit?
Not just one where you kind of look like you do.

And so a decade ago, I decided to take this seriously and I asked myself if it was possible to create a career where you don't have to fit into a box.

And then I quit my job to make that happen as my own boss. Since then, I have experimented with different **free-range ways of working**. I've run my business from everywhere, places like Bali, and Costa Rica, New York, and London. I've run these global online festivals where brilliant thinkers share how they handle these questions.

But most of all, I've been privileged to poke inside the heads of thousands of people who feel like this. And the biggest thing I've learned is this: We are told through our parents, education, media and more that we live in a black and white world where the game is to get good at one thing. *You fit into one identity, what one thing will you be when you grow up?* You've all heard that, right?

But some of us just aren't that person at heart. And so that advice leaves us feeling stuck. But what if the mistake isn't in how you are but in how you were told you should be.

Graham Greene said, *"Human nature is not black and white but black and grey."*

Guys, this is how we are as humans. This is how we actually are as humans. And realizing that is a game changer, because it means you haven't been getting it wrong.

That pull inside that was saying, "Oh, there has to be another way, other than to squish myself into this one-dimensional one-track version of me." It's not wrong. We are simply not given a model for the world that lets that way of being thrive.

And to be clear not only is this way of being a "thing", there's a word for it: *liminal*. This is my favorite word, and it describes a state of *in-between*-

ness. Like you are not quite one thing but not quite another. You are on the borderlines. A part of this, but also a part of that of becoming.

And when I first heard this word, I just thought: “*Wow, that describes me.*” And not just the big life stuff but say, right now on my bookshelf, the **Sex and the City** novel is cuddling up to a behavioral economics textbook and I love it both of them equally, right? There is actually a word for this.

A great example of *liminality* would be vampires. They are not quite alive but they are not quite dead. They are not quite human but not quite other. They are not fully evil but they are not all good. They are in-between worlds. It’s like they don’t fit into anyone’s space.

But why would I mention that here? Well, because it’s no mistake that over the past few decades, vampires and zombies have been the topic of some of the cult TV series with the biggest and most dedicated fan bases.

You see, we watch what we desire to be but aren’t allowed to be. And the one thing our society does not allow us to be is *liminal*. And in a world full of black and white messages, like you are in or out, with us or against us, this or that, then this has a big pull and heads up, now I said it, you will see it everywhere.

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I mean, so many popular dramas do the same like ‘**Breaking Bad**’. It’s a runaway hit that revolves around the question: *Is the main character a family man or something else? Or both?* That show is literally about liminality.

You see, we watch this stuff whenever we turn on our TVs or load up on Netflix. But then we go back to real life, where we squish ourselves down. *Be one thing. Fit in your box.* And millions of us are doing this. But it

doesn't have to be that way.

You see, here's a different model. The way we are told the world works is kind of like a **bunch of continents**.

Now, these continents could be different industries or identities. So, if this was careers, it could be here is continent lawyer. Here is continent small business arena. Here is continent cupcake baker or something. And your role, we are told, is to find the continent where you really fit. You know, get the visa, learn the customs, rise the ranks by being the one who fits best. But that's a losing game if you're liminal, because you don't quite feel like you fit.

So your only option other than to pretend is to look for a continent where you fit better. But even though the other world might seem exciting at first, soon you get disappointed, right? Like it wasn't quite as you as you thought. Like you have to leave another bit of yourself behind. And so the cycle continues.

But what is the alternative? Well, it's to create your own island — an island where every bit of you fits. And you create this island just off the shore of your favorite continent. And it takes the best of that world and fills out the rest with the best of the other worlds you have a foot in. So these could be bits of your personality, background or something you can't help being.

So, let me just give you an example. Consider an island where you do business strategy for people who run their own thing. Now the continent approach will be to look for others who do this and tell yourself, "There should be more like them!" Maybe Facebook stalk them or something.

Here you get to create your own version. So your island could be populated by the fact that you are a highly sensitive person, in a field that is traditionally more brash, could have some of the storytelling you can't

help do, a sprinkle of your travel lust, a light dusting of being a straight talker and so on.

By the way, that's a fair description of one of my islands. And I couldn't have found that job description anywhere, right? I did look.

And that's the bottom line. You don't find your place as a liminal person. You create it.

So, as I said that, I realized, this could sound like, "Isn't this a compromise?" Like a workaround to deal with your weirdness? Wouldn't it be better to not be like this in the first place?

Well, when you take the things that means to be liminal, like having a foot in more than one place and bridging worlds, slightly a different personality to others around you, maybe not focusing on one idea forever for the exclusion of anything else.

When you take those things and apply them to yourself we can feel shame. Like we are getting it wrong. Being weird. Not doing the grown-up thing right.

But here's the thing: If you take those same traits and apply them to others, you know who that describes? It describes leaders. It describes changemakers, innovators, creators. It describes the very people we are telling our children to aspire to be and they get there through the traits that we tell ourselves to squish down and hide.

I mean, take successful innovators. Innovation does not happen by some guys sitting in a silent white room for weeks just waiting for inspiration to strike. No, that kind of sounds like how right this block happens.

But innovation, however, happens through — well, generally from an idea

being taken from one world and used in another, like say a tiny camera with a tiny plastic lens that didn't sell to camera buyers but put it on the back of a mobile phone, and bingo.

Similarly people who create movements who are seen at the forefront of their field, they didn't get there by being like everyone else in that continent. They created their own island off the coast of that space. Movements are created by liminal people.

So, your liminal edge could be something about background, or maybe a personality trait that you could hide away for being too different but instead you step into.

Like this guy, Ricky who organized conferences where world leading specialists gave insightful speeches. But Ricky had a personality quirk a little different to others around him: impatience. He was a conference organizer who got really bored by long speeches.

So he started giving his speakers shorter and shorter time slots. Shorter than anything on the scene at the time and the little known TED conference started to take off. That's why we are sitting here today.

This is not about being some sort of rebel who is all different for the sake of it. Being liminal, it's like being an inside outsider, with one foot in the world you want to move in and a foot elsewhere. And you get to decide where those borders lie.

From introverts to extroverts in every shade of grey in-between this applies. It's always those pieces we are so tempted to hide in the shadows that turn out to be our edge when we bring them into the light.

I think I sort of stop here a second. Say you might be listening to this and thinking, "This is inspiring stuff!" hopefully or "I like these ideas. I'm totally going to tell my kids about them!"

But realistically maybe you already are a leader. Or you are just somewhere where you've worked hard for, right? And there can be a sense that maybe this is for someone younger or newer without so much to lose. Not me. Not now.

And I get this. I mean, I really get this because to be honest with you, that is how I felt a few years ago. See, everything had come together with my work, finally, after a lot of hard work. I had a business doing stuff I loved with great people, living between beautiful countries.

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And then one day, to my publisher's surprise, I found myself the author of a bestselling book related to this. And suddenly things exploded. Those opportunities I was circling for years were just pinging in my inbox. It was like my little island I created was attractive and everyone wanted to come and visit.

And so I did just what you expected at that point when my star was at his highest and I had a breakdown. I disappeared from the scene very quietly and turned down everything from keynote invitations — I mean I didn't create anything new in that time either; I just couldn't.

But the weird thing was at that same time the national press saw me as this sort of expert in entrepreneurship and location independence, I was kind of like the post to go for digital nomads. Every time I'd get a call I would think, "Why are they talking to me?" Yes, I had a business that I was running from around the world but I didn't feel like the person the magazines wanted to write about.

I mean for starters, digital nomads are supposed to be these sort of frugal travelers without a home who live out of their perfectly packed suitcase with like I know 2 T-shirts all year or something. I mean, I am terrible at

packing. Seriously it's not a key strength.

My hobby is interior design. I can't stop buying cushions. And so I felt like my messy liminal self didn't have anywhere to breath. I was like they've got this one wrong. And I don't even want to be what they think I am.

Just to be clear if that happened earlier it wouldn't have been a problem, right? I just would have stepped into my differences without a second thought. It wouldn't have even bothered me.

But not now. You see, in my mind it was fine to be all messy and liminal when you were the scrappy upstart. But there was still that 16 year old girl who believed her teacher, who believed that proper success meant fitting into one place properly and staying there. Others would kill for that opportunity, you've all heard that? Play the part.

But I couldn't keep talking about this stuff while feeling that way. So I took time out and went on a journey to figure this out. And it finally clicked one day that the people I most admired, people at the top of their field, I'm talking real household names, they didn't do things the way I was telling myself I had to do them now. They didn't let success on their island and turn it into a trap that defined who they could be or the one way to do things.

Instead, they turned their island into a boat and they moved it along with them. Take **Elizabeth Gilbert**, author of '**Eat Pray Love**', her major bestseller about a part of her life. Now, she could have written of that one story forever, right? Going on a speaker circle and talked about that one thing on a loop.

But instead she holed up in a small town and wrote a novel about 19th century plant collectors. And then went on the TED stage, talked about creativity, released a book on that. And you know the funny thing? '**Eat**

Pray Love' is how most people first heard of Elizabeth Gilbert. But that wasn't even her first success.

The 1990s movie '**Coyote Ugly**' was based on an article she wrote about her experiences working in a bar. And imagine if she had stopped then. If she had said, oh, writers like me or any are meant to take these steps from here. Oh, I might feel too different. Now I am too far along, hide all that away. I mean, no!

Instead it was about moving forward with her island. And as a result, she has made a much bigger impact than had she stopped and said, "That was it." You got one go. Now stay still.

It doesn't have to be that dramatic, of course. There were certainly more subtle evolutions out there. But this theme was consistent among anyone I admired who was world class in what they did.

You see, up until then I thought that embracing your differences and your liminal nature was kind of a tool, like a nifty marketing approach you'd would use to stand out or get an edge when you were younger or new.

I thought it was a tool, but what I didn't realize is it's who we are. And right now is your time as a liminal person. Right now the world is changing so fast. There's no way to predict what specialism or skill will be in demand.

Except for one thing: The ability to bridge genres, to navigate industries in change to be, in a word: liminal. And that's what you have already.

And what is more: The world needs you. At a time when the world is putting up its borders and trying to divide people into this or that, we need people like you who can struggle those borders and bring in fresh perspectives. We need you now more than ever.

So, if you like these ideas, the one thing you can do is live them, because it's hard to inspire other generations and do so authentically when you think there's no option than to be stuck for ourselves.

I mean imagine, if my teacher when I was 16 had known about we'd talked here today. Here is what he might have said, "Marianne, you and I have something in common: We are liminal. And the world won't always understand that. But I want you to know it's a valuable way to be. And don't just take my word for it. The examples and islands are all around when you know how to look. So don't hide that away. You see, you won't succeed despite your liminality but because of it!"

And I say the same to you: If you've thought, "That's me!", even once here, then know that you are not alone. You're in good company, along with the innovators and changemakers of the world, or simply those with a quirk who in the past would have hidden their true colors, but who know their time is now.

Because you belong here as does every part of you.

Thank you.

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