



Episode #217

**Allison Carmen on Finding Peace in Uncertainty
and Embracing the Word "Maybe"**

July 14, 2020

Debbie: Hey, Allison, welcome to the show.

Allison: Oh, thank you so much for having me.

Debbie: Just to give listeners a little insight. I stumbled upon your website and learned about your book. I was doing research for the *Differently Wired* book that I'm writing. And I'm writing a chapter about the importance of parenting from a place of possibility instead of fear. And so I'm on Google and I'm poking around and I find your website and that you have this book called *The Gift of Maybe: Finding Hope and Possibility in Uncertain Times*, and I was like, Okay, I have to talk to this woman. So that's how we got in touch. But I would love to hear, first of all, just kind of who you are. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

Allison: Well, I started out in my career as an attorney. I was actually a tax attorney, believe it or not. And then over time, you know, I was very stressed out, I had a lot of anxiety, which I'm sure we'll get into. And so I kept trying to change my life, to manage my anxiety and then I became a business consultant. And then I had some kind of spiritual awakening with how to deal with my anxiety and I realized I was addicted to certainty. So I did business consulting, I started to do business coaching and life coaching. And then when the 2008 crash happened, all my clients, there's a stock market crash, all my clients really lost their way. They couldn't get loans, lost employees, they lost sales. Everything had turned upside down, and I started to share my life philosophies with them because I I didn't know what else to do. And then one thing led to another and I got a book offer and, and I wrote the book *The gift of maybe* and and that's really how the whole thing happened. It was just nothing that was planned. It was just as I kept changing in my life and the external circumstances kept changing. This path just unfolded.

Debbie: Wow. And so when did your book come out?

Allison: November 2014. It was published by Penguin Random House.

Debbie: Okay, that's awesome. And just for listeners, I'll include a link on the show notes so you can definitely check it out. But so you brought up the word certainty. And you know, on your website, you talk about that. And you have a video where you talk about this idea of certainty as an addiction. Can you talk more about that?

Allison: Sure. Well, I can go back to my personal story. What happened to me is that I always needed to know what was going to happen next. And if I didn't know what's gonna happen next in my life, I projected things were going to be bad or they weren't going to work out. And I think a lot of us have this addiction in our society. We're always so scared and worried that we're not okay and the unknown brings things that we're not going to like and so what we do in order to make ourselves feel better, is we write stories about what needs to happen for us

to be okay. We might write a story, I need to have this job till I retire, or I need to have this amount of money in the bank when I'm 50. Or my child needs to go to this college to be okay. And so we hold on to these stories as if we know how the future is going to unfold. But then life happens and we lose the job, we don't have the money, our child doesn't get into that college. And then we spin out of control and we start to worry, life's not working out, things will never get better. I can never have the things that I want. And it's very difficult for a lot of people and for me, I lived like this my whole life. I was always afraid of what's going to happen next. And I wrote all these stories. And the biggest story that I wrote in my life is that one day I have no more worry. I was going to get a job at a really large law firm after I became an attorney. I was going to make a lot of money. I was going to marry this great guy and then my life would be set there would be no more unknowns. And I know it sounds like a very simple naive way of thinking but I actually based a lot of my life on that. And I did, I went to law school, I got a job at a large firm, I married this great guy. And I could actually remember walking to work my first day thinking, I've arrived, everything will now be okay. And of course, the second day of work, my office mate comes in and says, Hey, Allison, did you hear? They're firing half the first years, and I was a first year at the time, and they didn't end up firing me. But I remember that was the moment I realized that I would never have certainty. And I just kind of lost control. And you know, where was I gonna lose my job after that? Was there gonna be a terrorist attack? Would my parents feel okay? Wouldn't my husband leave me? So that's how I started to identify the fact that I had this addiction. And then I started to feel sick. And I couldn't sleep because the worry just took over until one day, I heard this beautiful Daoist story. And it's about this farmer and the farmer had a horse and his horse ran away. And the neighbor came by and said, you have the worst luck and the farmer said maybe. But the next day the horse came back with four mares and the neighbor comes by and says, you have the best luck. And the farmer said maybe. But the next day the farmer's son is on the horse, he falls off and breaks his leg. And the neighbor comes by and says you have the worst luck. And the farmer says maybe. But the next day the army comes to take his son to war, the farmer's son, and they can't take him because his leg is broken. And the neighbor comes by and says, you have the best luck. And the farmer says maybe. And in the Daoist tradition, the story means things just change is neither good or bad. But for me, when I heard that story, I actually felt a pop in my chest. And I just felt this release because I was always projecting that things were going to be bad when I didn't know when life was uncertain. And all of a sudden, I realized, like, has maybe. So whatever I was thinking, whatever I was projecting whatever I was worried about, it might unfold differently. And it sounds so simple, but this idea of maybe takes you from this place, where in your mind, you're so positive you're doing you're so positive, life's not gonna work out and it takes his place you realize maybe things could get better. Maybe there's more in life, maybe I don't know the answer, maybe everything is still okay. And it just, it changed my life from this place where uncertainty frightened me to this place where I truly believe that if I want my life to change, it has to happen in the unknown and uncertainty is my best friend.

Debbie: That's a great story. And I actually totally relate to that. I mean, this might sound silly or this or that, but I too, was thinking I was working towards when I was in

my 20s and I moved to New York with my boyfriend from college. And you know, I was like, waiting for that happily ever after. And then everything will be fine. And you know, of course, that isn't what ended up happening. That boyfriend broke up with me and you know, things kind of unraveled and I I went to see a therapist in New York for a few years. And that was one of the things that she kind of drummed into me. There's no guarantees, and I realized that I was looking for guarantees and that was a huge aha moment for me too. And so I love hearing your story. I love the fable and it just really resonates with me. And one of the reasons why I think this is so powerful for the Tilt community is that we are made up of parents raising what I refer to as differently wired kids. So kids that are in some way, neurologically atypical. And what I hear the most from parents like me, is that one of their biggest struggles comes from really coming to terms with the fact that they're parenting a child they weren't expecting, you know, this whole journey is looking so different than what they anticipated. So, I'm wondering, you know, what are your thoughts on that in terms of how this idea of maybe could change our experience?

Allison: Well, you know, parenting is, you know, of all the areas that maybe has helped me. Maybe it's helped me with parenting the most clearly without a doubt. Because what happens is that you know, what? The Buddhist said that all attachment leads to suffering, right? And we're attached to our children. So in a way, there's going to be some suffering being a parent, I've never met a parent that didn't have some type of attachment. We need our kids to be okay. Right. And we have a definition of what that is. But over time, I realized that it's not just the attachment that really causes a lot of suffering. It's our inability to deal with the unknown, the unexpected, and the stories we write because of it. And when someone has these unexpected moments with our children, what we do is we take this moment, and we project into the future. So a lot of our suffering is not sometimes it's in the moment, but a lot of it's what this moment today means for tomorrow. And so sometimes when a parent will come to me and they have a child that's going through a difficult time, an illness or a disability. It's not always the moment it's it's what is this going to look like in 10 years? What's this going to look like in 15 years? How will they have a job? How will they go to college? And what maybe does, it brings us back to the moment. And even if the moment is difficult, it brings us back to this moment to say, maybe things will be different than I think, maybe there'll be a cure, maybe my child will have growth. Maybe they'll expand in a way I can't possibly imagine today. Or maybe there's something in this moment that I could appreciate. Maybe there's something that and sometimes it could come down to a smile or holding a hand if your child is sick. But we really have no idea what's going to happen next in our life. And what we do is we take our entire life on and one moment and maybe we realize okay, I don't know. But not knowing leaves me with hope and possibility not knowing leaves me with the fact that this situation could change. It could get better, and it could lead in the direction I never imagined and that's what maybe does. So you let go of the expectation because the expectation is often a story that you were writing about how things need to be for your child to be okay. And when you let that go, and you really Okay, this is where I am in the moment. And maybe there are gifts I can see in the future. So that's where I feel the biggest gift for maybe is with, with people with parenting with with children.

- Debbie: How does that actually work in terms of identifying what that story is? Like, how do the people you work with go about identifying that? Or how can listeners get clear on that in action? Like, what is that process?
- Allison: When it comes to parenting?
- Debbie: Yeah, maybe specifically parenting but I imagine it's the same across the board if it if it's this idea of we're telling ourselves something that we have no idea if it's true or not, right? So we're kind of spinning or or spiraling, as I like to call it, but how do you actually stop that spiral? Is it just a matter of noticing or are there kind of practical strategies to go about doing that?
- Allison: Well, there's an exercise actually in the first chapter of the book, which I discovered through my own pain as parenting and what actually happened to me is that my daughter was having some stomach problems. And I thought, Oh, well, that's not a very big deal. And I took it to the doctor and I was sitting there and the doctor said to me, Allison, I think she could have celiac disease. And he didn't know for sure. And I was already practicing. Maybe it's very funny, like how, you know, beware of the person that writes the book, you know? And all of a sudden, it just struck me so that I just went into panic mode, and he took bloodwork and he said, it'll be back in a week. And that night, and like I said, I had already written the book, and that night, I couldn't sleep and I was petrified. What happens if my daughter has this? This is gonna be horrible. Her life is ruined. I mean, you wouldn't believe the stories because I was afraid. I was afraid that my daughter wouldn't be okay. And I think that's where our fears come from. My child's not going to be okay, whatever that okay means... they won't be able to take care of themselves. They're gonna have struggles, they're gonna have disappointments. So what I did that night, it just came to me is I said, What am I going to do? My husband was sleeping like a baby, mind you and I was like up. And I just started to write my fears down. And I think everybody really knows what they're really worried about. They do if you say, you know, quiet yourself down and write down your biggest worry. So I wrote, my daughter is not going to be okay. My daughter has celiac disease or life's going to be difficult. My daughter has celiac disease and things are going to get worse. I just kept reading even though I knew that I knew people who live with the disease, but it didn't matter. At that moment. I did not want my child to have this. So I was in pain. Then after I wrote all these statements down, all these fears down. I said to myself, am I absolutely certain that these thoughts are true? Am I absolutely certain that she has it? No, I wasn't certain. I'm absolutely certain that if she has it, her life is going to be awful. No, I don't know that. I am absolutely certain that it's going to lead to something worse. No. So as I realized I wasn't certain. I asked myself, what else is possible? And I started really broad. Maybe everything's okay. That's my family. statement, maybe everything's okay. Maybe it'll get better. Maybe she doesn't have it. Maybe she has it. And we'll figure out how to live with it. Maybe it's good that we went to the doctor, maybe this is a lesson in life. I just wrote every maybe statement possible. And I actually did for 30 minutes. And I noticed after 30 minutes, I felt that popped in my chest that I had felt the first time I heard the Daoist story, and I realized I was just writing a story.

And I had no idea what was gonna happen next. And my life had maybe and her life had maybe, and things would keep changing. And I just felt so expansive again, and when I woke up the next day, I finally fell asleep. I was in a different place. And yes, I had little moments. But for those seven days, I was just with my daughter, I changed her diet. We had a great time and we laughed about this. And what happened is really not only did it take away the fear of the future, when I'm in maybe it brings me very present because I realized, I don't know the future, there's hope. And I was very mindful and very open. And just very in the moment, I was With so I really enjoyed it. And then it turned out, of course, the doctor didn't get the blood work back and I had another three days to wait. And in the end, she didn't have that disease. But those 10 days, I realized that a lot of our pain comes from the projection. And so that exercise what you do is you ask yourself what your biggest fear is, everybody knows their biggest fear when it comes to being a parent. And then ask yourself, are you absolutely certain that thought's true, and then write your maybe statements down and everybody I know eventually finds the maybe statement that becomes their mantra. And once you find your mantra, sometimes you could just say that one statement, wherever you are, and it'll bring you to a more expansive place.

Debbie: Hmm, that's great. Yeah, I love that idea of writing, writing the fears down and really going to that dark place even in the worst case scenario, you have to kind of get it out to know what you're really grappling with.

Allison: And it to the presence that it gives you to NOT know. It's like, the reason it's funny. We suffer because we think we know. It's so interesting, isn't it that you think the suffering is because you, you don't know what's gonna happen next. But the suffering is really because you think you know what's gonna happen next. Right? And once you really identify that you can alleviate so much suffering. And yes, we're still going to be attached to our children, but it's our relationship with uncertainty that causes most of our suffering in our daily life, no matter what we're facing.

Debbie: Absolutely. And I like what you said too when you're living and maybe you really are in a place of presence. Because, you know, as you said, we're spiraling out about the future unknowns which we can control. We have no idea what's going to happen. Or we're regretting or thinking about things from the past, like the past. So neither of those have anything to do with what's actually happening in that moment. So I love that, especially with these kids, many of whom are so tuned in and sensitive to what's going on with us. They know when we're not present. You know, they know when we're feeling when we're living in that space of uncertainty, and that it's creating stress for us.

Allison: And also at this moment, there are sacred things. And we're so busy writing the story about how it should have been and how things should be that there's a sacred moment often in front of us in this present state that we miss. And that's the thing too, maybe brings me very present with my children. And what's ever going on with them in the moment, if I'm not writing the story about what it means for tomorrow and what it means for next week, and what it means for next year, I really capture the beauty of the moment with them, even if it's a

difficult situation. There's always beauty. There was always something sacred I find. So it's really it really improves also not just letting go of your fear but also improving the quality of your life with your family and your friends and everything that you do.

Debbie: Yeah, I talk about in my book, this idea of that every choice that we are making and I and I pulled this from the Neale Donald Walsch book Conversations with God but that every choice we're making we make out from a place either of fear or love. So I see a connection with that concept in the work that you're doing.

Allison: Right. Because deep down we're afraid we're not okay. And we're afraid our children aren't okay. And that that's fear, our, our fear of the unknown. And I think that if you think about it, your relationship with uncertainty dictates most things that we do every day. What job we're going to take who we're going to pick to love what we're going to it's all based on, are we willing to not know and if you're willing not to know and you're not afraid of what the future will bring you're going to have a much more expansive life so yeah, this this fear that we have that it basic fear, we're not okay. And we feel we're not okay, because it's something that might be experiencing in the moment, or the fact that we don't know the future. So I agree with that. I think that when we're not in fear and we're not projecting and we're very present, we're in a more of a loving, open hearted state of love. And I think that's another thing too. We don't realize it. We think we're giving our children everything, we're loving, and we're doing all these things. But if we're afraid, we're not as present. And if we're not as present, the love that we give will not be as expansive. I can't say that we won't give our children love because you could be in a totally fear state and, of course, love your children. But there's an expansiveness that we could have a more of a depth and just bring them into that and also to the more present you are, the more present your children will be like you said, they know it, they see it, they see how we act, they see the energy, they see our movements. So I think that our state of mind also helps create their state of mind.

Debbie: Yeah, I wanted to talk with you about that, actually, I think, you know, I'm a big advocate of just just modeling the, you know, the power of, of our children seeing us kind of do work on ourselves in this personal growth work and I can just imagine what that introducing this language of, of maybe into a child's life, you know, a lot of Kids in our community, especially gifted children can be highly perfectionistic, you know, which is also very fear based thing or, you know, they really struggle with and predictability and all of these things. So I can just imagine the power of them being able to really embrace maybe in their world.

Allison: Our society doesn't teach us maybe or society tells us we need to know, right? It's all you need to know what grade you're going to get, what kind of job you're going to get, what college you go to. So our kids are constantly being fed this one way thinking, one way thinking it and then the idea of maybe liberates them. It liberates them because it allows them to see that life doesn't have to be one way and I have a daughter who actually, she had a lot of anxiety growing up and she she had a tendency to want perfection, to want the A. And I think it really was this idea of maybe that's allowed her to be so much more balanced and so much

more successful in her life because she sees now when something doesn't go her way. Maybe it did. Or maybe it's going to get better. Or maybe this is good. Or maybe I need to do something different. So she doesn't get stuck in that place where I failed, it's never going to get better, it's not going to work out. So that seems to be a lot of the dialogue I hear from kids and when they hear this idea of maybe just gives them the freedom to not be upset with themselves, not to be upset with life and to just be more creative and hopeful. And what's also interesting too, is that I have a lot of kids come to me, they're like, well, I watch the news. And I'm afraid of terrorism, and I'm afraid of global warming and afraid of this and that and if you sell your kids doom and gloom, they're gonna make very limited choices in their lives. But if you sell them maybe they're going to see the world differently because they are going to say, okay, it's okay not to know the answer. That's the thing, this society and a lot of the schools they don't allow our children not to know. It's okay not to know. And it's okay for them not to have the solution for global warming and the solution for to end terrorism and the solution to make you know, to feed everybody in the world because things always change and they say life has Maybe and maybe I'll figure it out. Maybe there'll be new inventions, maybe we could have new types of energy. So when do they have this idea of maybe they start to dream more, and they have more hope and more possibility. So again, they see the world the way it is today. But they know life has maybe and things will always change, and then they're going to act on it, they're not going to be so afraid that they're limited because there's nothing in life that's limited, so maybe really makes them possible thinkers, and I really have a lot of hope that they're the ones that are gonna make the world a better place.

Debbie: Hmm, you and me both. Yeah, you know, and as you're talking, I was thinking of Carol Dweck's work around growth mindset and the short phrase that she uses that we've also tried to incorporate in our world is this idea of NOT YET. You know, so many of us demand this or that to happen for us right now, or we're not good at something right now. And so that idea of Yeah, not yet. Like it creates that curiosity, that possibility, that openness of what could be.

Allison: And it's our fear again, it's our fear of the unknown that creates that need. Because we're so afraid that life's not going to give us what we want, we become very impatient. Because not knowing makes us feel like, Oh, this didn't happen, or that means it's not gonna happen, or I don't know the answer. That means I'll never know what things don't ever get better. And that's the dialogue that we tell our children tell that's what gets us into this, this tight place to begin with this feeling of doom and gloom, but with the idea of maybe it makes us realize that we don't know and not knowing is good. Because if you're not happy with today, and you want your life to change, it has to happen in the unknown. And that's also so what's interesting about parenting, it's like, we're so frightened. What's going to be with our children, if we think about it, if we're having an issue or problem tomorrow, or, or the next day or the day after that usually will offer us a different answer a different way or a different possibility. So we don't, there's nothing to fear. There's just something to embrace.

Debbie: Yeah, that's great. One of the things I just wanted to touch upon is...I was thinking about Facebook, right? So so many of us are comparing what's happening in our world, especially, you know, as we watch their parents post pictures of their kids doing this and that successfully or, you know, winning chess championships or doing this and there is a lot of comparison, and there is this idea that other people do have certainty, right, that will, in a comparison situation, they seem to have it all figured out that child's path is clearly defined. Ours isn't, you know, so this idea of false certainty. Could you talk about that, like, does anyone actually, do you think everyone's addicted to certainty? Maybe that's my question.

Allison: I don't think everyone's addicted. I meet people who have faith. Sometimes it's religious, you know, faith or sometimes there are people who are just okay, we're how life goes. wherever it goes. I find parenting though. I've never met a parent that didn't have a little bit of an addiction. I have to be honest. Maybe I'll meet one but I haven't been That one yet. And what's also interesting too, is that, you know, I've had an opportunity over the years I didn't expect my book to resonate so much in the parenting community because I came from a business background. But over you know, last couple years more and more parents connect with me I work with them and everybody has issues everybody different types of issues, you know, somebody who could be win a chess championship and they have terrible anxiety or somebody you know, could be an A student, and they're horrible athlete and a bothers and you know, everybody has their stuff No, no, there I've never met a human being that doesn't have stuff. But we also have to remember that we all have our own path. And, you know, someone wants told me to, you know, comparing yourself to someone else's liking, comparing an apple to an orange, and I always remember that when I'm, you know, if I'm on Facebook, and I'm going through a hard time and, you know, I just always say a prayer of love out to whoever I'm looking at. I realized that, you know, I have my own path in life, and everyone has that wrong path and nobody has certainty. Nobody and everybody's going to have their bumps and people have more difficult lives than others. But I know that if, if I stay in my own place, and I always say sometimes that you know, if I stay in my own business in my own place, that I know that I put my power and my presence in the moment that I will always show up best for my life and for my children's life, and it will unfold the way that it's supposed to because we all have a path in life. Right? And so, I always say that, you know, focusing too much on someone else's path just drains my energy from my own, and that's how I view it but I understand you know, Facebook is very tricky. But you know, I also read an article recently that people just put their one moment on, right that one moment where everything looks beautiful and perfect. And there are a lot of other moments to life has different types of moments for all of us. And so, you know, but it's definitely an interesting conversation about that.

Debbie: Yes, and these days and times for sure. Before we go, do you have any, I don't know, a couple of tips for parents who are listening who want to incorporate this idea of maybe in possibility more into their daily life, you know, if they're listening to this, and they're, it's really resonating, and they're recognizing, yes, I have a lot of issues around around certainty and fear, like, what are a couple small steps that they could do to to impact them?

Allison: Well, the first thing, although this is not a maybe practice, the first thing I find is that every morning and every night, you know, have a gratitude practice. What happens is that we're always looking at what's not in our lives, we're always doing that over some reason what's not happening in our lives, always seems bigger than what is happening. So it's really important. Like I always say, you know, you could go into your kitchen, right, and you see dirty dishes in the sink, and you're like, Oh, my kitchens filthy. But if you spent the time to open every cabinet, you'd realize that most of your dishes are clean. Hmm. And so in life, always remember Remember that it gives you ground, it gives you a foundation, a place to stand. These are the things that I have today in my life, these are the blessings that I have. And I find it very grounding. Every day to do that, we forget that I cannot tell you this, and I do this stuff for a living, I cannot tell you how many days I'm just not looking at what is this? This for some reason, we're obsessed with the thing that's not so that's a beautiful place to start. And with the maybe practice everyday, that exercise that I gave is when you feel that you're stressed when you feel you're worried when you feel you're just overly obsessing about a thought and idea, you're probably not very present, you're probably projecting into the future. And it's a good time to pick up your pen and write what's my biggest fear. When I do the practice and again, everybody comes out differently. There's always a mantra like, I have a friend who's been dealing with maybe practice for years, and all of a sudden her favorite word is she just says to herself, maybe that thought's not true. Maybe that's not true. And it just frees her. See what happens with maybe you're going to find a thought or a mantra that's going to free you from that. Fear, it's gonna free you from that fear that that captured you that was making you feel miserable and stressed in this little word, it's going to take you from this place where you're sure you're doomed. You're sure it can't get better to this open place where like, okay, maybe I don't know if that's good, or maybe it'll get better. So that's how you move through the day, you're gonna you could do the exercise and eventually you're going to find a mantra that just liberates you in that one, that first moment you are liberated. It's life changing. It's life changing to know that you're not doomed or your child's not doomed. And life will change it. And thank goodness life changes, right? We forget uncertainty is our best friend. So I think a gratitude practice, and maybe practice and again, it's so simple, but it's so profound. Anything that takes you from this cramped place in your head, where you think life's not working out to this open place, we know that life will change and good things could still happen. It's a miracle. It's a miracle.

Debbie: I love it. I love it. It's so in alignment with what I believe and, and I really do believe that the smallest little tweaks can have a profound impact and thank you for sharing those And thank you for sharing the gratitude practice that is something we don't talk a lot about on the show, but it's something I personally am a big believer in the power of doing. So, before we go, could you just maybe share where people can get in touch with you or you know, learn more about your work and your book?

Allison: Oh, sure. The book again, is *The Gift of Maybe*, and it's sold at most major bookstores and independent bookstores but also you could always get it online

at Amazon and Barnes and Noble. I write for a lot of publications -- Psychology Today, MindBodyGreen I have a website allisoncarmen.com where you could even contact me and get in touch with me. I love always hearing from people who read the book or people that have questions about the maybe practice. And I also still blog I haven't written the last couple months because I've been a little inundated with my children and I have one graduating high school which is an exciting time. So but I write a lot often about maybe and about worry and stress and a lot about parenting. So you can learn a lot about you know, the work that I do on that the website as well.

Debbie: Fantastic. And again, listeners, I will leave links to Allison's website and to where you can buy her book and where you can read our blog on the show notes. So you can check that out after the show. So, Alison, thank you so much for this conversation. super interesting. I hope that it is sparking some little shifts in our listeners minds to just kind of think about that. And again, as you said, it said it's such a simple concept but so powerful and I appreciate you breaking it down for us today.

Allison: Thank you, Debbie. It's been great to be here.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Allison Carmen's website
- *The Gift of Maybe: Finding Hope and Possibility in Uncertain Times* by Allison Carmen
- *Conversations with God* by Neale Donald Walsch
- How I Taught My Children to See the Good in Life (Even When They're Unhappy) (Mind Body Green)