



The Taboo

*On the Things We're Not Allowed to Question, and
What It Costs to Obey*

*The rooms on your own map you were taught
never to enter*

BY

DAREN READS

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by Daren Reads

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*For anyone who's ever felt a pull toward a door
they were told to stay away from. The pull was
never the problem. The map was.*

The Parts of the Map They Blacked Out

Every culture hands you a map, and on that map are regions blacked out. Here be dragons. Don't go there. Don't ask that. Don't pull that thread. And most people spend an entire life obediently staying off the dark patches of their own map, never once noticing the strangest thing about them: that you were the one who agreed to call those places forbidden.

That's what a taboo really is. Not just something you're not supposed to say. Something you're not supposed to question, examine, or explore. A door with a sign on it, and the sign works not because the door is locked but because you've agreed never to try the handle. We think taboos mark the dangerous and the depraved, the few dark corners a healthy society fences off. Mostly they mark the opposite: the most ordinary human territory there is, the stuff nearly everyone is living through, fenced off precisely because looking straight at it would crack the polite story we all maintain about who we are and how the world works.

And the cost is bigger than it first sounds. The blacked-out regions don't disappear because you avoid them. You just end up living by rules you never examined, afraid of rooms you never entered, running on inherited beliefs and borrowed fears you didn't choose and aren't allowed to question. You obey a map someone else drew, and you call it your life. The unexplored parts don't stay quiet. They run you from behind the curtain, all the more powerfully for never being looked at.

Now, not every line is there for nothing, and I won't pretend otherwise. Some walls protect something real. There's a difference between a boundary, a wall around something genuinely worth protecting, and a taboo, a wall built only to keep you from looking. The first keeps something safe. The second keeps you obedient. Most of what we're told not to explore is the second kind wearing the costume of the first, and learning to tell them apart is most of the work of growing up.

One more thing, the engine under all of it: the forbidden is magnetic. Black out a region of the map and you don't kill the curiosity, you concentrate it. We are pulled, helplessly, toward exactly what we're told not to look at. That pull isn't a defect in you. It's the part of you that never fully agreed to the map.

A small instruction for how to read what follows. In each of these rooms there's the obvious thing, the thing you already half-know is in there, and then there's a second layer underneath that even people who go in usually miss, and then there are the questions worth actually sitting with once you're standing inside. We're going for all three. Not to be shocking, though some of it will be. To find out what's really there, behind the signs you were told never to question.

Sex

Start with the oldest forbidden region: your own desire.

You're allowed to have a sex life. What you're quietly not allowed to do is look at it honestly, get curious about it, ask what you actually want instead of what you're supposed to want. The map blacks out your own wanting. From the time you're young you learn there's an approved desire and a forbidden one, and you learn to perform the first and never examine the second, until your own inner life becomes a region of yourself you're afraid to enter. You don't explore it even alone, in your own head, because somewhere you decided that looking too closely at what moves you would turn up something monstrous.

Here's the layer most people miss, even the ones brave enough to look. The shame is almost never about the actual content of what you want. It's about being caught wanting at all, about being seen as a creature with appetites instead of the clean, managed self you present. That's why the specifics barely matter. The most vanilla person and the most adventurous one feel the same lurch of exposure at the thought of being truly known, because the taboo was never really aimed at any particular desire. It was aimed at the wanting itself. And here's the thing nobody tells you: desire is information, not a verdict. What turns you on is data about you, the same as what makes you laugh or what moves you to tears, and treating it as a moral emergency is what keeps you a stranger to yourself.

Flip the angle for a second and ask who profits from your shame. A person who is ashamed of their own wanting is easy to sell to, easy to shape, easy to make feel that the approved version, the one being marketed, is the only acceptable one. Your disconnection from your own desire is somebody's business model and somebody else's idea of control. The sign on that door wasn't always put there for your protection.

So how do you actually go in. Quietly, and alone first. The questions worth sitting with aren't lurid, they're simple and they're hard: What do I actually want, underneath what I think I'm supposed to want? Where did I first learn this part of me was shameful, and was that person right? Can I be curious about my own wanting without immediately putting it on trial? There's a real difference between curiosity and compulsion, between knowing yourself and feeding something that's hurting you or someone else, and that difference matters. But that's not usually why the door stays shut. It stays shut out of inherited, unexamined fear, and the way through fear has always been to look at the thing in good light. Go in. You're allowed to know what you actually want. That was never the thing you needed protecting from.

Drugs

Here's a question you're not supposed to ask: why is one way of changing how you feel applauded, and another one a crime?

Because everyone changes how they feel. Everyone reaches for something. Three coffees to start the day, two glasses of wine to stop it. The scroll, the overwork, the sugar, the gym you can't skip without panic. We just don't examine it, because the map says some of these are normal life and some are the mark of a broken person, and we're not supposed to question where that line came from or whether it makes any sense. Pull the thread and it gets uncomfortable fast, because the line turns out to be drawn less by logic than by law, fashion, and luck.

Here's what almost everyone misses, including most of the people lecturing about it. The substance is downstream. Nobody reaches for relief who isn't in some kind of pain, and the real question was never the drug, it was the ache underneath it, the thing you're trying to quiet or escape or feel less of. We obsess over the substance and never look at the wound, which is exactly backwards, because a person whose pain is handled doesn't need much numbing, and a person in agony will find something to reach for no matter how many times you tell them the thing they reached for is bad. The moral panic about which substance keeps everyone safely distracted from the harder question, which is why so many people are in so much pain that they'll risk everything to feel a little less of it.

Look at it from the other side of the street, at the person you'd cross the road to avoid. We tell ourselves they're a different kind of human, a cautionary category, and that comfortable distance is exactly what stops us from seeing the truth, which is that the gap between them and us is mostly which substance and how much luck. Make that person a separate species and you never have to ask whether you're medicating too, just in a way the culture happens to applaud.

So question the line, honestly. The point isn't to go exploring every substance, and I'm not romanticizing the ones that genuinely wreck people, because some do, and that's real and I won't soften it. The point is to look at what you reach for and ask the questions underneath it: What am I actually trying to feel, or not feel? What's the ache this is managing? What would be here if I put the thing down? If the honest answer is that something has its hooks in you, then the bravest and least shameful move is to drag it into the light and look at it with someone, because the not-looking, the keeping it in the dark where shame lives, is part of what's pulling you under. A thing you're not allowed to examine is a thing that gets to run you unexamined.

Money

Want to find the most off-limits subject in a culture? Notice what people will explore with you before they'll tell you what they earn. They'll examine their childhoods, their therapy, their sex lives, sooner than they'll let you near their salary, their savings, their debt. Money is the last region of the map almost nobody's allowed to question, and the silence is so total it's gone invisible.

And here's the layer people miss: the silence isn't an accident of manners, it's doing work, and the work mostly benefits someone other than you. Because no one says real numbers, everyone compares their own messy reality against everyone else's polished surface and quietly loses. You see the holiday and the house. You don't see the debt under them, the family money, the panic behind the nice car. So you conclude you're uniquely bad with money, uniquely behind, when you have no actual data, only everyone's performance. Two people doing the same job sit in the same room for years, each underpaid, each ashamed to say a number that might have told them so. The taboo against discussing money keeps workers from comparing pay, keeps the struggling isolated, and keeps the whole anxious game running. Manners, it turns out, can be a very profitable thing to enforce.

There's a deeper confusion in here too, the one that does the real damage to how you feel: we quietly treat being good with money as a kind of virtue and being bad with it as a moral failing, when an enormous amount of it is just where you started, what you inherited, what you were taught, and plain luck, all of it wearing

the costume of character. The person who never worries about money is often not wiser than you. They just started further up the hill. Flip it around and notice the person you envy may be drowning behind the surface you're comparing yourself to, and the certainty that everyone else has it figured out is built entirely from a silence that hides the truth in both directions.

So break the rule, carefully and on purpose. The questions worth sitting with: What do I actually have and actually owe, in real numbers, looked at without flinching? What am I really comparing myself against, and is it even real? Whose approval is my spending secretly for? Then, if you can, have one honest conversation with someone you trust where the real numbers come out, and watch the shame start to evaporate, because it turns out nearly everyone is improvising and anxious and feels behind. Separate your worth from your net worth, because the culture has spent a lot of effort fusing them, and that fusion was never for your benefit. The number was never as shameful as the silence around it.

Power

Two questions about power you're not supposed to ask. The first you ask about yourself. The second you'd rather not ask at all.

The first: would it corrupt me too? We're allowed to condemn the tyrant boss, the politician who sold out, the friend who got a little authority and turned insufferable. What we're not supposed to examine is whether we'd be any different. The map lets you keep a flattering story, that you're good by nature, that power wouldn't touch you, and it quietly forbids the harder look, the one that admits most people get worse when handed power over others, and that you have never actually been tested. Almost everyone who got worse was certain, beforehand, that they'd be the exception.

The second question is the one that's really off-limits, because it's about you right now: who, or what, owns you? We're allowed to call ourselves free. We're not supposed to examine how little of our own lives we actually run. Look at what gives the orders. The job you can't leave. The boss whose approval you chase like a dog. The mortgage that owns your next thirty years. The image you maintain at any cost. The person whose love you keep auditioning for. The phone you obey before you're even awake. We perform independence and quietly serve a master, and the one thing we're trained never to do is name it.

Here's what almost everyone misses: a lot of that powerlessness is chosen, because a master you can blame is more comfortable

than a freedom you'd actually have to use. As long as something else owns you, your smallness isn't your fault, and that's a strangely cozy place to live. The cage has its comforts, and the biggest one is that you never have to find out what you'd do if the door were open. And while you're cataloguing who has power over you, turn your head and look down, because you have power over people too, more than you admit, over the ones who depend on you, work for you, love you, need something from you. You'd swear you're the fair one. Almost everyone with power swears that. The people underneath you might tell a different story, and you've probably arranged your life so you never have to hear it.

So go to the questions, and they're not the comfortable ones about being oppressed. They're worse and more useful. What would I actually do if no one were watching, if there were no consequences? That answer is the real shape of your character, not the performance you give when there are witnesses. What am I afraid would happen if I stopped serving this thing I call my responsibility, and is that fear even still true, or am I obeying a threat that expired years ago? Where do I have power, and how do I actually use it on the people who can't push back? You only find out which of your masters is a real commitment and which is a decorated cage by examining it, and that's exactly the look the map forbids, because a quiet servant is more useful than an honest one. Ask anyway. What owns me. The only door out of any cage starts with finally looking at the bars.

Crime

You're allowed to condemn crime. You're not allowed to question the line that puts you on the safe side of it.

The map draws a clean border: criminals over there, good people over here, two different kinds of human. And we're trained not to examine that border too closely, because if you do, it blurs fast. Almost everyone has crossed a line. The thing taken that wasn't yours. The lie told to the officer, the boss, the form. The rule broken when no one was watching, filed away under "that was different, that doesn't count, I'm not one of those people." Which is exactly what everyone else is telling themselves about their own quiet transgression. The border between the criminals and the good people gets drawn, conveniently, just past whatever each of us has personally done.

Here's the layer that's genuinely uncomfortable. A huge amount of what separates the person in the cell from the person reading this isn't character, it's circumstance: poverty, desperation, addiction, who your parents were, what you were driven to and how cornered you were when you did it, and above all whether you got caught. We tell ourselves crime reveals a bad soul. Often it reveals a bad situation meeting an ordinary one. Take the comfortable person and strip away the safety net, the options, the margin for error, and watch how fast their morality starts to bend, because morality is a lot easier to keep clean when you've never truly been hungry. And notice the other thing we don't examine: that legal and moral are not the same word. Plenty

that's legal is monstrous, and plenty that's illegal harms no one, and the map quietly trains you to feel that the law is the same thing as the good, which is a very convenient feeling for whoever wrote the law.

Watch your own fascination, too, because it gives the game away. We can't stop consuming the heist, the con, the true-crime detail. That pull isn't a defect. It's the forbidden being magnetic, the part of you pressing its face to the glass of a line you'd never cross but can't stop staring at, and it's worth asking what that hunger is actually about.

The questions, then. What have I actually done that I've quietly filed under "doesn't count," and what makes mine an exception and theirs a verdict? Where am I confusing what's legal with what's right? When I feel contempt for someone who broke a rule, where is that contempt really coming from, and is it justice I want or just the comfort of feeling superior and safe? None of this is to excuse harm, and harm is real, and accountability matters. It's to examine the border honestly, because the second you do, the contempt that lets you treat people who crossed it as another species stops being available, and you're left with something harder and truer: they're people, like us, who did a thing, like we have, often with far less room to choose than we'd like to believe.

Death

The one certain fact about your life is the region of the map you're most forbidden to explore. Everyone dies. Everyone you love dies. You die. And we've agreed that looking straight at it is morbid, that examining it is a buzzkill, that the right thing to do with the single most certain event of your existence is to not think about it.

Here's what almost everyone gets backwards: avoiding death doesn't shrink the fear, it feeds it. The thing you refuse to look at grows in the dark, and a culture that never examines mortality doesn't become braver about it, it becomes more terrified, more frantic, more desperate to fill every silence so the fact can't catch up. The people who actually look at death, who sit with it on purpose, almost always come back less afraid, not more, and reporting the same strange thing: that facing it sharpened life instead of darkening it, that the limit is exactly what makes the time matter. The denial was never protecting you from the fear. The denial was the fear, wearing a polite face.

And there's a whole forbidden room inside the forbidden room, which is what we actually feel when death comes close. We're handed one approved way to grieve, the dignified, tearful one, and forbidden from examining the rest. The relief when someone's suffering ends, or when someone difficult is finally gone, and the guilt chasing it. The anger at the person for leaving. The numbness, the horror of feeling nothing when you're supposed to be destroyed. Nearly everyone who grieves feels at

least one of these and decides they're doing it wrong, because they were only ever shown the performance of grief, never the real and messy shape of it.

So look, deliberately, before life forces you to. The questions are the oldest ones and they reward the asking. What exactly am I afraid of: not existing, the pain of dying, leaving people behind, or getting to the end having wasted the time? Each fear points somewhere different, and most of them, looked at, turn out to be quieter than the formless dread you get from not looking at all. If I really let in that this ends, what would I stop wasting my days on? And the hardest, the one the deathbed asks of everyone: am I living the way I'd want to have lived? Talk about it with someone, out loud, the fear and the wrong feelings and all. The thing you were forbidden to explore was never going to be made smaller by looking away. Only lonelier, and only more in charge of you for staying in the dark.

Religion

Here's the most forbidden act in almost any belief system, religious or not: questioning it from the inside.

Politics and religion, we say, are the things you don't discuss. But the deeper rule isn't about discussing. It's about examining the belief of your own tribe, pulling the thread you were raised never to pull. The devout family where doubt is unspeakable. The secular crowd where admitting you pray, or that you're hungry for something more, earns a smirk. Every tribe hands you a set of sacred ideas and a quiet instruction: you may believe these, you may defend these, but you may not genuinely question these, and you certainly may not leave. So people sit on the biggest questions a human can ask, what's real, what happens when we die, whether any of it means anything, never daring to truly explore them, because exploring them honestly might cost them their place.

Here's the layer that stings, and it's aimed at everyone, not just the religious. We love the word "cult" for everyone else's belief and never our own. Theirs is brainwashing. Ours is just the truth. But the tell of a cult was never the strangeness of the belief. It's the rule against questioning it, the punishment for leaving, the certainty that the people outside are lost. By that measure almost everyone is in one, religious or political or ideological, holding a bundle of beliefs they're not actually allowed to examine, surrounded by people who'd treat real doubt as betrayal. The surest sign you're standing inside one is that this paragraph is

making you angry on behalf of your particular set of certainties. The people most sure they think for themselves are very often the ones who've simply never tested the walls, because the walls of your own tribe are invisible from the inside. They just look like reality.

And notice what doubt actually is, because the taboo lies about it. Doubt isn't the enemy of a real conviction, it's how you find out whether you have one. A belief you arrived at by questioning is yours. A belief you hold because questioning it would get you exiled isn't a belief at all, it's a membership card.

So the questions. Which of my certainties make me flinch when they're poked, because the flinch is a map of where the walls are? What do I actually believe, when I'm completely alone and no tribe is watching, versus what I perform to keep my seat? If I honestly explored this and came out somewhere else, what would it cost me, and is that cost about the truth or about belonging? You don't have to land anywhere, and I won't pretend to know what's true. Pull the thread anyway. A belief that can't survive your honest questioning was never really your belief. It was just the map, and you were never supposed to ask who drew it, or what they got out of you never asking.

Mental Illness

We've finally made it acceptable to mention mental health in the abstract. What's still forbidden is to actually look at the contents.

"I'm fine" is the most common lie in any language, and we all keep telling it, because the map lets you gesture at struggling but not examine the real thing out loud. Try saying the actual specifics, the genuinely dark thought, the precise shape of what's happening behind your eyes, and watch the room tense. The polite version of the taboo lifted. The real version, the unfiltered interior of a struggling mind, is as off-limits as ever, which means people still face the worst of it without ever being allowed to look at it with anyone.

Here's the layer that would save people the most suffering if they got it: the contents are almost always more ordinary and more survivable than the silence has convinced you. The dark thought you're sure marks you as uniquely broken, the intrusive image, the flat grey stretch where nothing matters, these are common, far more common than anyone admits, precisely because no one admits them. And there's a mechanism worth knowing. A thought spoken out loud to a safe person tends to shrink, to lose its grip, to become a thing you have rather than a thing that has you. A thought kept in the dark does the opposite, it grows, it festers, it convinces you that the reason you can't say it is that it's too monstrous to survive contact with another human being. That's the lie that keeps the worst of it in the dark, and the dark is exactly where it gets stronger.

Look at the angle, too. The person you envy for having it all together is very possibly white-knuckling their own afternoon, performing fine just like you, each of you alone in a crowd of people all faking the same composure. And ask who benefits from the performance. A world that needs you productive would rather you kept functioning quietly than admitted you were drowning, and "I'm fine" is the phrase that keeps the machine running while the person inside it goes under.

So, gently but without flinching, because this is the one where the silence isn't just lonely, it's dangerous. The questions: What's actually happening behind my eyes, in plain words, when I stop performing? What am I most afraid to say about my own mind, and what story am I telling myself about what it would mean if I said it? Who is one person I could risk the real version with? Telling that real version to a friend or a professional is not weakness and not a burden, it's the precise thing the taboo is built to prevent, which is exactly why it's the way out. Whatever is in there, you don't have to keep performing fine while you drown, and you should not explore the hardest region of yourself alone. That was never bravery. It was just the map, doing its worst.

The Family You're Supposed to Love

Here's a question you're trained from birth never to ask: do I actually like these people?

You're allowed to love your family. What you're not allowed to do is examine whether you do, honestly, or whether what you feel is mostly obligation, habit, and history. The rule is absolute and unspoken: you love your parents, your siblings, your relatives, automatically, no matter what, and to question it is monstrous. So the huge number of people who, if they looked honestly, would find they don't much like someone they're related to never look, because the map says that door leads somewhere shameful. They perform the warm, uncomplicated love they're supposed to feel and assume everyone else feels it for real.

Here's the distinction the taboo keeps you from making, and it changes everything once you have it: love and like are not the same thing, and neither is the same as obligation. You can love someone in the deep, wired-in, would-grieve-them way and still not enjoy a single afternoon in their company. You can owe someone for raising you and still not owe them unlimited access to your life. The map fuses all of these into one mandatory feeling and then calls you defective when your actual experience refuses to fit, which is a neat trick, because it means the problem is always you, never the relationship, never the person who earned the distance you feel.

And look at who the unquestioned rule protects, because it isn't always you. "But they're family" is the exact sentence that keeps people returning to those who treat them badly, that guilt-trips the one who finally wants distance, that hands a difficult or even cruel relative a lifetime pass on the strength of blood alone. The obligation gets enforced hardest, very often, by the people who benefit most from your not being allowed to question it.

So ask the forbidden question and let the answers be real. If this person weren't related to me, would I choose them in my life at all? What do I actually feel here, underneath what I've been told I'm supposed to feel? What would honest distance look like, and is the guilt I feel about it mine, or installed? You can love a parent and not want them in your daily life. You can honor what someone did for you and still protect yourself from who they are now. Looking at it honestly doesn't make you cold. It makes you one of the enormous number of people who quietly feel the same complicated thing and were all forbidden to examine it, each certain they were the only defective one. Blood doesn't guarantee affection, and you're allowed to know the difference instead of obeying a rule you never chose.

Love, Off the Record

We're allowed to talk about love endlessly, as long as we never question the script. The approved version, the one in the songs, you can explore forever. The parts that don't fit it, the common and forbidden parts, you're not supposed to look at, and not looking is how they fester.

Here are the things you're not allowed to examine. That you can love your partner deeply and, years in, not be in love the way you were promised, and that this might be what long love becomes rather than proof it's dying. That you can be happily committed and still feel a pull toward other people, still notice, still want. That you can love someone and sometimes not like them. That on a bad day you can wonder whether you chose right. And the most forbidden look of all: that you can love your kids with everything and still, sometimes, miss your old life, still find parts of parenthood relentless, still wonder, in a moment you'd never confess, what you gave up.

Here's the layer that would free a lot of people: the script set a standard that was never real, and then handed you your own ordinary human experience as evidence that you're failing. The movies sold a love that's all peak and no plateau, all certainty and no doubt, and measured against that fantasy, every real relationship looks broken, because every real relationship has flat stretches and doubts and the occasional cold spell. You're not falling short of love. You're falling short of an advertisement. And there's a mechanism people miss: the doubt you refuse to

examine doesn't go away, it leaks, it turns into distance and resentment and the slow drift of two people each privately convinced something's wrong and each too afraid to say it. The couples who last are very often not the ones who never doubted. They're the ones who could say the unsayable thing out loud and survive it.

Look at who profits from the script, too. An entire industry needs you to believe love should feel a certain way forever, because your sense of falling short is what keeps you buying the fantasy, chasing the next hit of certainty, trading in the real and complicated thing for the promise of the simple one that doesn't exist.

So the questions, held gently, because this is tender ground. What do I actually feel, underneath what the script says I'm supposed to feel? Is this doubt real information about the relationship, or is it just weather, the ordinary passing cloud that every long love moves through? Is there a true thing I've been afraid to say to the person I love, and what would happen if I risked saying it? A flicker of doubt is not a verdict and a flash of attraction is not a mandate, and none of this is permission to torch a good life over a normal feeling. It's permission to examine the whole of love, the parts in the songs and the parts they left out, without deciding the left-out parts mean you're doing it wrong. You're not failing at love. You're living the version no one was allowed to examine out loud.

Who Drew Your Map

So what do we do with all this. Because I can feel the wrong conclusion forming, and it's the easy one: tear up every rule, question everything into paralysis, treat every wall as a prison and knock them all down. That's not it, and it would be its own kind of foolishness, because some walls really do protect something.

Here's how to tell the difference, and it's the whole distinction the book turns on. A boundary is a wall around something genuinely worth protecting, and you can examine it freely, ask what it's for, and usually find a real answer that holds up. A taboo is a wall built only to keep you from looking, and the proof is that when you try to examine it, there's no real reason on the other side, just "because you don't ask that," just the flinch, just the inherited sign. A boundary survives your questions. A taboo only survives your obedience. The test was never whether a rule exists. It's whether the rule can stand being looked at.

So the move was never to burn the map. It's to stop treating the blacked-out regions as forbidden just because someone told you they were, and to start asking, of each one, who decided this was off-limits, what did they get out of my obedience, and what happens if I actually look. Your desire. What you medicate. The number you'd never say. The master you serve and call freedom. The line you've crossed. The fact that you'll die. The belief your tribe won't let you question. The contents of your own mind. The family you're supposed to love without examining. The doubt

inside your love. Every one of them is a door with a sign on it, and behind almost every sign is not a monster but a piece of ordinary human truth you were simply never allowed to see.

And here's the quiet gift waiting in the blacked-out places. You were never the only one standing at that door. Every region you were afraid to explore, certain you alone were drawn to it, is one that nearly everyone is standing in front of, just as quietly, just as afraid to look. Walk in anyway. Question the thing you were told never to question. Explore the room you were told to stay out of. You'll usually find two things waiting: a truth more ordinary and more survivable than the sign suggested, and the footprints of everyone who came to look before you and was told, like you, that they were the only one who ever wondered.

So go and look. The map was drawn by someone else, a long time ago, mostly out of fear, and sometimes on purpose, and you've spent long enough obeying its dragons. The forbidden regions are mostly just the unexplored ones. They were always yours to walk into.

*For anyone standing at a door they were told
never to open. The pull you feel toward it is not a
flaw. It's the part of you that never agreed to the
map. Go in and look.*

