

GREEN FLAGS

HOW TO BE
THE KIND
OF PERSON
YOU NEED
IN YOUR LIFE



Quique Autrey

“A probing, thoughtful introduction to the dynamics of relationships”

– James Hollis, PhD

Praise for *Green Flags*

“Autrey’s *Green Flags* is a probing, thoughtful introduction to the dynamics of relationships and will go a long way toward helping us understand why relationships so often turn out the way they do, and why something we say is so desirable is often so complicated. But be warned, this book will ask the reader to have the courage to look within to examine our relationship to our own lives for we are the only person who is common to all of our relationships. It only seems common sense, then, that to improve outer relationships we have to learn much more about that person we are bringing to all our engagements with others.”

—James Hollis, PhD, Jungian analyst and author in Washington, D.C.

“It is rare that one comes across a book that is so easy to read, but also so profound. In his book, *Green Flags*, Quique Autrey provides his readers with an encouraging guide for becoming more effective in creating and maintaining relationships. If approached with an open mind and a willingness to look deeper into why we do the things we do, this book will enlighten and empower readers in their quest for obtaining more contentment and connection in their lives.”

—Paul J. Leslie, author of *The Art of Creating a Magical Session: Key Elements for Transformative Psychotherapy*

“In my tradition, our weekly assembly begins addressing the presence of God: ‘...unto to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid...’ If God knows us so completely, then we would do well to be honest with ourselves about who we are especially when we relate to God, and those through whom we know God, our family, friends, and community. Autrey’s book is a helpful and accessible tool to explore our own hearts, desires, and secrets so that we might be bearers of green flags to ourselves and our community.”

—The Rev. J. James Derkits, M Div, Rector of Trinity by the Sea Episcopal Church, Port Aransas

“Throughout our lives, each of us inevitably confronts the paradox that while we journey alone, we cannot truly live on our own. We need Wayfinders to guide us through the evolving myth of our lives. *Green Flags* reveals that the path to self-discovery often lies in what we observe outside ourselves, ultimately leading us back to what we’ve concealed within. By recognizing this, we deepen our connection with ourselves and others, freeing them from the burdens we unconsciously project. *Green Flags* lights the way, guiding us to rediscover our truest selves.”

—John Price, PhD, Co-Founder of the Center for the Healing Arts & Science and host of *The Sacred Speaks* podcast.

We might initially think that the person we know best is ourselves, after all that's who we spend every waking moment with. Yet it is often our own selves that we know least about. Our conscious ego—with its desires—is easy to see, but our unconscious wishes are elusive, often only showing up indirectly in our judgments of others, our inhibitions and our repetitions. Not only do we not know ourselves, but we don't know that we don't know ourselves. Add to that the fact that we have all sorts of ingenious defences set up to avoid such a knowledge and one might conclude that we will never really encounter the subject that we are. For this reason, we are in dire need of *Green Flags*. With great skill, Autrey helps the reader to identify their defences. But Autrey offers us more than his skill and insight, he demonstrates a deep compassion in his writing, a compassion that offers the reader the grace that is needed to actually lower those defences and encounter themselves. An endeavour that promises to bear fruit in self-discovery, self-transformation and in a richer engagement with others.

—Peter Rollins, radical theologian and author of *The Idolatry of God*

“I liked *Green Flags* for its insight, but I loved *Green Flags* for its humanity; that is, its ability to be gracious even as it sheds light on critical psychological concepts. I highly recommend this book. It's an important read for anyone interested in becoming the person they need to become.”

—Jonathan J. Foster, PhD, author of *Indigo: The Color of Grief*

Autrey's new book *Green Flags* is an eloquent and exciting personal and practical work that carries with profound questions related to the complex needs of the human subject, to the 'problem' of subjectivity and to the importance and difficulties of intersubjectivity and interpersonal relationships. Whilst many practical books aim at 'conscious-raising' related to these issues, Autrey's does something much more challenging and important—aiming at raising the contours of the reader's unconscious. Instead of offering neat solutions, Autrey guides his reader towards an encounter with the unconscious dynamic of their life—with all the complexity and difficulty that that entails—and does so with humor and insight. *Green Flags* is a stimulating and life-affirming text from an experienced practitioner and a brilliant writer and thinker.

—Helen Rollins, author of *Psychocinema* and co-host of *The Lack* podcast

“In clear and vivid terms, Autrey's book revives the great insight of Aristotle that good friendships don't happen by accident but require thoughtful effort and care to bring out the best in the friend, and in oneself.”

—Richard Boothby, PhD, professor of philosophy and author of *Blown Away: Refinding Life After My Son's Suicide*

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Quique Autrey

To Amy, my best friend and soul mate.

Your love, support, and unwavering belief in me have made all things possible. This book is as much yours as it is mine. Thank you for being my partner in every sense of the word. I am forever grateful to share this journey with you.

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INTRODUCTION

"The quality of all our relationships is a direct function of our relationship to ourselves."

—James Hollis¹

The above quote lingers with me to this day. I encountered it on a bleak and rainy Sunday morning. Before anyone else in the house was up, I picked up Hollis' *The Eden Project: In Search of The Magical Other* and started reading.

The book was a recommendation from my therapist. At the time, I was a year into weekly therapy sessions with him. Therapy sessions started after my life and career collapsed. The year prior to starting therapy I was a senior pastor in Colorado. This role was the culmination of a decade working in various churches. Almost a year into that position, I started an affair with a woman who was a staff member. When my infidelity was exposed, I lost my job, my marriage fell apart, and any faith I had was shattered.

Initially, therapy was an attempt to save my marriage and figure out what I was going to do for employment. It quickly become something much more

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than this. I established a strong connection with my therapist. He fostered a safe space to explore my deepest fears and longings. While therapy helped me discern that I needed to proceed with a divorce and take serious steps towards becoming a therapist, *the real gift of therapy was helping me come to terms with my own unhealthy relationship to myself.*

My life and relationships were a mess due to avoiding grappling with my inner demons. This is why Hollis' quote lingered in my mind so long. The life and relationships I dreamt of would not be possible unless I worked on a more honest relationship to myself.

There is a trend in our culture to point the finger and highlight everyone else's faults. Many of us are quick to label someone we do not like a narcissist or point out the "red flags" that make us uncomfortable. Sometimes this is necessary, but often *what is needed is a humble attitude that allows us to confront our own flaws rather than projecting our problems onto others.*

Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius advised:

Whenever you are about to find fault with someone, ask yourself the following question: What fault of mine most nearly resembles the one I am about to criticize?²

The modern author Ryan Holiday paraphrases this

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ancient advice with the following maxim, “Be tolerant with others and strict with yourself.”³ This is much needed wisdom in an age tempted to blame others and not take responsibility for oneself.



THE FUNCTION OF THERAPY IS TO HELP MAKE THE UNCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUS.

My therapist embraced a depth psychological⁴ approach to working with people. At its core, depth psychology acknowledges that psychic processes are partly unconscious and partly conscious. This means we all do things for reasons we are not always immediately aware of. Destructive behaviors such as, over-eating or an addiction to gambling may be motivated by reasons outside a person’s conscious intentions.

One of the hopes of depth psychology is that people can come to a greater awareness of what governs their behavior. One common description is that *the function of therapy is to help make the unconscious conscious*.

To do this, it will be helpful to create a roadmap toward becoming the person we want to be. This book will not only dive into the unconscious roots of our behaviors, but also focus on positive, intentional steps towards becoming the person who we need to be for both us and others.

All of us can imagine the kind of person we would

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like to have in our lives, someone who listens to us, understands who we are, accepts us where we're at. But to become this kind of person the first step is to understand why we do what we do.

The other day I came across an *instagram* post from @herpsychology, which alerted me to a set of characteristics I wish I'd knew about twenty years ago:

Green flags in people:

- They celebrate the wins of people
- Remember the small things about you
- They respect your boundaries
- You feel energized after seeing them
- They listen without being defensive
- They allow you to be fully yourself
- They make you feel safe
- You don't have to watch what you say
- They support your goals⁵

The focus on “green flags” instead of the usual emphasis on “red flags” set this image apart from the thousands of mental health images on my *instagram* feed. Multiple therapists and influencers I follow highlight the dangers of “red flag” people and how to avoid them. It was refreshing to read a post about the virtues of someone who extols the traits and values of a healthy person whose relationships with self and others is focused on the positive behaviors and aspirations.

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THIS BOOK IS ABOUT HELPING YOU BECOME LESS OF A BURDEN ON OTHER PEOPLE BY TEACHING YOU HOW TO DEVELOP A HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIP TO YOURSELF.

If there are such things as a “red flag” person or character traits that raise “red flags” then there must be characteristics of “green flag” people.

After reflecting on the image for some time, it dawned on me why it initially grabbed my attention. *The image reminded me of the challenging work I did in therapy to cultivate a healthier relationship with myself and others.*

When I consider “green flags,” I envision someone who has examined their unconscious patterns and actively worked to resolve them, reducing the suffering they experience in their life and relationships.

People with “green flags” are not just safe; they are genuinely enjoyable to be around, and they energize others instead of draining them. My therapy journey has convinced me that becoming someone others perceive as marked by “green flags” requires a great deal of introspection, consistently challenging and examining of our unconscious patterns. Returning to the Hollis quote, a person characterized by “green flags” is one who has worked on their rela-

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tionship to themselves. This is evident by how they interact with others.

My wife and I, who are both therapists, often joke that we do not really like people. After years of making this joke, I have realized this is only a half-truth. It is not that we dislike all people; what we do not like are those who drain us and unconsciously burden us with their unresolved psychological baggage. This is not limited to our clients; we have acquaintances, friends, and family members who fit this description too.

This book is about helping you become less of a burden on other people by teaching you how to develop a healthier relationship to yourself.

Each chapter will delve into one of the “green flags” featured in the *instagram* post. Each of the nine positive statements presupposes an underlying negative unconscious pattern that everyone must recognize and address to become the kind of person others find energizing and enjoyable.

Chapter one explores the truth that healthy people celebrate the wins of others. The negative unconscious pattern that must be worked on is our tendency to feel insecure when others are thriving.

Chapter two emphasizes our tendency to connect with aspects of others that are exciting and fulfill our narcissistic needs. While not inherently problematic, if this becomes the main reason for relating to

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someone, we overlook the ordinary aspects that truly define them. If you have ever been frustrated by someone who only wants to spend time with you for what you can do for them, you will understand exactly what I mean.

Chapter three explains that we will only respect the boundaries of other people when we respect our own boundaries. Getting clear about boundaries requires that we understand why it is hard to establish them and reinforce them with others. When we have the tools to create healthy boundaries, we better understand how to honor the boundaries of others.

Chapter four asserts that when we are around healthy people, we tend to feel energized rather than depleted. This is because unhealthy people tend to unconsciously project their anxieties. If we can learn to manage our underlying anxiety, we can relate to others without burdening them with something that is not theirs to carry.

Chapter five reveals that healthy individuals listen without becoming defensive. The negative unconscious pattern to address is our natural tendency to identify with our beliefs, which can lead to taking things personally.

Chapter six explores the importance of confidence in a relationship. Unhealthy individuals struggle to let others be their true selves because it threatens their own sense of identity. As we build confidence by self-acceptance, we can interact with

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others in a way that affirms their authenticity without feeling the need to change ourselves.

Chapter seven argues that healthy people behave in a way that leads to greater trust in a relationship. Unhealthy individuals consciously and unconsciously deceive themselves and others about their true intentions. When this happens, people feel unsafe, and relationships fall apart.

Chapter eight addresses the importance of adopting a non-judgmental attitude in our relationship to other people. Unhealthy individuals are too easily offended by what others say and believe. Learning to accept people even when we disagree with their behavior or values is not only possible but essential to quality relationships.

Chapter nine examines the importance of supporting others' goals. Healthy individuals approach relationships with a spirit of collaboration rather than competition. This does not mean that all competition is bad; there can be healthy competition within a broader context of mutual support and affirmation. Healthy people support others' dreams because they recognize the benefits of reciprocal support.

Throughout the book I will share personal stories and examples from clients and other people in my life to help illustrate the points I want to make. While all of these have a kernel of truth to them, I have intentionally changed the names and some of the details to protect each individual's confidential-

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ity.

Each chapter ends with a set of discussion questions and tools for practice. The questions are intended to help you further process the content of each chapter. The tools are to provide actionable suggestions. These questions would be great to discuss with a friend, partner, or therapist—any trusted person in your life who is courageous enough to speak the truth to you in love.

No one person perfectly embodies the virtues of a healthy person described in this book, including myself. While I have grown and matured tremendously over the last twenty years, I am still a work in progress. The unhealthy unconscious patterns that I explore in these pages are something I struggle with daily. The important thing is that I am more aware of my flaws, and I actively seek to address them for the sake of my relationship to myself and others.

One of the central assumptions of depth psychology is that we cannot see our deeply ingrained unconscious patterns all by ourselves. This is why we need therapists, spouses, and friends to help us see our blind spots. As you read this book, *I encourage you to discuss it with someone who can see what you cannot see*. I am not suggesting this person needs to be a therapist (although that can be very helpful). It can be any trusted person in your life who is courageous enough to speak the truth to you in love.

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Celebrate The Wins of Others

“Promise yourself today to be just as enthusiastic about the success of others as you are about your own.”

—Christian D. Larson¹

“Green flag” individuals celebrate the wins of other people in their life. I know, much easier said than done! This can be such a challenge because many of us have not adequately grappled with feelings of shame, inadequacy and low self-esteem. *Our underlying insecurities can prevent us from affirming and celebrating the good fortune and successes of others, unless we address our underlying insecurities.*

This has been a struggle throughout my life. In my childhood, I battled intense feelings of inadequacy. My best theory is these feelings emerged from several sources. I grew up in a tumultuous home with a father who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. In 5th grade, I was diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome. To this day, there is still uncertainty as to how much this diagnosis was rooted in neurological differences and how much of it was my body’s reaction to early traumatic experiences.

Starting in junior high, weight and body image

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were a battle. Even though I was tall, I eventually reached a size of over three hundred pounds. My older brothers and multiple people at school bullied me because of my obesity and the strange tics and noises stemming from Tourette's.

The combination of an unstable relationship with my father, a socially debilitating diagnosis, and years of bullying led me to develop a persistent sense of shame and inadequacy. I felt inferior to other people and had little to no social status.

In my late teens I converted to Christianity. I was drawn to my friend's family who seemed more present and affectionate than my own. Eventually, they invited me to Lakewood Church, in Houston, Texas, and I was compelled by Joel Osteen's message of hope and positivity.

With this turn to religion, I mustered up enough willpower to start exercising and adopted a more reasonable diet. In the span of a year, I lost a hundred pounds. I was going to college and working part-time. For the first time in my life, I felt decent about my appearance and found social status through the church. People started recognizing me for my strengths and abilities rather than emphasizing my deficiencies.

As significant as these changes were, I was *not really addressing the deep-seated feelings of shame and inadequacy.*

No matter how well I was doing, I could not help

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but become upset by the accomplishments and good fortune of my friends and family. If a classmate excelled at a presentation, I would publicly congratulate them while internally criticizing them. It came to the point where I refused to attend events where friends were being celebrated because I did not want to be flooded by feelings of inferiority.

In my mid-twenties I worked as a youth pastor in a small church plant. My friend Tim was a fellow pastor of a church close to the one where I worked. During one of our frequent coffee outings, he paused our conversation and asked me what was wrong. I was initially taken aback. I was not sure what he was referring to.

Tim was brave and confident enough to ask: “You’re always making faces and squirming in your seat when I talk about the things that are going well in my congregation. Is there something you need to talk about?”

I was speechless, and did not know how to respond. Honestly, I was oblivious to my non-verbal reactions and ignorant of the root of the behavior. Sadly, my relationship with Tim fizzled out. We never talked about why the relationship fell apart but my guess is Tim got fed up with my insecurities. I wasn’t courageous yet to delve into my insecurities and communicate them to Tim.

In therapy sessions, clients frequently struggle with these feelings of inadequacy. Recently a client

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named Georgia came to see me. She wanted help transitioning out of her final year of college and into the work force. She was also looking for a way to understand her recent bouts of anger.

Georgia was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)² as a young child. She revealed that she was the oldest of two girls and that her younger sister was neurotypical.³ Georgia found herself getting upset with her sister every time she was around her. Georgia struggled making friends and was taking longer than planned to learn how to drive. Her sister, who was still in high school, had lots of friends and drove confidently. As patient and loving as her sister was, she started to distance herself when Georgia began calling her names and losing her temper. After talking in therapy, we discovered Georgia was getting so upset because her sisters' apparent "normalcy" was bringing up feelings of shame and inadequacy. The recent anger outbursts were a reaction to her deep-seated sense of inferiority.

Georgia was motivated to work on her inferiority because it was taking a toll on her relationship with her sister. Her sister adored Georgia very much and was very patient with her neurodivergence. However, Georgia's recent anger outbursts were very hurtful to her sister. Georgia would call her sister names and make demeaning comments anytime her sense of inadequacy was triggered. She was afraid that she would ruin her relationship with her sister if she did not get this under control.

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In *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck states, “We cannot solve a problem by hoping someone else will solve it for us. I can solve a problem only when I say, ‘This is my problem and it’s up to me to solve it.’”⁴



OUR UNDERLYING INSECURITIES CAN PREVENT US FROM AFFIRMING AND CELEBRATING THE GOOD FORTUNE AND SUCCESSES OF OTHERS, UNLESS WE ADDRESS OUR UNDERLYING INSECURITIES.

Here, Peck is calling us to take responsibility for our own deep-seated issues. This is not to suggest that our diagnoses or traumas are our fault. They are not, but if *we hope to make any progress in becoming a healthy person people want to be around, we must accept our psychological baggage and do something to address it.*

It took me years in a therapist’s chair to finally uncover and address my entrenched sense of shame and low self-esteem. I had to learn to accept my past and find a way to value myself before I could hope to be in a healthy relationship with anyone else. Once I could do this, I was not so threatened by the successes of friends, family and co-workers. When I started to believe in my own worth and dignity, I could easily celebrate the wins of others.

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The same thing happened with Georgia. She was understandably frustrated that her parents were not allowing her to drive. To their credit, her slower processing and tendency to get overwhelmed and distracted made driving a real challenge and potential hazard to herself and others.

We decided one of the only ways she was going to feel “normal” was by learning how to drive. We worked together and found a driving program that worked specifically with Autistic people. After a few months, she passed the driving test and received her license. Georgia’s esteem was greatly boosted by being able to drive herself to therapy. Although she still gets irritated with her sister, she no longer has the uncontrollable anger outbursts.

Shame and inadequacy no longer have such a strong hold over me and my relationships. This has very little to do with external accomplishments and much more to do with self-love and acceptance. One of the great things about addressing my shame is my increased ability to celebrate my friends and family when they experience success. Instead of avoiding triggering situations, I now look for opportunities to praise loved ones for their good fortune.

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Tools for Practice

Brené Brown offers the following definition of shame:

“Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.”⁵

One of the most effective ways to counter the power of shame is by practicing self-compassion. Self-compassion has three important elements.

*Managing Shame Through Self-Compassion*⁶

1. Self-Kindness over Self-Judgement

Practicing self-kindness means becoming more empathetic and gentler with ourselves when we perceive our flaws and imperfections.

The next time you are overwhelmed with feelings of shame, imagine that your best friend is going through the same situation you are.

How would you talk them through their negative feelings? Now try to relate to yourself in the same spirit of kindness and understanding.

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2. Common Humanity over Isolation

Shame and inadequacy are negative emotions that everyone struggles with. The great temptation when we are battling shame is believing that we are the only ones struggling with this.

Instead of isolating yourself when you are feeling shame, reach out to a friend and talk about what you are feeling.

3. Mindfulness rather than Over-Identification

Mindfulness is the non-judgmental awareness of an emotional or bodily state. When we practice mindfulness, we acknowledge the shame without denying it or identifying with it.

The mind is like a train station. Our negative thoughts and emotions are trains that come in and out of the station. Like a traveler at the station, we cannot control the trains coming in and out of the station. What we do have some control over is whether we get on the train. Likewise, we cannot control when thoughts and feelings around shame come into our awareness. We do, however, have some agency over whether we identify and perpetuate those negative thoughts and feelings.

Take a few minutes a day to practice this mindfulness exercise:

Imagine your negative thoughts and feelings as

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trains at a station. Without judging them, notice them and watch them pass through the station. Try not to get on the trains when they arrive. If negative thoughts and emotions arise, change the way you relate to them. Remember, you are not your thoughts or emotions.

Questions For Discussion

1. Is it difficult for you to celebrate the wins of others? If so, why?

2. Are you aware of any insecurities that might be blocking you from praising others?

3. Think of one person in your life that's hard to celebrate. Why do you think that is?

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4. Who is someone in your life that needs encouragement? What is something significant you can do for them today?
