And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.

—Anaïs Nin

Jeffrey Rudell was born in 1963 into a flat world. The whole state of Michigan never rises more than 1,060 feet above sea level—and certainly not in Lawrence, a flat little town known mostly for its annual ox roast. “It was poor, rural, economically depressed, undereducated, and conservative,” says Jeffery. You don’t know how flat life can feel until you’ve gotten up at 4 a.m. to milk cows on a farm off Red Arrow Highway, a road pointing nowhere.

At age fourteen, Jeffery was already six feet tall, still six inches shy of his adult height. Everyone assumed he’d go out for basketball, but Jeffery was unusually clumsy, the result of childhood amblyopia, which can happen when there is not enough stimulation from the visual part of the brain. “I’m essentially blind in one eye,” says Jeffery. “I was miserable at basketball, hurdles, and all those things that require distance judging. Everything is flat. I live in a flat world.”

Jeffery added dimension to his life by telling stories and making
things. One of his earliest memories is of wanting a typewriter from the Sears Wishbook so badly that he made one for himself out of an egg carton and put it under the Christmas tree. It was one of the rare times that Jeffery knew exactly what he wanted and didn’t let any excuse stand in the way of getting it.

Jeffery’s first career ambition, at age five, was to be Santa Claus. He and the elves could hang out in the workshop making stuff all day. At worst, he could be a journalist. But his dad had other plans. “My father pulled me aside and said that he had talked to Joe Blow at the local CITGO station and arranged for me to be taken on as a part-time night manager,” says Jeffery.

“If you work hard,” his dad told him, “in ten years or so you can work up to full night manager.”

“I remember thinking that I would have to kill myself,” says Jeffery. “I would have to find a way to step in front of traffic or hang myself.”

The idea of college didn’t occur to him until an aunt brought it up. With financial aid and part-time work waiting tables, he went to Michigan State, but two things happened in quick succession that would change the course of Jeffery’s life: He failed math, which infuriated his parents, and he fell in love.

With a guy.

Jeffery had suspected for years that he was gay. Now that he was in love, he was so uncharacteristically buoyant that his mother was suspicious.

“Nothing is wrong,” he said. “I’m happy!”

“You’re not a happy person,” she said.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re not happy. You don’t have any friends.”

Jeffery drove home to straighten everything out. Despite their failings, his parents had raised him with strong values—love, forgiveness, the whole nine yards—so he thought if he leveled with them and told them he was gay, this too would pass.

It didn’t.
His mother pronounced him dead and cleaned out the joint account that held Jeffery’s tuition money. His parents wouldn’t speak to him again for ten years, and very few times thereafter until they died. His mother went around the house collecting everything Jeffery had owned, made, written, read, or loved, and gathered it into a bonfire that burned for more than seven hours. A spark escaped and took down a majestic sugar maple, too.

School was off the table; of this, Jeffery was certain. “I failed one class. I come from an economically and academically poor part of the state. There’s no chance. I’m not good enough.” He bought into those excuses too well to explore the subject further.

“Now that I look back, there might have been a way,” concedes Jeffery. “Coming from an impoverished part of the state, I probably could have gone to a four-year college on full scholarship.”

While waiting tables at a restaurant known for lively exchanges between staff and patrons, he dumped a bowl of soup in the lap of an obnoxious diner. The man turned out to be a state legislator in need of someone with moxie to manage his upcoming campaign.

“I’ve done a lot of campaigns,” said Jeffery smoothly. The next day, he went to the library and checked out a book on how to run political campaigns. Two days later, he had the job.

As a legislative aide, Jeffery became so well known as a “fixer”—give him a problem and he’ll solve it—that he was either recommended for jobs or seemed to fall into them. At twenty-eight, the former farm boy who had been allergic to the hay he baled moved into a world of mansions and chauffeured Bentleys as chief of staff for a mercurial billionaire Kuwaiti diplomat in New York City. After that, he worked for a cantankerous fixture of Manhattan’s society and fund-raising circles. His next job was with the New York office of the American Academy in Rome, which awards prizes to artists and scholars. After six years with the Academy, its president, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, sat him down and asked what he wanted to do with his life.

“I see myself in five years really taking more of a leadership role here at the Academy,” said Jeffery.
“This place doesn’t offer that,” said Adele. “I think that you need to make some decisions in your life.”

Jeffery had never taken the reins of his career because he assumed that he lacked all the things he needed to get anywhere. Spurred on (and somewhat hurt) by Adele’s words, he interviewed with an investment-banking firm in Lower Manhattan.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?” one of the partners asked over a dinner at which Jeffery assumed he’d be offered the job.

“I see myself as an integral part of your organization by then, having been through the orientation and gotten up to speed,” said Jeffery.

There was an awkward pause. “That’s not going to happen,” said the partner. “We like you, but you’re not corporate material. You’re too independent-minded. Have you thought about working for yourself? Do you have a business plan?”

Jeffrey trotted out his fallback excuse. “I don’t have two nickels to rub together,” he said indignantly.

“Well,” said the partner, “you’ll never get anywhere without a plan.”

After the meal, Jeffery went over to Barnes & Noble and picked up a copy of Business Plans for Dummies.

Jeffery needed $74,000. He took his new business plan back to the banker who had shot him down and offered the guy first crack at investing in Jeffery’s proposed design firm.

“Do you have a degree in design?” asked the partner.

“No,” said Jeffery.

“Are you good at it?”

“We’ll see.”

“How will you pay me back?”

Jeffery suggested that the partners give his new company as a “donation” to their favorite charities. The charities would get free graphic design. The investors would get tangible results and a tax write-off. Jeffery would get his start-up capital. As it turned out, he got more than that—the charities liked his work and hired him independently. It was 1999, and business was good.

Then it was 9/11, and business was not so good. “I was depressed
and felt worthless,” recalls Jeffery. “I didn’t know what had changed. I assumed it was the world around me because I was still the same, doing the same thing.”

It was time to give up the excuses and start stepping up his game.

Jeffery wasn’t the easiest client The Reinvention Institute has ever had. He stubbornly refused to see how the creativity and problem solving he had used as a “fixer”—along with the wealth of experience and connections he had amassed—was just as valuable as the college degree whose absence he bemoaned. He was thoroughly invested in the idea that his lack of money, education, and loving parents made him unworthy enough that no one would ever pay him well for his “collection of random skills” or his art. Jeffery needed to learn to value himself. This was the real impediment to his success and happiness, and it wasn’t going to change until he gave up his litany of excuses.

It takes a lot for a client to get under my skin, but Jeffery managed. I remember saying something uncharacteristically curt on the phone to him. He remembers it, too.

“What was the turning point for you?” I asked him recently.

“Some nasty thing you said. You got very short with me once after I’d been very short with you for the course of an hour. You said, ‘How’s that working for you? Good luck with that.’ It was like you were saying the time for talking has passed,” says Jeffery. “Then I hung up and cried. I was very angry at me, you, and the world.”

Gradually, Jeffery weaned himself off the excuses, and that’s when everything began to turn around. After a lifetime saying he was going to write, he sat down and wrote. He performs frequently at The Moth, a nonprofit storytelling organization, where he turns tales of his boyhood—like the one about the newborn calf loose in the house—into funny, poignant theater. After so many years of wandering in the world without a home, he now owns a house on the beach where he can see the ocean while he creates the most extraordinary things.

Today, Jeffery Rudell is a paper artist. The typewriter he once made from an egg carton was an early clue to his talent. From paper, he can make a snowstorm. A dodecahedron. A Baroque headdress. He
makes a “valentine” so heartbreaking you could weep—and not just
because it is made from the skin of an onion. Jeffery gets fan mail from
other crafters and paper artists who follow him religiously on his blog;
one post reads in its entirety: “Will you marry me?”

He is also a designer and business consultant. But for someone
whose vision failed him because of a childhood condition and who
claims to live in a flat world, Jeffery creates reams of beauty in three
dimensions from the plainest and flattest of objects.

“My skills didn’t change between last year and this year,” he says.
“I just started doing it instead of talking about it, wanting it, and
wishing for it.”

No more excuses.

THE LESSON BEHIND THE LAW: EXCUSES BLOCK YOUR
REINVENTION

People come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid the effort and risk
of reinvention. They’re only acting in their best interests—or what
they think are their best interests—because reinvention is all about
change, and excuses give you an out so you can avoid or delay the pain
of change. Your conscious, rational mind understands that reinvention
is merely a strategy for managing your career, but your subconscious
experiences it as a leap off a cliff without a bungee cord.

Excuses can get so elaborate and creative that it may seem there are
a million of them. But psychologist Barry Schlenker’s “triangle model”
boils them down to three types: denying personal obligation, denying
personal control, and denying “prescription clarity” (you didn’t under-
stand the instructions so you assumed they didn’t apply to you). Here is
how these three categories of excuse play out in career reinvention:

“It’s not my job.” Like the classic joke about the one waiter in a
small restaurant who insists, “It’s not my table,” this is where you
construct excuses that deny your responsibility in the situation. I
speak frequently to groups in industries that are going through
rapid change, and the version I often hear is: “My company hasn’t
created any new opportunities for me.” Or “My company won’t
reimburse me for training in the new technology.” When you fall prey to this excuse, you put the obligation for your reinvention onto someone else.

“It’s out of my hands.” This is where you lay all the blame on your circumstances, just as Jeffery did; e.g., lack of funds, not having the right connections or a college degree. But the truth is that career reinvention is in your hands—you can always find a way to overcome a situation. Even Jeffery later had to admit that he probably could have gotten a scholarship if he had thought to look into that possibility at the time. Instead, he had told himself that college was off the table because he’d failed one class and came from an economically disadvantaged background. He didn’t bother to think of ways to continue his schooling because he believed he had no control.

“I don’t know enough.” Here you blame your inertia on a lack of sufficient knowledge. Perhaps you think others have not given you all the information you need, and you can’t do a thing until they come through: “I waited for them to call me back. I didn’t know I was supposed to call them.” In this case, you use not understanding as an excuse for not moving forward.

All three types of excuses imply that you’d be perfectly willing to take action if only these things weren’t stopping you. However, if you look closely, you’ll see that nothing is stopping you but your assumption that you cannot proceed.

If there’s one industry that’s rapidly being forced into a reinvention, it’s media—particularly newspapers and publishing. The Internet has upended their circulation and advertising models, and the industry is scrambling to adapt. And if the industry is scrambling, so are the people in it.

I was in Chicago recently to give a talk to a group of media executives at Northwestern University. It was a room full of shell-shocked people who had given from ten to twenty-five years of their lives to an industry that was collapsing before their eyes. On the whole, journalists are a tough, smart bunch. They are used to finding a way to get the story even when obstacles seem insurmountable. But when it came to
their own reinvention, all of a sudden they were blocked, with no hope of progress. They came up with one reason after another—some of them quite persuasive—for why they simply could not do this or that thing, or why their lives could not possibly change.

I decided to ask each one to name the number-one reason why their reinvention was impossible. Out came the litany of excuses:

“I started working at the paper right out of high school so I never got a college degree.”

“My schedule is jam-packed so I can’t carve out the time to investigate a new path.”

“I don’t have any mentors who can guide me.”

“I’ve always wanted to do [insert long-held dream here], but I don’t know how.”

“I don’t have enough money to [insert action step that would take them closer to their dream].”

On it went, until all sixty had spoken. When finally the room was quiet, I asked them another question:

“Of all the excuses you have heard this morning, was there one that could not be overcome?”

I had to squint as I looked around the room. The flash of sixty lightbulbs going off at once was blinding.

**Excuses = Fear**

It’s simple, really. *Excuses are a manifestation of fear.* There are few guarantees in your reinvention journey, but this I promise you: You will come face-to-face on a regular basis with fear. In fact, of all the emotions you’ll likely experience throughout reinvention—excitement, sadness, annoyance—fear will be your steady companion.

Fear is a healthy sign that you are venturing beyond your comfort zone, which you must do repeatedly if you want to move closer to your goal. You might think that a necessary requirement of reinvention is
that you “get over” your fears. *This is not possible.* Fear is a biochemical reaction that is necessary for ensuring the survival of the species. Even if you wanted to get rid of all traces of fear, humans are hardwired for it—and you should be grateful for it. Thanks to fear, your forebears ran for their lives whenever a saber-toothed tiger came around, and the human race did not go extinct before you made it onto the scene.

In modern times, fear does a decent job of keeping us safe and creating boundaries—without which too many people would go around looting and running wild. (This is also known as “a conscience”; those who don’t have it are called “sociopaths.”) It’s also true that fear is a Stone Age instinct that has not kept up well with the times. Fear is not very sophisticated when it comes to distinguishing between a saber-toothed tiger and a job interview. Either situation—one life-threatening, the other life-enhancing—can cause the same sweaty palms and urge to flee.

Fear is necessary. It is here to stay. However, it is prone to setting off false alarms, where you freeze up in the face of the good stuff or for no reason at all. These false alarms create and contribute to unnecessary panic during reinvention. That’s why you have to learn to manage your fears, not master them. The key is to be able to tell the difference between functional fears (the ones that keep you from walking into traffic) and false fears (the ones that keep you from walking into the office of a hiring manager).

Here are a few examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONAL FEAR</th>
<th>FALSE FEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have $5 in my bank account, so I have to focus on earning money today so I won’t run out.</td>
<td>I have twelve months’ expenses in my bank account, so I have to focus on earning money today so I won’t run out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re reporting heavy traffic today, so I’d better start out early for my interview.</td>
<td>What if I’m late for my interview next week?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This job description says there’s a lot of heavy spreadsheet work, and I hate working with numbers.</td>
<td>If I get another job I might have to work with numbers, and I hate working with numbers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I got a pink slip today and I don’t have my reinvention plan in place.</td>
<td>I don’t have my reinvention plan in place because I am worried it won’t work out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Functional fears are a response to a situation that exists today and that requires you to take action in the moment to forestall a negative
outcome. False fears are when your mind goes to potential negative outcomes that may or may not happen in the distant future. Many of your fears can be put into perspective simply by asking yourself whether you are in actual danger this very moment. (Hint: If you have time to ponder this, then the answer is usually no.)

Most reinvention fears break down to a number of anxious what-ifs. What if everything fails? What if I’m making the worst decision of my life? Go ahead and imagine the worst that could happen. If “everything fails,” will you be able to deal with it? Are there really no alternatives? Will your life come to an end? Reinvention is a process of change, but it won’t kill you. Maybe someone will say no to you. Maybe a meeting will end in discouragement instead of elation. Maybe you’ll find a particular path isn’t for you and you’ll have to switch course and try another one. So far, you’re still breathing.

Moving Through Fear

Reinvention does not require you to get over your fears, only that you be willing to take action in spite of them. We all know someone who has been complaining since forever that he coulda, woulda, shoulda been the next Bill Gates. But Bill Gates is the one who actually sat down in front of a computer and began learning to program it. If you’re waiting to get started on your reinvention until you’re finished slaying all your dragons, forget it. You won’t make progress on your career reinvention unless you are willing to give up the excuses and take action in spite of fear. As the Chinese proverb says: Talk doesn’t cook rice.

To reduce your fears enough to get moving, here are some of the techniques we teach at The Reinvention Institute:

Find a shoulder to lean on: Share your fears with supportive people in your life (friends, therapists, coaches) who can serve as a sounding board.

Distract yourself: If you’ve ever engaged a child in a sing-along to divert attention from the doctor with the needle, you know this technique works: Redirect your focus to another absorbing activity.
Your brain cannot handle major competing claims for its attention, so the more you distract yourself, the more the fear subsides.

**Take a walk down Memory Lane:** Survey your past and make a list of the times you managed to succeed in the face of fear and doubt. This will reassure you and remind you that even when taking action seems daunting, survival is all but guaranteed.

**Identify the real culprit:** Go deeper into your fear and identify the core value you feel is being threatened. Is it your sense of safety? Is it your sense of identity? Once you’ve gotten beneath the superficial layers, you can objectively analyze how to address the situation. For example, if your sense of security feels threatened because you fear you will run out of cash during your reinvention process, review your budget and contingency plans to see whether this fear has a solid foundation.

**Look for role models:** Doubtless you are very special, one of a kind. But you are not unique in your fears. Other people have faced and overcome the very same ones. Seek out such people; they can serve as inspirational role models and provide tactical information on how they managed.

**Talk back to your fear:** Politely acknowledging your fear while insisting that it step aside is a way of asserting yourself over it: “Thanks, but no thanks.”

**Feel the fear and do it anyway:** Like the slogan says.

**HIDDEN CONFLICT THAT COULD STOP YOU: ALLOWING YOUR EXCUSES TO BECOME SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES**

Being mired in fear to the extent that you continually make excuses carries a penalty far worse than simply falling behind in your reinvention timetable. Excuse making is actually habit-forming. Studies show that excuses become a crutch that you teach yourself to reach for until it’s second nature—in *all* aspects of your life, not just reinvention.
Excuses feel as comfortable as an old blanket. And like a blanket, they can smother the life out of your life. This is what happened to my friend Samantha. We first met years ago when we were both students at the local high school, dreaming of leaving Milwaukee to make our mark in the world. Sam was a talented artist who planned to show her work internationally. She received school-wide accolades and won several local art competitions.

Deep in her heart, Sam didn’t believe she was worthy of making it in the big leagues. She occasionally confided that she was scared, but more often she made excuses. When it came time for us to graduate, she said she didn’t have the money to go to art school. I loaned her a book I had on how to get scholarships, but she was always too busy to read it. After I moved away, Sam and I lost touch.

At our ten-year high school reunion, I ran into Sam. She’d held a series of jobs, mostly in factories, but told me she was still doing her art on the side. I encouraged her to send samples of her work to a gallery in our hometown, and I put her in touch with a contact I had there.

Several weeks later, Sam called, excited. They wanted to see more of her work! There was just one problem: They wanted slides. Naturally, I told her to go have some made.

“I don’t have the money,” she said.

“Well, how much does it cost?” I asked.

She didn’t know, but she was sure it was “a lot.” I asked her how few slides she could get away with; she didn’t know, but she probably didn’t have “enough” samples of her art to make the cut.

On it went, in an endless loop. By the time I hung up the phone, I was exhausted.

Some years later, I ran into a mutual friend who told me that Sam was still working at a factory and talking about how she had just as much talent as the big-name artists, but she just couldn’t get a break.

Like Sam, you can let your excuse-making habit become so ingrained that it’s your fallback response to every fear. It’s who you are. Over time, you’ll feel less empowered to create a different outcome, which in turn diminishes the likelihood of success in future life endeavors. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To overcome this conflict, you must give up your cycle of excuses. You can always find ways to change your situation, get more information, or
take the initiative. You have the power to transform circumstances once you take responsibility for doing so—just as Jeffery realized when he finally set aside his excuses and made it his job to learn how to write a business plan and seek funding for it.

LIVING THE LAW: LETTING GO OF EXCUSES

What are your reasons for why you’re stuck or unhappy, or unable to change or make progress in your reinvention? Certainly there are times when an excuse is legitimate—“The hurricane prevented me from hanging out the wash”—but for the most part, excuses aren’t the rational explanations you think they are. To be a Reinventor and thrive in this challenging new world, you have to want to reach your reinvention goal more than you want to hold on to your excuses.

In addition to working through your fears using the tactics mentioned earlier—such as sharing them with a supportive person or reminding yourself of previous fears you’ve successfully overcome—you must do the following:

1. Give up complaining. Complaining is excuse-making in an angry mode. It is victim behavior, another way of avoiding responsibility—“denying personal control,” according to Schlenker’s triangle model. Complaining creates a downward spiral that draws energy and attention away from the options at hand. When you give up complaining, you admit that you always have a choice—even though some choices involve difficult decisions and significant effort. The moment you give up complaining, your future is transformed. Jeffery’s childhood was devoid of rich educational opportunities and financial abundance, and that could not be changed. But when he embarked on his reinvention, he realized that, as an adult, he could choose to stop complaining about things that were long past and to take responsibility for creating financial abundance and educational opportunities in his life right now.

Exercise on Page 229: Make a List of Your Excuses
2. **Make a commitment.** At The Reinvention Institute, we define “commitment” as taking action, even when you don’t want to. It’s not enough to say you’re committed to reinventing your career. It’s all in the doing. A client of mine—Sylvia—had been a marketer at a major consumer packaged-goods company but wanted to position herself as an independent branding expert. On the form I have every new client fill out, she ranked herself a “10,” on a scale of 1 to 10, in terms of her level of commitment to reinvention, but I subsequently discovered that she hadn’t followed up on my coaching request that she set up a meeting with a well-known speaking agent who had expressed interest in her. Not only that, she said she often didn’t follow up on opportunities. Some of her excuses: *I’m swamped. I have nothing prepared. I need to finish this other project first. I’m not feeling confident. I don’t have enough information. If I take the meeting before I’m ready, I’ll blow it, and I’ll never find another agent of that caliber. I won’t have the time or resources to follow up on the meeting. I’m scared.* I’ve heard it all, and more. I told Sylvia that if she wouldn’t put in the effort to stretch beyond her comfort zone, then coaching would be a waste of her money and my time. Shocked by my response, Sylvia began to take meetings, even when she hated them. “I was scared straight,” she told me. She realized that if she wanted a successful business, she would have to follow through on her commitment to make it happen.

3. **Match your actions to your words.** In the previous example, Sylvia learned that her actions didn’t match the “10” she gave herself for commitment. To give up your excuses, you have to realize you’re making them! The way to do that is to examine your actions in light of what you claim you want. Ask yourself the following: *What does my mouth say I want? And when I shut my mouth, what do my actions say I want?* You may be surprised by the disconnect between what you say and what you do.

4. **Step up your game.** You’ve got to want better results. Jeffery finally buckled down to creating a business plan, but that wasn’t

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Exercise on Page 230: Match Your Actions to Your Words
enough. His initial vision for his company didn’t include a strategy for using his artistic talent with paper creations—and this was the real problem behind Jeffery’s feeling of being stuck. He wasn’t using enough of his many talents. When Jeffery came to The Reinvention Institute, he was working at things he was good at, but he wasn’t working at the things he most loved. Only when he learned to value himself could he appreciate what was unique about him, and that meant his art had value, too. Now he was willing to step up his game and seek ways to monetize his creative output. Today Jeffery is a high-priced consultant. Craft and paper manufacturers seek him out to help with product development, and he has a multi-book deal with Sterling Publishing for do-it-yourself craft and paper constructions books.

Many people never muster the courage to begin a career reinvention, so deep is their terror. They continually reach for the bottle of excuses to dull the pain of their fear. But until you master this Law and break yourself of the excuse habit, progress will be intermittent, and lasting change will be elusive. The moment you move past your fear and give up your excuses, you leave the shallows of your life and swim into an ocean of opportunity.

**The Takeaway:** Making excuses is a habit motivated by fear, allowing you to avoid or delay the pain of change. To manage your fears and take action in spite of them, you must give up your excuses.

**Watch Out for . . .** Believing your excuses so deeply that they become a stumbling block to your progress.

**Putting the Law into Action:** Pursue three options for getting around your biggest excuse.

**Something to Think About:** What would your life look like if you gave up all your excuses?