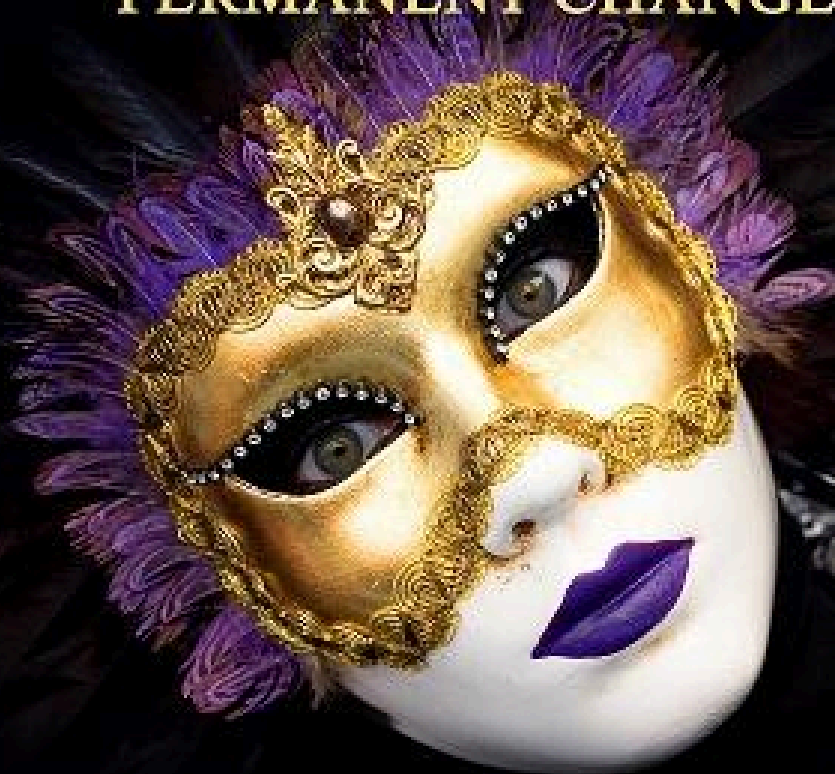


HONESTLY SPEAKING

**KNOW THYSELF,
TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE**

**YOUR STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO
PERMANENT CHANGE**



D A W N K E E G A N

To my mother who provided so many of the experiences leading to who I am today and to my dad who kept me financially afloat during the last couple years even when he didn't exactly understand what I was trying to achieve.

Forward

In the months leading up to my arrival in Austin and for several months following I was without focus or purpose. The best way I can describe myself is like one of those intelligent and high energy breeds of dog that everyone knows must have a job to do or they will destroy everything important in your life. Without question that was me. My personal brand of passion, enthusiasm and complete disregard for personal or professional boundaries left unbridled put extreme pressure on everyone in my life. But thanks to the serendipitous intervention of an executive at a local publisher who put me on my current path, and the unrelenting coaching and cheerleading provided by a business network too large to mention individually I found the outlet I needed for all that creative energy.

For nearly 50 years I've been a consummate observer of human nature including my own. In doing so I developed the absolutely automatic and uncontrollable tendency for complimenting total strangers and giving random hugs. I have to imagine it's because I've learned that the unexpected nature of those things is what makes them so valuable. But that need to connect also drives my extreme desire to "fix" everything and everyone.

Because of my own former struggles with weight and body image it was natural for me to look at that demographic first when trying to find answers to the struggles I saw being played out daily in those I met. I simply refused to accept the standard off the cuff answers of no motivation and lack of willpower.

After the idea worm of a wellness book was implanted and burrowing about in my head I expanded my thinking to review my observations and experiences as well as all the personal traits that make me special and have gotten me to this place in life. Soon thereafter I developed a theory. Once established I've thought of little else and thus "Honestly Speaking" was born.

It is with zero doubt or reservation I say this has been all at once the most enjoyable, terrifying, and satisfying experience a person could possibly ask to get from a creative endeavor. I have put words to paper thousands of times in my life, but never have I been so totally in love with and passionate about a project and the potential impact it might have on my readers. However, the very nature of the content had me constantly looking inward at myself and reviewing both pleasant and not so pleasant memories. I must ask up front that you take the entire work as a whole and forgive any parts that might be perceived as too personal and/or self-serving. I have always worn my heart on my sleeve so to speak and hold tight to the belief that we are unable to truly see our own situations objectively. While I don't live or die by other's opinion, if no one found my efforts helpful, any personal pleasure I derived from it would be at least partially diminished.

It is my sincerest hope that within these pages you find something that resonates either in your own life or in a manner which allows you to view others in a kinder and maybe more helpful light. We are all in this together, but without the ability for honest and transparent communication all other efforts are doomed to be futile.

Honestly Speaking

Know Thyself – Transform Your Life

"Many persons have the wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose." Helen Keller. Imagine yourself going through life every day having the confidence to overcome any

fear, reject any label and achieve any dream. Envision knowing even though the bad times will still come it's okay because now you won't just "get through it" you will guide the outcome and REALLY get stronger because of it. Finally, imagine that through having that knowledge and power you can change any aspect of your life currently causing you pain.

For most of us, that sounds like just a fanciful notion with an implied empty promise not having anything to do with life as we lead it. But when you are the expert on yourself; when you have the confidence that comes from knowing exactly who you are and what you want, as well as your strengths and your weaknesses, all of a sudden not only are those things possible, they are inevitable and unavoidable. Because as the person who knows you best in the world you have the control, the power, the ability and the right to dictate how you feel and what impact you will have on the world.

I've long been curious and bothered by what I see as an increasing number of people

going through life on autopilot not actually getting the joy they crave or worse yet actively sabotaging what chance they have at the happiness we all so richly deserve. In my everyday interactions with people, as well as through my coaching practice, I hear tale after

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heartbreaking tale of a population at odds with what they are doing or saying they want and what they are receiving from life.

"Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." — Aldous Huxley

Despite the overwhelming abundance of our era, the World Health Organization predicts that by 2020 depression will be the second leading cause of disability. The psychologist David Myers has been researching happiness since the 1950's and found that for more than six decades we hold steady at a mere 20% of humans claiming to be happy. In 2013 the website drugabuse.gov reported that 31% of Americans were addicted to cigarettes, alcohol, prescription painkillers or illicit drugs. Currently, 2/3 of us are overweight or obese, and we are getting fatter faster than ever despite more pills, surgeries, gyms and exercise programs than ever before.

Depending on the study you use, anywhere from 30-60% of spouses will be unfaithful in their marriage at least once. Even in a down economy dating and hookup sites flourish with many of the members there being married individuals who claim "I'm happy but...".

More than one million times a month, someone asks Google a question about self confidence, building self-esteem, happiness or success and there are nearly 370,000

Amazon results for books on those topics. There are popular fan pages on Facebook that feature nothing but memes relative to these concerns.

To say we're "searching" for something is an understatement. While at some level we know we're responsible for our own happiness and in turn all those other things, the reality of how to make that happen escapes us.

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Every day becomes a struggle between tending to the responsibilities we already have and trying to wrest back control of elements we desire but may see slipping away. The patterns in our lives both at home and work repeat themselves often without our even seeing the impact. What's scarier and equally tragic is that while we're fighting so mightily to grab what happiness we can from our own lives we're simultaneously setting our children up to experience the same insecurities, frustrations and life hurdles. More than two centuries ago founding father Thomas Paine said: "If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace." Yet, here we are repeating the same sentiment and regretting the same actions time and again.

So how did we get here? What drives this cover up and self-medication? What does that cover up look like? And how do we begin to get back to a place of more truth, honesty and authentic communication with ourselves and others?

I have both a theory as well as a proposed solution. Therefore, my mission with this book is first to show evidence to support what I've come to believe and then to hopefully walk with you, my reader, down the path to our joint discovery and healing. This is a book about control and about permission. It's about choosing to give up our

control and about giving ourselves permission to take it back.

The theory and concepts I put forth here are in no way new or profound. They've been addressed many times by authors some of whom have far more formal training or brand recognition than I do. However, what I intend to do is give you very real world everyday examples of how this plays out for us and how our refusal to acknowledge it threatens not only our happiness but also that of our children. Throughout the pages that follow,

I'll show what

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happens when we fail to live authentically as well as the amazing things that happen when we succeed. Also, in bits and pieces, I'll relate my story with its inherent strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, because if I weren't living in this manner every day, not only would the concept have never come to me, more importantly, nothing I said here would be of real value.

However, each of the stories here is very personal. Some of the most tragic ones represent people who are no longer on this earth. Those folks will never have another opportunity to learn from their mistakes or to change the outcome of their lives. Some of them died physically or emotionally alone thinking they were unloved and without value. The real purpose of this book is to do anything I can to prevent you and me from experiencing those same horrific and lonely fates. For that reason, I ask you to approach the rest of this text with a completely open and curious mind. Maybe, in the end, none of it applies to you, but I can tell you I learned things about myself while writing it and did my best to structure it in a way for you to do the same.

But true to the title of this book I will talk to you like I talk to the most important

people in my life. Sometimes that will be gentle; other times it will be painfully direct.

This is a topic of great importance to all of us. Every generation wants to be the one to make things different, but from parent to child to grandchild we continue to suffer the same struggles and insecurities. The time for sugar coating is long gone, and I've worked too hard to get this into your hands. I have just this one chance to make it count.

Finally, the most important thing to remember is this: what happens next is and always has been up to you. You began with picking up this book. Now open your mind and be intentional with every page. You can change, or you can stay the same. You can live in

denial

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and cover up the misery, or you can live every day with mind blowing and breathtaking confidence, but in the end, it is all your choice.

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What is the cost of ignoring your true heart?

"We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others that in the end, we become disguised to ourselves." François de la Rochefoucauld

We are a society in pain. The pain manifests differently in each person, but it distills down to one simple truth. Too many of us have either lost sight of who we are and what we value most or do not take active steps to live according to those values. We no longer live in an authentic fashion, and it affects every aspect of our lives. We spend our waking hours attempting to please parents, employers, and personal relationships. We blame each other, society and technology.

We build entire identities around these paths we've mistakenly begun to follow. We tell ourselves and others "This is who or what I am." And we make them believe it because we think we believe. But at some level, this "truth" is not comfortable for us. Somewhere inside a part of us knows differently and feels the disconnect between our thoughts or actions and our true heart.

Once we've established these false personae, we struggle to maintain them and live with the constant fear (consciously or not) of being discovered. The pain this confusion causes leads us to look for solutions everywhere except within ourselves. The insecurities we've carried since childhood lead to self-medicating which then leads to cover up and denial and the

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cycle repeats. In our efforts to fit in, we often look to individuals such as celebrities or organizations, causes, and social groups not aligned with our values because we've yet to identify or in some cases forgotten what those values are.

“Tomorrow, you promise yourself, will be different, but tomorrow is too often a repetition of today.” James T. Mccay

For decades we've been fighting drug abuse, alcoholism, infidelity and obesity as if finding the cure to those things would suddenly turn our country around and make it “like the good old days.” We have hundreds of books on self-awareness, communication and other concepts related to both our internal and external relationship with ourselves and the world around us. Even more conversation and discussion revolves around the woes of humankind and what we see as the decline in values, motivation and morals.

Our interactions with others are strained, uncomfortable and fraught with skepticism or doubt at best. At worst we are outright duplicitous. But because we may not even realize we are doing it, the long term results can be disastrous. As individuals, we are experts in all manner of things relating to our professions or hobbies even celebrities we've never met but know precious little about the person we are closest to in ourselves.

It keeps us in an almost constant state of stress for which honesty and transparency are the only solutions. Every interaction turns into a dance to determine what to divulge and what to keep secret as well as a struggle to guess how much of

what we hear from others we can trust. We become skeptical and mistrustful. For many folks, this means building walls. And

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because each of us is unique in the power and number of our negative or traumatic experiences, those walls will be higher, thicker or less permeable for some than others. I believe there is a strong connection between our inability to communicate effectively and the moral or emotional issues we face. Furthermore, it's my opinion all we are doing is fighting the symptoms without truly addressing the cause.

“Emptiness is a dangerous emotion because nature hates a vacuum and people instinctively act to fill their voids. Some people overeat to obesity, some drink to alcoholism, some abuse drugs, some engage in serial meaningless sexual encounters, some are shopaholics and so on.” Dan Kennedy

How many times a day do you suppose someone says to themselves "I wish this, that or the other were different"? How often is that thought followed up by committed action to change or instead, a deliberate move to quash it with any one of a long list of self-indulgences? How much time do most of us spend critically considering our lives, our feelings, the consequences of our words and actions or our impact on the world? Instead, most of us will do anything to avoid the topic and not only do we have access to more distracting measures than ever before, we also are getting more creative in our utilization of those distractions. However, I believe we mask our feelings not because we want to be ignorant so much as because of the pain we experience by

thinking the world is a negative place. We tend to look at change as being so necessarily large and global in nature that it's much easier to retreat into our personal version of safety than to start in the smallest, easiest and most familiar of places in our own hearts.

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"We are so accustomed to the comforts of "I cannot," "I do not want to" and "it is too difficult" that we forget to realize when we stop doing things for ourselves and expect others to dance around us, we are not achieving greatness. We have made ourselves weak." — Pandora Poikilos

The American Medical Association currently recognizes more than 30,000 diseases including a category for what they call "lifestyle" diseases such as obesity which at one time was instead a status symbol. If you wait long enough whatever it is you are struggling with is eventually labeled a "disease," thereby feeding into the idea there is no personal responsibility. Things happen to us rather than because of our choices and eventually someone will give us the excuse and out we need to ignore the real problems.

All this does is make us easy and profitable targets for anyone claiming to be able to "help or fix" us. In fact, when the AMA ruling about obesity was handed down in 2013 an article in Medical News Today stated that classifying it as such "could improve funding for obesity drugs, surgery, and counseling." Weight loss is a \$56 billion industry. Pharmaceuticals are a \$425 billion industry. Celebrities from every industry slap their

name on products from cookbooks to diet supplements trusting you won't look any further than the packaging with a face you recognize. Who do you think wins every time you purchase one more gym membership, exercise video and gadget you won't use or quick fix pill that doesn't work?

Our inability or unwillingness to look inward at what is going on in our hearts and minds is something Marc David, founder of The Institute for the Psychology of Eating calls "Terminal Shallowness" and describes like this: "...we begin to develop core beliefs that reinforce that

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sense of I'm not connected. There is no meaning to this all. We create beliefs such as I'm alone, I'm not enough, I'm not lovable. I'm not good enough as I am. I'm broken; I'm unwhole. With these beliefs, we begin to develop behaviors that reinforce those beliefs. Nothing is safe. Everyone is the enemy. People are against each other, every man for himself so we adopt behaviors of abusing others and abusing self, scarcity thinking, hoarding, adopt revenge, deny the body."

"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them." James A. Baldwin

While we as adults struggle with these challenges, we are inadvertently passing on the same skewed thinking to our children. More than 90% of all women are reportedly unhappy with their bodies and resort to dieting. In turn, 42% of girls in 1st

through 3rd grade want to be thinner, and 12% of teen boys are using unproven supplements and/or steroids. All of this happens because we are so caught up in the externally focused and advertising driven nature of peer pressure and insecurity.

As it pertains to our efforts here, I want to share right at the beginning some of the most tragic stories I've encountered and look at how this kind of thinking manifests in everyday lives. Let us view these as the worst-case scenario and the terrible, painful outcome we want to avoid.

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“Each day of our lives we make deposits in the memory banks of our children.”

Charles R. Swindoll

It's a cliché that so many of us state as a number one driving factor in our lives the idea that we don't want to be like one or both of our parents. There is no truer fact in my life. My mother was one of the most gifted women I've ever known. And yet when I look back over the years I see so much pain and unhappiness for her that not only was she miserable but she also made miserable the people around her ultimately making it difficult for them to see the amazing person she was. Since her story has had such a profound impact on my own and because it's the one I know best I want to begin there.

“Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false naming of real events.” Adrienne Rich

A child of the 50's all Julie ever wanted was to be a wife and mother. As the beautiful, intelligent and talented daughter of a successful and respected small town surgeon it seemed a perfect match when she married the handsome college jock. As expected they had the fairy tale wedding with handmade wedding dress and all the usual trappings.

For years, all outward appearances were that of the perfect family. The home was immaculate; she made many of the children's clothes and every night saw a home cooked meal. Holidays were a huge event marked by festive decorations and culinary spreads all made from

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scratch. She taught my brother and me to read before kindergarten, and attended every school and sporting event.

However, behind closed doors was another story entirely. Because my mother carried innumerable injustices, both real and imagined, from her childhood from which she never recovered, forgave or moved on she continued to be an angry and hostile woman. That anger affected all aspects of her life but most particularly the relationships with her family. She regularly saw slights, infidelities, and accusations where there were

none and the fights between husband and wife often became violent even if only in the form of broken belongings and ruined food. As the oldest and “daddy’s little girl” I ostensibly got the attention my mother believed was robbed from her. Around the age of three, I began to take the brunt of her jealousy. Both mental and physical abuse became familiar because she directed her anger and pain outward rather than looking at its origins and fixing it where it started. As often happens these pains and insecurities travel from one generation to another and I became poisoned with many of the same difficulties, insecurities and struggles passed from my grandmother to my mother to me.

"One foot in the past; one foot in the future; pissing on the now." - Russell Friedman

When she got divorced in her mid-thirties my mother's world, as imperfect as it might have been, crashed down around her. Because she hadn't finished college and never really had a career, she found herself adrift with no identity. Furthermore, she had an unrealistic sense of entitlement that somehow she was supposed to be taken care of rather than make her way by

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using the rich array of talents at her disposal. It was at this time she began her chameleon-like efforts to blend and adapt to whoever was in her life going so far as to start drinking when those she associated with were alcoholics even though alcohol had never been a significant part of her life. She sought familiarity and acceptance in anything and everything. Later, still unable to see her value, she began a practice of

finding her value through the achievements of her family namely her new husband and her children. Over the years, she became more angry and bitter seeing her life as a failure and not worth living. One by one she drove off those same people thereby leaving her with no identity at all and feeling as if her life was not worth living.

“We must all suffer one of two things: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret or disappointment.” Jim Rohn

For as long as I can remember the aspect most consistent in my mother's life was her love of animals. Looking back at pictures of her across some of her most difficult years, the ones that stand out the most are those of her at Sea World being kissed by a beluga whale or another of her with arms outstretched to support no less than half a dozen parrots. Rescuing and caring for animals was a great source of joy for her. However, in the last decade of her life, as she turned to her pets more and more for comfort, her once beautiful home became soiled and disgusting. No longer did she care about the immaculate cleanliness that had always been a hallmark of her life. And as she gave up on love she also gave up on herself. Unfortunately, one of the things I struggled with most was my willingness to see the beauty and talents she couldn't own for herself.

That challenge made it much harder for me to make the break necessary for my personal healing. When others in the family would criticize or suggest she was a bad person, I found myself defending her. I held out hope I could somehow find the right

words to help her

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despite the fact she wouldn't admit to her own unhappiness. Eventually, the decades of

smoking, obesity and mental abuse she heaped on her body eroded everything good such that her beautiful blue eyes were the only thing still visible of the once stunning creature she'd been.

People meeting her later in her life often viewed her as mean, angry and hateful and she drove off anyone who would have cared for her. The final days of this once talented, popular and amazing person were spent alone. She died in her sleep thinking she was unloved when her self-love alone would have saved her.

My mother's primary struggle is one so familiar and faced by an overwhelming percentage of us. She always looked for validation of her worth in the extrinsic and unsatisfying nature of material belongings and personal relationships. However, a similar fate can be arrived at when we receive the external validation we crave, but choose to reject it in favor of a self image built from fear.

“The worst loneliness is not to be comfortable with yourself.” — Mark Twain Hope is a tragic example of this as she also was unable to overcome her childhood and, therefore,

lead a woefully unfulfilled life because of it. The daughter of an alcoholic father Hope was thrust into the caregiver role very early when her mother became terminally ill while

Hope was still in her early teens. Hope was essentially running what was a very dysfunctional home all on her own at a time when she should have been thinking about boys, prom and applying to college. Instead, she turned to the only comfort she knew in

food. But with every pound she gained she felt less attractive, less loveable and she

despaired more of ever finding happiness.

After her mother's death and having seen her sister escape their life through marriage, Hope ran away with the first man who showed her attention despite him being a couple of decades her senior. After a short and violent marriage, Hope raised her children alone while also putting herself through both college and graduate school a feat that on its own showed how strong she was capable of being. However, both to assuage her guilt over the necessity of being largely unavailable to her kids as well as to shield and protect them she did as many of us do and overindulged them absolving them of much of their own sense of personal responsibility.

Between her continuing weight struggles and the additional emotional stress caused by her failed marriage she remained unable to see herself as anything but unattractive and unworthy of love. She was overly sensitive to any comment made not only to her but also to others that she perceived as negative, critical or derogatory.

Shortly before Hope's 30th birthday her best friend, who also struggled with morbid obesity, sought help in the way of gastric bypass surgery. As Hope put it "I saw how happy Ellen was and I wanted to be happy too." And for a short time she believed she had achieved that goal. After losing a couple of hundred pounds and getting to an almost petite size eight she married a good man from the small town where she lived. For her, it was a nearly ideal life. However, since nothing internally had ever changed and she never addressed the pain of all her previous years she soon began gaining the weight back. Although her new husband genuinely loved her, she continued to see herself as a failure and unworthy. Her mind was so firmly stuck in the image of herself as a fat person she very literally smiled and subsequently waived at her

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reflection in a department store mirror one day because she didn't recognize this new version of herself she'd longed for all her life.

“To the question of your life you are the answer, and to the problems of your life you are the solution.” -- Joe Cordare

Furthermore, the relationship with her children and her unwillingness to see them as anything but perfect led to a huge rift in her marriage with a trial separation that very nearly ended in divorce.

For many people, especially men, challenges of this nature leads them to turn to their jobs or physical activity as an outlet for the stress. However, Hope was a middle school teacher of at-risk children all of whom struggled with their own family dynamics. On a daily basis, Hope found her already depleted emotional resources taxed even further. But after decades of putting everyone else in her life first Hope somehow came to think that being a martyr was noble. Rather than requesting a transfer to a different classroom or some other solution, she allowed herself to be worn down to the point of no return.

Furthermore, as happens all too often following extreme weight loss measures, there was no change in the way Hope thought or acted. She continued to eat exactly as before and never exercised a day in her life. Each emotional stress was covered up by a few more pounds and a short 14 years later she was right back to the dizzying weight of before. This time her doctor took charge and redid her surgery using damage repair as

the stated motivation rather than getting Hope to work through the real problems. She again lost the weight, but now the damage done to her body was irreparable in the other direction. Her arteries ended up stretched so badly that she battled with low blood

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pressure. That fact combined with decades of smoking meant that everything she did had an extreme and unpredictable impact on her body.

Barely into her 40s Hope was on a rapidly declining and ultimately unrecoverable health spiral. The lifetime of stress and abuse of her body began health problems both physical and mental that drove her permanently from the work she used to love. Therefore, all her years of self-sacrifice, first for her mother and then her children, had culminated not in her reaping the rewards of her hard-won education but instead finding herself facing early retirement and disability.

“How would your life be different if... You stopped allowing other people to dilute or poison your day with their words or opinions? Let today be the day... You stand strong in the truth of your beauty and journey through your day without attachment to the validation of others.” — Steve

Maraboli

Believing that no one in her employment community cared or wanted to remain friends, Hope started withdrawing more and more until no one but her husband and closest family knew how to reach her. Without any hobbies or interests to fall back on she resorted to watching television around the clock. As her health continued to decline, she stacked one medication on top of another. She suffered daily with migraines, gut

pain and many other maladies for which doctors found no cause or remedy.

Like my mother, Hope spent her final years feeling increasingly alone while also suffering mentally and physically. As she got weaker, she was prone to injury and the additional medications required to make her comfortable led her children to the incorrect and callous

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assessment that she was stoned or drunk. Her son told her she would no longer be allowed to see her grandchild and her daughter threatened to have her committed to a mental hospital. Hope died much younger than she should have at age 57, believing she was weak and unworthy of love. At her funeral, the friends and co-workers she had shut out showed up en masse expressing regret and the sentiment they thought she would eventually reach out. Yet, the children she'd protected, loved and sacrificed so much for didn't send so much as a card. Viewed as gentle, loving and kind, Hope was loved dearly by many people but died not knowing it because of her fear of judgment thereby preventing her friends from accepting her for who she was frailty and all.

An additionally compounded tragedy is that Hope's daughter has five daughters of her own who now have not only lost out on the amazing and unique relationship we so often share with our grandparents, they also are at very high risk of experiencing many similar struggles.

“One of the greatest regrets in life is being what others would want you to be,

rather than being yourself.” — Shannon L. Alder

The insecurities faced by my mother and Hope are very common in women and therefore most familiar to me. What women have as their greatest asset in this area is also potentially their biggest weakness. Our willingness to acknowledge our pain often makes us more open to change; however, we also have a tendency to exaggerate our shortcomings making us vulnerable to viewing ourselves as broken. But, while it might exhibit differently these struggles are in no way isolated to our gender.

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Men, on the other hand, are far more likely to ignore or deny their pain making it harder to identify and therefore alleviate. They not only hang on to it, but they justify their actions with such strength and conviction they leave no room for argument. As a society, we tend to look at financial or other professional criteria as evidence of success or strength and any show of emotion or tenderness as failure or weakness. Our perspective on the situation can be terribly skewed. It may also be that as the real or perceived providers men find it unacceptable to show weakness or be willing to consider other alternatives. So many people go from living at home and being cared for straight into the role of spouse and caregiver that they don't take the opportunity for real reflection. Even if we are somehow aware of a problem the thought is always "I'll get to it, or I can power through and eventually, it will resolve itself."

“The fundamental defect of fathers, in our competitive society, is that they want their children to be a credit to them.” - Bertrand Russell

Another area where our personal struggles can spill over onto our children is in our inadvertent tendency to look for them to fulfill our unrealized dreams or have the successes we feel we missed. This too often leads to disappointment for us and resentment for them. It also can lead to a lifetime of blame for both parties.

Regret, anger and blame are wasteful emotions. Holding onto anger does nothing to affect the person or situation we are angry at and only continues to lessen our life. The tendency toward harboring anger and regret or for placing blame for our current situation on people or events from our past can only end in heartache. It reduces the quality and in some cases even the actual length of our lives. Because instead of releasing our minds of the

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responsibility as we imagine it does, what instead happens is we waste precious energy maintaining and nurturing that anger or pain. We use it to justify decisions that only keep us in self-defeating situations. Additionally, the anger often propels us to drive wedges in meaningful relationships because either it is they we are blaming, or alternatively, others are unable to live with our misdirected anger.

“The trick is in what one emphasizes. We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves happy. The amount of work is the same.” — Carlos Castaneda

Matthew's story provides insight into the potential impact of hanging onto that

resentment and anger. Growing up, Matthew was somewhat of a geek in the traditional sense. Despite being an attractive kid, he was a bit socially awkward not making friends easily and preferring the company of his computer and gaming systems to taking part in athletics. The sports thing was a source of significant contention between him and his father as, like many dads, his had envisioned warm summer days of playing catch or otherwise doing "guy" things. Never feeling understood and not having male guidance in many key areas of his upbringing, Matthew experienced a significant degree of social isolation.

Although a good student and with seemingly ordinary family relationships otherwise Matthew was always missing something in his life. He was 18 or 19 the first time he asked a girl to marry him despite having known her just a few weeks. She turned him down, but it was only a short time later he found a taker. He ended up married twice to this woman. The first ended in divorce when she cheated on him, but since they had a child and going back was easier than finding someone else he gave it another shot. A second child resulted, but this time even

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children were not enough to save this irretrievably broken and dysfunctional pairing. In the interim between separation and divorce, Matthew went online to look for someone to assuage his loneliness.

Despite being an intelligent man, Matthew's desperate need for company led to finding himself caught up in an overseas scam. A short time in, he was trying to put together

several thousand dollars travel expenses for his new global interest. Luckily family members were able to intervene before that happened. With one crisis averted he again proposed to the first person who would accept him. This person turned out to be an alcoholic as well as a fiercely manipulative woman who used all manner of deceit in an attempt to keep him around. After finally permanently extricating himself from that disaster he ventured out hoping the third wife would be the charm. A few failed dating attempts later he found someone else to say yes.

The shallow, empty nature of Matthew's unfulfilling personal relationships is by no means unique. The more tragic element though is that while in constant pursuit of love he thoroughly and deliberately shut out his flesh and blood family. He is unable to see or acknowledge his role in the struggles of his sons, and when his mother passed away, he refused to be involved in any burial arrangements. The feeling of superiority he derived by eschewing claim to her estate trumped any sense of duty he felt for the woman who had raised him. He was even willing to let her body go unclaimed and buried three persons deep in an unmarked county grave.

“To find yourself, think for yourself.” — Socrates

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What all three of these stories have in common is none of those individuals felt good enough as is and searched for external validation. Whether shallow relationships,

accumulation of wealth or the fictional lives found in endless hours of television, any attempt at easing our burdens other than from within will ultimately fail. When searching for solutions to our pain, it's natural to want help. That's why you picked up this book. The challenge is in knowing who to ask or what advice you can trust.

If you ask ten people about an action you've taken or performance you've given, you'll get ten answers ranging from mildly different to wildly disparate. If you aren't wholly secure in yourself, you risk getting knocked off course. And depending on the severity of the criticism or advice it could take a long time to get back on the correct path.

Nearly everyone we meet has an opinion about what we should do, how we should act, what diet is best for us etc. In my life I had men telling me I needed sex, doctors telling me I needed medications and well-meaning friends and family telling me I needed religion. In the end though, you are the best judge of what you need. You have to consider everything said to you and evaluate it for usefulness. If you have a clear understanding of who you are and what is important to you, some things barely get a thought before being discarded. Others may have to bounce around in your head a bit longer while you look for evidence they do or do not fit your value system. To this day, there are still times when I find myself struggling to find a balance between honoring my true heart while also bending to accommodate someone important in my life. As a consummate people pleaser giving is as I say "in my DNA." While giving and being

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generous is not inherently bad, allowing it to put you in compromising situations is not conducive to your well-being. Furthermore, it also does nothing to enhance or facilitate the other person's growth.

“When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everyone will respect you.” — Lao Tzu

Have you ever met someone with whom you had an immediate comfort level as if you'd known each other forever? Alternatively, have you had the experience where despite a great affection for someone you just couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right and maybe they were hiding a significant part of themselves or were being outright deceitful in some way?

When two honest, authentic and sincere people meet or talk for the first time as total strangers, there is often an instant bond or camaraderie. Authentic people are easy to identify because they have no fear of raising other people up or otherwise revealing their true heart. They aren't threatened by others or by allowing others to have their value. They can show their inner self because they aren't afraid of what they'll see there. The understanding and acceptance are very close to the honesty I talk about later in the behavior of children. The opposite of this is the dance we see played out every day in every possible scenario across the country.

“Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only

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an extemporaneous half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Imagine, if you will, what most people consider the acceptable pattern of new relationships where everyone is on their "best behavior." We only divulge the best parts of us. Our conversations are all politically correct. Every interaction is structured such that the darker or more challenging parts of us stay hidden. If we don't honestly know what our core values or desires are this dance can go on endlessly with results spanning decades and generations.

In my research for this book, I asked people what they considered acceptable first date topics and got answers like basic background, previous travel, education and common interests. In our fast paced short attention span lifestyle that seems like a waste of time. If we connect on a deeper level, I will learn all those things later. What I really want to know is what are your hot button topics? How tolerant are you of other's opinions even when they differ from yours? I learn much more about a person when I offer up things about myself and see their reaction or when I ask something less than politically correct and find whether they are willing to answer. If they can answer without hesitation, I know they are at least not afraid of the truth even if they are not ready to divulge all their skeletons. We can then continue on equal footing. There is not a struggle to understand each other, to pick apart and find the true nature and hidden meaning behind the language because everything is already on the table and there is

an instinctual shared trust.

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“The proverb warns that, 'You should not bite the hand that feeds you.' But maybe you should, if it prevents you from feeding yourself.” — Thomas Szasz

If even with all our acquired wisdom we are still trying to “figure it all out” in our 30’s, 40’s and beyond, there is virtually no hope of parsing it out as toddlers. This unavoidable immaturity of thought process leaves us incredibly vulnerable to all manner of confusion and mixed signals. One of the earliest and greatest tragedies coming from that confusion is it often makes us susceptible to allowing others make us question our value or self-worth. We let them dictate who we are and what we’ll do with our lives. We walk around thinking we are broken and if you think you are broken you are more likely to be taken advantage of.

For many years, the cycle of my life was that of seeing evidence of my ability, but then hearing the voice of my mother in the back of my head telling me I was vain, had visions of grandeur and thought I was better than everyone else. When we're young with developing minds, few of us at that age have the confidence to think independently enough to allow us to shut down those critics especially when they are our parents who most of society is telling us we must respect and listen to.

So my young, impressionable mind took her words as evidence of my inadequacies. Therefore, I came to believe if I succeeded, I’d fulfill her prophecy. My

naturally driven and perfectionist nature was continually at odds with the erroneously instilled belief that striving to be better, desiring to win, being first or in any way recognized for my natural talents, gifts and achievements were indeed proof of the worst kind of failing.

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It didn't stop me from continually attempting new things and challenging myself, but instead, I began to see failure as acceptable, and while being second place always hurt my heart, intellectually I justified it as the proper place for me. During the early nineties, I took up bodybuilding and power lifting. I was able to deadlift 315 pounds repeatedly and twice I stood on a bodybuilding stage in front of hundreds of people wearing nothing but a few ounces of fabric. I collected several trophies and medals for my efforts. Ideally, I should have been able to look at those as evidence of success regardless of whether they were first place or last. However, because I saw them as not representative of my real ability they were suddenly not good enough and I eventually threw them all away.

“It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

The difficulty increases when we begin seeing each of our failures as who we are and allowing it to define our character. One by one we begin accepting our failures as

not only expected but right. With every new one we accept, we make successive failure easier to handle. Failure, not success, becomes the norm and while we unconsciously begin structuring our lives for this pattern our self-esteem also plummets.

It would take two more decades, allowing myself to reach rock bottom physically by tipping the scales at nearly 300 pounds and on more than one occasion reaching the emotional certainty I had nothing to offer the world and my life was not worth living. However, eventually, I realized I had both a right and an obligation to meet my potential and succeed in what I was

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best at. I came to understand that my mother's or anyone else's criticisms were simply fear brought about by their insecurities. However, just realizing that fact doesn't make it easy to act on.

“Parents are the ultimate role models for children. Every word, movement and action has an effect. No other person or outside force has a greater influence on a child than the parent.” Bob Keeshan

Sometimes we know what we value, but cannot or will not take the steps toward change because we justify other reasons for not doing so. I recently listened to a very impassioned speech by a young woman. She told of her sincere belief in the value of education and how we needed better teachers. She argued that the reason we didn't have more good teachers is that it's a profession woefully underpaid.

At the end of her plea she stated, she'd love to become a teacher but wasn't able

to give up the lifestyle currently being lived by her family and children. My suggestion is that if she or her spouse were to lose their job they'd be forced to adjust their manner of living accordingly. Furthermore, we tend to raise our standard of living to meet our income. Finally, one of the most important things we do for our children is to teach them values and how to live by them. If they hear us saying one thing, but see us doing another, it hardly matters whether you believe it's for the right reasons or not. Rohn refers to them as "moral philosophers". He says children will forgive all manner of personal indiscretion, but lose credibility in their sight and you might never regain it.

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"You must take personal responsibility. You cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the wind, but you can change yourself. That is something you have charge of." Jim Rohn

To this point I've set up a pretty bleak and depressing view of life. It may seem that I, like many others, am suggesting humanity is doomed and unrecoverable as a species. In fact, if you listen to the news or to almost anyone born before 1980 the forecast is one of rapidly declining morals, a sense of "entitlement" and laziness. However, instead what I will show you is that despite what you've always heard about how you are weak, unmotivated, undisciplined and how only the "right program" will fix you, you already have within you all the tools you need.

The good news, then, is that as we'll discuss later, you have success and confidence muscles that with practice will grow even stronger and faster than the failure ones. And once you have the understanding of how, it takes far less conscious effort than you might imagine. Most importantly since the work happens inside yourself it doesn't require any special equipment or memberships, you don't have to drive anywhere to get started, and as Dr. Wayne Dyer said "Wherever I go, there I am". While on the one hand it means you will never escape yourself, it also means you can work on you anytime anywhere. And as stated in the opening paragraphs of this book once you begin building those muscles, all the amazing things you desire in life will begin manifesting themselves with less and less intentional thought.

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Exercises

1. Are there ever times current or past where you attempted to change things about yourself because someone said you should or because you thought it would make you more attractive to a mate or employer?
2. What secondary dialogue are you aware of running around in the back of your mind?
3. What are some of the negative things you say about yourself?
4. Can you think of examples of times that those things weren't true?
5. For the next 24 hours I challenge you to carry around a notepad or sound recorder app on your phone and make a note or tick mark every time you say or think about assigning

blame or causation to any factor outside yourself. Give a mark to every “He/She/It made me” or “I did this because of someone’s actions or something’s influence”.

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How did we get here and what factors influence our view?

“The chains of our habits are too light to feel until they are too heavy to be broken.” - Warren Buffett

Now that we’ve taken a look at some common examples of the everyday impact of extrinsically focused thinking in our lives let us attempt to shed some light on the path

that gets us to that place. One theory put forth in the book *Leadershift* is something authors Orrin Woodward and Oliver DeMille refer to as the Five laws of decline. Woodward and DeMille were primarily examining the effect of these laws on leaders generally and political figures specifically, but the points they make have parallels in all aspects of our lives.

The first known as Sturgeon's Law states that 90% of everything is crap. Theodore Sturgeon was an American science fiction author and critic. He developed what we know as Sturgeon's Revelation as an answer to critics of his writing. While sort of a crass statement, what Sturgeon was suggesting is that regardless of the situation you can scrape the top 90% of your findings away to get to the small percentage of useful results. Regarding our present topic, it means that only about 10% of the population are both interested and motivated enough to make the change necessary. It isn't that the rest of us aren't capable. Quite the opposite, this sort of transformation is attainable by anyone willing to acknowledge the problem and make an effort to fix it. By picking up this book, you are already atop that small list.

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The second law of decline helps to explain why the first law is possible. Known as Bastiat's Law, it states that since humans are naturally inclined to avoid pain, it follows they will resort to plunder whenever it's easier than work. In other words, any change is difficult, and most of us will take the path of least resistance. But with regard to our societal condition we are asking for an entire paradigm shift. It requires not only going

through the actual process of change but necessitates a great deal of thought and introspection beforehand. It is simply easier to fill our days with "Wine, women, and song" or "sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll."

This reference, of course, leads us easily into the fairly straightforward Gresham's Law which states that when you reward bad behavior, what you'll get is more of the bad behavior and, in turn, will subsequently drive out the good behavior. We ignore our heart's true desire and focus on any number of temporary pleasures. The immediate gratification we get encourages us to continue. Unfortunately, while we might believe we've gotten what we want in the form of a high paying job, long term relationship, etc., the next law says the respite might not last. Known as the Law of Diminishing Returns, law number four states that "in all productive processes, adding more of one factor of production, while holding all others constant ("ceteris paribus"), will at some point yield lower incremental per-unit returns." This law ensures that eventually the "high" will wear off and we'll be forced to go in search of something else. At some point, we lose complete sight of what we need and all we have left is the void and emptiness which we'll continue trying to fill with any means available.

The final law of decline known as the Law of Inertia says that an object at rest stays at rest while an object in motion stays in motion. While a difficult one to overcome, this law has a

great potential to work in our favor once we learn and begin implementing the steps that start the movement.

“With everything perfect, we do not ask how it came to be. Instead, we rejoice in the present fact as if it came out of the ground by magic.” – Friedrich Nietzsche

It's pretty easy to get just about anyone to talk about what they think is wrong with the world and who or what they think is responsible. And there are differing opinions regarding when the decline began or what caused it. However, not only is the when or why subjective, it is largely irrelevant since we have no other option than to start right now with today in taking the steps to making a change.

If you've ever had the pleasure of watching children interact with one another, you may have noticed their unabashed honesty and acceptance. One of the most wondrous things I've ever witnessed is the natural way in which one child will run up to another they've never met before, and just because they're both children, there is an instantaneous friendship. There's no prejudice against race, religion, political affiliation or any of the other myriad reasons adults drum up. They don't need anything more than the commonality of childhood to know this person is worthy of trust and friendship.

But as we grow up, and for some of us this happens sooner than for others, life begins to crowd out that trust and honesty. We experience perceived or actual hurt, betrayal and all

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the other things that force us to look at the world from a different perspective. Suddenly we no longer find it natural to give anyone the benefit of the doubt and trust is difficult. Therefore, we begin consciously or not to seek ways of managing this new interpersonal vista we face. We surround ourselves with those who support or sustain our falsely developed personal world view. While we rally around the cry for independence and individuality in many aspects of our lives, we seek directions regarding what to do, what to think, what to eat, etc. We give up all personal power in favor of quick fixes and being part of the in-crowd. It's easier to blame others or close ourselves off from those who might remind us of or shine a light on the areas of our personality we disdain.

“There is no greater sorrow than to recall in misery the time when we were happy.” — Dante

However, if you take the time to listen, the evidence of these walls and false personas is often identifiable. Think of the conversations you've had over the years. If you're an adult of more than a couple decades you've had thousands of experiences already in your life. But how often do we tell or hear the same stories time and again? How often are these glory days stories or tales that in some way get us the desired reaction of awe, humor, pity or shared anger or disgust? I'm not suggesting the stories aren't true. In fact the stories or some version of them are in most cases true and to some extent relevant. The disconnect is in the fact that we don't make allowances for change. We tell stories

of what we see as our best selves, the self we remember and want to be again but might not think we are anymore. We talk about when we were a certain weight, accomplished an important goal or excelled at some skill or trait.

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“I had learned one of the bitter lessons of life: never try to regain the past, the fire will have become ashes.”

—Gen. Douglas MacArthur

Could it be we continue to tell these stories because this is the version of ourselves we most identify with or want others to know? When do we quit trying to recreate our former selves and begin living life as the person we are today?

When I was younger, the stories I repeated most were of the abuses and perceived injustices I'd suffered. As I aged, I came to realize those were no longer the lens through which I wanted myself or others to view me. I began telling new stories of strength, empowerment, and triumph. But even then I found I was telling 20-year-old stories of my Marine Corps days. Despite all the personal confidence I'd developed, I was still looking at the last time I saw myself as successful professionally. It was the last time I remembered getting out of bed every morning knowing what my job was and that I was damn good at it. I was forced to take another look at my modern day life and decide what it would take for me to regain that feeling. What do I have to add or give up, to make today and every day after my new glory days?

The first thing that comes to mind when contemplating our situation is how

common and repetitive it is. As humans on this earth for thousands of years, every struggle we encounter has been faced by millions before us. It's such a bizarre testament to the frailty of human nature and our independence and individuality that we continue to fight the same fight faced by every other generation.

“Nothing is so common-place as to wish to be remarkable.” — Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

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I did some database cleanup and tagging for a company once that had allowed freeform answers to the question “what is your job or profession.” As expected many people put standard answers like doctor, attorney, etc. However, the interesting and telling answers were the ones where people went to great length to explain their unique situation.

What I discovered is it always comes back to identity. We're in a constant battle to identify and express who we are. But too often we put out there not our true face but whatever we think will get us the attention we crave.

For a short time, I tested out life as a Redditor. My thought was to find sub-reddits on self-esteem, self-improvement and confidence to get another perspective on the pain points people were experiencing. Here are the titles of some of the posts I found there:

👤 I'd rather be in an unhappy relationship than be by myself.. how can I

overcome this? 👤 I'm not one of those people who have their s*** together

👤 Whenever I'm not occupied with something (gym, video games, friends) my mind

starts thinking about every old memory and then hypotheticals and I become sad.

🎬 Is there a self-assessment ranking system?

🎬 I deeply hate myself.

🎬 I (23 f) constantly feel inferior to others (especially girls)

🎬 I constantly see people telling me to work towards my goals, but I don't know what my goals are.

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Not only are these individuals at a loss to identify who they are and where they're going, but they were seeking guidance from others in the very same predicament.

“Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.” - St. Augustine

Just a couple short centuries ago we couldn't meet someone from another country without spending months on a boat. If we got world news at all, it was weeks or months old. Now within seconds, you can connect with anyone and broadcast yourself to the world. In some cases, it's opened up opportunities for previously unrealized levels of philanthropy, understanding and acceptance. But in too many other instances instead of making us closer as a human race we now just have more creative ways to mask who we are and a bigger pool of others to judge.

It's become sadly comical these days to walk through a crowd and see every man, woman and child with their noses pointed toward the ground looking at a cell phone. I've joked that future generations are going to come out of the womb in that bent over position. Recently I observed a woman riding her bike down the sidewalk while using both hands to text on her phone. She was totally oblivious to who or what might be in her path thereby endangering herself and others. It was such a perfect analogy for the way we live our lives these days.

Such a high percentage of our communication happens through virtual means. Whether it be on social media, in email or text we are "communicating" more than ever and yet we are simply alone in the most crowded room. We collect friends and professional connections we've

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never met and display the numbers like trophies. The top trending search phrase in the iPhone app store recently was "Get Likes" which turned out to be a program to increase your exposure on Instagram. We go to great lengths to boost our perceived social value. Meanwhile, human beings have become expendable and throw away.

"There are some that only employ words for the purpose of disguising their thoughts." Voltaire

In this era of virtual communication, it's become so easy to hide behind decades old or photo shopped images and fantasy profiles of the people we would like to be

rather than who we are. We create clever screen names that disguise everything from age to ethnicity and use the anonymity to seek validation of our worth or convince ourselves the rest of the world is unworthy. Communication via email or text is cold and stale. There's no real sense of the person writing it and is too often rife with misunderstandings. Sarcasm and even humor don't always translate well. Additionally, it gives rise to false bravado or confidence we might never be able to pull off in person. If the person on the other end of the electronic communication doesn't feel real and we can't identify with the human on the other end, then the content of such messages hardly seems to matter. We use the opportunity to judge, berate, demean, and ridicule each other. But in the end what we are really doing is projecting on to others all our years of pent up personal doubt and self-hatred.

Furthermore, our ability to access endless amounts of information at lightning speed has developed in us a severe lack of patience, and something often referred to as bright shiny

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object (BSO) syndrome. The very successful video sharing service Vine created its \$30 million selling price and numerous overnight "celebrities" through the popularity of 6-second videos. Probably the most glaring example I can offer of how this phenomenon can affect our daily lives is in our efforts to find love or even simple companionship. Having chosen to take the plunge back into the world of single living, I

for a short while waded into the murky and sometimes shark filled waters of online matchmaking. I got an eye-opening look into the depths we'll sometimes go to assuage our loneliness and make a personal connection. I took the opportunity to poll both men and women whenever possible regarding their experiences. What I've learned is all at once saddening, frightening, surprising and insightful. Men and women alike have become so starved for affection and acceptance if not actual love (and maybe we can't tell the difference) that we'll say or do anything to attract someone hoping they'll overlook whatever deception we might have used.

One story I heard was of a woman who used her daughter's picture for her profile with the justification "I'm told I look like her." I observed the profile of one physically attractive woman whose introduction read, "My husband left me for another woman so I need as much attention as I can to get my self-esteem back." While I don't know the real reason her husband left, I do know the approach she was now taking wasn't going to yield her the results she sought.

And the BSO syndrome has enabled the popularity of mobile swipe style dating apps where respondents are encouraged and indeed required to make split second decisions with little to go on but a single picture. This has only made "relationships" and therefore human

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beings more disposable than ever. If you are stepping into that world as a beginner with no frame of reference or with already low self-esteem, you don't stand a chance.

We've taken the "other fish in the sea" idea to a new level of dysfunction. Instead of being the battle cry of our freedom from accepting mediocrity it's become a way for us to convince ourselves we don't need love.

My approach, while different, was an equally ugly path. Rather than using inaccurate pictures or drafting a deceptive profile, I instead built a block list of the people whose messages and advances I'd summarily cast off. I advertised and wore that list like a badge of honor as if somehow it was proof of my desirability. In fact, it was more representative of the lonely desperation prevalent in that world. But because I didn't view the senders of those messages as real people it was easy to approach any encounter as temporary. And since most of us have already decided before ever meeting that any encounter is only temporary, our actions in the interim are of little consequence.

"Don't forget that I cannot see myself, that my role is limited to being the one who looks in the mirror." Jacques Rigaut

In its simplest form insecurity is one of the easiest frailties to identify in those around us.

Most of us have an automatic tendency to downplay our successes or negate compliments paid to us. Somehow we've lost sight of the fact that simply saying thank you and accepting praise without brushing it off or excusing it in some manner is not vanity it is graciousness, maturity and a sign of being comfortable in our skin. When you've worked hard for an outcome, and it's recognized, you deserve and have earned whatever accolades come your way.

While parents are often the first and most noted examples of people who purposely or inadvertently undermine our efforts; they by far are not the only ones. As children, it's something we usually can't control. Our young minds are unable to separate natural desire from the teachings of those we admire and respect. But as adults, we allow this pattern to continue in part because it is easier to give in to group think and we're conditioned to seeing ourselves only through the eyes of others.

"We fear violence less than our feelings. Personal, private, solitary pain is more terrifying than what anyone else can inflict." Jim Morrison

Sprinkled heavily throughout this book you'll find quotations from many different people.

Oftentimes we just trust or accept something better if we hear it from someone we are familiar with or respect. Go to any social media site, and the memes far outnumber the original content. It seems to suggest that because someone else approached some

degree of notoriety,

their opinion is more important than our own. Furthermore, those memes and quotes seem to distill all of life down to just a couple sentences. So rather than taking part in life, creating experiences worthy of quoting we are instead trading other people's wisdom on the off chance we might make some connection and a small difference in the world.

"All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume." — Noam Chomsky

It also highlights another disturbing trend in our constant need to give in to the

“popularity contest” nature of these sites. We rush to join whatever the newest craze

is and

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each time you log in whether it be Facebook, LinkedIn or any of the others you’re bombarded with statistics regarding how many views you’ve gotten and how many likes you received. Michael Hyatt, author of “Platform Get Noticed in a Noisy World,” refers to those numbers as vanity stats and numerous studies have shown a direct relationship between a person’s need to chase those numbers and a significantly reduced level of self-esteem.

Not only does it set up an unnatural culture of competition it also contributes to our feelings of being alone or unworthy if we don’t get the desired results from our efforts. The fact is, if you break it down, with rare exception, those stats are far more helpful to the business platform you are using than they are to you. By getting you to chase the vanity stats the company boosts the appearance of its value and popularity which directly translates to increased stock value.

“Almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble.” Samuel Johnson

But if we pause a moment from all the flurry of activity surrounding the cover up of our loneliness and unhappiness it can seem like we’re the only ones feeling this way. Frequently, the better known or more celebrated someone is, the more we believe

they've found the answers. That expectation intensifies if the person works as a professional in an industry we want to believe has all the answers. However, make no mistake every human being suffers from their struggles and demons. The perception is all the rest of the world is experiencing the

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lives we wish we had until some tragedy either personal or global makes us realize that dissatisfaction resides to some extent in all of us.

The difference is the degree to which we are willing to acknowledge, shine the light on and address the problem. The beauty of knowing we aren't alone though is it opens the door to our healing as well as helps us by knowing that no matter how successful or outwardly "together" someone seems, anyone, you might respect has some piece of humanness in their heart with which they struggle.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds." — Bob Marley

Before I continue with my next personal disclosure, it's important for me to admonish up front that what I'm about to say should not be misconstrued as a suggestion for anyone to go against their doctor's advice. I do what is best for me based on my knowledge of myself and with the additional input and support of those I trust most.

We love labels. We refer to people as motivated, lazy, successful, worthless, masculine, and feminine. Intentionally or not we judge everyone and everything, putting all we encounter into neat little pre-determined boxes. When we're unhappy with who we are, we throw around words that are hurtful both to ourselves and those around us. We think it helps us make sense of things and gives us control. In fact, what it does is set up a culture of blame, pain, confusion and self-medication.

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For a very long time and maybe even to this day the label I was most sensitive to was crazy. As stated, my need to identify with my professional self is so strong it comes before anything else in my hierarchy of non-essential needs. If I don't have a clear sense of purpose and view myself as successful in the professional world, I am not the best version of me. Therefore, when I first got out of the Marine Corps and found myself without that sense of purpose I subsequently fell into a deep, very physical depression. I described it once as the feeling of being in a box where the air was stale, unmoving and stifling. Having only the VA for medical care and no longer having my physician grandfather around for advice, I soon found myself prescribed very strong anti-depressants not suited for me.

First experiencing the most profound non-physical pain I could imagine followed by the equally dramatic rebounding effect of the meds meant to solve it led to my first suicide attempt. Upon being admitted to a half-way house, this straight A college

student was treated like some leprous villain. When I objected to the confiscation of my wedding ring I was told: "You should have thought of that before." After being released, I was put on different but equally destructive medications and then ended up in a wild week-long sleepless mania, something I'd never experienced in my life.

When the VA diagnosed me as bi-polar, it started me down a path that resulted in nearly two decades of shoving any number of different psych meds down my throat. All of a sudden I was not Dawn the Marine or Dawn the athlete or any of the other positive attributes with which I'd previously identified. I owned my diagnosis stating not that "I HAVE bi-polar disorder," but instead "I AM bi-polar." And anyone who's ever been tagged correctly or

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otherwise with a mental disorder label knows it isn't something taken lightly. Those meds were what started me down the path to the weight gain that reached nearly 300 pounds before I finally got it under control. More importantly, the mental framework pressed upon me continues to plague me to this day despite the fact that the only time in the world I've ever gone through the motions of attempting to end my life were while taking their drugs.

I tell this story because a large part of this book is built around the concepts of awareness, self-examination, epiphanies, ownership of our decisions and therefore the outcome of our lives. I lost 16 years of my life to taking those medications. I had some minor successes during that time, but for the most part, I simply lost all of my 30's and a

big part of my 40's to the constant battle of racing from one extreme altered mental state to another. Finally, I dug deep inside and came to the realization that it didn't matter whether my diagnosis was correct or not. If I was going to survive, I had to get off those medications. To be honest, though, and directly relative to the content of this book, the biggest catalyst might have been my reaction to what I saw as doctors looking down at me, placating and mollifying my feelings. Even during my worst times, I had such a deeply seated belief in my intelligence and intrinsic value that the best thing anyone ever did for me was suggest I was in some way inferior. It drives me like nothing else ever has.

With regard to removing my dependence on psych meds I knew I had a great support system in friends and family since they had been through so much of the misery alongside me both with and without the drugs, I trusted they knew me well enough to give an accurate report on which state was better.

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To this day they'll tell you I'm not always the easiest person to contend with, but without a doubt, I'm a healthier person for the lack of anything that unnaturally alters my state of mind. And if you take mental illness off the table all my challenges are very easily

identifiable

and manageable through simply taking care of myself first. I still have a bad habit of getting caught up in work or other stresses and ignoring basic needs like food, sleep and exercise. And I can still be vulnerable to allowing my desire to be respected

temporarily influence my decisions and behavior. But through my understanding of myself, I always come back around to do what is right for me and thereby right the ship.

“The best years of your life are the ones in which you decide your problems are your own. You do not blame them on your mother, the ecology, or the president. You realize that you control your own destiny.” --Albert Ellis

When I first realized down deep all the years I'd lost and the misery I'd endured while taking those medications I broke down and cried. Not the tears of simple sadness, but instead the body wracking sobs of total grieving loss. But eventually I came to realize that A.) No amount of wishing, anger or sadness would get those years back and B.) I had at the same time gained a great number of experiences and insights (including the weight gain) that would make me better able to understand and help others. I chose to change my thinking such that my thoughts were no longer structured around blame or regret over the unfortunate events in my life. Now they are structured around how to use those experiences to help improve the lives of others.

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“That which we manifest is before us; we are the creators of our own destiny. Be it through intention or ignorance, our successes and our failures have been brought on by none other than ourselves.” — Garth Stein

We've already talked some about blame and the damage it can do. While fear is the number one reason most people give for avoiding change I believe removing

blame is the number one hurdle we have to overcome first. Blame is easy and convenient. Not only do we have a nearly unlimited number of people and factors we can hold responsible for our predicament, but if we word it properly in our minds and speech, it's also accepted and supported by the society in which we live.

In an article published January 9, 2015 by Life Science entitled "Alcoholism after gastric bypass: Is it in your mind or gut?" author Steph Yin opens the discussion as to whether an increased incidence of alcoholism after gastric bypass surgery is a matter of addiction transference or caused by a physiological change in the body brought on by the surgery. The patient interviewed and highlighted in the article spent two years engaged in out of control behavior surrounding her use of alcohol. She reports drinking alone at home, two bottles of wine at a time, hiding bottles from her husband (behavior also common with food in obese individuals), driving while drunk and blackouts. She says, "Lots of scary stuff happened during those years." But she lays the responsibility for her behavior squarely at the feet of her surgeon for not doing more to coach her on the risks before her procedure. She says "I experienced a lot of anger with my surgeons afterward for not doing a better job educating me. If they had told

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me not to drink, I wouldn't have started in the first place – and it wouldn't have spiraled into what it became."

While I do strongly advocate personal responsibility, my aim in telling this

particular story isn't to argue the merits of either the transference or physiology questions. Instead, I use it as just one illustration of how no matter what you want to believe you can find "proof" to support your claim, but the personal healing only comes when you let go of the blame and quit trying to reason it away.

"There's no chance, no destiny, no fate, that can circumvent or hinder or control the firm resolve of a determined soul." - Ella Wheeler Wilcox

A concept similar to blame is the idea of convincing ourselves we simply don't have what it takes to attain our goals. Psychologist Angela Duckworth talks about this aspect in her book "Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance." What her studies tell us is we want to believe in innate talent and the idea that some people are born in some ways better than the rest of us. We look at professional athletes or successful leaders and console ourselves that something made them destined for their greatness. We choose to think that because it releases us from responsibility and allows us to ignore the hard work. But instead what Duckworth has found is that what you have done in the past or what your test scores say are only part of the story and not proof of your ability. The real question comes down to how much do you want it and how hard will you work for it.

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"My greatest fear has always been that I would be afraid - afraid physically or

mentally or morally and allow myself to be influenced by fear instead of by my honest convictions.” Eleanor Roosevelt

Fear might be the most paralyzing emotion there is. It is certainly the one heard most often when asking people “What’s keeping you from pursuing your dream?” Fear of failing, fear of the unknown, fear of succeeding and changing our status quo and pushing us out of our comfort zone are all very common and understandable reactions.

When I was nearly 300 pounds, I had an irrational fear of ending up on TV through some bizarre news event or otherwise. As a self-ascribed control freak, I was terrified anyone I knew from the Marine Corps, or high school would see me and how out of control my life had gotten. I saw the undoing of my physical appearance and health as the worst failing ever, and I was paralyzed with the thought of the judgment I might face at the hands of those who had known me previously.

“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” Plato

We fear the things we don’t understand. But the only way to overcome them is head on.

There are a couple of questions I routinely ask new or potential clients. The first is why do you continue to do these things you know are hurting you? The two most often reported answers are either stress or even more troubling is the “if you’d had my life (or this or that particular event had happened to you)... The second question is a follow-up to whatever they

told me was their biggest unfulfilled dream. When I ask why they aren't pursuing that dream the most common answer is fear.

While fear is good and necessary to some degree for keeping us safe, letting fear paralyze us into inaction or inertia is unacceptable. I've commented on some of the negative influences my mother had on my life, but one positive thing she did for me early was to recognize that as parents we play an incalculable part in how our children will approach fear.

My mother was an exceptional swimmer. One of my favorite stories from my grandmother was that of her describing Julie performing the backstroke and "flying through the water" during a competitive meet. Because my mother loved the water and knew we would be around it a lot, she began as early as six months very literally dunking me full under and teaching me to be fearless when it came to swimming. It's a skill that served me very well in many areas and one I made sure to pass on to my son. The opposite of that is something we all have encountered whereby parents transfer their fears onto their children. I see it in fear of dogs, fear of swimming and simply the fear of anything unfamiliar.

"In order to learn the important lessons in life, one must, each day, surmount a fear." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

While fear is a very familiar though uncomfortable concept for most people, it can be turned into something to be welcomed. Very often being afraid means you must be on the right course. It means you are pushing your personal boundaries in a way that will

lead to growth one way or another. The more afraid you are, the more important it is that you follow through.

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If nothing else the chances are you won't be relieved of the nagging effects of the challenge in question until you've faced it head on. Regardless of the outcome, you'll sleep better for having looked it in the eye.

In a blog post on the website "Psychology Today" Karl Albrecht Ph.D. states there are five types of fear and categorizes them like this:

1. Extinction—the fear of annihilation, of ceasing to exist. This is a more fundamental way to express it than just calling it "fear of death." The idea of no longer being around is a primary existential anxiety in all normal humans. Consider that panicky feeling you get when you look over the edge of a high building.
2. Mutilation—the fear of losing any part of our precious bodily structure; the thought of having our body's boundaries invaded, or of losing the integrity of any organ, body part, or natural function. Anxiety about animals, such as bugs, spiders, snakes, and other creepy things arises from fear of mutilation.
3. Loss of Autonomy—the fear of being immobilized, paralyzed, restricted, enveloped, overwhelmed, entrapped, imprisoned, smothered, or otherwise controlled by circumstances beyond our control. In physical form, it's commonly known as claustrophobia, but it also extends to our social interactions and

relationships.

4. Separation—the fear of abandonment, rejection, and loss of connectedness; of becoming a non-person—not wanted, respected, or valued by anyone else. The "silent treatment," when imposed by a group, can have a devastating psychological effect on its target.

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5. Ego-death—the fear of humiliation, shame, or any other mechanism of profound self disapproval that threatens the loss of integrity of the Self; the fear of the shattering or disintegration of one's constructed sense of lovability, capability, and worthiness.

For me, it is even a bit simpler as I break it down to two. One is of failure leading to some public humiliation; the other is fear for personal safety or the safety of something I care about. The first is easier to deal with in my opinion because the thoughts surrounding it are firmly in my control. I figure out what I need to do such as make a phone call, write a letter, confront an individual, etc. Then I remind myself the worst that can happen is not getting the desired outcome. That certainly has happened before. But through continual practice, you can build up those confidence muscles. I firmly believe (or at least continue to tell myself) I can do anything. So I flip a mental switch and hit send on the email, phone call or whatever it is I'm trying to do. More than once my hands have been shaking or my stomach was so twisted I was nearly sick, but I'm calmed immediately after. The situation may not resolve to my liking, but I

find comfort in knowing I did all I believed I could do.

However, fear for personal safety and in turn all the first four he lists is a little different. In that case, I believe it is more fear of the unknown brought on by the lack of knowledge. As an example, I'm not a fan of snakes. Honestly, I've never taken the time to learn about them. I don't know how to recognize the dangerous ones, and I don't know what to do if someone experiences a bite. If I would just bother to learn that, it would take most, if not all, of the fear away. I realize that is an over simplification, but the point is that whether it is fear of humility or fear of safety both situations are something we have control over.

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“Courage is the most important of all the virtues because, without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.” — Maya Angelou

Fostering the skill to overcome fear isn't easy especially when you struggle to identify it as such and are still learning your techniques for dealing with it. For most people fear and stress have very physical manifestations and are nearly inseparable in so much as stress at its core is just fear. I experience my fear and stress dead center in the middle of my gut. At its worst, it keeps me from eating and very nearly paralyzes my mind. When that happens, the resulting mental state runs the gambit from mild sadness to very close to a full-blown depression. However, as you get to know yourself better, you will develop an important ability to identify the source of stress. With that

understanding, you can then begin preparedness steps to build your knowledge and confidence enabling you to do what's necessary to bring your mind and body back to a more relaxed place.

The difference between my depression or sadness now is how I react to it and my actions that follow the onset of the feeling. My doctors led me to believe my sadness was something to be feared, fought and stamped out. On their advice, I was willing to take any pill and endure any horrible side effect in the name of making it better when in fact all it did was get worse. Now I use my sadness as a tool and motivator. Just like fear of something should tell you you're on the right path sadness should be a sign you need to regroup, look for the good in your life and start anew. While you won't ever desire the bad days, you can use them as a

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driving mechanism. The worse you feel the harder you need to come out swinging. Remind yourself you have extreme value in this world.

Exercises

1. Consider this: If fear were not a factor so that you weren't scared of anything what would you do with your life?
2. Can you think of incidences where being more honest and authentic might have led to a more positive outcome for you?
3. How do you react when someone pays you a compliment? How does it

- make you feel?
4. Can you identify things you may be saying to your children that might undermine their confidence or self-esteem?
 5. Ask yourself what stories are you telling repeatedly?
 6. What do the things you say and the manner in which you say them reveal about you?
 7. How have those stories affected your current life?
 8. Can you identify both positive and negative ways this thinking has impacted you?
 9. What part does blame play in your attitude toward life?
 - a. Are there past events you blame for any aspect of your current situation?
 - b. Do you see anyone else such as a spouse, parent or employer responsible for any aspect of your life as it is today?

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What is the benefit of living according to your true heart?

“Simply put, to be self-aware is to know yourself as you really are. Initially, self awareness can come across as somewhat ambiguous concept. There is no finish line where someone is going to slap a medal on you and deem you ‘self-aware.’

Awareness of yourself is not just knowing that you are a morning person instead of a night owl. It's deeper than that. Getting to know yourself inside and out is a continuous journey of peeling back the layers of the onion and becoming more and more comfortable with what is in the middle – the true essence of you.” – Travis Bradberry & Jean Greaves

While the chapter on steps to change required the most intentional and concentrated thought on my part, it is the benefits of change that most captures my thinking on a daily basis. It is in this chapter where you'll find my favorite stories and the place where I most hope to capture the essence and evidence of what is possible for us as individuals and as the human race.

The entire premise of this book is that until you align your beliefs, values, words and actions, there is no way to truly be at ease and, therefore, happy. You will always have inside you a nagging realization something isn't right. Making a move to choose internal happiness over external rewards is not easy. If you've spent decades hearing from others or yourself that you aren't worthy or valuable in some way, the idea of actually examining the essence of who

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you are might be terrifying. Opening up to that honesty allows new pain and challenges, but ultimately there is a reward.

At times like that, it is very important to have what Dan Kennedy co-author of The New

Psycho-Cybernetics refers to as an unshakable self-image. Of course, you must develop it ahead of time. Searching for that self-image in your darkest moments is not going to prove useful.

Kennedy says, “The truth is that you can modify and manage your self-image to suit your purposes and gain incredible confidence and power. Your self-image is your conception of the “sort of person you are” and was built from your beliefs about yourself. It has been unconsciously formed from your past experiences, your successes and failures, your humiliations, your triumphs, and the way you were raised from childhood. Once you believe something about yourself, about your abilities, no matter if true or false, it becomes your self image that cannot be outperformed or escaped.”

I think there are some important distinctions we need to make before going any further. There is a book by the late Jim Rohn called “Cultivating an Unshakable Character.” As I see it, the unshakable self-image and unshakable character are both critical. However, one is internal, and one is external. Likewise, you cannot have the latter without first having the former. And neither can be had without a solid understanding of and living by your core values.

There is also a third concept we are more familiar with known as public image. There are too many people who receive undue respect by building and maintaining a public image built completely on false statements and contrived outward appearances. We frequently see it in political figures, heads of companies and celebrities. We believe that because they’ve

achieved some degree of success or fame that equates to good character. Then we are hurt or confused by revelations of their true nature and character.

Rohn refers to these distinctions as the difference between character and charisma. He points out the dictionary definition of charisma as derived from a Greek word meaning an ability to elicit favor in other people. He says “Charisma is almost like a magic wand that confers power over others. On the other hand, character comes from another Greek word meaning chisel or the mark left by a chisel. And of course, a chisel is a sharp steel tool used for making a sculpture out of a hard or difficult material like granite or marble. People of character are usually well loved by everyone around them, but they make it clear that their first love is for the truth even if it hurts. Character is the result of hundreds and hundreds of choices you may make that gradually turn who you are at any given moment into who you want to be.” He says without that process you may have a personality rather than a character.

There are a few values in my life that are non-negotiable and the driving force behind all my decisions. They are integrity, compassion, empathy, authenticity, honesty and transparency. I realize some would see several of those as redundant, but for me, they each have different and important distinctions. Some of my most difficult decisions and conversations have happened when I found I had to give up something or someone familiar or important because they didn't ultimately fall in line with those values. It's not always the easiest way to live. However, I find the discomfort I feel if I don't is far worse.

Even as I undertook the additional research I needed to back my theories on this book, I found myself having to look constantly at and re-evaluate my daily actions.

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of light into every corner of your life is a painful process that has to be repeated daily. But not doing so can have powerfully more negative consequences. My next story exemplifies both sides of that equation.

“Trust your instincts, and make judgements on what your heart tells you. The heart will not betray you.”

— David Gemmell

I knew Laura was a shining star and someone special the first time we met. She has a passion and a beautiful infectious smile that immediately drew me in. Therefore, it came as no surprise to learn that at age 21 she was the youngest hospital administrator in the country. She was good at her job and paid accordingly. However, there was always something that just didn't feel comfortable or right about what she was doing. She got out of healthcare more than once for pursuits she felt would be closer to her heart's desire, but the six-figure income always lured her back. She'd made her deal with the devil. But at the age of 28 Laura's debt came due and the price she paid still affects her decades later, long after she permanently made her escape. Here is the story in her words:

“Several years ago, I was in a position of executive leadership as a Risk Management Administrator for a non-profit health care system. An unnecessary death occurred when a surgeon made a horrible mistake during a surgical procedure—the patient bled to

death. It was my responsibility to make sure the family didn't sue the hospital. I settled that case for a mere million dollars. I did my job, and I did it well. However, the sacrifice I made in that situation, in addition to the grieving family, was – me. I could no longer look at myself in the mirror without

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disgust. I couldn't play enough racquetball to work out the revulsion. I couldn't eat enough chocolate or drink enough vodka to remove the disappointment in myself. I could no longer look my staff in the eye. I didn't deserve their respect or their loyalty. Relationships at the hospital became strained. My marriage took a beating. It took me sitting in a formal leadership forum to realize that doing my job well had cost me personally more than I could have ever imagined. I had compromised everything I valued—my self-respect and the respect of my staff—to do my job 'well.'”

Nowadays Laura is happily remarried and CEO of her own business. She is still working through some of the challenges brought about by the ordeal that caused her epiphany. However, she is doing something she loves and believes in rather than chasing money for money's sake. Furthermore, she knows the penalty for letting herself get overwhelmed and overtaxed. When she becomes aware of the world pressing in past her limits she and her husband make a concerted effort to completely unplug from the world not allowing society and less crucial factors, dictate how and when they will conduct their lives.

“Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that

something else is more important than fear.” — Franklin D. Roosevelt

In my mind, one of the greatest secondary tragedies coming from 9/11 is the collateral damage caused by our newfound distrust for all people labeled foreign or different. A few short decades ago most of us would have thought very little about encountering a 25-year-old Iraqi kid. When I met the subject of my next story, it crossed my mind, even if only for a second, to

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wonder who he was and why he was here. However, the important thing is I forced those thoughts aside and chose to approach him like any other random stranger and learn his story. I will be forever grateful I did.

There are a substantial number of things most of us would do if the safety of our family depended on it. However, the tale that follows is of a young man, who while still not of legal age himself, made the incredibly difficult decision to leave his home and everything he'd ever known so that his mother and others in his family remained unharmed. Furthermore, he not only moved to another country, he moved to a country that has often shown distrust and sometimes outright hate for him simply because of his religion and his country of birth. For that reason, he exemplifies for me more than any other the risk, struggles and reward inherent in what is arguably that most difficult of life decisions. His name is Mustafa and he is an Iraqi in America at a time when just mention of the word Muslim stirs up terrible images and feelings of hate in even some

of the most forgiving among us.

When asked about growing up in Iraq Mustafa says there are two distinct answers: before the war began and then after. Before the war, he says life was routine much like life in most other parts of the developed world. He and his family lived on a farm with cows and chickens. Things like running water and electricity were pretty much taken for granted. However, once the war started all that would change. Suddenly he found himself doing his homework by candlelight and water only came directly from natural sources like rivers or streams. Crowds were something to be avoided at all costs, and even friends and family were no longer beyond suspicion.

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Mustafa had barely begun middle school in September 2001 when the towers fell in New York City. He says that while in the past it was only disease or age responsible for the loss of friends or family, soon war is what was taken for granted and with each passing year violent and cruel death became the new reality. There was almost no one he knew who had not lost one or more family members to terrorism or the war against it. But by age 17 his family had so far been lucky. He says even though you knew it was happening it was always to someone else. For more than five years he and his family had learned to live with the everyday experience of looking over their shoulders, trusting no one and suspecting everyone.

But in June of 2007, it got far more personal. Mustafa had just gotten paid and after stopping by home to give his mother a portion to help with expenses he was going

shopping at a nearby mall. His 16-year-old brother wanted to tag along. There had been a big soccer match that day between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. It was one of the few ways this region was attempting to maintain some sense of normalcy in an otherwise chaotic life. Iraq won the match and so hundreds of local Iraqi residents had gathered to celebrate near the shopping area where Mustafa and his brother were headed. But since Mustafa and his family didn't follow the sporting schedules they were unaware. When it became apparent that the crowds were too large and shopping was out of the question, they chose to stand a bit joined by a friend of Mustafa's and watch the revelry. Mustafa's brother saw one of his friends in the crowd and took off to visit taking with him the stern warning to stay in sight. A few minutes later Mustafa remembers the loudest explosion he'd ever heard as the window behind him shattered covering him in glass and forcing his friend to the ground. Mustafa recalls his ears ringing and

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having an overall sense of confusion. He says that within moments of the explosion the bright, beautiful day had become as dark as night.

A handful of cars parked near the crowd had been blown up causing several secondary explosions. As he began to get his bearings he became aware of his friend urging him to get down and potentially out of harm's way, but by this point, all Mustafa could think of was finding his brother. As soon as he was able Mustafa took off in search of his sibling, but there was just no navigating the chaos. Eventually, he returned home to tell his mother.

Mustafa, his family and the family of his friend all set out in search of his brother. Because of the chaos and the vast number of injured, dead and dying, Mustafa and his family were always pointed toward the dead first, most of which were lined up outside the hospital walls. It wasn't until the last hospital that they finally located his brother. Burned to death in the explosion, he was barely recognizable. Mustafa recalls his mother collapsing from grief and himself experiencing a pain his 17-year-old mind could never have imagined. He says even returning home where he and his brother had shared a room was nearly unbearable.

For many of us, especially at such a young age, this would have been the final straw. The temptation to give up would have been too strong. But when Mustafa's mother urged him to take a year off from his education, he refused. Instead, he finished school and went to work for a local shop. But he admits his mother's naturally protective nature had blown out of proportion and become more than he could handle since the death of his brother. She began setting strict curfews and calling and texting him every five minutes. He and his brother decided that for her peace of mind and theirs they needed to move out of the area to give

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themselves the space they needed for their healing. However, to do that would require more money than they had so Mustafa felt very fortunate when he landed a job with a private multi national security firm that guarded places like Baghdad International Airport. And when the teenager began getting threatening calls from people who

accused him of betraying his country by working for a company they mistakenly believed was supporting Americans and thereby killing Iraqis he boldly told them it was the best money he could make to take care of his own. Unfortunately, it was his family that next became the targets of the hate when they received more than one envelope containing a letter and a bullet.

Initially, Mustafa found a compromise when he enrolled in college, and his boss let him continue working double shifts and more in between classes and helped him to disguise his comings and goings from the security compound. But when Mustafa came to the realization that graduating from college was not going to provide him any more security than he had already, he decided it really was time to move on. However, Iraqis were quickly becoming unwanted even by other Arab countries simply because no one was willing to accept the risk. The brothers were initially offered asylum by Egypt, but it was revoked before they even left. Jordan accepted them, but they were not allowed work visas. This made them perfect targets for business owners willing to take advantage of them by paying them half a normal employee. In one instance Mustafa worked an entire month to be paid at the end which was a common practice only to have the shop owner refuse to pay him and with no Visa there was nothing the teen could do.

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Luckily though because of the time he'd spent working for the security firm

Mustafa's processing time once he'd been accepted by the US was much faster than that experienced by most others in similar positions. He was finally able to begin his new life in about nine months as opposed to 5 or 10 years. Today Mustafa and his older brother live in Texas. Although he has mostly adjusted to his circumstances, he admits to the constant challenge of balancing the religion of his birth that in many ways abandoned him with the often equally caustic experience of Christians choosing to see him as evil simply because of his heritage.

"Extraordinary people survive under the most terrible circumstances, and they become more extraordinary because of it." Robertson Davies

I often meet people who inspire me for any number of reasons. I've seen a 60+-year-old man with a boot brace on his leg who chose to take the stairs at the gym when the 18-year-old "aspiring" basketball player took the elevator. Or there was the veteran with more than one missing limb who walked around the VA telling jokes and uplifting those with fewer physical challenges. And recently I met a 90-year-old who is at the gym every single day being put through the paces by her trainer surrounded by patrons texting on their phones who would be the first to talk about their "workout" when they never broke a sweat. But occasionally you are incredibly lucky enough to make the acquaintance of someone so amazing as to defy explanation.

My friend Boris is that person for me. Boris' favorite super hero for years was Superman. It seemed like every time I saw him he had a different t-shirt displaying the

logo of

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the man of steel. As I got to know him I realized how apropos that logo was. However, unlike my other stories of tragedy leading to change, Boris' stories are simply a look at how unwavering positive attitude and commitment to persevere despite any challenge has forged both the mental and physical disposition equal to his hero.

I first learned about Boris through Facebook when a mutual friend told of an accident that had Boris in a coma given only about a 3% chance for survival. It would be several months later before we would actually meet, but I followed his progress and always inquired after him. When I saw him in the gym for the first time maybe 6 months after he was discharged from the hospital I introduced myself and asked him if he would mind telling me his story. I was in no way prepared for what I was to learn.

But before I tell his story, let me just tell you a little about the man I met and why I wasn't prepared. Boris is always smiling. If he has a down moment only people much closer to him than me ever know about it because the rest of us just see the bright eyes and the ear to ear grin. He is intensely passionate about his dog, his daughter, his workouts and just life in general. He uplifts everyone around him with no conscious effort that I've ever seen. Being drawn into his orbit is one of the greatest gifts I've ever received.

As the story goes, the morning of his accident he had gone to the store for breakfast items. For some reason, of which I don't believe there has ever been found an explanation, he suddenly went unconscious and while driving uphill ended up in a high speed collision with another vehicle that was traveling at 70 mph. None of his airbags

deployed and his driver's seat broke loose throwing him first to the roof and then to the backseat. As he recounts it the

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Traumatic Brain Injury he sustained caused blood to flow from his ears and other parts of his head and left him in a coma for three weeks with very low odds of survival. When he did finally wake he remained in the hospital for a total of four months and lost 70 pounds.

Now as a small side note and of importance to anyone struggling with their workouts I'd like to point out that if Boris had not already been heavily into lifting he would have not had 70 pounds available to lose and I can't imagine how he would have survived. As I've always told my personal training clients you are not just working out for today or for the aesthetic improvement you are working out for the unknown future.

It took some time, but with his amazing work ethic and aided by muscle memory Boris is in most areas as big or bigger than ever. He is back driving finally and every day he discovers one more thing he can do that was previously denied him. We all celebrate with him at each new achievement.

But this is not all of Boris' story.

Boris is from Zagreb, Croatia. He was 6-years-old when the Croatian War of Independence began. He has one parent who is Croatian and one who is Serbian. The three of them along with his one-month-old brother were forced to flee from Serbian forces and from that very young age he remembers climbing over dead bodies in their

efforts to escape. Furthermore at one point he was separated from his family for several days while he wandered around lost and sure he'd never see them again. Later, while his father was forced into service fighting on behalf of the Serbs, Boris and the rest of his family stayed in refugee camps where a woman shot herself in the head directly in front of him within the very confined space of a

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bathroom. While still recovering from the mental trauma of that experience the only friend he had killed both himself and his mother.

It was five more years before Boris and his family would be given political asylum to move to the US and there is no way of calculating how far that experience went in building his current character. But hopefully you can see why this young man made such an impact on me.

We have all had and continue to have adversity in our lives. You don't have to survive a war to feel like you are fighting one every day. But it's how we choose to handle that experience and the person who comes out on the other side that matters. Our struggles are the fire that forge our steel backbones. The harder it is the more character building opportunity it provides. And yes, I do know that in the middle of it we just want to say "screw character", but there will come a day when through a near death experience or any other multitude of tragedies you will be thankful to have the strength provided by that backbone.

“That's what real love amounts to - letting a person be what he is. Most people love you for who you pretend to be. To keep their love, you keep pretending - performing. You get to love your pretense. It's true, we're locked in an image, an act - and the sad thing is, people get so used to their image, they grow attached to their masks. They love their chains. They forget all about who they are. And if you try to remind them, they hate you for it, they feel like you're trying to steal their most precious possession.” — Jim Morrison

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I am decidedly NOT a relationship counselor. I have no training in that area and frankly the way many people handle theirs is a mystery to me. By much of societal standards, my two marriages were resounding failures. However, my first husband and I held hands walking into divorce court and to this day my second remains an important part of my business team. That isn't to say there wasn't hurt or a need for healing. But everyone involved walked away a better person because of our experiences and with none of the hate, blame and destruction that keeps too many of us lining the pockets of divorce attorneys across the country.

I bring this up because it's our relationships that stand to benefit the most from us figuring out who we are, what we want and how to communicate that effectively to the ones we care about. Hands down any fear gets in our way if it isn't faced and used to

our advantage. But the fear I believe causes the most discontent in all our lives is the fear of speaking the truth about how we feel. The primary reason for this is that no other fear left un-faced has such potentially long-lasting and devastating results. I hear told all the time of regrets over fears not faced and chances not taken. But relationships irretrievably lost or broken can have unrecoverable repercussions.

“The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.” Harriet Beecher Stowe

In the last chapter of this book, I'll attempt to provide structure to the actual process of change. While the first step is awareness, the most difficult step will probably be the communication aspect. This is largely because we need to replace our fear of judgment or

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reprisal with the understanding that regardless of the other person's reaction the very act of voicing our thoughts is the only thing able to facilitate our healing and growth.

“Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.” Oscar Wilde

With me what you see is what you get. I make no efforts (and frankly am incapable) to hide anything about myself. For better or worse I'm an open book with a distinct lack of boundaries. However, some of the best first dates I've ever had were with people very much like me. Conversation topics range all over the map, and very few of them are considered “acceptable” first date material. But for me, that's the most

refreshing of experiences and some of the best conversations I've ever had.

There is a sign I've seen for sale over the years that reads "A stranger is only a friend I haven't met yet." To the chagrin of many, I take that idea to extremes. If I strike up a conversation with you as far as I'm concerned, we've known each other forever, and I will say or ask nearly anything. While some find it incredibly refreshing, far more find it a bit shocking.

For a long time, I saw this tendency of mine as a personal failing. But eventually, I had to both accept it as not going away and embrace it as one of many things that make me who I am and, therefore, special. This accepting of myself in all areas has been a very lengthy and arduous process. However, it has also been one of the most rewarding challenges as it's released me from being caught up in the opinions of others and thereby tortured by any subsequent actions on their part. It isn't foolproof or immediate every time. There are still occasions where I'm stung or bruised temporarily, but the healing process is shorter each time, and I always come back solid in my self-image.

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"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." Carl Rogers

One thing I come across almost daily is people who struggle mightily with self-image. As I've aged the attention I get has far less to do with my physical appearance than it does the confidence I've developed. One of the greatest

compliments I've ever received is that the impression I gave was of confidence and caring. I couldn't possibly ask for more. The irony is that my growing confidence gets me more accolades and compliments and yet I need them less.

When we go through life not having a clear idea of who we are it becomes easy to focus on superficial aspects of life such as appearance or money. However, once we become grounded and in touch with what is truly important to us on a more emotional level, we suddenly find it easier to get in touch with our bodies and overcome physical struggles such as weight loss or other body image concerns we previously found insurmountable. Exercises and resources

1. For a good look at what living according to your values looks like in action (even if in a fictional medium like Hollywood) there are two good TV shows I can suggest. The first is "Blue Bloods" starring Tom Selleck as police commissioner Frank Reagan and "The Good Wife" starring Julianna Margulies as attorney Alicia Florrick. Both of these characters are routinely faced with difficult decisions where they have to weigh what is easy or expected against what they value and believe is right.
2. Consider the aspects of your life you like least.

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- a. What decisions brought you to that place?
- b. Are there any repeating patterns you see?
- c. Can you recognize where those patterns might be at odds with what you

really desire?

3. Think about the most traumatic or distressing events in your life.
 - a. Can you identify your part in their occurrence or outcome?
 - b. Have you made any significant changes to avoid similar experiences in the future?

Chapter 4

What are the catalysts to change?

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change

their minds cannot change anything.” George Bernard Shaw

During the 16 years, I was on psych meds there was very little significant or profound change in my life. Frankly, every day was too much of a fight for survival. I did manage to graduate college with my journalism degree, and I got my weight issues under control. However, everything else was just day to day routine. Once I got off the meds I was very slow out of the gate in figuring out who I was and where I was going next.

“You can't be brave if you've only had wonderful things happen to you.”

— Mary Tyler Moore

It can be seen as an unfortunate reality that most significant and permanent change is brought about due to what we usually identify as cataclysmic events in our lives frequently not of our intentional making. Although I've been on a path of discovery for years, it was two recent and specific earth shifting events that led most to my current self-realization.

The first was the death of my mother. After her passing, I traveled to San Antonio, Texas for what I thought was a temporary visit to handle the affairs of her estate. But because those affairs turned out to be far more complex and drawn out I chose to stay. Suddenly I was in an unfamiliar place hundreds of miles from anyone who loved me where I knew no one and had

no means of supporting myself. On top of that as I fought a battle against the company

which had insured her home I was forced daily to go toe to toe with all the painful memories and scars surrounding my relationship with her. The stress on my mind and body got so bad that at one point I got to a place where I had dizzy spells, spots in my vision and slurred speech. As someone who counts so heavily on my mind and communication skills, I was seriously freaked out. Eventually, though I remembered how physical I tend to be with my stress and realized it was just a matter of changing my thinking. The stress didn't go away, but the physical manifestations did which were themselves stress inducing and making the situation worse.

The important thing from my growth standpoint though was that since she was no longer around to further undermine my efforts, I was free to examine both my life and hers from different perspectives. I was, therefore, able to be kinder in my assessment and effectively re-write my memories in a manner that released us both from a great deal of blame.

“Remember that no relationship is a total waste of time. You can always learn something about yourself.” – H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

The second life altering event happened when I moved to Austin, Texas to be perfectly honest, following a man I felt very strongly about, but one who ultimately claimed not to feel the same and, in fact, trivialized our entire experience. He caught me at a very difficult time in my life. I was newly divorced and while I was not then nor since looking for a permanent relationship he represented for me an outside source of strength and stability I seriously lacked at that stage. Always having been the strong one and the one to carry everyone else I was thankful to have someone I perceived as stronger than myself to lean on. Unfortunately,

because of the previously stated circumstances I had way too much time on my hands and my focus was mistakenly and almost obsessively placed on him.

While he was still ostensibly supporting my vision, I, unfortunately, didn't know myself what that vision was. And anyone who knows me well can tell you, my level of energy and passion do not do well left unattended and without very deliberate action. Busy work is not my style. I must have a strong feeling that what I'm doing has a purposeful outcome. Left without direction and focus, I'm impossible to manage and put unbearable pressure on those around me with disastrous and often unrecoverable results.

About the time I figured out my path was also the time my friend decided to move on to greener and more manageable pastures. Suddenly I found myself with even less of a support system while attempting to build a business from scratch with zero experience doing so. A situation further intensified because I craved the respect of this person and temporarily let his opinion matter to me. Therefore, I struggled far longer than I wanted to hauling around his memory.

Initially, it brought into question my instincts and ability to read others which are skills I've always trusted and depended on. Eventually though, I came to the realization that my ego was bruised way more than my heart. Taking back my dignity didn't keep me from thinking about him, but it allowed me to structure my thoughts around the idea that whether I was right or wrong about him, he no longer deserved my respect and it was his loss more than mine.

When we've failed to identify what we truly want and value then our words and actions tend not to be congruent. This has the potential to lead to confusion and pain for both us and those we interact with. In personal relationships when we experience hurt or confusion

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surrounding someone's actions we might take it as a personal failing when that person is dealing with experiences and memories of which we're unaware. Their response may have less to do with us than it does their personal demons and troubles. Either way, allowing their actions to affect your thoughts about yourself is simply another example of extrinsic factors impacting your internal self-image.

Another important reason your opinion of yourself is the only one that matters is at any given time we make decisions and judgments about others and they about us based on where each is in that space in time. If someone doesn't recognize a talent or ability or amazing trait you have it doesn't mean you lack that trait or it isn't valuable, it's just that in their current frame of mind they are unable to see it. In a different time, they might. Either way, if you remember that you do what you do based on who you know yourself to be and your true values, then their reaction only has as much meaning as you allow.

Knowing that building my business was the only option for me and that having no support was still better than the wrong kind, I took a hard look at my actions and the people in my life. One by one I removed any influence that wasn't a direct improvement to my situation. That left me with a very quiet home on most days.

"I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself." — Charlotte Brontë

As I built relationships, I also honed my vision and game plan for the direction of my company. But throughout it all, I was keenly aware this was by far the most difficult undertaking of my life. I never wavered in the belief of my personal value, but there

were many

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times I nearly lost faith in my ability to accomplish this monster professional task I'd carved out for myself.

Having doubt is a natural part of life. So is the desire to be recognized for our worth. One of the reasons for that is we want to know we are having a positive impact on the world in some way.

But if you allow a business or person to create your identity, where are you when that gets taken away? If you've built a solid foundation of core values and character, then nothing that happens to you on the outside can permanently unhinge you on the inside. You get up every morning with the knowledge that "this too will pass" and you will still be the same or better when you come out on the other side.

"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true." — Nathaniel Hawthorne

Men and women, frequently have different paths for their self-denial and how they deal with it. Many men use their demons and struggles to drive them in their business pursuits. We tend to look up to these people and assume because they've been

successful professionally and financially reaching some of the highest positions in our companies and government that somehow, they are without pain. Women on the other hand often throw themselves into the pursuit of family and softer more nurturing roles.

While no less difficult, they might not be seen in the same light of success simply because we aren't as likely to put a monetary value on the raising of families. But in either case, it's easy to deny your truest desires while chasing down

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what you've been taught you should do and therefore have come to believe will fill your personal void. There are an inordinate number of women desiring to see themselves as more successful but torn between responsibilities at work and home. Many of the men I encounter have all the financial and professional success only to see the communication and closeness they desire in personal lives slipping from their control.

The two stories that follow are of men who faced similar traumatic childhoods, but whose outcomes were decidedly different and illustrates the difference in how we might view success while ignoring our true heart and deep-seated needs for healing.

"Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them." Oscar Wilde

I once read or heard that children who suffer physical abuse become some of the best readers of people. From an early age, because of their daily efforts to avoid angering their abusers, they become expert at reading microexpressions and signs of danger that don't even register for the rest of us. Furthermore, it's my belief these same

people tend to be some of the kindest folks with the biggest hearts very often going out of the way to help others and to prevent hurt in strangers when they can. For those who suffer and overcome the biggest hurts they become the strongest, but inside they can also be the most empathetic and vulnerable. They continue to experience a deeper and more profound kind of pain both for themselves and for others because of what they've seen and survived.

My next story is of one such person whose tale is a strange mix of overcoming unspeakable childhood horrors and using that as the driving force behind a very successful

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professional career. However, by failing to be honest in his personal life, choosing instead to force others to bend their will to his, he always gets what he believes he wants but never completely received what he needs.

“Just because everything is different doesn't mean anything has changed.” -- Irene Peter The first time I met Jason, he made a sort of a passing mention of his brutally mean and angry father. Although I've always known there were monsters in this world, I've never knowingly come face to face with one. I don't see how the man my new friend would later describe could be considered anything but.

At 6'5" and 260 brick wall solid pounds Jason is a towering beast of a man. With his deep resonating voice and commanding presence, he tends to be very intimidating. And yet the man he described to me stood a full two inches taller and by all accounts had the rolling, boiling and explosive anger of an active volcano. There were only a couple stories told to me with detail, but neither was I prepared for and, unfortunately,

will never forget.

The first happened when Jason was approximately six-years-old. He says he came into a room to find his father holding his mother against a wall and off the floor with his hand around her throat. Of course, this was by no means the first incident of this kind nor was it the first time Jason had attempted to intervene. But he says, this time, there would be an important difference. Jason flung his young child's body at his father attempting to make him release his hold on his wife. The giant of a man swatted the boy across the room and over the dining room table where he landed in a heap in the corner of the room. He lay there for a moment stunned but suddenly realized that unlike in similar past incidents, this time, the tears were not coming. As he recalls, that was the turning point. When you realize you can stand the pain, it changes