



## When's Your Ship Coming In?

There's only one way to find out what's keeping you from getting what you really want, says  
**RAPHAEL CUSHNIR.**

IT'S NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1988. I'M TRAVELING alone off the coast of Belize. After spending the day snorkeling, I've come down with a terrible infection. Racked with chills, barely coherent, I stumble across town to rouse the lone nurse from her holiday dinner. Grudgingly, she gives me some

antibiotics, and I take to bed.

That night was perhaps the most important of my life. Twisted up in the sheets, raging with fever, I thought I was going to die. In those supposed last moments, I considered my life with deathbed candor. Having failed to make it as a Hollywood screenwriter after

almost a decade of trying, I'd privately become convinced that my lack of success was well deserved. I believed that, deep inside, there was something wrong with me—a fatal flaw, an indefinable shortcoming.

Whenever that belief had arisen before, I'd fought it with all the resistance I could summon. Now, instead, I dove straight into wave after wave of enveloping hopelessness. It was excruciating, but there was also great relief in giving up the struggle. Maybe it was the semi-delirium that finally melted my defenses—I'll never know. But when dawn broke and I was still breathing, the darkness inside me was lighter, too.

In the months that followed, I enjoyed my first hot streak with the studios. Within a couple of years, I had written, produced, and directed an award-winning film. It wasn't newfound discipline that had led to my turnaround. Nor was it a burst of creativity or a stroke of luck. What changed everything was my willingness to feel how hopeless I'd been. When I was finally ready to reclaim the part of me that was so hurting and broken down, healing began. Out of that healing came ease, a new and natural sense of flow. And from that flow, in short order, came the realization of my dream.

**O**NE DECADE AND SOME major transitions later, I began teaching workshops and counseling clients about how to live more joyfully. I quickly found that most people have a vision for themselves that they're not pursuing, or are approaching halfheartedly, or are chasing with all their might yet somehow falling short. The goal can be modest or grand. It might involve breaking free of a destructive habit, finding a healthy relationship, or leaping into a new career. But in almost every case, there's a similarity to my own story: Whenever people aren't living their dreams, it's because of emotions they're not yet willing to feel. Once they're willing, the dream comes true—in one form or another.

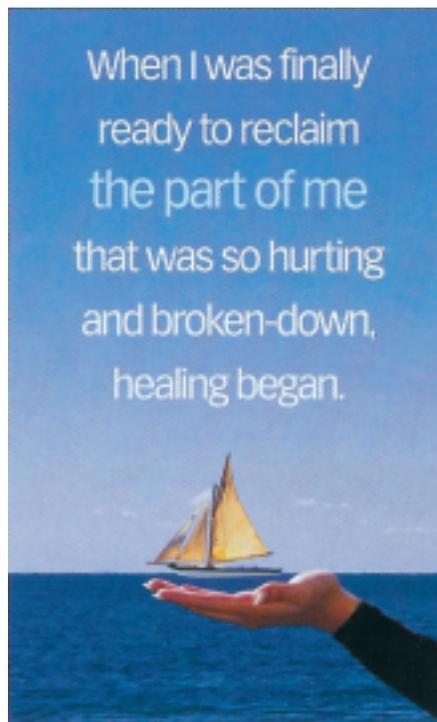
Annette, for example, was an office manager. When she called me for counseling, her voice was small and clipped. What she'd always wanted, she told me, was to start a flower-arranging business for weddings. For almost two years, she'd had the

information she needed to begin but hadn't done a single thing with it. By the time we spoke, she was avoiding her home office entirely.

I asked Annette to imagine herself in the office doorway, about to get to work. Immediately, she reported feeling "scared to death."

"Scared of?" I asked.

She paused. "Hmm. You know, I thought it would be fear of failure, but what's coming up is different." Annette went on to describe an emotional legacy from her childhood, when she learned to be seen and not heard. If



she put herself forward without being asked, she was met with such fury that she quickly trained herself never to do it. Starting a new business, therefore, felt like trying to get away with something. After her fear subsided a bit, I asked Annette to tell me the worst thing that could happen if she went ahead with her project anyway. "Well, I'm not sure," she said. "I've never thought that far ahead."

I suggested she imagine that her business was up and running, and that she delivered a floral arrangement to a client who was angry and disappointed, shouting, "Who do you think you are? You don't deserve to be a florist!"

Annette seemed to shrink, and reported that her chest and shoulders felt wrapped up like a mummy. I asked her to keep her

attention on that tightness, to regard it with as much tenderness as possible.

"It's starting to release," she told me after a few moments, "but now I feel humiliated, as though I'm being punished for the whole world to see."

"Keep feeling that, too," I said, knowing she'd struck gold. It was Annette's unwillingness to come face-to-face with this humiliation that had led to her professional paralysis. All she needed to do was stay present to the feeling, without fighting it or trying to figure it out. In about two or three minutes, the emotion subsided. This left her a little stunned.

"Wow, that wasn't as bad as I thought," she said. It almost never is, I told her. Then I asked her, from this place of relaxation and acceptance, how she would respond to the angry client.

"I guess..." She paused. "I guess I could just apologize and see if there's a way to fix the problem."

This simple recognition, that there was life after her worst-case scenario, marked the beginning of Annette's transformation. Shortly afterward, she started going to trade shows and making cold calls. Today, while she still needs her day job, she arranges flowers for about two weddings a month. What's even more important is that she feels like a success, which provides her with the energy and motivation to persist.

You can jump-start just about any dream using these four steps:

**1. Find the flinch.** Identify an important action you haven't taken. This could involve doing research, making a call, or just putting your plans on paper. It's possible that you've taken this action from time to time, but not consistently. Or you've taken it over and over with no success. What's crucial is that you recognize the moment when you ordinarily check out, not only from your dream but from your ongoing emotional flow. This is the point you might reach for a distraction, go numb, or sink into a "what's the use?" depression.

**2. Go for the jugular.** If there weren't something very challenging for you to feel, you'd have no need to check out. To find that challenging emotion, ask yourself,

*“What’s the worst thing that could happen if I went forward in this moment?”* Rather than jump to conclusions, let the answer come on its own. Once you’ve discovered your worst-case scenario, now ask: *“If this happened, what’s the most awful feeling I’d have*

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*to endure?”* Again, let the answer arrive naturally, without rushing to uncover it. It may be fear, failure, loss, guilt, rejection, rage, hurt, or something uniquely yours. You know you’re on the right track when your original flinch deepens, when you want to run for the hills.

**3. Weather the storm.** It’s now time to feel what you’ve been resisting, perhaps for most of your life. This takes real courage, but the only alternative is an unfulfilled dream. So go ahead, imagine that the worst has come to pass, and give yourself over completely to that torment. Whether you feel it in one particular spot or all over, stay connected to its physical manifestation. Whenever you lose your focus, patiently bring it back. Let your awareness remain soft and steady, without attempting to do anything. Freed up in this way, your emotions will shift and change, just like the weather.

**4. Repeat as necessary.** Now you know the most liberating truth: The emotion you thought was intolerable actually isn’t. You have the capacity to accept it, survive it, and feel cleansed with its passing. And that means it can no longer deter your dream. You’ll be able to stop procrastinating, work longer and harder, uplifted by an

exhilarating flow. These same four steps will be required whenever you find yourself yearning to escape. But each time, the process will be easier and quicker.

One of my clients, Noelle, was freed to have a peaceful relationship with her teenage daughter by accepting that she felt like a bad parent. That didn’t mean believing she really was a bad parent, but rather ceasing to deny the feeling and therefore having to blow up every time her daughter triggered it.

Another client, Evelyn, loved to sing, and wanted to create a cabaret act—but couldn’t accept that her voice wasn’t great. When she surrendered to feeling “painfully mediocre,” she soon found songs that played to her vocal strengths.

Perhaps the most telling example is Christine, who yearned to turn her enthusiasm and caring nature into a career as a personal coach. She’d printed up business cards and gone to a few networking events, but that was years ago. She called herself the Queen of Procrastination, and a lost cause. “It’s like there’s a mile between me and my dream,” she told everyone at a workshop, “but I can’t take the first step.”

It turned out that the feeling Christine most resisted was being overwhelmed. A few moments of staring at a to-do list usually sent her straight for a bowl of Haagen-Dazs. But when she sat still and said yes to the feeling, she found she wasn’t so overwhelmed after all. Instead, she felt sadness. She realized that all her role models had been even bigger procrastinators, and that no one had taught her to follow through.

Christine’s sadness gave way to relief, and she was able to give herself a break. She came to understand that her first job was to coach herself. In the process, she developed greater patience, an ability to ask for help, and the kind of authenticity that only meeting challenges can bring. Six months later, her coaching practice is already half full. And what inspires her clients the most, she reports, is hearing about her own path to emotional freedom.

*Raphael Cushnir is the author of **Setting Your Heart on Fire (Broadway)**. For more information, go to [heartonfire.org](http://heartonfire.org).*



In 1988 screenwriter Raphael Cushnir found himself at a professional and personal low point. Instead of fighting his feelings, he let himself “experience the wound, dive into it,” he says. “That’s what allowed for healing and change.” Now a workshop leader and spiritual counselor, Cushnir helps others face down the feelings that prevent them from pursuing their dreams, which he writes about in *“When’s Your Ship Coming In?”* Cushnir, who lives in Tomales, California, is the author of *Setting Your Heart on Fire (Broadway)*.

