# BORN WHOLE

### CHAPTER ONE

# FROM PERCEPTION TO POSSIBILITY

*How the Mind Learns to Say No and How It Learns to Say Now*

You have probably already tried, in some form or another, to change. Perhaps many times. You have read books, attended sessions, committed to practices, started fresh on a Monday morning. Some of those things may have helped. Others may have left you wondering why the change felt real for a few days and then quietly dissolved. The reason is not a lack of willpower or commitment. Most approaches to change begin at the wrong level. They address the symptom, the behaviour, the pattern, the habit, without ever quite reaching the root. The root is perception. Everything begins with perception. Before a child learns rules, or the meaning of obedience, or the particular sting of being wrong, they learn how to see. What they encounter repeatedly becomes what they believe. What they believe shapes what feels reachable. And what feels reachable quietly draws the borders of their entire life.

The journey from NO to NOW is not a motivational leap. It is not about believing harder or trying more. It is something both simpler and more demanding than that. It is a perceptual shift. Most of us move through our days assuming we assume we see the world clearly—as it truly is: accurate and undistorted. But the mind does not work that way. What we see is always shaped by what we have already lived. The brain is not a passive recorder of reality; it is an active interpreter of it, endlessly filtering incoming experience through the accumulated lens of everything that has come before. My brother, Dr. Mushtaq Margoob a psychiatrist and behavioural neuroscientist who has spent decades listening to the architecture of human minds, speaks of perception not as a faculty we possess, but as a story we inhabit. We do not simply see. We interpret.

And we interpret through the accumulated weight of everything we have already been shown. This is why a child who is repeatedly corrected begins to see danger where curiosity once lived. Why compliance begins to feel safer than exploration. Why the silent language of ‘No’ doesn’t stay outside, it migrates inward, until it sounds, over time, exactly like the child’s own voice. We are not poor observers of the world. We are extraordinarily faithful ones loyal to the version of reality that has kept us safe, accepted, intact. That faithfulness is not a flaw. It is, in many ways, a remarkable act of survival. But what once kept us safe does not always serve who we are becoming. And the story the mind has learned to tell, however understandable, is not the same as the truth.

## The First No: A Mother’s Protection

Consider Arjun, who is two years old. He reaches for the stove. His mother’s hand intercepts firm, immediate, and loving. ‘No.’ The word arrives before explanation, because it must. There

is no time for a conversation with a toddler whose fingers are inches from flame. This No is pure. It is the No of love. It guards life itself. But watch what happens as the years pass. By five, Arjun hears No when he asks why the sky is blue in the middle of dinner. By seven, when he wants to build something instead of finishing his homework. By ten, when his drawing doesn't match what the assignment required. Each No is reasonable on its own. Each is delivered with care. But slowly, imperceptibly, the nature of No shifts. What began as protection becomes prescription. What once guarded life begins to narrow it. The child who once reached for everything without a second thought begins to hesitate before reaching at all.

This is not any one parent's failure. It is something that happens in the ordinary course of raising a child in a world with rules, expectations, and limited time. The tragedy is not that boundaries exist. The tragedy is when a child can no longer tell the difference between the boundaries they were given and the person they actually are.

## The Invisible Roots of Limitation

Consider Priya, a bright student who freezes every time she has to speak in front of the class. Her teachers see anxiety. Her parents call it shyness. But Priya remembers something they have long forgotten: age six, school assembly, stumbling over a poem she had memorized. Laughter rippled through the hall not unkind, just children being children. The teacher smiled and helped her finish. Nothing dramatic. Nothing anyone would call a trauma. But something was written down that day not in words, not even in conscious memory, but in the body, in the place where self- image quietly takes root. Speaking in front of others means the risk of exposure. The risk of becoming the thing people laugh at, even gently. Now, twelve years later, Priya braces herself before every presentation. Her chest tightens. Words disappear. The No she feels is not a choice.

It is not even, strictly speaking, a memory anymore. It is protection. Learned before she had language to question it. I have watched this happen across classrooms in Kashmir, in Haryana, in communities I have been privileged to sit with for decades. Most human limitations do not begin with failure. It begins with a single moment of certainty and the quiet faithfulness with which the mind honours that certainty, year after year, without ever being asked to. A child doesn't need to be explicitly told they are limited. They only need to see limitation reflected back at the min a parent's hesitation, a teacher's correction, a peer's dismissal, a system's indifference. What is repeated becomes familiar. What is familiar becomes normal. What is normal becomes invisible. After a while, you stop noticing it. The limitation just starts to feel like you.

## The False Promise of Efficiency

I have spent years in educational spaces watching what happens when we build systems around a single value: efficiency. We train children to follow instructions, produce correct answers, and perform on cue. Moreover, in a stable, predictable world, efficiency has a certain beauty. It makes sense when the future looks like the present. But we are not preparing children for a stable world. Many of the roles they will inhabit do not yet have names. Many of the challenges they will navigate do not yet have shapes. Nature does not reward efficiency in

changing systems. It rewards adaptability. The most resilient systems, biological, social, and human are not the ones that are optimized for speed or correctness. They are the ones who could change direction when the world changed. T eaching children what to think anchors them to yesterday. T eaching them how to perceive how to question what they assume, how to stay curious at the edge of the unknown is what prepares them for the territory ahead.

Yet most systems do the opposite. They narrow perception in the name of focus. They standardize thinking in the name of fairness. They reward compliance in the name of order. And in doing so, they teach children to experience limitation as structure, not as a set of inherited choices that can, in time, be made differently.

## Creativity as Permission

Creativity is often imagined as something explosive a sudden arc of lightning between two distant points, a spark that arrives from nowhere and changes everything. But that is not what I have seen. In my years of sitting with children and watching the moments when something shifts, when a child who had given up suddenly reaches again, creativity almost never looks like that. It looks more like a small permission. A door left unlocked that was always there. A question that was finally allowed to be asked. What I have observed is that the mind doesn't leapits steps. Each small question loosens the certainty around the next one. Each loosened assumption makes the adjacent territory feel a little more reachable. What looks, from the outside, like a sudden breakthrough is almost always, from the inside, a series of tiny thaws. The ice didn't melt in one moment.

It had been quietly warming for a while. This is why the most creative people I have known are not the most talented. They are the most willing not to know. They have learned or perhaps never unlearned the capacity to hold a question with genuine curiosity rather than anxious urgency. Creativity is not the act of doing something extraordinary. It is the act of loosening certainty. Nothing meaningful begins with knowing. Everything meaningful begins with the willingness to not know and to stay present in that uncertainty long enough for something new to surface. No says: I already know what is possible. Now asks: What is actually here, right now, that I haven't yet seen?

## The Biological Barrier: Why the Brain Fears 'Now'

The deepest barrier to this kind of openness is not intellectual. It's biological. The human brain evolved to anticipate. Our ancestors who couldn't read the movements of predators, the patterns of seasons, and the reliability of food sources they didn't survive to become our ancestors. Uncertainty meant danger. Not knowing could be fatal. That inheritance lives in us still. When certainty is threatened, something tightens. Perception narrows. The mind retreats toward the familiar even when the familiar is limiting, even when it no longer serves the life we are actually living. This is why children stop asking questions. This is why adults defend beliefs they would struggle to justify. This is how No becomes a survival strategy, a way the mind tries to protect itself from the discomfort of an open horizon. Yet transformation cannot occur inside certainty.

The new cannot enter through a door we have sealed. I know how uncomfortable it is to not know. I've felt it myself, many times, that vertigo of standing at the edge of something unresolved. But in all my years of sitting with children and families, I cannot think of a single real change that began somewhere safe and certain. The paradox is inescapable: uncertainty is the only place where anything genuinely new can emerge.

## Play: The Bridge from 'No' to 'Now'

What I have witnessed, over and over, in classrooms and community spaces and in my own life, is that there is a natural passage into uncertainty. One the body already knows. One that doesn't require courage or technique or overcoming anything. That passage is a play. Play is not simply an activity, it is a way of being in relation to the unknown. It is the one space in which unpredictability is not merely tolerated but actively wanted. The punch line not yet known makes the joke funny. The outcome not yet decided makes the game worth playing. In play, not knowing is not a problem. Not knowing is the whole point. I kept seeing it, in classroom after classroom, the moment a child stopped performing and started playing, something in the room shifted. The air changed. Children who had been cautious became experimental. Children who had been silent became curious.

Play is not a technique for producing engagement. It's what happens when a child finally feels safe enough not to know the answer. Play is not a break from learning. It is how learning survives uncertainty. The most adaptable species in nature are those that retain the capacity to play into adulthood. Play builds range, the ability to respond to what comes rather than only to what was expected. And range, in the face of a shifting world, is what survival actually looks like. I think about the children at our schools during Gullak Day, small hands emptying piggy banks not to keep, but to give. They are not following a lesson in generosity. They are playing at being generous. And in that play, something real is transmitted, something that no worksheet or lecture or rubric could produce. Compassion, alive and practiced. Not taught. Experienced.

## Seeing Through the Glass

A mother once brought her eleven-year-old son to one of our centres in Haryana. He was bright, she told me. Gifted, even. But he had stopped trying at school. Stopped raising his hand. Stopped finishing projects. He had, in her words, given up. When I sat with the boy, let's call him Kabir, I didn't ask him about school. I asked him what he liked to build. His eyes changed. He talked for forty minutes about how he designed a working water wheel from sticks and rubber bands in his backyard, how he had studied the angle of the paddles for a week, how he cried a little when it finally spun the way he'd imagined. Then I asked him when he last felt that way about something at school. The light went out. 'School is not for that,' he said. He was eleven years old, and he had already divided the world into two separate territories: the real world, where he was capable and alive, and school, where he was somehow less.

That division wasn't born in him. It was built. Brick by patient brick, interaction by interaction, over years of being met with a version of learning that had no room for water wheels or the kind of boy who cries when something beautiful finally works. The tragedy was not that Kabir had given up on school. It was that he had quietly accepted that the version of him that

designed water wheels and cried at beauty was not the version that mattered. Perception is not passive. It is always working, always selecting, always constructing the story we call reality. The question is not whether our perception was shaped by our experiences, it was, inevitably, as it should be. The question is whether we have ever had the chance to look at that shaping and decide what to keep.

### The Journey Begins

The movement from No to Now is not about rebellion. There is love woven into most of the Nos we carry. This book is not a prosecution of parents, teachers or systems. It is an invitation to all of us to look honestly at what we received and decide, with open eyes, what we want to pass on. The inherited No that limits us is not written in stone. It lives in perception. And perception can shift. When it does, possibility expands not because the world has changed, but because we have learned to meet it with different eyes. What comes next is not theory, but testimony.

## Now.

The ground has been laid — not as argument, but as recognition. Something in you already knows the distance between who you were told to be and who you actually are. This chapter has simply given that distance a name. The Reflection that follows is the first of many invitations to close that distance, one honest moment at a time.

## REFLECTION

*Take a moment before moving to the next chapter. Not to summarise what you have read, but to notice what is present in you right now, having read it. Is there a memory that surfaced? A recognition, however small, that something described here has a name you did not previously have for it? You do not need to resolve anything. You only need to notice. This is what the word Now means each time you encounter it in these pages: a genuine pause, a real question, a brief turning toward your own interior before the next chapter begins. What feels closest to you in what you have just read? Not the most intellectually interesting part, but the most personally close. If something in this chapter produced a slight discomfort, that is worth noticing too. Discomfort in this kind of reading is often a sign that something true has come near. You do not need to do anything with it immediately.*

*Just acknowledge it. Let it sit in you. You might also consider keeping a journal alongside this book, not to record summaries, but to write down what surfaced in you: a memory, a moment of recognition, a question you hadn't*

*thought to ask before. Even a single sentence is enough. The journey from No to Now begins with a quiet act of noticing. Just this. Just now.*

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