

# 1, 2, 3 CHOOSE

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**W**hile doing research for an upcoming workshop, I came across a commencement speech on YouTube from Maharishi University, a small private university in Fairfield, Iowa, that features a “consciousness-based education.” I’m not sure what that means exactly, but the speech was by none other than one of Canada’s finest comedic exports, Jim Carrey. He was, of course, funny in that over-the-top Jim Carrey way, but between his moments of goofiness, he offered the students this insight: “All the decisions we make are based on either fear or love.” Too many of us, he said, “choose our pathway out of fear.”

Carrey’s words echo the work of psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, co-author of *Life Lessons: Two Experts on Death and Dying Teach Us about the Mysteries of Life and Living*, who says there are only two primary emotions: love and fear. Positive emotions like happiness, joy, and excitement come from love, while negative emotions like guilt, frustration, anger, and envy come from fear. Our amygdala, nestled in the most primitive part of our brain’s fight and flight system is where we form memories and process strong emotions, like fear and love. This ancient part of our neuroanatomy serves an important function: it keeps us safe. It makes sure we remember the first time we touched a hot stove so we don’t do it again. Strong emotions are our brain’s way of saying, “Pay attention.” It isn’t necessarily the emotion but rather our inability to sit in the discomfort of it that holds us hostage; opportunities wait just beyond the “feelings.”

I realized recently that all the good stuff in my life has followed moments of fear. Sometimes the fear felt like loneliness. Sometimes it felt like being overwhelmed. Sometimes it felt like paralysis. But every time I got to the other side of fear, the good stuff was waiting. I’ve decided I no longer want the angry almond, my amygdala, to hold me hostage. If there is good stuff waiting just beyond fear, how exactly do I get past it? How do I choose its opposite, love?

**Step 1:** Step outside your triggered sympathetic nervous system and do a reality check. Is there an immediate danger to your physical safety, or is it just your cave-person brain doing what it evolved to do? If the answer is “Yes, the danger is real” then listen up. Take action, and for heaven’s sake, take your hand off the stove. If there is no immediate danger, then tell your fear monster to hush and move on.

**Step 2:** Acknowledge that fear is just an extreme emotional state. Name it, tame it, and take control. Commit to being in the driver’s seat or being the creator of your life. You can spend your whole life imagining ghosts and worrying about the path ahead, but here is the truth. None of us know what the future holds. All we know for sure is what is happening right here, right now and the decisions we make at this moment.

**Step 3:** Once you’ve shifted into a more reflective state, that is, engaged your creative pre-frontal cortex, ask yourself “What are you really afraid of?” In my experience, we like to trick ourselves by disguising fear as something else to avoid dealing with it directly. Do any of these disguises sound familiar?

- I can’t: Code for “I am afraid I might fail.”
- I shouldn’t: Another way of saying I am afraid of being judged, also known as, “What will others think or say?”
- I would but: Otherwise known as the excuse game. The game where you forfeit the power you have over your life and your ability to choose and hand it over to others. I get it. It is a great option to have an excuse when things don’t work out the way you’d hoped.

**Step 4:** Set aside your fear. That’s right. Pick your fear monster up and put it back in the closet. Don’t worry, it will still be there when you need it for the real dangers and also sometimes when you wish it would just stay in the closet.

**Step 5:** Choose love by:

- Focusing on what is within your control and moving forward despite your uncertainty.
- Asking for help and learning to accept it with grace.
- Sharing your amazing self with others as you build community and connections.
- Practising gratitude. Be as kind to yourself as you are to those you love.

You can spend your whole life waiting for the other shoe to drop, doing the “right” thing, or worrying about the future. You can fool yourself into believing it isn’t fear that holds you back by disguising it in righteousness, responsibility, or blame. Or you can call it what it is and make a different choice.

To steal from the words of Jim Carrey: “You only ever have two choices. Love or fear. Choose love and don’t ever let fear turn you against your playful heart.” [WCV](#)

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