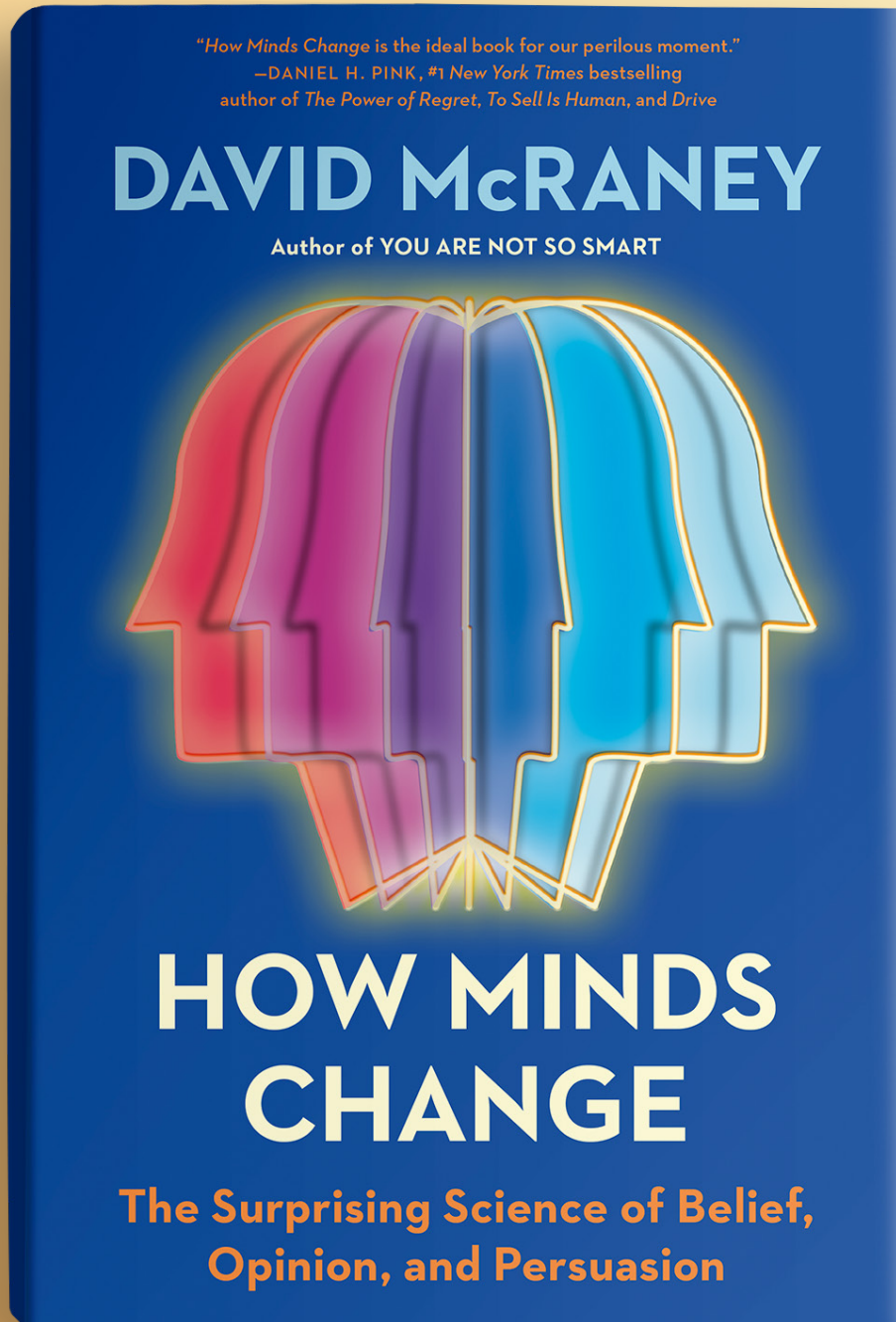


EXCLUSIVE EARLY EXCERPT

Internationally-bestselling author of
You Are Not So Smart and You Are Now Less Dumb



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INTRODUCTION

We are about to go on a journey together to understand how minds change. By the end of this journey, you will not only be able to use what we learn to change the minds of others, you'll also change your own, I hope, because that's what happened to me, in more ways than one.

After writing two books about cognitive biases and logical fallacies, and then spending several years hosting a podcast about those topics, I had settled into a long and comfy pessimism that you may currently share. On stage behind a microphone, in articles, I often said there was no point in trying to change people's minds about topics like politics, superstitions, or conspiracy theories—and especially not a combination of the three.

After all, when was the last time you tried to change someone's mind? How did it go? Thanks to the internet, we have more access to people on the other side of the issues we care about than ever before. So the odds are pretty good you've recently been in an argument with someone who

saw things differently, and I bet they didn't change their mind when you presented them with what, to you, seemed like clear evidence of their wrongness. They likely left that argument not only angry, but more convinced than ever they were right and you were wrong.

Growing up in Mississippi, like many in my generation, these kinds of arguments were part of our daily lives long before the internet introduced us to the wider world of disagreement. The people in movies and television shows seemed to routinely disagree with the adults who told us the South would rise again, homosexuality was a sin, and evolution was just a theory. Our families seemed stuck in another era. Whether the issue was a scientific fact, a social norm, or a political stance, the things that seemed obviously true to my friends, the ideas reaching us from far away, created a friction in our home lives and on the holidays that most of us learned to avoid. There was no point in trying to change some people's minds.

Our cynicism wasn't abstract. In the Bible Belt, there were real stakes to breaking taboos, and from time to time we each had to make a choice about how—and when—we'd defy them.

As a teenager, I spent a summer delivering flowers for my uncle, who had bought a florist shop in the middle of our small town with money he had saved working as a paramedic. When the landlord began to bully him, my uncle called my father for help. As he hung up the phone, my dad grabbed his car keys and asked me to join him, and then we raced to the shop. He parked, walked into the middle of the confrontation, made it clear there would be trouble if the intimidation continued, and returned to the car. But the thing that stuck with me was that he said nothing on the ride back, nothing the rest of the day, and never mentioned it to the rest of the family. He didn't need to ask for my silence. I knew why we had to keep it secret, and I did.

A science and science fiction nerd, my cynicism only grew stronger after I left home and began working for local newspapers, and then local television, just as social media entered our lives. Before becoming a science journalist, one of my responsibilities was moderating the Facebook page for the small news operation at WDAM-TV in Ellisville, Mississippi. For years, I spent a portion of every day reading the disheartening comments of angry viewers threatening to boycott the station after any science story that challenged their worldviews.

I realized just how far our viewers were willing to take these arguments when a meteorologist explained on air why climate change was real, and most likely the result of carbon emissions from human activity. The comments overflowed with rage after I used the station's official Facebook account to share links from experts. Like most people, I thought the facts would speak for themselves, but a slew of angry commenters countered my links with links of their own, and I spent the afternoon playing fact-check whack-a-mole. The next day, a man confronted one of our news crews out on assignment and asked who ran our Facebook page. They gave him my name, and then he drove to the station and asked to see me in person. Sensing he was potentially dangerous, the receptionist called the sheriff. The angry viewer drove away before police arrived, and local law enforcement added the station's parking lot to their patrols for the rest of the week, but I spent months looking over my shoulder when entering and leaving the building.

While still at the station, curious about the psychology behind all this, I started a blog about it. That led to a few books, then lectures around the world, and a new career. I launched a podcast to explore all the ways that people refused to accept evidence or empathize with others, and under the brand *You Are Not So Smart*, I made the psychology of motivated reasoning my beat as a science journalist. I was making a

decent living telling people that there was no point in trying to change people's minds.

But I was never comfortable with that pessimistic viewpoint, especially after witnessing the sudden shift in opinion about same-sex marriage across the United States. That shift that eventually reached my hometown, allowing my uncle to live as an openly gay man, and my LGBTQ friends to post photos of their weddings.

Though in 2012 the majority of the country was opposed to legalizing same-sex marriage, the very next year, the majority supported it. Around 2010 opposition began to plummet. When the majority opinion flipped, the arguments evaporated. Just a few years earlier, I had been moderating daily arguments about how same-sex marriage would ruin America by destroying its family values. *Clearly, I thought, people can change their minds, and quickly. So what was the point of all that arguing in the first place?*

I looked for a scientist who could help me answer a question I had never really considered asking, one that was now making my brain itch. Why do we argue? What purpose does it serve? Is all this bickering online helping or hurting us?

I invited the famed cognitive scientist Hugo Mercier, an expert on human reasoning and argumentation, to be a guest on my show. He explained that we evolved to reach consensus—sometimes on the facts, sometimes on right and wrong, sometimes on what to eat for dinner—by banging our heads together. Groups that did a better job of reaching consensus, by both producing and evaluating arguments, were better at reaching communal goals and out-survived those that didn't. That led to the innate psychology that compels us to persuade others to see things our way when we believe our groups are misguided.

Mercier told me that if we couldn't change our minds or the minds

of others, there would be no point in arguing in the first place. He asked me to imagine a world where everyone was deaf. “People would stop talking,” he said. The fact that we so often disagree isn’t a bug in human reasoning; it’s a feature. For examples of how arguing had led to sudden shifts, all I had to do was look at the history of change in America.

I found a book about public opinion by political scientist Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro that revealed since polling began in the early twentieth century, nearly half of the significant opinion shifts in the United States had been, as in the case of same-sex marriage, abrupt. Opinions about abortion, the war in Vietnam, attitudes about race and women and voting rights and smoking and marijuana and many others, were stable for years. In each case, arguing had spread from small groups to large, from homes to the House of Representatives. Then all at once it seemed that stasis shattered. When the tide of public opinion turned on these issues, it shifted so quickly that if people could step into a time machine and go back just a few years, many would likely argue with themselves with the same fervor they argue about wedge issues today.

I started to see the push and pull of our incessant arguing as a form of punctuated equilibrium. That’s what they call it in biology. When creatures have the capacity to change but there’s little encouragement to do so, they remain mostly the same from one generation to the next. But when the pressure to adapt increases, the pace of evolution increases in response. Over long timescales, a pattern emerges, long stretches of sameness punctuated by periods of rapid change. Looking at the history of social change, revolution, and innovation, it seemed like the same pattern, and I wanted to understand the psychology behind it.

I wondered what was happening inside all those brains before and

after they changed their minds? What persuades us, and how? What breaks through resistance so powerfully that we not only see things completely differently, but wonder how we saw it any other way?

How does a person, over the course of a decade, go from being opposed to the “gay agenda” to happily attending a same-sex wedding? How does an entire nation go from smoking on airplanes and in offices to banning smoking in bars and restaurants and daytime television? What makes hemlines go up and down and beards appear and disappear? How did marijuana go from a prescription for madness to a prescription for glaucoma? Why don’t you agree with the person who wrote your teenage diary, want or believe the same things, or cut your hair the same way as the person you were just a decade ago? What changed *your* mind? How *do* minds change?

I wanted to understand the psychological alchemy of epiphanies, big and small. I thought if I could explain the mysterious nature of how people do and do not change their minds—and why that change often comes in bursts after long periods of certainty—we could become better at changing them, our own included. And so began the obsession you now hold in your hands.

This is a book about how minds change—and how to change them—not over hundreds of years, but in less than a generation, in less than a decade, or sometimes in a single conversation. In the pages that follow, we will learn what we are doing wrong when we fail to change minds, by exploring the surprising psychology behind how people modify and update their beliefs, attitudes, and values; and how to apply that knowledge to whatever you believe needs changing, whether it’s within one mind or a million.

We will meet experts who study this sort of thing, and spend time with people who changed their minds, whether in powerful moments

of epiphany or on long walks toward surprising insights. In the final chapters, we will see how these ideas combine to create social change and, in the right circumstances, sweep across entire nations in less than a generation. We will see that the speed of change is inversely proportional to strength of our certainty, and certainty is a feeling: somewhere between an emotion and a mood, more akin to hunger than to logic. Persuasion, no matter the source, is a force that affects that feeling.

When we wade into the techniques, you might feel some misgivings about the ethics of it all. Even if we feel like our intentions are good or that the facts are on our side, persuasion can seem like a form of manipulation. But it may put you at ease to learn that by its scientific definition, persuasion is the act of changing a mind *without* coercion. As Daniel O’Keefe, a professor of communication, defines it, persuasion is “a successful intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom.”

More specifically, as psychologist Richard N. Perloff explained years ago in his book *The Dynamics of Persuasion*, we can avoid coercion by sticking to symbolic communication in the form of messages meant to alter another person’s attitudes, beliefs, or both, via the “voluntary acceptance” of those messages. According to Perloff, you can differentiate coercion from persuasion when “dire consequences” are employed to encourage someone to act the “as the coercer wants them to act, and presumably contrary to their preferences.” He adds that when people believe they are free to reject the communicator, that’s when ethical persuasion is at play. It’s only “when individuals perceive that they have no choice but to comply, the influence attempt is better viewed as coercive.”

Persuasion is not coercion, and it is also not an attempt to defeat

your intellectual opponent with facts or moral superiority, nor is it a debate with a winner or a loser. Persuasion is leading a person along in stages, helping them to better understand their own thinking and how it could align with the message at hand. You can't persuade another person to change their mind if that person doesn't want to do so, and as you will see, the techniques that work best focus on a person's motivations more than their conclusions.

We will learn that, in many ways, persuasion is mostly encouraging people to realize change is possible. All persuasion is self-persuasion. People change or refuse based on their own desires, motivations, and internal counterarguing, and by focusing on these factors, an argument becomes more likely to change minds. As psychologist Joel Whalen once put it, "You can't move a string by pushing it, you have to pull it."

This is why it is so important to share your intentions up front. Not only does that keep you on solid ethical ground, but it also increases your chances of success. If you don't, people will assume your intentions. Whatever they assume will become your "actual" position in their minds, and you run the risk of not having the conversation you intended. If they believe that your position is that they are gullible or stupid or deluded or in the wrong group or a bad person, then of course they will resist, and the facts will now be irrelevant.

Early in the research, I applied some of this with my father in an argument over a conspiracy theory that had made its way into his politics. We were debating the facts—for a long time. Exhausted, I took a breath and asked myself what I actually wanted. Why did I want to change my father's mind?

I said, "I love you, and I'm just worried that you are being misled." The debate ended instantly. We then entered a conversation about who

we can trust on the internet. He softened, and admitted he was open to changing his mind about the facts, just wary of where they came from.

When I asked myself why I wanted him to change his mind, my answer was, “I don’t trust his sources, and don’t want him to trust those sources either.” Why? “Because I trust other sources who disagree, and I wish he did too.” Why? “I want us to be on the same side.” Why? You can keep asking until you are contemplating quarks and gluons, but it’s crucial you at least share your intentions for challenging someone’s ideas, or else both of your positions will be: “I am right, and I think you are wrong.”

I hope you will carry that question—*Why do I want to change their mind?*—in your mental backpack as you travel with me chapter by chapter. And I hope that question will blossom, as it did for me, into a series of questions.

You are reading these words because we each have the power to give up old beliefs, to replace old ignorance with new wisdom, to shift our attitudes in light of new evidence, and to free ourselves from outdated dogma, harmful traditions, and the diminishing returns of defunct politics and practices. The ability to realize we are wrong is baked right into the gooey mess of neurons wobbling around in every human head. But when and what and who should we be trying to change?

What counts as dangerous ignorance or outdated dogma? What qualifies as a malignant tradition, defunct politics, or a misguided practice? What norms are so harmful, what beliefs are so incorrect that, once we know how to change minds, we should take every opportunity to do so? And here’s the kicker: How do we know when we are right and they are wrong?

But also, what does the phrase “change your mind” even mean?

We will answer all of these going forward, but I didn’t start this

journey with these questions in mind. They came later, after a good deal of my own ignorance revealed itself. That's why I think we must ask ourselves these questions here, before we begin, and bring them along to the lessons and conversations ahead.

The ability to change our minds, update our priors, and entertain other points of view is one of our greatest strengths, an evolved ability that comes free with every copy of the human brain. You soon will see why, to leverage that strength, we must avoid debate and start having conversations. Debates have winners and losers, and no one wants to be a loser. But if both sides feel safe to explore their reasoning, to think about their own thinking, to explore their motivations, we can each avoid the dead-end goal of winning an argument.

Instead, we can pursue the shared goal of learning the truth.

HOW MINDS CHANGE

1



POST-TRUTH

I spotted Charlie Veitch as he rose on an escalator from beneath the London Road entrance to Manchester’s Piccadilly train station. He wore a green plaid hoodie, blue jeans, and a backpack. A splotch of white just above his temples stood out from within his otherwise conservative haircut. At the top, he smiled, pivoted, and kept his momentum going as he closed the distance between us.

He said hello while walking and changed direction to enter the flow of pedestrian traffic, his body parting a parade of people walking in the opposite direction. Charlie kept his head turned toward me and abandoned introductions, explaining with wide gestures the architecture and history of the city where he and his partner, Stacey, were now raising three kids. Life was good here, he said, though he still worked under a false name to keep the truthers from finding him.

Charlie is a tall man, so keeping up with his stride took some effort. I felt pulled along as if I had grabbed the back of a bus, my feet suspended

in the air like in a Chaplin gag. He had insights he wanted to share on homelessness, the local art and music scenes, modern movie production, the similarities and differences between Manchester and London and Berlin—all before we had reached our third crosswalk, which he would have likely ignored like the others if traffic had permitted.

I wanted to meet Charlie because when he was making a living as a professional conspiracy theorist he had done something incredible, something so rare and unusual that, before I started this book, I thought was impossible—something that had nearly ruined his life.

It all began in June of 2011, just ahead of the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, when Charlie boarded a British Airways flight at Heathrow Airport bound for the United States and Ground Zero. He and four other truthers joined a group of cameramen, editors, and sound engineers along with comedian Andrew Maxwell, the host of a TV series called *Conspiracy Road Trip*. Maxwell and his crew would make four programs for the BBC, each dealing with a different conspiratorial community: UFO enthusiasts, evolution deniers, London bombing conspiracy theorists, and truthers, the people who believe the official story of what happened on September 11, 2001, is a lie.*

The premise of the show was to send such people around the world and have them travel by bus to meet experts and eyewitnesses who would challenge their conspiratorial beliefs with undeniable evidence, with facts. Whatever drama that ensued made for great television, arguing and frustration on both sides cut together with playful music and the usual reality show editing. At the end of each show, Maxwell, our host and guide into the world of conspiracy theorists, would sit down

* The BBC has taken down the 9/11 episode from the show's official website. It is still available online through a number of streaming services.

with his road trippers to see if the facts presented had persuaded them in any way. That was the hook. People never budged. Maxwell, exasperated, ended every road trip shaking his head, wondering what it would take to reach them.

But Charlie's episode was different.

He and his fellow 9/11 truthers spent ten days in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. They walked the crash sites. They met experts in demolition, explosives, air travel, and construction. They met family members of the victims. They met officials from the government, including one who was at the Pentagon when it was hit and helped with the gory cleanup. They visited the original architects of the World Trade Center. They met the person who was the national operations manager of the FAA at the time of the attacks. They even trained in a commercial airliner flight simulator and took flying lessons over New York City, landing a single-engine airplane with no prior piloting experience. At each step of their journey, they met people who were either at the top of their fields of expertise, saw 9/11 unfold firsthand, or had lost someone that day.

Despite Maxwell's efforts, the truthers doubled down, more certain than ever that there was a conspiracy afoot. If anything, his efforts confirmed it. They all argued with him, suggesting they were being tricked by paid actors, or that the experts were mistaken, or the so-called facts came from dubious sources. All except for one.

At the time, Charlie was a leader in the truther community. His main income for years came from producing hundreds of anarchy- and conspiracy-themed YouTube videos, some receiving a million views or more. He told his fans that the fires of 9/11 couldn't have burned hot enough to melt the World Trade Center's steel beams, and that the buildings fell perfectly into their footprints: it must have been a controlled demolition. He traced out the connections between governments,

businesses, militaries, and so on to determine who was truly responsible. He routinely hit the streets with a megaphone in one hand and a camera in the other, working diligently to gain subscribers and wake people up to the truth.

Once it became his full-time job, Charlie traveled the subversive speaker circuit where he regularly appeared at festivals that catered to fellow conspiracy theorists, anarchists, and neo-hippies seeking sex, drugs, and free Wi-Fi. He became friend and collaborator to world-famous histrionic patriot Alex Jones and the interdimensional reptilian investigator David Icke.

For five years, he had paid his dues, even going to jail on several occasions. He was arrested for impersonating a police officer when Russian state television sent him to cover the G20 Summit in Toronto to uncover the machinations of a dystopian new world order. Later, he was arrested on, ironically, suspicion of conspiracy for planning a protest during the royal wedding. Covering his capture, the *Telegraph* described him as a “known anarchist.”

A darling of the conspiracy community, a rising star on YouTube, Charlie saw himself as an up-and-coming celebrity provocateur. Hated by some. Beloved by others. He thought the trip to New York would be his big break, the event that would take him mainstream. But once there, at the height of his fame, he did something unbelievable and, as it would turn out, unforgivable.

He changed his mind.



At the Eastern Bloc coffee shop, we sat through a few revolutions of customers stopping to eat and talk and laugh, and Charlie seemed to feed off of it, raising his voice so that bystanders could easily hear him

explain from within a cloud of American Spirit cigarette smoke why he was no longer a truther.

Early in the filming of his episode, he and the other truthers met a demolition expert named Brent Blanchard, who told them that a controlled demolition would have required a massive crew of people. They would have needed to first demolish the inner walls of the World Trade Center (WTC) towers to expose hundreds of internal columns, then pre-cut each one with jackhammer-type devices, and then insert explosives, Blanchard explained. It would have taken months for workers to rig the WTC towers for a controlled demolition of that size. All the while, they would have been seen going in and out of the building, taking lunch breaks, moving equipment, dealing with debris and construction waste. It would have been impossible to conceal.

Charlie asked: If this was true, why did the buildings fall perfectly into their footprints? Blanchard explained they didn't. He used a prop made of Legos to show Charlie how the top half destroyed itself and everything below it in a chain reaction as it all came crashing down. It blew the debris outward, he explained, not into the buildings' footprints.

Charlie asked: But if it was only jet fuel and not explosives, and jet fuel doesn't burn hot enough to melt steel beams, how could the buildings have collapsed? Blanchard explained that the steel skeleton didn't need to melt. The beams only needed to bend just the slightest bit. Once bent, they couldn't support the entire weight of the building above them and would continue to bend even farther, past the point where they could support the enormous forces pressing down. Charlie didn't argue. He absorbed Blanchard's explanation, unsure what to think.

The group later met the architects of the World Trade Center who patiently explained that it was designed to withstand an airplane of its

era, not a modern jet loaded with fuel and traveling at full speed. They met Alice Hoagland, who lost her son, Mark Bingham, whose hijacked flight crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. They met Tom Heidenberger, who lost his wife of thirty years, Michelle, an American Airlines flight attendant who was working on the plane that slammed into the Pentagon. The doubt rushed in on him, filling his head with a swarm of other doubts.

“All of this suddenly, then, bang!” Charlie said, describing his realization. The flight school, the blueprints, the architecture firm, the demolition experts—it had all chipped away at his certainty. It exposed the possibility that he might be wrong, but it was the grieving family members that confirmed it.

But back at the hotel, Charlie was surprised to learn that his epiphany was his alone. The others told him that Hoagland had been brainwashed by the FBI, or worse yet, she was an actress hired by the BBC to trick them all with her “crocodile tears.” It shocked Charlie, who had held Hoagland while she sobbed. He said he began hating his companions, thinking, “You fucking animals. You disgusting fucking animals.”

While still on the trip, Charlie stood in Times Square and filmed himself explaining what he had learned. He had met experts who showed him how easy it was to fly a plane and land it with little experience, how hard it would be to create a controlled demolition with no one noticing, how the buildings could withstand the impact of a modern jet loaded with fuel, and so on.

“I don’t know, man,” he said, detailing the specifics. He understood why so many people, like him, had suspected foul play. There had been lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and wars had been based on those lies. Their anger was justified, their obsessive pursuit for answers understandable.

“We’re not gullible,” Charlie said. “We’re truth seekers in a 9/11 Truth movement just trying to find out the truth about what happened. The mind boggles. This reality, this universe is truly one of smoke screens, illusions, and wrong paths, but also the right path, which is always be committed to the truth. Do not hold on to religious dogma. If you are presented with new evidence, take it on, even if it contradicts what you or your group might be believing or wanting to believe. You have to give the truth the greatest respect, and I do.”

A week later, back home, Charlie edited and uploaded a three-minute-and-thirty-three-second confessional intercut with footage from his trip. He titled it: *No Emotional Attachment to 9/11 Theories—The Truth is Most Important*.

He wrote in the video’s description that after five years of believing in the conspiracy theory, after appearing on Alex Jones’s program several times, after promoting the truther community on stage and on television, he now believed that “America’s defenses got caught with their pants around their ankles. I do not think there was high-level complicity in the events of that day. Yes, I have changed my mind.” He signed off with, “Honour the truth—Charlie.”

The backlash was swift and brutal.

At first, people began emailing, asking if he was okay, asking what the government had done to him. Within the first few days, fellow conspiracy theorist Ian R. Crane posted on truther forums that a producer friend told him Charlie had been manipulated by a psychologist who worked closely with mentalist Derren Brown. That explained why Charlie had uploaded that video.

Rumors began to spread that he had been an operative sent by the

FBI or the CIA or the British Secret Service the whole time, sent to infiltrate the ranks of the truther movement—a plant sent to discredit them. Conspiracy radio host Max Igan said that Charlie was the first person he had ever heard of in the truther movement to change his mind. It just didn't make sense. Commenters to that show's website wrote things like, "they got to him," and "so Charlie how much hush money did the elites give you to shut your mouth?" and "that's like exchanging the belief in gravity for believing that it doesn't exist."

Hastily shot response videos began to appear online claiming Charlie had been paid off by the BBC. To explain himself, he appeared on internet conspiracy talk shows. He shared what the experts had told him and why it was so convincing, but his fellow truthers were incredulous. Charlie begged in his own response videos for decency. Before long, it became clear he was being excommunicated. The harassment continued for months. His website was hacked. He shut down his comment sections. David Icke and Alex Jones cut ties.

Charlie's episode of *Conspiracy Road Trip* eventually aired. At the end, he told Maxwell, "I just need to basically take it on the chin, admit I was wrong, be humble about it, and carry on," but by then the truthers had made that impossible. Charlie told me the most heinous moment in his harassment came when someone discovered he had an unpublicized YouTube channel that featured videos of his family and other personal material.

"In one of my videos, my sister had two younger children at the time, and I went to visit her in Cornwall, lovely part of England, and some asshole—" Charlie searched for the right words. "—The channel was called, like, 'Kill Charlie Veitch,' and he Photoshopped nudity on my sister's children. They sent it to my sister."

Charlie's sister called him crying. She couldn't understand how or

why it was happening. His mother would call, too. Someone found her email address and sent her thousands of emails, including one that contained child pornography with her grandchildren's faces superimposed. The sender claimed the images were real, and that Charlie had taken them. She contacted Charlie thinking it was true.

"They were out for his blood, like a trophy," explained his partner, Stacey Bluer, who had joined us for breakfast. "When I was pregnant, I started receiving a lot of messages—'your child is devil's spawn,' all this horrible stuff."

Alex Jones chimed in with a video of his own. He sat in a darkened room, his face illuminated by red light, the camera zoomed in on his eyes, and explained that he knew Charlie was a double agent all along. He ended by saying his fans should remain vigilant because people like Charlie would keep showing up, and they might say they had changed their minds after being in the movement for a while. For Charlie, that was it. He gave up trying to convince anyone of the things he now believed. The truthers had officially cast him out, and so he left the community for good.

In April 2015, Charlie landed his current job, which I won't describe in much detail for the sake of his anonymity, but it involves selling properties around the world.

"I'm very good at it. I can earn good money," he told me, proud that he had finally eluded his haters. "It took a while, but ultimately my six years of YouTube, or having to just rant and speak eloquently about abstract concepts, it was almost like I did six years of training. And I've developed a very thick skin. I think I am a very good salesman."

"That's a good endorsement for how maybe Google won't destroy your career," I told him, considering how troubling a google search for Charlie Veitch would have been for a potential employer.

Charlie told me that, actually, he had posted photos of his new business cards to Facebook when he was first hired, and right away someone emailed his boss and told him Charlie was a child abuser and a criminal. He said he had already come clean about his YouTube past, but not the harassment.

“I told my boss the story that we’re talking about now, the whole life change.” Then Charlie imitated him: “It’s ok Charlie. These people are cunts, real cunts.”

Charlie changed his name after that and got new business cards.

At first, Charlie’s story seemed like a paradox. Charlie Veitch changed his mind in the face of overwhelming evidence. But his fellow truthers saw that same evidence, talked to the same experts, hugged the same widows and widowers, and came away feeling more certain than ever that 9/11 was an inside job. I thought there must be something else at play, something that maybe had very little to do with facts themselves.

For one thing, from writing my previous books, I knew the idea that facts alone could make everyone see things the same way was a venerable misconception. The nineteenth-century rationalist philosophers said that public education would enhance democracy by eliminating all superstitions. Benjamin Franklin wrote that public libraries would make the common man as educated as the aristocracy and thus empower the public to vote for their best interests. Timothy Leary, the psychologist who proselytized mind expansion through psychedelics and later became a champion of the cyberpunk ethos, preached that computers, and later the internet, would remove the need for information gatekeepers and give people “power to the pupil”—the democratic might that comes from being able to put whatever you want into your

eyeballs. Each dreamed that one day we would all have access to all the same facts, and then, naturally, we would all agree on what those facts meant.

In science communication, this used to be called the information deficit model, long debated among frustrated academics. When controversial research findings on everything from the theory of evolution to the dangers of leaded gasoline failed to convince the public, they'd contemplate how to best tweak the model so the facts could speak for themselves. But once independent websites, then social media, then podcasts, then YouTube began to speak for the facts and undermine the authority of fact-based professionals like journalists, doctors, and documentary filmmakers, the information deficit model was finally put to rest. In recent years, that has led to a sort of moral panic.

While I was writing this book, in late 2016, the Oxford University Press dictionary named “post-truth” its international word of the year, citing a 2,000 percent increase in its usage during arguments about the Brexit referendum and the United States presidential election. Commenting on the announcement, *The Washington Post* wrote that they weren't surprised. Instead, they lamented, “It's official: Truth is dead. Facts are passé.”

Throughout the 2010s, terms like *alternative facts* rose to the top of public consciousness, and across the world the remaining uninitiated became intimately familiar with long-banded concepts in psychology like filter bubbles and confirmation bias. Apple CEO Tim Cook told the world that fake news was “killing people's minds.” Then the term *fake news* mutated from a rebranded way of talking about propaganda to referring to just about anything people refused to believe. This led Brian Greene, a physicist who studies string theory, to tell NPR, “We've come to a very strange place in American democracy where there's an

assault on some of the features of reality that one would have thought, just a couple years ago, were beyond debate, discussion or argument.”

Social media adapted, leaving behind photos of tacos and babies for arguments over contentious issues that generated more engagement as they grew more intractable. A new cold war began, one based on targeted misinformation, and within months Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was sitting before Congress explaining how Russian trolls were seeding news feeds with weaponized clickbait, not so much to misinform, but to encourage the sort of dead-end arguing that makes democratic collaboration difficult.

As the decade came to a close, a *New York Times* op-ed titled “The Age of Post-Truth Politics” argued that democracy itself was now in danger because facts had “lost their ability to support consensus.” *The New Yorker* examined “Why Facts Don’t Change Your Mind,” *The Atlantic* announced, “This Article Won’t Change Your Mind,” and then came *Time* magazine’s ominous black-and-red, bold-print cover featuring a single question that seemed to sum up the moral panic over our growing epistemic chaos: “Is Truth Dead?”

And all of that was before QAnon, “Stop the Steal” rallies, the insurrection, the impeachment of Donald Trump, mobs ripping down 5G towers out of suspicion they may be emitting toxic rays, protests at state capitals claiming COVID-19 was a hoax, the rise of COVID anti-vaxxers, and massive protests over police brutality and systemic racism after the death of George Floyd. In each case, within this new information ecosystem, we desperately tried to change each other’s minds, sometimes with videos, sometimes with news articles, sometimes with Wikipedia pages.

But after learning about Charlie Veitch, I couldn’t stop wondering: If we now live in a post-truth world, if facts can’t change people’s minds,

then what explained the fact that Charlie *did* change his mind when presented with facts? That's why I traveled to Manchester to meet him, and after hearing his story, I started to feel the same kind of doubts he had felt in New York.

I didn't know it when I first met Charlie Veitch, but the answer to why the facts that changed his mind didn't change the minds of his peers would reveal why so many of us resist some facts and not others. So we will return to his story after we visit activists, neuroscientists, and psychologists, to help us understand how we form our beliefs, attitudes, and values in the first place; and how those mental constructs shift, mutate, and change as we move through the world, learning and experiencing things that challenge our preconceived notions and received wisdom.

In a newly flattened, online world, where we are more likely to engage with people who disagree with us than ever before, widespread resistance to change—on issues as wide-ranging as whether Bill Gates wants to use vaccines to put microchips in your blood to whether climate change is real to whether *The Notebook* was a good movie—led us into an age of dangerous cynicism.

Inside this new information ecosystem where everyone had access to facts that seemed to confirm their views, we began to believe we were living in separate realities. We've come to see the people on the other side as unreachable as the truthers who accompanied Charlie to New York. I used to see things this way, too, but in writing this book, I changed my mind.

That all began when I ventured out to meet professional mind changers in Los Angeles.

A brain-bending investigation of why some people never change their minds—and others do in an instant

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David McRaney is a science journalist, author, lecturer, and a self-described psychology nerd fascinated with brains, mind, and culture.

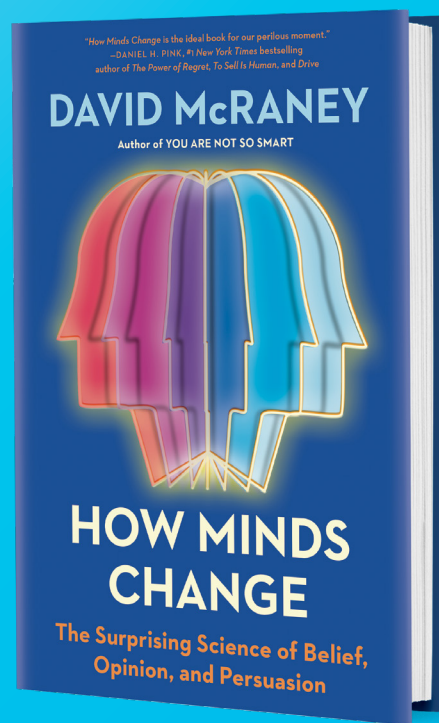
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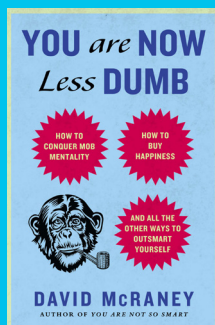
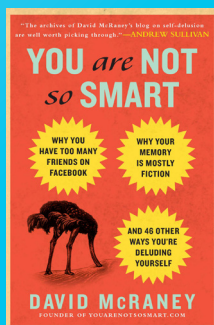
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