

# **What I Should Say: How Video Affects Our Thinking**

by

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Humans are curious and passionate beings that connect with the representation of relatable human experiences. When we engage with certain genres of digital video we are allowing our conscious (and subconscious) to be susceptible to a self-reflection invoked by what we have witnessed on screen. The way we perceive certain digital video can have an immense impact on the way we think. The impact that genres like narrative, episodic, or experimental film can have on our mental state can truly benefit us in many ways. It allows us to relate on a psychological level to what is we are viewing that in turn can help us work through our own troubles. Digital video with relatable emotional and psychological themes can also provide a way for us to understand and evaluate similar ideologies or issues concerning our minds day in and day out.

For the past two years I have been questioning the idea of human existence on a personal level. I question my individuality, my relationships to others, and my inspirations in life. At first, I didn't want it to be considered an existential crisis, but actually the reason for some of my anxiety. It went on to show that these very questions were driving some of the most frightening and enlightening emotions I have ever experienced. It was this *fear of the unknown*—simply put, I couldn't figure out exactly what I was afraid of.

I wanted to begin developing certain strategies to relieve this state of anxiety. I needed a distraction. There were a handful of ways to distract myself, but the one that really stuck was through watching a variety of digital videos which included a feature length film, a streamed popular series, or an experimental short I found on Vimeo. Content that comes with structure, meaning, and a theme is where we need to focus.

I am drawn to certain films or videos that would allow me to relate to what specific “concerns” are rooted within my anxieties. A common concern is the idea of our existence.

“*What does it mean to be in existence?*” is a slightly more complicated way of saying “*who am I?*”. Questioning one’s philosophical existence and place in the world can often be troubling and intimidating. This seems to be one of the reasons so much emotion is brought up throughout my experience with anxiety.

Narrative films began to expose similar ideas of individuality and identity to me. The concept of questioning “*Who am I?*”, is shown throughout the film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013). In this film Ben Stiller plays a photo editor in his late 40’s that doesn’t seem to have much belonging in this world. It is not until he is prompted to impulsively go on a journey to Greenland and chase a photographer who he is not sure is even there. This film makes the viewer feel empathetic and that they can relate to the main character because he wants to have a meaningful place in the world. Who would want to be without a *place* in the world?

It comes naturally to human behavior to want to uncover where we belong. When considering this within a larger group of diverse people of a society, the need to exist still doesn’t change. Jean-Paul Sartre states “What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there” (1983, p.38). This can be applied to understanding the societal connection to digital video content. When we relate to something that we see on screen, it allows a to feel a connection to something. This connection is what gives us the feeling of belonging that we desire.

Emotional relatability is an important factor in the way humans can connect with digital video (Matthews, 2013). It can be approached with two different thought processes: *I understand what is going on so I can relate to it*, or *I wouldn’t want to feel like that, so let me not*. Understanding what a character or subject is going through plays into our natural and curious attitude in life. When someone is going through something that we might have or know a bit

about, we gravitate to wanting to know more about it, without actually experiencing it. Almost like an emotional fly-on-the-wall. When taking a look at the way emotions relate to film, Norbert Wiley dissects the many emotions that contrast in our real life verses that in the “world” of being a spectator. When analyzing the contrast of being the emotional subject in life versus as a spectator he writes:

You are the subject of your real life emotions. They are happening to you. The emotions in a movie are, in the first instance, happening to some character in the story. They are only happening to you to the extent that you identify, empathize, sympathize, etc. with that character. Strong as they may be, these emotions are vicarious or “witness emotions” (Tan, 1995, p. 82) and you are only the pseudo-subject. The sense in which the viewer is the quasi- or pseudo-subject is controversial in film theory. The issue quickly gets to the (closely-guarded) premises that separate one theory from other. But I can side-step this issue, at least for now. Your movie emotions then are, in a sense, not yours; whereas your life emotions are only too inescapably your own. (174)

This is a fascinating analysis of how we connect to what we see on screen. It is important to take some time to look at the description of having these vicarious emotions. When we experience a glimpse of a certain emotion or feeling through an on-screen character, we are simultaneously prompted to want *more* of that feeling. When we desire to feel a certain emotion, we analyze what having that emotion may be like. This is how we connect so well with digital video, specifically work of a narrative genre. When we can understand and relate to the character, we are indirectly prompted to hold a metaphorical mirror up. When we witness a subject on screen experience something we comprehend and feel, we can pull apart what is that makes us feel the way *we* do.

Being intimidated by our environment is something that many people can experience as an uncomfortable anxiety. Trying to understand who we are in this world and why we are here can be quite overwhelming. If digital video could be considered a reflection of society then it could most certainly help us feel more at ease with certain ideas, like this questioning of our

world. When I began to question my beliefs in the physical world, I came across an action sports short film. "Depth Perception" strayed from the traditional path of action films, but pulled heavily on the ideas that there is more to the natural earth than what we may know. The world is portrayed as a deeply rooted, deeply connected physical object. Director J.T. Smith allows the plot to unfold around four friends traveling the deepest parts of the earth with an overlying narration (J.T. Smith, director, 2017). The film raises questions about nature and how it came to be that way.

*Depth Perception* provides an insightful way to analyze thoughts surrounding our environment. The film builds a connection with the viewer by acknowledging that there are going to be many questions about the earth that cannot be answered. It drives home the point that we must be appreciative of the earth and all of its natural beauty. The nature of it has a connection much deeper than our own and for that we must not question it. Additionally, the film establishes a relationship between the audience and the four friends through empathy and relatability to these existential concerns.

As humans, our relationships with one another are considered of a communicative nature. Our day to day interaction within our society is driven by the ability to communicate with each other. In addition to the simplest form of communication, through language, we have the resources to communicate digitally. It seems as if we have entered a time that we are beginning to rely more on digital technology to communicate than other methods. A majority of our entertainment now seems to lie within digital technology, but could the consumption of video play a role in building our relationships, both intimate and platonic? Could it help us engage in and improve the communication we so heavily rely on? Or could we say that digital media

actually separates us from each other? Contrary to this idea, there is a certain idea that may prove differently.

There has been evidence to support that binge watching our favorite episodic programs with others may actually lead to strengthening our interpersonal relationships (Medina, 2016). Yes, binge watching-- the screening of multiple episodes of an episodic program in a rapid succession. How could something that can *traditionally* not be good for us actually provide a beneficial characteristic. It loops back to the idea of relatable emotion within what we see on the screen that connects us. When discussing emotion's role within her research on the top of binge-watching, Jennifer Holt, a communications professor from UC Santa Barbara states "And emotional experiences keep our attention and we engage with them. We think about them. We talk about them. And then we look forward to having those emotions again" (Nabi). This statement from the professor further drives home the idea that humans enjoy vicariously experiencing certain emotions yet, want the same emotions out of their daily lives.

What is it about the almost obsessive, episodic viewing that has us so hooked? It relates back to the growing presence of digital media in our lives. As we find this media, specifically digital video more and more prevalent in daily interactions, it seems that we are beginning to have less and less of an attention span for this type of media consumption. This in turn, makes the episodic consumption of entertainment the prime candidate for viewing. When we watch these episodes, we become bonded through the emotions, themes, and relatability of the characters. This gives people who watch these episodes together something to share. Although every series and character dynamic will vary, it still provides the people who "share" the series something to bond over. It gives the viewers a break from their normal lives to become engaged in something(Nabi).

There is another aspect of the binge watching structure that drives home another beneficial quality. This idea comes from the psychological aspect of “escaping” from the stresses of daily life. Humans sometimes tend to lose themselves in the tumultuous ups and downs of life. Sometimes, people are left feeling overwhelmed, over stressed, and even run down (mentally, that is). The concept is that repetitive watching of digital video distracts us, destresses us, and can even lift our spirits away from negative states. Jennifer Holt, a UC Santa Barbara Film & Media professor notes that people have had to and will rely on television and video for a variety of psychological reasons. One of these main reasons being that we need diversion from the things that provide us with negative emotions in our daily routines.

This idea comes with this underlying notion that consuming a decent amount of digital video content pulls out of a negative mental state by a temporary distraction from the things that put us there in the first place. When speaking more on the topic of this she writes “...Media happens to be readily available with lots of options and minimal effort . . . So it ends up serving that need for diversion very well.” (Holt). This idea she proposes to us takes the idea that we use digital video content as a tool in using an escapism practice to change the way we think in certain mental circumstances.

With these positive ways binge watching affects us, it is only fair to address the potential negatives that come with it as well. It is important to remember that every person who consumes digital video is different, which means that way we allow it to alter our thoughts will differ in some cases. I believe the main way our habitual consumption of video may negatively affect our thoughts is related to sleep (Breus, 2018). Ultimately, when we are watching video we are being stimulated. Our brains are processing each millisecond of data entering our eyes and ears and it provides the brain a task. Does this practice keep the brain awake? Could it cause a lack of

sleep? It is important to consider the consequences that could affect us from the way we consume digital video content.

In an article written in Psychology Today, it is discussed that certain things happen to our brain (and us) when we watch digital video late in the evening. This concept of “pre-sleep arousal” (Breus, PhD, 2018) talks about how the content we consume- meaning the plots, characters, action, etc.- cause us to stay awake. Now, what is so fascinating about pulling this concept apart is not the action of this causing us the physical alertness we experience, but what it may potential cause long term (Breus, 2018). We discussed early how we use digital video as tool of escapism, which allows us to alter the way we feel when experiencing negative emotions and thoughts. Could the same process of consuming digital video in repetitive amounts before sleep indirectly cause negative effects?

These negative effects however, could potentially come from the lack of sleep caused by binge watching digital video prior to going sleep. When the body lacks sleep, certain things cause a physical and psychological response. In the discussion of binge watching’s relationship to sleep disruption, Clinical Psychologist Michael J. Breus PhD states that “...the duration of a binge-watch session creates enough pre-sleep arousal to interfere with our ability to fall asleep. Watching back-to-back episodes of your current favorite show may feel like a relaxing escape at the end of the day, but it’s actually getting your brain fired up.” It is necessary to point out that although Dr. Breus is focused on the negative effects of binge watching, his quote does relate to what Professor Jennifer Holt of UC Santa Barbara wrote about the psychological benefits people rely on from digital video. However, the psychological side effects that can stem from lack of sleep cause by this “pre-sleep arousal” (Breus, 2018) can be the exact conditions, stress and anxiety, Professor Holt is addressing (Nabi). If we take the two point of views and analyze, it



comes to conclusion that with a controlled intake of digital video, the way viewers think can positively be influenced from a controlled consumption.

Two years ago, I begin to experience a series of anxious and irrational thinking. I Professionally, it would be addressed as anxiety, but for its face value it was exactly those two things. It put a real strain on my emotions, relationships, and daily inspiration to feel good. The idea that if these negative thoughts could be out of mind temporarily. Being from a filmmaking background, I always felt myself gravitate to putting on a film, short, or show to help fill my thoughts with the content I was being fed. Looking back and really addressing the substance that this digital video had, it all was relatable. The themes and plot all addressed something rooted within the anxieties I was experiencing. The reason behind it all was that there was a relation I could share with the content. I was questioning my conscious meaning in the world so I would watch short films about characters trying to find belonging and meaning. When I would find myself fearful of the massive unknown behind our environmental existence, I would hunt down video with topics relating to our exploration of nature and our universal existence. Again, it was never meant to be a search for a scientific answer, simply philosophical. It wasn't until I started seeing my significant other that I experienced the phenomenon of "binge-bonding". These experiences indirectly lead me to wanting to develop an examining of how digital video plays a role in the human mind.

I wanted *What I Should Say* to be a short film accounting the experience of an anxious young man. This film will be my way of pulling the audience in with a captivating, thought-provoking storyline. The contrast between the character's point of view and the narrator's dialogue will pull on the irrational and rational thought process of the mind. The audience needs to be pulled in, understanding of, and bonded with each the themes within the film. Throughout

the story of the character's journey from episodic anxiety to developing an understanding of how to handle it calmly, I want to show the ways in which digital video can affect our thinking.

Digital video has the power to work the human mind and emotions because it uses a variety of media to shape its own medium. Through the narrative of the young man in *What I Should Say* we can all see the journey in which he does just the opposite of this. We will see how through digital video and its many qualities, one can be found.

When I first started working on the idea for this project it was a very loose idea. Throughout my time at purchase I wanted to create a feature-length film, or at least something longer than 10 minutes. Once I became fixated on creating a film around an hour of runtime I was stuck. The problem with creating a project of that length is that it requires the ability to have the audience hooked the whole time. A plot must achieve this otherwise the film will be considered boring and unsuccessful. I have learned over the last few years that as an artist, I struggle in developing the theoretical end of my projects. Knowing this, I began to question what holding myself to the expectation of creating a film that long would result in, especially on the writing side of production.

This project was the brainchild of my personal struggles, experiences, and deepest questions I've had in life. I wanted to present how I was feeling or had felt to an audience of people. The story behind this film was going to be relative to the one I had gone through, mixed with bits and pieces from other individuals' struggles. The original plot was going to be broken down into three acts. The reason being was that we commonly relate to the "beginning, middle, end" structure of stories and I wanted it be easily understood.

The plot was going to be based around a single character who we watch go through internal battles with certain psychological issues. These issues of anxiety and trying to

figure out who he was were going to be dealt with in each of the acts. The first act was going to serve as the introduction to him and what he was going through. I wanted to show this by visually representing *what* he was going through. I wanted the viewer to witness the character work himself up, get flustered, panic, and really expose his current vulnerability. Visually representing this would be one of the biggest challenges of this original idea.

Throughout my academic career I have received many critiques on a variety of work. The intensity of the critique varied from class to class, but I noticed that there was always a common note. My ability to achieve a high level of production quality surpassed that of the content or theory behind the project. Knowing this after I received my first feedback in Senior Seminar, I decided to reconsider what I was aiming for. After the second week in October, the feedback that I had been given before repeated itself once again. The problem that I first recognized was that my idea was too vague. The technical goals were unproportioned to that of the writing of the project. I was told that I should scale down the size of project and focus on a piece of the theme that I had pitched. Once I figured out what I was looking to write about, I could then draw out a plot from it.

The technical end of production is my passion and what I wish to pursue as a career field. Since achieving a high level of production quality was and is so important to me, I wanted to make sure this film was equivalent thematically. After taking some time to brainstorm an outline for the film I settled on a three-piece structure. The main point that helped me decide on this was the idea behind episodic entertainment. I felt that if I could create three fulfilling segments within the film, I could captivate the viewers for a short amount of time, yet still achieve my goal of technical and theoretical success. My idea was broken down like this:

“Part one introduces us to our main character, a boy in his early 20s. This boy is going through some issues with anxiety that have him questioning his existence, his purpose, and other deeper concepts of life. We are introduced to him as he reaches his worst freak-out. We are also first exposed to our narrator, who serves as the back bone of this film. The first scene will contain a wow factor, showing us into how lost this boy is. Part one will serve as the “what is going on?” platform. His anxiety has him questioning: *What his existence is? What is our existence? Is it OKAY to question existentialism?*

Part two is going to begin our character’s progress on his method of thinking, allowing his anxieties to overwhelm him. He is looking for self-reflection, talking his thoughts out, and really evaluating how his darker thoughts are allowed to consume him. We want the viewers to understand that he is going through a transition to a place of less vulnerability. In part two, the main character will begin to build a way for him to carry on in life, not suppressing, but accepting certain thoughts without having his emotions overtake him.

Part three was the final piece to the puzzle. We are going to see if our main character is in control of his mind. He can learn to appreciate and enjoy the little things in life without losing control of his thoughts. He can appreciate all aspects of life regardless of his thoughts or questions of a frightening nature. He will discover that sometimes things cannot be answered or pulled apart and that we need to be okay with that. When you spend time searching for an answer, you pass up experiences or memories that are really valuable in life. He learns to lay trust in the unknown and accept that if we knew everything, it wouldn’t make life such a journey.”

Looking back, I have realized that some of this was still extremely vague, but I was able to narrow things down. The problem I had with trying to write a story that fell within this theme of anxiety and existentialism was that I needed more of an event, or a storyline. I

wanted to use inspiration from personal experiences during the few years I spent at Purchase.

After a self-reflection of what stood out most in my life, I settled on *loss*. The feeling of loss is a universal emotion and can be so impactful on someone. Additionally, it is a very raw and relatable emotion that I knew could be understood from my visual and auditory content. This is how I settled on my final idea for the project. The film shaped up to follow a young man dealing with a recent loss of someone close to him. We would follow the main character through his feelings of anxiety and internal troubles.

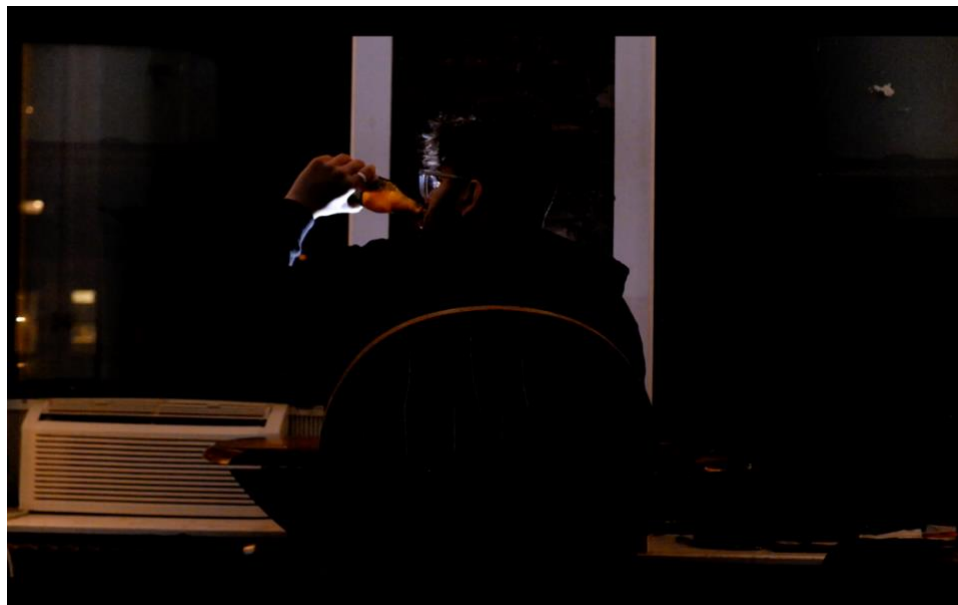
After I developed the final plot I went to my advisor to discuss the technical procedure I should follow. There was a segment within Experimental Film Workshop where we discussed and analyzed manifestos of different filmmakers. When discussing these guidelines to follow under my senior project production, it almost instantly resonated as a manifesto. So following the technical meeting I decided to create a senior project manifesto. I wanted this list of *rules* to challenge my creative skills. I knew that this was going to be the last project I saw through in my academic career at Purchase and I wanted to give myself a bit of a struggle with it. I always considered a project that was completed easily, wasn't worth completing.

The manifesto wasn't as long as I had initially wanted it to be. My goal was to create enough of a manifesto to feel challenged, but I also wanted to leave myself some room for creative freedom. I decided on the following for my manifesto:

1. *No dialogue from the main character.*
2. *Use only instrumental music.*
3. *Only to be shot on prime lenses.*
4. *The camera cannot be on a tripod more than twice.*
5. *No production lights can be used.*

Following the manifesto, I began to test shoot my film. After I established my idea with my advisor we created a timeline that started with trying to create one or two minutes of the film and see how it looked in post-production. The main objective of the test shooting was to capture dramatic lighting without the use of anything but practical and available light. I took to the street with my Fujifilm mirrorless camera and began staging scenes with my actor. We used a 23mm, 35mm, and an 85mm lens to capture certain looks and depth of fields.

*Fig. 1: 35mm wide shot*



I wanted the technical and creative choices that I made to play into certain topics I came across during research. One of the most influential topics was emotional reliability (Matthews, 2013). I wanted to portray an emotional struggle that was deep, honest, and relatable. The idea behind this was that I could keep the viewer locked in and emotionally invested in what they were seeing. I planned to use close up shots with a shallow depth of field in order to really

solidify the hardship the main character was going through. (See *Fig. 2*) I felt that if I could visually highlight parts of my character's face, I could highlight his emotional discourse. Doing this would in turn help the viewer want to continue watching because they would be dealing with heavy emotions without being vulnerable themselves. I referred to this idea earlier as an "emotional fly on the wall" and this was what I wanted to draw right out of my audience. It is a natural instinct to be emotional. When someone else is going through certain troubling emotions, like pain or fear, we tend to have interest because we are not in danger of being hurt ourselves. My goal was to play on this concept visually in order to bring the film's theme full circle.

*Fig. 2: 35mm close up shot*



After I screened the film for the first time I was thrilled. It felt like something I put a time, energy, and thought into had come out the way I actually wanted. Sticking to my timeline that was established with my advisor left me just shy of a month for editing revisions. This was the one area that I felt needed work. Additionally, I was met with the same opinion of the

professors of Senior Critique. I was told that there were a handful of shots that were left running a bit too long for their purpose. Now, this feedback originally fought my idea of playing with longer shots to try to sell the idea of being a fly on the wall. I decided to cut one of the opening scenes in quick cuts to convey the message of how rapidly the main character had begun to experience certain emotions. These quick cuts combined with a close up, shallow depth of field shot would deliver a personal insight for the viewer. After all, I wanted the viewer to be experiencing these emotions *with* him.

*Fig. 3: 35mm medium shot from the final cut*



The narration was an original idea to help keep the character separated from the audience. I didn't want the character telling us his struggles. In traditional cinema the characters' dialogue is how we come to understand what is going on. In this film, I wanted the narration to serve as separation between the viewer and what the character was doing. The narration itself was to serve as the backbone of the structure. I wanted the narration to guide us through in a partially cryptic way of what was going on. By this I mean that what the narrator was talking about *was* emotions and loss. It was almost if it were to be a monologue for our main character without him



presenting it himself. Again, because I wanted there to be a separation between my audience and the character.

The main inspiration for this came from an outdoor film called *Depth Perception*. In this film we watch a group of snowboarders explore a vast mountainous region during the winter. They're on the hunt for untouched and hidden gems throughout the woods for them to ride. The beautiful detail about this film is that is narrated by man with a deep, yet soft voice. And this voice takes the audience on a wonderful auditory journey providing well-scripted details about the untouched natural landscape. As the film wraps up we find out that the voice speaking is that of the trees, who has forever been a bystander to what man has done throughout the years. The voice isn't any of the groups and we don't hear anything from the group of snowboarders. This allowed me as a viewer to create a special "bond" with the group of snowboarders and allow myself to become emotionally invested in the film, while being led by this narrator (J.T. Smith, 2017).

*Fig. 4: 85mm close up as the narrator is speaking*



This feeling of connection and trust with the film, was the exact feeling I wanted to replicate. Through the soft-spoken narration of my film and beautifully shot visuals, I felt the same success was achieved.

The final film ran exactly ten minutes in length. The plot was built into three pieces around the original structure I was hoping for. I established the first part to introduce the character and this understanding that he was dealing with some internal struggles. I used a combination of angles, shots, and gear that I discussed with my advisor and seminar class and it was successful. There were certain pieces that were slow-paced in the beginning, but as the film went on it picked up. Most of the critique I received on this film was technical, which isn't a bad thing to me at all. My goal was to bring the theory and meaning behind this film up to the level at which I have previously kept my technical goals at.

A film can only be as good as the story it is telling, which has taught me that I need to continue focusing on the story itself. If this means that I need to dial back on how much weight I put on the production value, then that is okay. Ultimately, I need to focus on the writing end of things JUST as much as the technical, geeky, gear-head side of production. Reworking how I continue to produce films and videos in the future will shape me for success when I hold myself accountable for both sides of production.

I took a few risks on making this film the way I wanted to. The biggest one was that I allowed myself to be emotionally vulnerable. I have found that writing about the way you are feeling or the way you have felt is quite easy to me. On the flipside of this though, is that when you put your heart and feelings into your creative work, you're exposing yourself for an audience of people. You're allowing your thoughts and feelings to be susceptible to criticism and disapproval. Personally, that is one of the hardest things about being a filmmaker, yet looking

back, I wouldn't have done the film differently. When it comes down to some of technical and aesthetic choices I see in the film, there are some things I would alter. I still believe it is okay to feel like certain things in your work need changes after you complete it. To me, seeing these things as flaws later on, only means you are growing as an artist.

Ultimately, my film allowed me to access my inner feelings, creative freedom, and passion for video. It has allowed me to feel proud of everything I have accomplished artistically since day one of my studies. My film is evidence of everything I have learned, achieved, and grown to in my academic career. Finishing school at 26 years old is a challenge because the world around me seems to be at significantly different places. After this project, I was taught to accept where I am and be confident in where I am heading and I wouldn't have done it differently.

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