

Ep #118: Getting Anchored: Boundaries



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Ep #118: Getting Anchored: Boundaries

This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, Functional Medicine Expert, and Life Coach, Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello my love. I am so delighted to bring you another fundamental show from the *Feminist Wellness* library this week. In the over 100 shows on the books to date, there are some that stand out for me as most pivotal, the lessons that were most ground-shaking my own life that I know you can gain something new from by listening to for a second, third, or fourth time.

So today, I'm delighted to share episode five all about boundaries, which are a vital part of breaking free from codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing habits. They are so vital in getting anchored in your own self.

Boundaries are a way to voice what does and doesn't work for you, what you're available for, and setting clear, direct, simple boundaries are at their core, one of the most loving things we can do both for ourselves and for the people in our worlds.

They're resentment prevention. They let the other people in your life know what does and doesn't work for you, so they can make their own choices and you can make yours. As you listen in to this episode, I want to invite you to really get present with these lessons, to take notes, to see where you are and aren't setting boundaries in your life, to ask yourself why you aren't setting boundaries with certain people or in certain situations, to tune into your body and ask your body why, and to get real about the decisions you make to support and care for yourself when you set a boundary and it isn't honored.

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And with that, off we go. I hope you enjoy this replay of episode five. Be well, my love.

I am really excited this week because my partner, who is so super-duper amazing surprised me with a trip to Tulum, which is in Mexico.

And I am particularly excited because it's been a long cold winter and you know, a little break does us all some good and because I used to work in that section of Mexico, in Quintana Roo for gosh, years when I was in my 20s. I did a Master's degree in public health at Boston University, then I studied under some completely amazing people who are working in this part of Mexico and I was lucky enough to be able to join their team.

We were doing public health work in Mexico and Nicaragua and Cuba and it was really an amazing thing to get to do in my 20s to go to these indigenous communities, to connect in with the folks there. I almost said the word stakeholders, which feels so jargony and weird. But it was a really cool project. So the focus was the environmental public health of these communities.

We built composting toilets, grey water recycling systems, and organic gardens to support food security. So it was really dope and I miss that part of the world. It gets busy and I haven't been back in a while, so I'm really excited to go see the ruins that I haven't seen in years and see some of the old folks I used to work with and get some really good sunshine and tacos.

So, you are listening to this while I am on the beach because I'm recording it in advance. So I hope things are lovely wherever you may find your beautiful self. So today, we're going to talk about boundaries and why they're important for our health in so many ways.

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Boundaries are a tool we use to stop up those energy leaks, to get what we want for and from ourselves by stating our wants and needs clearly and directly. To say this is where you end and I begin. So boundaries are like having a yard on your property. The boundary is where your land ends and your neighbor's begins.

You get to decide what types of flowers, trees, herbs you want to grow, and your neighbor gets to decide what they'll grow in their own space. You don't tell that human what to grow and they don't tell you. You each just take care of your yard as you see fit.

Boundaries need to be spoken when they are violated. When your neighbor comes into your yard and starts to rip up the flowers that they don't like or to plant the ones that they do like without your consent. Boundaries can be established ahead of time or in a moment when they're crossed. Any type of abuse would be considered a boundary violation, as would be disrespecting a clearly stated boundary.

Boundary violations can also be far more subtle than someone F-ing with your yard or disrespecting your personal space. In the metaphor with our neighbor, we can either do something preemptively to make our boundaries clear, like when we move in we might say, hey, I want to be clear about what space is mine and what's yours, let's walk through the yard together.

Or sometimes we think it's clear to both people in the conversation, where one yard ends and the other begins. But it may turn out that our neighbor thinks that their yard actually ends a few feet further into what we know is actually our yard. That's a time when we can check in and let our neighbor know that they've actually come into our territory and they'll need to stop.

These are times when we're assuming best intentions. Sometimes people don't realize they're crossing our boundaries because they just don't know. And there are also times when we don't have to explicitly state our boundaries, but we know what they are, and the more we can get in touch

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with ourselves, the more we can be our own watcher. The more we can feel it in our bodies when a boundary is crossed and we get to speak up and say how we feel.

What I want to bring to the conversation today is a clear understanding of some things that may be new for you. I would posit that boundaries are not emotional and are just about you and what you'll do in a given situation. I also want to highlight what boundaries are not, so we can all get clear on that because I hear the term boundaries thrown around in a number of less than useful ways and I love clarity.

And because I'm me, I want to talk about and focus on how boundaries are a health issue. So boundaries are stated in the first person, come with a consequence, are not just about saying no, are not about changing other person's behavior, are stated without guilt and shame, and are good for our health.

I know that setting boundaries can feel really challenging if it's new to you, and I want to remind you to be patient and compassionate with yourself while you practice this. You wouldn't get mad at a newborn for not being able to run, so be gentle with yourself. This is a new skill and it takes a lot of practice and that's fine.

You're learning, you're growing, you're going to F this up, and remember that there may be times when people don't love your boundaries. And when we stop people-pleasing, people stop being pleased. And all of that is okay, my love, truly. So here's the simple truth and the reason why we're talking about boundaries together.

You're way more likely to get your needs met if you state them and if you're clear about what works for you and what doesn't. I remind myself often that when I state my boundaries, I am setting myself and others free. Most people can't read your mind and it's not kind to expect them to do so. And furthermore, you're setting yourself up for disappointment when that other

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person doesn't do that thing that you told them not to do in your head but never said out loud.

I know I like it a lot more when I know the rules of a place or a person. It would be deeply uncomfortable to start working in an office with no clearly stated rules or expectations and then to have your boss say, "Do whatever, it's fine," only to find that I've violated an unspoken rule after I've done something that she thinks is wrong.

By being clear and upfront, we give the people in our lives a roadmap that makes it a lot easier for them to know what I think is okay and what I think isn't okay. So let's start by defining what boundaries are and how to set healthy ones for yourself.

To do so, I want to start with a simple situation that can feel difficult for many of us. So you go to see your parents and the first thing your mom says is some comment about your body. How you've gained or lost weight, how your hair looks, how oh my gosh, you have acne, or is that a cold sore? Whatever. You get to set a boundary about that.

To say, "Mom, I don't want to talk about my body with you, and if you bring it up again, I'm going to go in the other room." Another example might be that you don't like being around cigarette smoke. If someone lights a cigarette, you're simply going to walk away for 10 minutes or however long it takes to smoke a cigarette. I don't know that. I feel like I should know that.

Anyway, you can say to your smoker friends, "Hey, let me know if you're going to light up so I can take a little walk," or you can ask folks not to smoke around you, but you don't get to set the boundary you cannot smoke around me if you're outside or at someone else's house. You can't control other people's behavior and choices. You can only control yourself and you can choose to hang out while folks smoke or not.

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This last part goes to the point that boundaries are flexible, changeable, moveable, and removable as we see fit for our own wellness. Walls are the opposite of boundaries. They are permanent, rigid, solid. They keep others out and they keep us trapped inside. It's up to you to decide how open or closed your boundaries will be at any moment.

You get to decide what's acceptable behavior from others and also from yourself. You can decide to stay on the picnic blanket with your pal the smoker because you love them and you want to hang out, and you can just ask them to blow the smoke away from you or if your asthma's acting up and you don't feel like being around it, you can take a walk.

Flexible, changeable boundaries put us in control of our thoughts and the feelings that arise from them. So we can take actions that serve us and have results in our lives that feel good and supportive. When we're setting a healthy boundary, there's a consequence for folks who don't want to honor our boundaries.

And I'm not talking about throwing someone in the pit of despair. Hey, are my Princess Bride fans out there? What's up, nerds? Who loves The Princess Bride? Sorry, just cracked myself up a little too much there thinking about that scene with the albino in the pit of despair.

When we're setting healthy boundaries, there's a consequence for crossing it. Not just the pit of despair. But when we make clear, simple statements about what we'll do to take care of ourselves if the other person crosses a boundary. And internally, we set clear boundaries about what we will do for ourselves.

In the example about your mom and the body talk, if you told you mom plainly and clearly, "Ma, if you do x, I'll do y." And this isn't like a threat with threat energy. It's a clear statement of your limits. "Mom, if you talk about my body, I'm out." But not, "Mom, I'm out." Just calm, clear, direct.

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You don't have to be mean to set a boundary. You don't have to get intense or aggressive. You just get to own your own choices and state them. With your pal the smoker, the consequence is simple. You light up, I'm out. Easy. If that person chooses to light up in your house, you can set the boundary that there's no smoking here and if they choose to light up in your living room, they either have to put the cigarette out or leave.

And if they want to smoke while you're hanging out in the park, a public space, the consequence for them may be that you'll walk away and they'll miss out on time spent with amazing you because you're going on a little walk while they smoke. Super simple, easy peasy. No stress, no threat. Just a clear statement.

The third thing is about saying no. So simply saying no is not a boundary, per say. Saying no and then doing what you said you would do in response is setting up a healthy boundary. Saying no and then trying to control how someone else thinks or behaves is also not a healthy boundary and it is not in service of your goal of living with peace in your heart, which I hope is one of your top life goals.

I mean, I know it's my most top-est life goal. Setting a boundary is only necessary when someone crosses into your emotional or physical space without your permission. That's when you state your need and the consequence clearly. We don't set boundaries in attempt to control or change other people because that's not possible.

Each of us take action based on our feelings, which were created by our own thoughts. So it's actually impossible to truly control someone unless you can control their mind. Sorry, I cracked myself up there. I crack myself up a lot. I feel like that's - side note here, when I talk about having peace in my heart, I think one of the things that brings me the most peace and joy on any given day is how much I have learned to laugh at myself.

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More like with myself. Not like, at in a mean way, but like, I say ridiculous things because they come into my ridiculous mind and I love that about me. Okay, I will refocus, my loves. So, it is actually impossible to control someone unless you can control their mind. Okay, I can't not say it funny.

We set boundaries as a way to clearly say what we want and need and to respect that other humans have their own autonomy and can make their own decisions about how they want to act. Whether or not someone changes their behavior is so not the point. Setting a boundary in the first place is about deciding how you will respond to a given situation.

And this is foundational, my love. Setting boundaries is not about the other person at all. I wish you could see my face. I'm making a very emphatic Muppet face. It's not about them, it's about you because you can only control you. And setting healthy boundaries is not about expecting or even wanting the other person to change their behavior.

It's for you, as your own autonomous being to decide what will trigger a particular behavior for you. Ending a conversation, giving a warning, walking out of a room. If you do x, I will do y. You as a person need to be really clear about why you're setting that boundary. If you do this, I'm not going to try to control what you do. The boundary is about how I'm going to take care of myself.

You do x, I do y. Not you do x and I try to guilt or shame you into doing y because it's what I want you to do. And I get that this can feel nuanced in the moment of trying to do it, so getting clear on why and how you're setting a boundary is vital. Checking in with yourself to make sure your goal is your own self-care and not to change another person's behavior.

So in the example of your friend lighting a cigarette outside while you're hanging out at the park, a public space together, you're not saying, "Dude, if you light a cigarette, I'm going to force you to leave this shared space. I'm going to shame you, guilt you, bother you until you quit smoking." It's not

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our job to try to change another person's behavior. Adults can do and say and think and feel whatever and however they want. We can only control ourselves and the choices we make in a situation.

And that brings us to the point that boundaries are not emotional. And I'll be the first one to get vulnerable here and I'll say that I used to have this habit back in the day of stating what felt like a want or a need but with a whole boatload of guilt or shame because I was insecure about asking for what I needed.

Some part of me didn't believe I had the right to state a boundary or a need and part of making peace with that old story of knowing deep in my heart that of course I get to ask for what I want and need, and of course I get to state boundaries because boundaries are just about me has been to do it. Because we know that what we practice, we believe. So the more I'm able to state my boundaries clearly without all the bullshit emotional baggage and to carry through with that boundary, the more firm my belief in my own right to do so gets.

Let's go through an example. So maybe instead of just saying, "Mom, please don't talk about my body, and if you do, I'm going to walk away or hang up," maybe you do this whole song and dance to justify your boundary. Perhaps bringing in some beautiful shame or guilt. Something like, "Listen mom, I know you love me and you just want the best for me, but the way you raised me with so much emphasis on my weight, my looks, my skin, my hair, my clothes, I mean it really did a number on me. Let's not even mention the emphasis on my grades. It was really stressful and it's really stressful now when you bring up my weight. It makes me feel really bad. It makes me feel like shit for days so could you please try not to do that anymore?"

See how the story and the explanation, the guilt, all of that just dilutes our message and takes us out of our power. If you want to have a real convo

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with your mom about body shaming, go for it. But patting your boundary setting with a whole lot of BS because you're worried about her reaction is not loving and it's not rigorously honest.

Your needs are valid and real and worthy on their own without a story because that story and justification is at its core manipulative. In that moment, you may be seeking to get the listener's emotional buy-in to what you're saying and asking for, versus staying on your side of the street and simply telling the other person what you will do for your own self in response to their behavior.

Another use of guilt and shame could be trying to set up a boundary around your pal the smoker, and could go something like, "Dude, I don't know why you keep smoking, it's 2019. We know that smoking is so ridiculously bad for you on so many levels. It smells gross, it's expensive, it's going to give you cancer, and if you sit here around all of us smoking, you're poisoning all of us too and that's so not cool."

See how that was a delivery of a whole bunch of your own BS onto another person without even putting a clear boundary ask in there? Again, if you want to have a loving, consensual convo with your friend about their smoking, that's one thing. But layering all of your thoughts and feelings about their human choices on them without consent, while wrapping the whole thing in a boundaries blankey, I mean, dude, I'm going to call BS on that.

And beyond that, it's just not nice. So when you're working to start setting boundaries, leave out those jabs. Leave out those little bits of bullshit and just clearly state your needs. Doing so was so vital in retraining my own brain that it was okay to state a boundary and to act on it. And part of that retraining was reminding my brain once again that the other person has zero to do with my boundary. It's by me, for me. If you do x, I'll do y.

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So let's talk about health. So, setting boundaries is a health issue, largely because resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. So when we set healthy boundaries, we don't allow other people to make choices for us. We stay on our own side of the street and take care of ourselves. Our focus is on what we need for our own wellness.

Not stating our boundaries and then getting pissed off that the other person crossed this invisible line in the sand is a quick one-way trip to resentment-ville. When we get angry or upset that someone has harmed us, our cortisol goes up. Cortisol is one of the stress hormones, and chronically elevated or imbalanced cortisol can lead to fatigue, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, and because cortisol thins mucus membranes, being angry at the world and everyone in it can lead to leaky gut, which we heard all about in episode four.

Instead, we can have good boundaries and can say what we will and will not accept in a relationship, and the cost or consequence if that line is crossed. When we're letting our energy leak by taking care of others before ourselves, our self-care falters and all of a sudden, we're not doing what we need to for our health.

When you're working to change a behavior like not eating or drinking certain things, let's say gluten and alcohol for example, you can set a clear boundary that you don't want to talk about your food choices or you won't be pressured into eating pizza or having that beer. So there's two settings where I hear about this an awful lot from my clients and patients.

The first is family. So folks will tell me, "I was doing great until we went to my in-laws for dinner and my father-in-law was pressuring me so much to have his famous bread rolls and I knew they would make me feel like garbage but I ate them anyway because I didn't want to upset him." And I also hear this a lot about socializing with friends and the pressure people

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feel to drink alcohol or to eat what everyone else is eating, to not cause trouble or to not be the odd one out.

And I hear this one a lot, "I just don't want to be that girl asking the waiter like, what's in the food or what's in the drink." And I hear a lot about folks' friends laying into them being like, "Okay, come on, why don't you just have one drink or just have one slice of pizza," kind of the like, everybody's doing it kind of framework.

And if you're new to setting boundaries, you may not know that you can say, "I'm cool, all good, I don't want to talk about my drinking." And if that person continues, you can say, "Listen, I don't want to talk about my drinking and if you push it, I might need to take a little break from this convo." Or that you can set an internal boundary and you can just choose to walk away from a situation where someone's laying into you about something you've decided for your health.

When we do not take care of ourselves with clear boundaries, we set ourselves up for resentment. So in the example of eating something that you know will hurt your health, so you go to your father-in-law's, he pressures you to eat his homemade bread rolls, you know gluten makes you feel terrible and you eat it and you feel terrible. So you blame him for making you eat the food or pressuring you to eat it.

Or you do that subtle combo of shame and blame where it's like, part mad at yourself, which often looks on its surface like mad at him and maybe subconsciously you feel mad at the societal norms that you aren't supposed to say no lest you offend someone. And that often goes something like, "I ate the bread rolls to not upset him. He gets so upset if I don't eat what he cooks and I didn't want to hurt his feelings or get my mother-in-law involved."

And I get it. Many of us, especially those of us socialized as women who grew up in chaotic households, we're taught in direct or subtle ways that it's

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not okay to say no when we mean it. And we can experience a lot of guilt or shame when we say no. This is a core feminist issue about trusting ourselves and raising our voices.

I believe deeply that all of us, humans of all the genders have the capacity to change, shift, and grow, despite our socialization. We can learn to see how cultural and societal norms have led us to act in ways that do not support our mental and physical health and can work to change our relationship to these harmful teachings, to say what we mean, to say no, to set healthy boundaries even if other people don't like it. Even if good girls eat what they're given, don't say no, are polite at dinner.

I want to say it clearly. You aren't causing a fuss or being a bother by calmly stating a boundary. You are taking care of your one and only perfect human self and you are so worthy of that care and love. And this all starts with re-teaching ourselves to know what we want and need. So many of us are out of touch with that part of ourselves that says I want x, or I really don't want y.

And the first step here is to be your own watcher. And I want to empower you to learn to watch your mind on the daily, as it does what it's been told so that you can get in touch with what you want and need and to say it clearly without any bullshit around it. And if you're lost here, no worries, my love. Episode two is all about becoming your own watcher. Go check that one out.

So back to your father-in-law and gluten. You get to set your own internal boundary, such as I will not eat things that will harm me. And you can then plan your thoughts ahead of time for your future self. When my father-in-law invariably pressures me to eat the gluten, I can take a deep breath, not get frustrated or mad, not take it personally, and can simply calmly say, "No thanks, Tom, I'm not eating that."

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And if you continue to feel pressured and need to draw a line in the sand, you can plan and practice in advance to calmly say, "Hey Tom, I don't eat gluten, and if you keep insisting that I eat it, I'm going to go read in the living room during dinner. Thanks."

And this harkens us back to the work of Pavlov, which I've talked about before, about social conditioning. If you want to learn more about it, you can go back to the episodes on mindfulness and anxiety where you'll hear a lot more about Pavlov and his work on conditioning. Where it's relevant here is that the things we practice feel less scary.

So if you're worried that while you're at your in-laws' and your father-in-law's like, just have a bread roll, that you're going to cave and that you're not going to be able to stand firm in your own best interest, practice it ahead of time. Train your future self to believe that when he says x, you will say y.

And that brings us to our last point. My friend Tara from college always says, "Say what you're going to do and do what you say." If you make a boundary request and you don't follow through on it, you've diminished yourself in that moment. But with your own sense of self-respect and the other person's respect for you, as someone who means what she says, it is your responsibility to carry your own boundaries through.

If your mom starts talking about your body and you stay silent, you're teaching her that though you said you would hang up or walk away, you actually won't. So it's okay for her to keep talking about your weight. If your friend lights a cigarette when you ask that they don't do that around you and you say or do nothing, you're teaching them that you didn't really mean that boundary.

I often see people not setting or keeping boundaries because they're afraid of the other person's response. That your mom will get mad if you ask her not to mention your weight, or your smoker friend will say, "No dude, I want

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to smoke wherever I want to smoke. Deal with it." Or your father-in-law might make that super disappointed face if you ask him to stop pressuring you with the gluten because you've always eaten it before.

If we're just coming to understand that something isn't working for us and wish we had some kind of Hot Tub Time Machine and could go back in time to set a boundary years ago, it can feel complicated and weird to be like, "So that thing you've done for ages, can you cut it out please?" We often have to set boundaries because we haven't taken care of ourselves in this way before.

And I get that that can feel scary. I totally get it and I cannot emphasize this enough; an ounce of prevention is so much better than a pound of cure. That is, it's so much better to just say, "Please don't talk about my weight. Please don't light a cigarette around me, or if you're going to, just let me know so I can walk away. No big deal. Please understand that I'm going to eat what works for my body and please don't pressure me to make a different choice."

Rather than to do something that doesn't work for you and to be mad at or resentful of the other person because you didn't speak your mind and that other person keeps doing things you haven't asked them not to do. Remember, our thoughts create our feelings and we take action based on our feelings.

So if your father-in-law is thinking, "My gluten is the most amazing gluten and I show love through food and I want you to be happy so you need to eat my food," that string of thoughts would lead him to feel perhaps an urgency or anxiety for you to eat the gluten. And the action he might take then is to pressure you.

And all of that is based on his internal processes and has zero to do with you as the human that you are. Your father-in-law can't have a new thought about pressuring you to eat something if he doesn't know you don't want

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him to. And he might still choose to pressure you once he does know that you don't want him to, and that's when you get to take action around your boundary, to restate it and to let him know you won't be coming over for dinner again. Maybe y'all could do a different activity together like a board night.

And there are two important caveats here. The first - and this is really important - is that it may not always be physically safe to hold your boundary. Like with someone who's violent, and you get to check in with yourself to see what feels like a safer choice in that moment to take action, enforce your boundary, or not and to get out of the situation in the safest way you can.

You can also decide in a moment that you actually don't mind the smoke that much and I mean, the wind is blowing away from you anyway and you have limited time with your friend who's visiting from far away and whatever the situation may be, where it genuinely feels better to stay than to enforce your boundary. It's yours to live however you want and need to.

In closing, I want to say, boundaries are vital for our own mental and physical health, protect our relationships, and prevent resentment. You get to set boundaries to take care of yourself and only yourself. Boundaries are about no one but you because we can't change other people. Only ourselves. And we're not responsible for anyone else's actions either.

Your homework, my love, is to work on addressing just one of your own personal energy leaks. Make it anything you want. Big or small. Set the boundary. Plug up the leak. Make the change. Reclaim your power to control your own life and reclaim your own energy. And then take all that energy you're no longer spending on being mad that other people crossed an invisible line you drew in the sand and spend it to take your perfect life and health back.

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When you're free of trying to manage others, only then can you take true charge of your life. And what could be more feminist than that? Thank you for listening in to this week's episode of Feminist Wellness. It is such a pleasure to be able to share this information with you and I hope it's helpful.

If you enjoy the show, please make sure to go to the iTunes, do the subscribe, rate, and review, so that more folks can find this show. It really makes a difference for spreading the word. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon.

If you've been enjoying the show and learning a ton, it's time to apply it with my expert guidance so you can live life with intention, without the anxiety, overwhelm, and resentment, so you can get unstuck. You're not going to want to miss the opportunity to join my exclusive intimate group coaching program, so head on over to victoriaalbina.com/masterclass to grab your seat now. See you there. It's going to be a good one.