



FROM BROKENNESS TO BLESSING

Matthew Emerzian

Do you feel things deeply?

If you are like me, you are very sensitive person. Sometimes I think it's a curse. For many very dark years, it felt like a bad one. But today I see it differently. I see it as a badge of honor, because I now know what it feels like to be human, and it allows me to see and feel things in other people that I never felt before. No, I am not an energy healer or a psychic or anything like that. But I am some-one who has felt deep brokenness, anxiety, and depression. I am someone who has run the gamut of "Life is good" to "Life is horrible and hard" to "Wow, this is what life is about! This is better than I could have imagined."

Being human is tricky. Part of this is ultimately because we never chose this life. It's not as if one day we decided to be born and, next thing we knew, we were taking our first breath. Nope. That's not how it worked. But just because we didn't choose to be born doesn't mean we don't get to choose how to live.

In the summer of 1997, I had to make a big choice. I had just graduated from the Anderson School of Management at UCLA with my MBA, and I had a career decision to make. I had interviewed with several companies and had some options on the table, but my heart wasn't really into any of them. Sure, having those three letters after my name could afford me an attractive salary, but I wasn't feeling the passion for the work. The truth is that I never really felt like I belonged in business school, and every day I questioned why I was there. But, at this point in my life, I was used to struggling to find my path: it seemed to be the story of much of my life. Ultimately, however, I needed to make a choice with the hope that, this time, I would get it right. But would I?

On a beautiful evening in early fall, my friends, Andrew and Dave, invited me over to their apartment to watch Monday Night Football with a group of buddies. Little did I know, they had a plan. After priming me with pizza, beer, and something else that makes you feel a little funny after smoking it, they popped the question—“Matt, we want you to manage our band. You in?” In that moment, the seas parted, the stars aligned, and Matt officially found his purpose in life. We signed an official contract on a Domino’s Pizza napkin and the rest is history. My job was to make Virgil the next U2. No big.

We worked hard and the guys killed it in the studio and on stage, which landed us a multimillion-dollar record deal. However, after a few months of receiving checks from the label, the money stopped coming in. I couldn’t get anyone from the label on the phone. Panic settled into our camp. The guys needed this monthly check to pay their bills, to pay for band expenses, to eat. Clearly something was not up to par, and the wind was sucked out of our sails.

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After weeks of trying, I finally figured out that the label lost its funding and was shutting down. No more millions of dollars. No more multiple albums. Dreams squashed. Grown men upside down. Dirty business people ruining lives. I was at a complete loss over what to do.

It was recommended that I meet Robert Kardashian. I only knew of his face and name from the O.J. Simpson trial. I knew him as a lawyer on the "Dream Team." What I didn't know is that Robert started and ran a successful music marketing company and had actually stopped practicing law in the 'seventies. The reason he was a part of the O.J. case was because he and O.J. were close friends from college at USC.

The plan was to meet Robert Kardashian because he had contracts with every major and indie record label at the time. If I could befriend him, maybe he could help me connect Virgil, and other artists, to record labels. I remember my first meeting with Robert like it was yesterday. I remember his big smile, his welcoming eyes, that silver streak in his hair, and his humor. I remember him taking me back to his office, which had walls covered in gold and platinum record awards and a life-size cardboard cutout of The Beatles.

Robert was kind and generous with me from the first moment we met. When we sat in his office he asked, "So who are you and how I can help you?" I shared with him that I was a band manager with a plan to build mega-acts, and I thought he and I could work together to make it happen. I also played him a few demos of different artists, but mainly with the goal of him falling in love with Virgil.

Unfortunately, Robert did not fall in love with the music, but he did fall for me and he offered me a job as vice president of his music marketing company, an offer I said yes to. Working for Robert meant experiencing the music industry on an entirely different level.

He knew everyone, and everyone knew and loved him. We had a small team, which often included the kids—Kim, Kourtney, Khloé, and even little Robert, Jr. We produced a radio show, we promoted music videos on the big screens in theaters, and we produced DVD releases and live events. I found myself working on projects for every major and indie label. More specifically, on projects for artists such as U2, Coldplay, Snow Patrol, Keane, Avril Lavigne, Black Eyed Peas, Tim McGraw...the list goes on.

During the day, I worked in the office, which often included sightings from the kids' famous friends and the crazy energy that brought into the day. Then after work, I was either working with Virgil or attending some sort of celebrity dinner or event. These dinners and events often led to after-parties, and then after-after-parties. It was a slippery slope, and I was sliding with the best of them. Somehow the business kind of grooms you this way. So much ego and narcissism. So much brokenness and dirty deals. Yet so much glamour and so many bright lights. The red carpet and the Hollywood Hills were the places for VIPs, so that's where I started hanging out.

Being close to this level of celebrity made me feel more important than I was. I looked at the fame and popularity around me and thought, "This matters." I looked at my new celebrity friends and thought, "They matter." I looked at the screaming fans and thought, "That matters." And all of this made me finally think, "I matter...right?"

But underneath the veneer of importance, a gnawing sense of emptiness started to linger inside of me. I painfully realized I had grown lonely in my relationships, most of which were shallow and superficial. Then one sun-drenched Saturday afternoon I found myself at a pool party in the Hollywood Hills, filled with celebrities and models and millionaires—the typical fare. Sitting by the pool, I started looking around and observing

the crowd. I noticed that many of the people at the party were likely in their fifties, yet they were still performing and pretending to seem and feel important. Is this where I would be in twenty years? Was I destined to become that desperate guy one day?

A weird feeling began to build inside me, and I got up from my poolside lounge and grabbed the keys to my car from the valet. Racing off the property, I got into my car and sped home. The sensation had subsided by the time I arrived, but the peace would not last. I was beginning to realize I had been chasing after smoke and wind. I was starting to question everything, including my own worth. And unbeknownst to me, I was about to have a complete mental breakdown.

At that point, my “dream” life was crashing down. I failed everything and everyone. My appetite had vanished. Sleep evaded me. The paranoia got so bad at night that I needed to shut all of the blinds in my home to deflect the feeling that the sky and the darkness were closing in on me. Driving my car became too stressful because I knew I wouldn’t be able to handle a traffic jam, short of leaving my car in the middle of the road and running home. I also had this real fear of taking my car up to 80 mph and simply yanking the wheel to end my anguish. I was literally that desperate.

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Thankfully, my parents made the executive decision to spend a month with me. My dad came down from Modesto first for two weeks, and then they traded duties. I remember my father driving me to my first counseling appointment. I was not happy at all. I could feel my core body temperature skyrocketing—partly from anger, partly from fear, partly from embarrassment—not the best places from which to operate. At the same time, I remember the feeling of surrender. Acknowledging that I needed help, and thank God I had my loving mom and dad there to hold my hand and lead the way.

My therapist's name is Denise. She and I spent several hours together that day. And the next day. And for many days over the weeks, months, and years to come. I got lucky, because I knew from the very first minute that she was the right therapist and coach for me. I could tell she was going to be empathetic and compassionate, but she was no pushover and was going to call me out on my shit. Perfect.

One day Denise told me she wanted to give my recovery a motto, and she slid a book across the table to me. She asked me to read the first sentence of the book, which is: "It's not about you."

Denise then said, "Matt, until you understand what it means to live a life not about you, you are never going to feel better." Interesting. Foreign. Confusing. How is it possible that I am sitting here depressed, riddled with anxiety, having occasional suicidal thoughts, yet it's not about me? All of a sudden, one plus one didn't equal two. Besides the fact that I was the one hurting, I was also the one seeking her help. A narcissist working in the most narcissistic industry in the world. How can this possibility not be about me?

The next thing I remember is that week after week, for months, I spent my Saturday mornings doing something that wasn't about me. A new addition to my recovery tonic: I fed homeless people. I read to elderly. I picked up trash, painted over graffiti, wrote letters to veterans. For some reason, my jam became picking up litter. There was something about being out on the town Saturday mornings that was so peaceful. The city was still sleeping. I got to know the Meals on Wheels drivers, the dog walkers, the early crew at Starbucks. I didn't wear headphones or listen to music, rather I was just super present with the sights, sounds, and even smells of walking the streets and picking up other people's trash. Just me, my rubber gloves, garbage bags, baseball cap pulled low, and big sunglasses. Of course, I still had a reputation to protect.

One Saturday morning while picking up litter, I got a phone call from some friends who worked in PR. They were going up to a pool party in the Hollywood Hills. Sound familiar? They asked me to join them, and I blurted out, "No thanks, I am out picking up litter. I'm good."

I hung up the phone and thought, "Holy shit, I just outed my secret. My sickness." Only my family and one of my closest friends knew about my situation, and that just changed.

But then, in a moment of magic, lightning bolts, God, aha, it all clicked for me. The motto Denise gave for my recovery finally made sense. I realized that it was actually possible to find more meaning, purpose, and significance picking up other people's litter than it was doing all of the other bullshit I did all week. That by being of service to others, I could find myself. That living a life not about me would actually lead me to me.

It was that moment, when hope reentered my life. It was that moment, when I started believing that I could actually live a long, healthy life free from the pain, worry, anxiety, depression, and darkness that had taken over my life for years. I finally saw the way to live a life that mattered, and I couldn't wait to share it with the world, because I know I wasn't alone on this journey called "life."

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A few weeks after my profound moment standing on the sidewalk of Wilshire Boulevard, trash bags in hand, rubber gloves on, and empowered by a new understanding of the meaning of life, I was walking back to my office with a coworker and noticed a piece of litter in the street gutter. In his defense, he had no idea I was a secret semiprofessional trash picker-upper every Saturday morning, so instinctively I bent down and picked up the crinkled piece of paper. At that moment, my coworker asked me why I would pick up someone else's trash. I tried to explain by sharing a bit of this breakthrough I had experienced a few weeks prior, but the conversation ended quickly with an argument and him saying, "Dude, you're weird."

Pissed off, I went up to my office and called my friend Kelly to share an idea that popped into my mind. "Kelly, it's Matt; I want to write a book," I shared excitedly. She responded with, "Matt, you don't even read books; how are you going to write one?" There was some truth to her reply, but I went on to explain that I wanted to write a book that shows us ordinary people that we matter. That every single one of us matters. And that together we can change the world.

My thought was, if it took me one second to pick up one piece of litter, what if all 300+ million people in our country picked up just one? It would still be a collective one second, but 300+ million pieces of litter would be gone. What if we each picked up five or ten? Or what if we got our schools, companies, churches, friends, or family involved? It is just a numbers game.

What if we all smiled more, planted a tree, donated blood, wrote a note of gratitude, took better care of our health? It just became a "What if " game. I wanted to call the book *Why Wouldn't You?* The actions I wanted to put in the book were so simple for people to do, why wouldn't they want to do them? Kelly and I started making a list of "Why wouldn't you?" actions, and we immediately had over 100 of them. Eventually the list got to 150.

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One day my father called me to offer his opinion on the book. He said, “You know, I believe your working title is too negative and not inspiring enough. I think you should go with something more upbeat and positive, like *Every Monday Matters*.” Bam. The book got a new name. Let’s help people start their weeks off inspired. No more TGIF, which has always been one of the dumbest concepts to me. The fact that we even have a restaurant chain named after it boggles my mind. Living doesn’t only happen from Friday evening to Sunday around 1:00 p.m. when we start dreading the next Monday on the horizon. Living starts at the beginning of the week, and we take it up a level each day.

We picked fifty-two actions from our list and wrote the book *Every Monday Matters: 52 Ways to Make a Difference*, and amazingly it was acquired by a publisher. It was a simple guide to help people engage in something bigger than them every week. Sounds a bit familiar to what Denise had me do, doesn’t it? If it worked for me, it just might work for someone else, too. We were going to find out soon enough.

A month after the book came out, I received an email from a single mother named Darby, who shared a story that she was driving down the road and saw a car pulled over with a woman hanging out of the door. Darby pulled over to see if the woman was having car trouble. What she learned was that she was not having car trouble, rather she was there to commit suicide. She was just waiting to get up the courage to jump in front of an oncoming car. Instead, Darby showed up. In her email, Darby included the copy from a thank-you note the woman had sent to her for saving her life. And at the end of that, Darby wrote, “If it weren’t for your book, I would have never pulled over to help.”

I never dreamed of writing a book, let alone one that would literally save somebody's life. But that was the sign I needed to walk away from the music industry and try to make *Every Monday Matters* a household name. To finally live a life that matters.

It started with just me, then unemployed and working from home. Little by little it started to grow. I created a Myspace page and people started joining in. I was asked to write a newspaper column for *The Modesto Bee*. Massive readership, for sure. The column was then syndicated to papers all across the country. From music exec to "Dear Abby," who would have thunk it? Then I received an email from Harpo Productions. Unbeknownst to me, Forest Whitaker, the actor, bought my book and took it to President Obama's first inauguration in DC, where Forest handed it to Oprah. What? Oprah! I ended up doing a year-long partnership with Harpo, which showcased a new Monday on Oprah.com and on her Spirit newsletter.

All of the sudden, I found myself running a small "movement" out of my home. I say the word "movement" loosely, because I believe it is overused, often inaccurately, but I certainly wasn't running a business yet, so I had to call it something. But then a few key developments turned the book into an actual company.

Teachers who purchased the book started emailing me asking for lesson plans, as they wanted their students to learn this concept of self- and social responsibility. So we partnered with a group of educators in Central California to create the EMM K-12 Education Program and began selling it. Additionally, companies for which I had keynoted starting asking for more. They wanted team-building experiences, employee engagement, and corporate-culture work, so we launched the EMM Corporate Engagement Program and started working with companies nationwide.

Every Monday Matters now had office space, employees, payroll, health care. Somehow, in a wild tail-wagging-the-dog fashion, EMM had become something. But just when everything seemed to have settled into place and had found a rhythm, another moment happened that changed me again. I was asked to speak to a group of convicted felons who were using Every Monday Matters, the book, as part of a restorative justice program.

I will never forget the moment the judge asked me if I was ready to meet the convicted felons. As soon as I said, "Of course," the door opened and in entered a group of men and women in prison jumpsuits, ankle chains, waist chains, and wearing flip-flops with socks. As they sat down and stared at me, the judge said sternly to the group, "Okay, everyone, this is Matt. He wrote the book, so Matt go ahead and share."

I was frozen. I had never seen another human being in chains before. It broke my heart. I was at a complete loss for words. But something told me that the best thing I could do was to let these men and women know how much they mattered. I'm not sure of the exact words I used during my fifteen-minute pep talk, but it was clearly effective. I was just trying to give them hope. After I finished, one of the convicted felons stood up and said, "No one ever told me that I mattered; that's why I ended up where I am today." With that, I watched a six-foot-six, three-hundred-pound man break down in tears.

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This convicted felon changed Every Monday Matters, the company, and me forever. He showed me that I still had it all wrong. For me, EMM was still all about the numbers. What if, because of EMM, we could prove that there is less litter, more volunteers, less this, more that? For example, one of the Mondays in the book is: "Don't Flick Your Cigarette Butt." In writing the book, I learned that every year in America we smoke 300 billion cigarettes. Even worse, we litter 100 billion of those cigarette butts every year. I measured a cigarette butt and figured out that if you connect every one of those 100 billion cigarette butts end to end, they would span from L.A. to N.Y.C. 337 times a year. So we basically build a cigarette-butt freeway across our country every year. And we argue whether or not or why we have environmental issues in the world. My thought was, what if, because of EMM, we could get that number down to 90 billion? Or 80 billion? What if we could change the numbers?

But this convicted felon, a man whose name I don't know and whom I will probably never see again, changed how I see it. Yes, litter is an environmental tragedy, but this convicted felon taught me that the biggest tragedy is that every single person who littered one of those 100 billion cigarette butts didn't think it mattered. They also didn't believe that they themselves mattered. In other words, our environmental problems are really just human problems. And the same with any other problem we see in the world. So change the way people see themselves and help them connect with how powerful they are, then we can change the world. In other words, we change the world from the inside out.

With this new understanding, I decided to transition Every Monday Matters from a for-profit company to a not-for-profit organization. I don't own it anymore; I just work there now. There's no ownership or equity in not-for-profits. Our mission is to create a world

where everyone knows how much and why they matter. We launched a brand-new education program that now serves over 1.5 million students nationwide. We continue our work with companies to help them create workplace cultures where people feel like they matter. We are launching a senior program that will be rolled out in assisted-living communities to help our seniors reconnect with how much they matter in the last part of their lives.

I realized that before my breakdown, I lived a pretty easy life. Sure, I had bad days. Sure, I've had my heart broken and have lost friends, pets, and family members. But for the most part my emotions lived on the positive and bright side of things. If we put our emotions on a continuum, with "As Good as It Gets" on the far left and "As Bad as It Could Be" on the far right, I might have only experienced about 75 percent of that spectrum, leaving out the final 25 percent to the right.

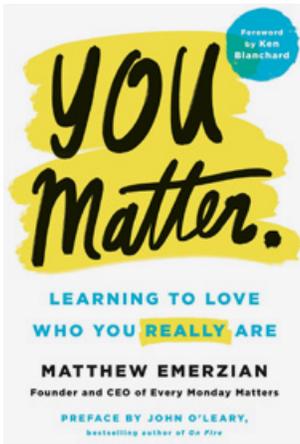
If we can change the way people see themselves and help them connect with how powerful they are, then we can change the world. In other words, we change the world from the inside out.

But that one Monday morning changed everything. Now I know what resides in that remaining 25 percent. Now I know what despair, helplessness, and hopelessness feel like. Now I understand how people can consider taking their own lives. Fortunately, I didn't. But experiencing those emotions has given me a new understanding of what it means to be human. It has changed the way I see people, for if it could happen to me, it could happen to anyone. On paper, my life looked great. Deep inside it couldn't have been any different. It has gifted me a deep sense of empathy and compassion for people that I never had before, because I never want anyone to experience what I did... yet I know it's possible they are experiencing something similar, or have before.

I am grateful to have a chance to share my story, but, more important, the stories of other people and the incredible teachings I learned from them. I am committed to helping you fully embrace how much and why you matter. Because, whether you know it or not, you matter to yourself. You matter to your family. To your friends. Your company. Your community. Every word you speak. Every thought you have. Every action you take matters. It's time for you to truly love yourself for who you really are. **You matter.** 🙏



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Emerzian is Founder and Chief Inspiration Officer of Every Monday Matters (EMM), a not-for-profit organization committed to helping people and organizations understand how much and why they matter. EMM's programs have been utilized by some of America's largest corporations and nearly a million students in 49 states and 7 countries.

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