

Natalie's voice

"You are *free* to be whoever you want to be." I'm not a singer. I'm not a ballerina. I'm not a movie star. I am... a psychologist. My name is Natalie Hershlag, I'm 36 years old.

I develop new methods to help those who are in the dark regain control over their lives, like with my latest patient, Olivier. Ten years ago, he faced a choice: film school or law school. He spent months analyzing the options, hoping this would reveal *the best possible decision*. But he couldn't do it. He became so obsessed with what *he could have done*, that he never did anything. He told me once: if decisions are like doors, then mine are like walls. So I asked him: "What if you could *know*? What if you could *meet yourself* in another life? What would you ask yourself? Would you take their place?" I had gone on a journey, to help him find his freedom, but in doing so, I almost lost mine.

From one, there were many. From many, I found *five*.

Could you introduce yourself, tell me your name, what you do?

When we step into this world, our parent tells us: as long as you're happy, anything is possible. As children, we don't worry who we're going to become. We don't keep track of time. Summer days last for a lifetime. One minute we're a superhero, the next a pirate, and the next, an animal. We get lost in our own world. I told him, when I was a child, I wanted to dance, to sing, to act. I pretended to be other people. But I was also open to what the world had to offer. I thought I would never be satisfied doing just one thing. And because I was driven, determined, I *found* my way. Why didn't he?

I'd like know how you got to where you are today. Maybe could we start with what you chose after high-school?

Is this what you always wanted to do?

Like what?

But why do you have an American accent?

Are you glad you moved to London?

Why did you study law?

How are we to be in control when tiny events we don't control can so greatly change the course of our lives? There's always a moment, where you know you almost took a turn... What if I had gotten that part? What if the director had picked me? Where would it have taken me? But then everything would be so different... My husband... My friends... We would never have met. Who would it have been? Who did I not meet? Who are all my possible best friends or husbands out there? Strangers in the street are lovers from another life. But which life? Why am I living this one and not that one? People often say: "Things happen for a reason." But what reason?

What is your biggest regret in life?

Are we really to blame for what happens to us? Are we really the masters of our fate? Some look for a parent to guide them through life. To feel reassured, in the hands of a higher will. Everything will be alright. All is prophecy or miracle. Others look to the stars to find their way... Sailors... Lovers... Physicists... What do they say? Are we free? Or is it an illusion?

The stars taught us there are two ways in the universe: the way of Necessity and the way of Chance. We don't get to choose which one to follow. We have to discover which one is driving us.

Necessity rules all, knows all. It is straight and precise like an arrow. There's no use resisting, it won't yield or change. It is obsessive, mechanical. The true prophecy.

Chance has no rules, knows nothing. It swerves with no direction. It doesn't care what you expect or hope for. It is mysterious, magical. The true miracle.

If you could go back and do things differently, what would you do?

If we are on the way of Necessity, then the only path we *can* take is the path the universe has to take. We are cogs in the plan, hitting our marks. Destined to succeed or destined to fail. Effort, praise, blame, remorse, hopes and doubts... all would be pointless. When will I die? Where will I be in 10 years? What will I have for dinner tonight? Everything is already decided. Scripted.

Or is it?

If we are on the way of Chance, we *can* go in different directions, but we don't get to say which way we go. We just happen to go there. We are meant for nothing. When will I die? Where will I be in 10 years? What will I have for dinner tonight? Everything is always undecided. Improvised. Random.

Son. Hums. Sees. Sage. Mom. Age. God. Gag. Wane. Many. Sky. Neons. His. Helm. End.

There *is* a future ahead of me where I become a famous actress. It's there, but where is it? Why can't I see it? What should I do to get there? What is the right combination of steps? Should I take acting classes again? Should I go to new auditions? Should I change my appearance? Should I get an agent? Should I quit my job or keep it?

I began to see a deeper problem. If at every decision, I stay and I leave, I persist and I give up, I say no and I say yes, who am I? Why does it matter what I chose if in fact I chose all options? What does it mean to say what "kind of person" I am? There is no kind anymore. If there are infinite worlds where I am everyone, then I am no one in particular. I am everything. So I am nothing. Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes.

The ways of the universe are inescapable. Atoms like tiny random galaxies. Galaxies like giant determined atoms. Necessity or chance. Either way, we are passengers. Powerless and meaningless.

I had spent my life telling people they could take charge of their lives. Was I wrong all along? Maybe the only way to be free is to surrender. I had to understand. So I went searching for the one person I had promised I wouldn't look for: myself. And I found her. She had made it, she had become an actress. A big star. I was jealous. I told her: "You and I, we just drifted into our lives!" "No – she said, we didn't. I made up my mind and you made up yours."

Looking back, can you identify one decision you made that was originally a turning point in your life?

Why did you break up with her?

A decision is like a ring where several versions of ourselves collide, competing for reality. In that moment, we are radically free. Quantum.

Randomness in our brain frees us from determinism. This is a liberation. And then our character, motives and desires determine the outcome. This is why we call it: a de-liberation. We are not pre-determined, not un-determined, but self-determined.

It was right there in front of me: it's not Necessity or Chance. It's both, together. We need Chance to open up the road for us, but then we need Necessity to keep us on the road.

Why did you leave?

The path we take isn't entirely determined, but it isn't entirely random either. It's probable. Because of who he was, there were strong chances he would study filmmaking and strong chances he would study law. But there was little chance he would ever become... a violinist, or a mechanic, or a surgeon. Who we are at every moment sets the odds of taking one decision or another. And in turn, every decision shapes who we become, changing the odds for future decisions.

Species evolve with random mutations that are put to the test of the environment and only the fittest survive. This is called natural selection. Thoughts arise from random brain impulses and are put to the test of our character and ambitions and only the fittest are willed. This is a mental selection. Intelligence means: to select among. As life in nature, the future is evolving in our minds.

Do things happen for a reason? Only if we *make* things happen for a reason. The whims of the universe have no reason but the reasons of our wills. Necessity and Chance. The one and the all, and we are at the crossroads, between atoms and galaxies, in balance, emergent, neither machines nor magicians, but arbiters. Ours is not the way of Necessity or Chance. Ours is the way of Judgment. We make rulings. We evaluate, we doubt, we debate. But we aim and we reflect. In the noise, we try to be sound.

Whatever we do, we often wonder about a different time. Not in the past, not in the future, but in the present. A different present. If we could peer across, what would we see? What could we learn? Could I help him break through? If the key to freedom is a balance between Necessity

and Chance, then maybe the key to leading life is to be found there too. Between what we can control and what we can't control, what we strive for and what we achieve, who we wish we were and who we actually are.

So, my next question: do you consider yourself lucky?

We could go anywhere else, do anything else, be anyone else. All similar but each unique. All inspired but each original. Each worthwhile without the others. I – am – here. Subject, verb, complement. The structure of meaning. The basis of knowledge. The true sentence.

Finally, perhaps the most important question: are you happy?

I often wondered why I wanted to be an actress. It's because acting, is living out a story, a life made up, where things imagined become real, all avenues can be explored, reversed, perfected. Everything happens for a reason. But sadly, summer days don't last forever.

What's the next step for you?

We have to learn, to find, the serenity to keep wanting what we chose, the courage to stop wanting what we gave up, and the wisdom to know when to do the opposite.

From five, he could select one. For years he didn't choose because he couldn't know. Now he knew, he couldn't choose.

He had found the way. It's not to choose the best of all possible lives to begin with. It's to make the best of the one actual life you've chosen. And for that, you have to do one thing: begin.