‘This is a book everyone must read’
VEX KING

let go of the past
connect with the present
expand the future

lighter

yung pueblo

New York Times **bestselling author**
of *Clarity* & *Connection*

Praise for *Lighter*

"yung pueblo is the real deal—a modern sage and guiding light. In his new book, he beautifully illustrates how finding harmony within is the key to creating a progressive society built on compassion, clarity, and understanding. This is a book everyone must read, many times over."

—Vex King, #1 *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Healing Is the New High*

"yung pueblo teaches how to heal with compassion as the driving force. *Lighter* is an empathetic and wise book that will guide you on a journey toward a deeper understanding of self and help you make impactful changes within and in the world. yung pueblo created a core curriculum on how to heal despite your experiences with suffering."

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"A beautiful encouragement for tending your own heart: for learning and healing, for finding well-being, and being part of the solution for all you care about."

—Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart*

"To learn of yung pueblo's beginnings in this intimate book is a gift. *Lighter* helps us understand the daily ways in which his deepening practice has impacted an entire generation of seekers. His words leave an indelible mark—his struggle with self-abandonment and his personal process of compassionate self-connection have quietly inspired millions of us. yung pueblo's humble, potent teachings help us prioritize our emotional maturity in the face of constant change, a vital understanding in these turbulent times."

—Elena Brower, bestselling author of *Practice You, Being You*, and *Art of Attention*

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"yung pueblo offers insight into daily practices and choices that can remove the burdens of habitual reaction to reveal the freedom of wise reflection. In *Lighter*, we see that knowing the mind can transform a person, and also transform society."

—David Simas, CEO of the Obama Foundation

"*Lighter* is the story of one man and of all of us as we seek to become lighter, to walk through our lives freely, unencumbered by the weight of the past or the future. It is as inspirational as it is a practical guide."

—Mark Hyman, MD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Pegan Diet*

"A rare and insightful journey into the author's own healing journey will inspire you to let go of the past and find a lighter path forward. As always, yung pueblo speaks truth in such an eloquent way. This book is a true gem."

—Sheleana Aiyana, author of *Becoming the One*

"Facing a pivotal moment, yung pueblo turned inward and learned that through investigation he could build a new way to think and live. He learned that true love of self is possible. *Lighter* shares his journey in a way that will touch you deeply, as he offers hope that peace is possible for ourselves and the world."

—Sharon Salzberg, author of *Lovingkindness* and *Real Happiness*

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pick the path that lights you up
the one you know deep down is the right choice
stop listening to doubt
start connecting with courage
do not let the idea of normal get in the way
it may not be the easy path
but you know great things take effort
lean into your determination
lean into your mission
lean into the real you

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people who have experienced deep suffering
and are still gentle with others
do not get enough credit
to not let the hard things
that happened to you win is heroic work,
to drop the bitterness
and still live with an open heart
despite it all
is a massive gift to the world

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Introduction

My Story

As I lay there on the floor, crying tears of fear and regret, my mind took on a sharpness that for the first time allowed me to see how far I had veered from my potential—how I had allowed drugs to block me from having to deal with my inner sadness.

I had been recklessly pushing my body and mind with dangerous excess when I finally pushed myself too far. It was during the summer of 2011, after another night blindly focused on the pursuit of escape and pleasure, that I found myself on the floor, thinking my heart was going to explode. I was twenty-three and convinced that I was having a heart attack. I was both scared I was dying and embarrassed that I had let myself get to this point.

My mind flashed back to my teen years, working as an activist and organizer for the Boston Youth Organizing Project (BYOP). I remembered how nourishing it had felt to

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be part of a group helping others reclaim their power and making real change. How had I lost my path?

In the beginning, I thought I was just having fun and that I was in control. But I could now see that the partying had become a way for me to avoid spending time with myself. I used and abused drugs to numb the pain and hide. There was sadness and anxiety inside me that screamed for my attention, but all I could do was turn away from it. And my drive to keep my attention away from my emotions stood like a wall blocking me from considering the long-term impact that drugs would have on my well-being, on my life.

My mind also kept focusing on the bravery of my parents, how much they had to sacrifice and how hard they had to work to give me, my brother, and my little sister a better life in the United States. When I was four years old, we moved to the United States from our home in Ecuador. Being immigrants and trying to make it in our new city of Boston left its mark on all of us. In the long run, it was the right decision to move here, but for the first decade and a half we all felt the intense pressure of poverty. It almost broke us. My mother cleaned houses and my father worked in a supermarket. It was a miracle that they made ends meet, but too often it was an incredible struggle that placed them under an immense amount of stress. Even though we lived simple lives with zero luxuries in a small two-bedroom apartment, money was still always lacking. As I lay on the floor, I

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kept thinking to myself, "I don't want to die this way. I don't want to let my parents down. They have worked so hard and selflessly, given so much to me, that this would be a horrible way for me to die. I need to live and make the most of the opportunity they have given me."

For about two hours I just lay on the floor, unable to move, as I felt the shock that my body was going through. I prayed and begged for my life, as I kept bouncing between regret and gratitude. Regret for slowly losing the drive to serve others and for not figuring out earlier how to handle my inner tension in a healthy way. Gratitude for the strength of my parents and their ability to take care of me and my siblings under such challenging conditions, for their selflessness and their unwavering love. Most of all, I felt an enormous pull to cling to life and begin again so that I could make the most of all the energy my parents had put into giving me the chance at a better life.

The movement between regret and gratitude reignited the fire of life in my body. After a few hours, my heart stopped beating so intensely and I no longer felt as if my life were on the brink of ending. My body felt incredibly fragile and exhausted from trying to remain in the realm of the living, but even so I got myself back on my feet. I had one clear objective. I grabbed all the self-prescribed "painkillers" I had and threw them away. That day, I resolved deeply in my heart to stop dulling my senses and to start the long walk

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back to a better life. *Gambling with my life, just because I feared my emotions, was over.* I knew that I had to cut out all the drugs and start being radically honest with myself.

I did not yet understand what was happening inside me and why I had fallen into such bad habits, but I knew that part of the reason was that I was lying to myself about how I really felt inside. I didn't know how I would finally heal, but I instinctively knew that my path forward had to be based on radical honesty, having the strong determination to stop ravaging my health with dangerous intoxicants and focusing on building new healthier habits for my body and mind.

It was a hard and long journey back to health, but slowly the changes started. I knew it was not going to be easy, I knew that good habits would feel like entering an unknown world, and I knew the only way to walk through it would be by taking each step with bravery and determination. But I was done with hiding.

During the years when I had abandoned myself, my mind felt undeniably heavy, and I knew that I needed to find a clear way to help feel lighter. I began by examining every part of my life and put my focus on doing the opposite of what had almost led me to an early death, from eating foods that made me physically stronger to exercising to paying real attention to my thought patterns, even when they felt turbulent. I started examining my relationships with friends and family and tried behaving with kindness and patience in

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areas where there was once too much roughness and irritability.

I acted like a detective in my mind, asking questions to deeply investigate and discover the source of my problems. Whenever the urge to escape with intoxicants tried to take hold, I would bring my awareness inward to take a good look at the tension. I remember finding immense amounts of sadness and fear, and an emptiness that ached for love. Later I would discover that this was a space that only my own love and unconditional compassion could fill. I did not immediately arrive at answers to all my questions, and it was not until I started meditating that I learned the real root of my suffering. But the simple act of being unafraid to take a deep look within released much tension in my mind. Simply accepting whatever I found helped me feel a new sense of ease, even when my mood was down. Running away from myself took up so much more energy than mustering the courage to embrace solitude and stillness.

The first year of building positive habits created a massive shift in my life. I did not feel terrific immediately, and every day was not a good day. Most days felt like a huge struggle. From the work of sitting intentionally with an emotion that scared me or just the mundane task of waiting in the cold for a bus to take me to the gym, staying committed was not easy. It all felt new and difficult. There were many ups and downs during that time, but my persistence did not

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waver. Going back to how things were was no longer an option. The habits that initially felt like impossible tasks started slowly becoming second nature. And as time passed, happiness became more common and my heart started feeling stronger. No matter how stormy my emotions got, bits of joy began appearing at random. I kept up the practice of turning inward to take a good look at what was bubbling up inside me, and, once the changes in me started adding up, I noticed that my relationships with family and friends were also improving. The old feeling of heavy, stagnant energy started lifting. Before the healing, I felt like a stranger inside my mind and heart. Gradually, that feeling passed and I began to feel at home in my own being.

Though life already felt new, and the learning felt continuous, when a friend told me about Vipassana meditation in 2012 I knew intuitively that this was something I needed to pursue to take my healing to the next level. *Vipassana* means "to see things as they really are." These are silent ten-day courses that teach you how to purify the subconscious mind through self-observation.

The healing began as soon as I initiated practicing radical honesty, but much deeper levels of healing opened up when I took up meditating. As I progressed in meditation and attended silent courses a few times a year, not only did I begin to feel better, but I started to feel freer. It took a while for me to be able to meditate consistently at home, but when I made a full commitment to meditating daily, starting in

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2015, the positive changes in my mental health flourished. By 2016, I stopped consuming alcohol and marijuana and adopted a lifestyle that was free of all intoxicants. I felt like the two were making my mind dense, while meditation was trying to make my mind lighter.

Turning inward by practicing meditation felt like an intimate and personal renaissance. I started learning so much about myself and the human mind. Closing my eyes to feel what was really inside me opened me up to an entire universe. Not only did I gain insight into my personal emotional history, but I also started feeling the undercurrent of impermanence that is pervasive throughout all of reality. The learning accelerated to a new level that went beyond knowledge and started entering the realm of wisdom. This was a type of learning that superseded anything I had ever read about, a type of insight that could only be gained through direct experience. And the shifts in my internal life had an immediate effect on my external life, especially when it came to listening to the guidance of my intuition. In my new view, the world was elevated into higher definition—cultivating presence made everything around me look more vibrant and crisp. Self-awareness began to blossom and a greater sense of inner clarity helped me overcome the fear of being alone with my thoughts. My mind simply felt like it had new space where I could more intentionally choose the actions that felt most genuine and least harmful when tough situations would arise.

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There was nothing perfect about this period, no great attainment, no sense of being fully healed or fully wise. I was not enlightened at all, but I did feel lighter. What I gained was an all-encompassing relationship with my humanity and a growing ability to accept the truth that rejecting change only makes life harder. Though my mind is no longer overburdened with tension and I have learned to dwell more in the present, I still feel that I am full of imperfection. The journey to grow in my healing and freedom continues. To this day, I feel like a student fortunate to learn from the wisdom that anyone can access when they observe reality within the framework of the body.

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healing isn't about filling your life with pleasure
or never having a hard moment again
it's about being real
and facing what you feel
so that it doesn't accumulate in unhealthy ways
being with the down moments is better than
carrying unprocessed pain everywhere you go

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Why Yung Pueblo and Why This Book

When I started meditating, two things became pristinely clear—that deep healing is possible and that humanity as a whole is young. When I felt plagued by sadness and anxiety, I could not imagine that such a heaviness could one day become lighter and manageable in a healthy way. As I progressed in my first year of moving in a healthier direction, and as I later started my meditation journey, it shocked me that I could actually feel better. This new sense of well-being wasn't me repressing my emotions or some sort of delusion. Instead, in a concrete and observable way, the root of my mental discontent was truly being alleviated. At a fundamental level, a real shift was taking place. While everyone heals differently because each of our emotional histories is unique, it became clear to me that healing is open and available to anyone who seeks it. Healing yourself is possible through letting go of the past and connecting with the present, all so you can expand your future. And healing progresses quickly when you find the practices that connect well with the conditioning your mind has developed over time.

As I continued learning through meditation, another idea that kept returning was that humanity has not yet matured. The basic things we are taught and start practicing as children—to clean up after ourselves, to tell the truth, to treat each other fairly, to share, to be kind to one another, not to harm each other—have not yet been successfully ap-

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plied at the level of society. But these principles do show us a path to supporting the health and harmony of all people. In this century, in particular, it feels like we are in a special moment in human history, poised to face our great challenges and to come to terms with much of the harm that we directly and indirectly cause each other. This moment is an opening to grow deeply in our maturity so that we may build a world that is no longer structurally harmful but is structurally compassionate.

These two ideas converge in the name *yung pueblo*, which literally means "young people." This pseudonym reflects a social commentary that points to humanity's coming growth and maturation. The name signals a time when we will collectively transition from being ruled by shortsightedness and self-centeredness to having an elevated appreciation of our interconnectedness, which normalizes treating each other with a new and considerate gentleness. The evolution of the way humanity thinks and acts is spurred on by many factors. But one major factor stands out: the healing of the individual. All people do not need to be perfectly healed for us to live in a peaceful world, but as more and more people progress in their healing, this will create waves that can change the trajectory of human history. As more people heal themselves, our actions will become more intentional, our decisions will become more compassionate, our thinking will become clearer, and the future of the world will become brighter.

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This book is meant as a bridge between the ideas of personal transformation and global transformation, to show that the two are deeply intertwined and function in support of each other. This book will hopefully serve not only as inspiration, but as a way to demystify personal healing and its benefits. While the primary focus is on the healing of the individual as you cross deeper thresholds and move from human habit to human nature, the journey concludes with an exploration of what is possible when compassion is scaled up from the interpersonal level to the structural level. *Lighter* aims to explore common understandings and experiences that people share when they go deep within themselves, regardless of the practice they are using, to navigate their inner world. Though human experience exists on a vast spectrum, there are some universals that can be highlighted to help us better understand ourselves and the world. I hope this book's message is one among the many forces that support the emergence of a world where harm is no longer systemic.

Meditation remains a huge part of my daily life but writing as "yung pueblo" has become a wonderful tool for me to process what I am understanding about healing. When I first started sharing my writing, I hoped that some of it would resonate with others, but I never imagined that so many people around the world would find solace and meaning in my work. I take the trust you give me seriously. And I will hold it gently.

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Chapter 1

Self-Love

When I ask myself what I was addicted to, no particular drug or craving stands out as the one source that led me into darkness. After I stopped the serious drug abuse, I realized that I had been using a mixture of whatever could bring me temporary pleasure to cover up a void in myself that I did not have the courage to face. The void was never satiated or content. Any enjoyment I could experience or attention that people gave me was never enough. It felt like an endless vacuum that could take in the world, spit it out, and still have room to ask for more.

The shift finally came when I stopped throwing pleasure at the problem and started nourishing myself with nonjudgmental and honest attention. The refocusing of my energy into paying attention to all my changing emotions had an immediate effect. Paying attention eased my incessant craving for more pleasure and I stopped feeling so ragged and run-down.

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I was not aware of the term *self-love* when my personal journey started, but I certainly used the practice as a critical stepping-stone. I would not have been able to move forward into a better life without this gentle and accepting attention that I started giving myself. Self-love was the missing link. It was the key to wholeness that I was unconsciously searching for. I discovered that the appreciation you seek from others will not hold the same rejuvenating power as the appreciation, attention, and kindness you can give yourself.

What Does *Self-Love* Mean?

Anything powerful and long-lasting requires a sturdy foundation. When a home is being constructed, all attention first goes to the foundation that will stabilize the structure. Once that foundation is firmly in place, you can go on to build, expand, and create something magnificent. The evolution of the individual works in a similar manner. Self-love is the first step that all inner and outer success is based on. Self-love gives your journey the energy and stability to stay on a clear trajectory. It is a profound commitment to self-discovery and to making your well-being a top priority.

Somewhere around 2014 or 2015, a big shift started happening culturally regarding the idea of self-love. In particular, I noticed that the word began entering the sphere of social media in a big way. I like to think of social media as a forum where humanity talks to itself, and at the time it felt as

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if we had collectively picked up the word *self-love* and started looking at it in different ways, turning it in all directions to get a better sense of its true meaning. Many individuals were asking themselves what *self-love* means to them, and at the same time I was going through my own process with the word. I wondered: Is self-love real? Is it needed? Is this something I can apply in my daily life? Is self-love different from self-centeredness? What is the relationship between self-love and healing yourself?

Initially, commercialization surrounded the idea, with mainstream media pushing the belief that you could buy yourself happiness and self-worth. But this is misleading because it confuses your needs with your cravings. The understanding that self-love means giving yourself all the things that you want, especially in the material sense, seems fine to a certain extent, but from the experience of many it is clear that material things can only go so far. Treating yourself to small gifts or going on rejuvenating trips can all fall under the umbrella of self-love, but self-love should not be confused with materialism. Material things cannot give you complete balance of mind and they cannot fundamentally heal your past. It is easy to go to extremes in trying to find solace in external or material things and end up further fueling the fire of craving that ultimately results in dissatisfaction. Thinking of self-love only as what you can buy or obtain does not activate its life-changing power.

Others understood self-love as putting yourself first at all

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costs. It makes sense that many would embrace this understanding of self-love because too many of us live our lives for others and fall into cycles of people-pleasing without taking the time to properly take care of ourselves. However, we run the risk of falling into the trap of ego if we only think of ourselves. Putting ourselves first in all situations can quickly become another type of extreme that disregards the welfare of others and pushes us to become more and more self-centered. If your ego is growing, then your mind is full of agitation and will have great difficulty seeing reality clearly. If self-love is supposed to help our lives, then this must not be the right direction.

The understanding of self-love that makes the most sense to me is much more internal. It is the way you relate to yourself with compassion, honesty, and openness. It is meeting every part of yourself with unconditional acceptance, from the parts that you find easy to love, to the rough and imperfect parts that you try to hide from. Self-love begins with acceptance, but it does not stop there. Real self-love is a total embrace of all that you are while simultaneously acknowledging that you have room to grow and much to let go of. Real self-love is a tricky concept that requires a sense of balance to be able to use its transformative power—it is nourishing yourself deeply without becoming self-centered or egotistical. It is no longer seeing yourself as less than others, but at the same time maintaining the humility not to see yourself as better than others. The greatest benefits of self-

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