



BODY TECH

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

In the Name of Science

“You can do this,” I said out loud while stepping out of my 12-year-old Nissan. “You *have* to do this.” From the other side of a wall of eucalyptus trees, the roar of the 101 Freeway not only drowned out the sound of my shaky voice but also my thumping heart. Unlike the cars hurtling toward Hollywood or flying in the other direction toward Santa Barbara, I still had a choice. I could forget about this weird little experiment and avoid the discomfort altogether or go through with it. I grabbed my canvas gym bag from the backseat, shut the door, and pressed the barely visible lock icon on my key fob. In my nervous anticipation, the ensuing horn chirp sounded less like a confirmation that my car was locked and more like a pistol launching the start of a race—a race that could either be as short as a lap around the park or as grueling as a marathon across the Santa Monica Mountains. In less than a minute, I’d introduce a persona that was totally opposite of who I was simply to confuse people—all in the name of science.

A few weeks after a devastating end to a seven-year relationship, I joined the upscale gym in Camarillo, California, in the summer of 2010. I figured the change of scenery would expose me to new people and lift my spirits. The gym was unique in that it was affiliated with an exclusive physical therapy center, catering to the affluent, who could afford weeks, if not months, of higher-end one-on-one rehabilitation. In my first two months at Body Tech, I’d become chummy with the gym staff—most of whom were still in school for various careers in physical therapy—and on a first-name basis with a dozen or so members, some of whom were former colleagues at a company I was laid off from a few years earlier. But something was eating at me—something I couldn’t help noticing each time I went to the gym. Pretty soon it became the elephant in the room that only I could see. I realized that if I didn’t initiate acknowledgment or conversation, I’d spend an hour or so working out in awkward silence, feeling invisible and unworthy. I found that odd, if not troubling.

I drew a deep breath as I pulled the handle of the heavy glass door and stepped into the gym's narrow reception area to begin the experiment on the first day of my third month at Body Tech. To my right, I was expected to check in with my membership card as well as add my signature and date to the sign-in sheet on top of the six-foot-long countertop. Typically, on the other side of it, two to four staff members would either be typing or shuffling papers behind four desks, always making me question whether I was in a gym or a small accounting office. *What were these people doing?* As usual, Jake and Walter were behind computer monitors in the back. Katie, a husky 21-year-old woman who split her time between taking classes at Cal State Channel Islands and assisting physical therapy patients, was attempting to remove a coffee stain from her white Body Tech polo shirt.

Out of everyone behind the counter, Jake was the most engaging, but that didn't come as a surprise since his name tag indicated he was the gym manager. Plus, he was hard to miss. He was around 30 years old, stood two to three inches above six feet, and, as a muscled powerlifter, weighed between 220 and 240 pounds. He was completely bald, clean-shaven, and appeared to have no body hair—a guesstimate on my part since his forearms were baby smooth. Jake was so white that if he angled himself just right in the sunlight cascading through the gym's skylights, I swear I could see muscles, tendons, and ligaments under his translucent skin. Most noticeable—at least to me—were his delicate John Lennon-style spectacles. The lightweight, rust-colored wireframes contrasted sharply with his Lou Ferrigno size, making him look like he'd rip a book in half with his bare hands if he didn't like the ending.

Normally, I'd walk in and immediately acknowledge the staff with a spirited "Good morning, everyone!" followed by a customized greeting to the manager like, "How's it going, Body by Jake?" or "Time to Jake and Bake!" Many times, I'd take a moment to share something odd or funny I had witnessed while out running or cycling. And I wasn't shy about telling them about an upcoming art

show I'd be in, joking that they'd be VIPs at the event just for knowing me. But today was a new beginning. I still acknowledged everyone; however, I simply nodded at them, saying nothing after attempting to make eye contact. If my experiment was to have sound, scientific merit, I'd have to give everyone a fair opportunity.

Jake reciprocated my nod. Katie continued dabbing the hem of her shirt without looking up. And Walter rose to his feet and started walking toward me as if he had something to say, which would've been surprising considering he rarely spoke to anyone. I liked Walter—especially after buying an hour of his time a month earlier to show me how to exercise around chronic tendinitis in my shoulders and hamstrings. He appeared to be the same age as Jake, about 15 years younger than me, and of Hispanic descent. I chose Walter over the other trainers because his approach matched his perpetual facial expression: serious and intense. I watched the five-foot-seven, anatomically correct Mexican-American flash a half smile at me before bending down and reaching for something underneath the counter. He popped up with a folder and headed back to his desk.

I obediently filled out the sign-in sheet and placed my membership card underneath the wall-mounted card reader. After hearing the audible click, I yanked the unlocked door toward me and proceeded to enter the gym area. But just before passing through the threshold, I was shocked to hear Katie—of all people—saying, “Have a good workout!” However, despite her surprising engagement, the experiment wasn't over—not by a long shot. I turned around and gave her a quick smile and an emphatic thumbs-up. I wasn't taking a vow of silence at the gym until someone merely spoke to me. That would be too easy. I was planning to stay silent until someone asked me *why* I was no longer speaking. Since everyone had seen two months of my friendly and talkative personality, I figured the experiment would last a day or two—three at the very most. If I tried the same thing at a coffee shop, grocery store, or a new gym—places where people didn't know anything about me—I'd basically be starting a second career

as a Tibetan monk. And because I needed to hear a specific question, I knew the awkwardness would be particularly unsettling once a staff member or gym-goer decided to look past my facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language to engage me directly.

The door closed quickly behind me, practically catapulting me toward the men's locker room, which was where I was headed anyway. While putting my keys and membership card into my gym bag, I heard someone from the cardio area shout my name, "Chuck!" *How weird! First Katie, and now this? Unbelievable!* I looked up and saw Andy waving me over from a humming elliptical machine. I slowed down but maintained my trajectory toward the locker room. I smiled at Andy and answered him with three movements of my left index finger. I pointed toward the ceiling, then at the locker room, and then back at him. Andy nodded and offered a thumbs-up. Our conversation basically went like this:

"Hey, Andy! Give me a sec to drop off my bag in the locker room, and then I'll come over," said my finger.

"Sure thing, Chuck. I'll be right here," replied Andy's thumb.

I walked into the empty locker room and set my gym bag on a bench close to the bathroom to wash my hands in the sink—something I did regularly after handling community pens and grasping public door handles. While drying them off, I looked in the mirror and thought about Andy's chatty nature. I wondered if my experiment would end even before I broke a sweat on the very first day. I threw the wad of paper away and kept my left hand extended—palm side down with my fingers splayed. I rocked it from side to side, thinking my odds were 50/50.

Andy

Andy's legs were still churning away on the elliptical when I came out of the locker room, but his hands were no longer grasping the moving handlebars. Instead, they were holding his iPhone up to his face. The contrast between his fast-moving lower body and his motionless upper body made him look odd—like he was trying to run away from what was on his mind. But I knew that wasn't the case. Early in my now-defunct manufacturing career, I collaborated with Andy on projects that demanded an engineering mind, someone who could think creatively and be willing to take risks. As a project manager, I got along wonderfully with Andy, but not because I was as brilliant as he was. He was on another level. Unlike the other managers, I could tolerate his talkative high energy, his instant visible boredom with whatever it was you were telling him, his abhorrence of deadlines, and his tendency to think out loud. I simply stepped back, took orders from him, and reaped the benefits over and over again.

Although I admired Andy's intelligence and liked who he was as a person, we never crossed the line from colleagues to friendship, mutually opting to keep the successful relationship at work like a personal coffee mug used only while at the office. When he saw me approaching, Andy put his phone down on the elliptical's console and began talking excitedly even before I was within earshot of his voice. *Same old Andy*, I thought. Other than thinning salt-and-pepper hair and 15 extra pounds around his midsection, he hadn't changed very much since I last watched him climb on top of bioreactors 18 years earlier. At 55, Andy's face was wrinkle-free and dominated by expressive brown eyes that betrayed his innermost thoughts. His was a baby face that aligned with an almost childlike exuberance over anything that interested him. Although he had a wife of 30 years and two kids in college, Andy seemed more like a real-life Peter Pan singing "I Won't Grow Up" than a husband and father.

“Hey, Chuck,” he said as I walked up. Without the phone, his hands, once again, found the handlebars. I stopped in front of the elliptical and watched his arms go back and forth. “Have you ever heard of a wine called Obispo Oaks? You might have seen some of their bottles in Trader Joe’s. They’re a relatively new operation based in Carmel Valley.”

I furrowed my brow earnestly and shook my head.

“There was an opportunity to buy a stake in the company, and I jumped at the chance. I know what you’re thinking: ‘What do I know about wine?’ Well, let me tell you—I’ve been learning so much about the science and business of winemaking. It’s fascinating! Do you like the heavier red wines? They have a terrific Petite Sirah and an even better Cabernet.”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah, me too,” he admitted while patting his stomach. “Between the new wine venture and organizing this year’s Greek Festival, you probably won’t see me here at the gym for a while. I’ll have to get my workouts in during the evening hours. I think I remember you coming to the event last year, right? The festival will still be held at the Camarillo airport, but instead of the first weekend of September, it’s scheduled for the second. I hope you’ll come. You’ll be there, right?”

I took a step back and gave Andy a thumbs-up. Then, I tapped my watch and pointed toward a row of stationary bikes. “If he was going to ask me why I wasn’t saying anything,” I reasoned, “now would be the time.” Instead, he looked at the elliptical’s control panel and said, “I hear you, Chuck. I need to get a move on, too. See you at the festival if not before!”

I left Andy with my experiment's clock still ticking only to come face-to-face with another dilemma. Two women occupied the outside stationary bikes, leaving two open bikes between them. Both appeared to be around my age. One lady was slim and gorgeous; the other—chunky and sweaty. Each woman wore earbuds plugged into personalized MP3 players that facilitated their mental exodus from the current surroundings. *Hmm . . . Which bike should I choose?* If I chose the bike closest to the more attractive lady, she'd probably think I was some kind of opportunistic creep. If I chose the bike closer to the other woman, she might see me as someone who, like her, also views the bold and beautiful as toxic and insufferable. But on the other hand, she might interpret my bike choice as a "pity alliance." If that were the case, I could imagine her saying, "Get over yourself, jerk. You're not doing me any favors." *Sigh . . . If only these stationary bikes were urinals, my decision would be so much easier!*

I sailed past the bikes toward a bank of treadmills while attempting to make eye contact with both ladies, not because I wanted to, but because I'm hardwired to acknowledge people around me—a genetic flaw in today's society. I don't really want to ask, "How are you?" or "How's your day going?" What I truly want to say is the translated version of what many African tribe members say to each other in passing: "I see you." Then, in my dreams, they'd say in return, "I see you, too." Asking a perfect stranger to tell me how they're feeling has always seemed intrusive and archaic. No wonder nobody asks me that anymore. I don't blame them. I could see myself saying, "I see you" to my fellow shoppers in Walmart as my next social experiment, but I don't think it would go over too well.

"I see you," I'd say to the young lady in pajama pants putting a 12-pack of Diet Dr. Pepper in her cart.

"What are you? Security?" she'd ask. "I didn't steal anything! Check the tapes!"

“I see you,” I’d say to a bearded guy wearing a dirty trucker hat with a carton of coffee K-cups under his arm.

“Back off, queer!” he’d reply.

“I see you,” I’d say to an elderly couple comparing prices of pot pies in the freezer section.

“Let’s go,” she’d whisper to her husband. “No, just leave the cart where it is. See? This is why I hate coming here!”

Predictably, neither bike rider met my eyes. I settled onto a treadmill that not only gave me a view of the entire gym floor but also a glimpse into the adjacent physical therapy treatment area every time its connector door swung open. Inside, I saw a middle-aged man lying on a spinal decompression machine and an older lady with white hair sitting on an exercise ball with her arms stretched out in front of her. Like them, I, too, was trying to fix something on the inside. Whereas their afflictions were buried within a lower back and pelvis, mine was hidden in my heart. A staff member closed the connector door just as Andy shuffled past it in the direction of the gym’s exit, momentarily disrupting my train of thought. His legs were on their way to an emergency while his arms steadied his phone under his chin. Again, I couldn’t help but notice the contrast between his upper and lower body. It made him look odd.

Closed for Business

I looked up from my work table and noticed the time. The glowing red numbers on the digital alarm clock indicated it was close to lunchtime. I quickened my pace. Years earlier, I found out the hard way to never split the embellishment process into two or three sessions when working with a thick gesso; otherwise, it dries funny on top of the canvas. I learned about the technique by watching other

artists on YouTube explain how the gooey sealant can add texture and pop, as well as up to several hundred dollars to the price tags of art reproductions. “It certainly won’t look as good as the original art piece,” they said, “but it’ll come close!” By the time I finished the hours-long application of the sticky goop to “Beam Me Up,” an art piece featuring an astronaut leaving Earth with all the things that mattered to him, I was ready to eat something light and unwind at the gym. I dropped my gesso brush into a repurposed jelly jar of warm water and transferred the artwork from my work table to an easel to dry. A mother of two young children—a girl and a boy—bought the oversized piece to hang in her son’s bedroom. I wasn’t planning to tell her the astronaut was me—a lone figure blasting away from a self-sabotaging species hellbent on destroying each other and the only home they have.

Shockingly, my experiment was entering its fourth week—and not because I was acting surly, ignoring people, or working out at odd times around folks I’d never seen before. Other than that first day when Katie shouted, “Have a good workout!” and Andy attempted what could pass as discourse, the next three weeks were uneventful. Other than Body Tech, I had no other social outlets besides picking up orders from my art reproduction guy or the occasional art show. The layoff in 2007 came out of nowhere, stripping me of a paycheck, health insurance, and friends. I thought if I started a commercial art business, I could resuscitate my social life but quickly learned that solo enterprises are all-consuming and isolating. The indefinite silence was getting louder and louder—almost deafening—as the experiment dragged on.

For 15 consecutive 75-minute workouts, I was able to sign in, access the gym, store my personal belongings in the locker room, exercise, and leave without uttering a single word. I was so ready to end the experiment that I would’ve called it quits even if someone simply asked, “What’s your problem?” Apparently, Jake, Walter, and the rest of the staff behind the counter were satisfied with head nods, finger gestures, and facial expressions. It was strange because they all knew about

my community art projects and cycling excursions. I thought Walter would have at least asked if my tendinitis was any better from the exercises he'd shown me. At times, it felt like they went out of their way to avoid asking me anything, as if doing so would risk establishing rapport—making me feel like I was more than just an upsell opportunity or a monthly credit card transaction.

For obvious reasons, I could understand why my experiment had little to no chance of ending in the men's locker room, where unsolicited chitchat and eye contact can sadly be interpreted as "homo behavior." What troubled me the most was the total lack of engagement on the gym floor. *What's up with these people?* I'm sure if I asked each one of them if they'd like to meet new people, make friends, and feel a sense of community, they'd all say the same thing: "Of course!" And yet, at the same time, rather than venture beyond themselves, they'll choose to stay in their lanes—behind screens, earbuds, playlists, and private thoughts—contributing nothing but detached indifference to the public space. In the months leading up to the experiment, I had sown enough social seeds to reasonably expect inquiries about my abrupt vow of silence.

I met Christine soon after I joined Body Tech. We were both angling toward the same leg extension machine from different areas of the gym. I got there first but insisted we take turns. "Ladies first," I said. She told me she was recovering from a knee replacement and that she'll probably have the other one replaced in 18 months or so. I thought Christine was at least 10 years older than me but later learned she was actually two years younger. "I let myself go for too long," she admitted while gingerly lifting her surgically repaired leg. "So, is the leg work part of your physical therapy?" I asked. "Oh, no," she replied. "I finished with that last week. I guess I caught the motivation bug to get in shape again. I just don't want to make the mistake of overdoing it." Christine and I would see each other from time to time—and when we did—she'd ask about my latest art project, and I'd ask her about her knee and fitness progress.

Phillip was a man on a mission. I watched the gangly 30-year-old labor on the treadmill and correctly guessed he was training for an upcoming running event. His form was terrible, and he appeared to be suffering. At the end of my first month at Body Tech, I took a chance and approached Phillip as he was stepping off the machine.

“Hi there,” I said. “I’ve seen you grinding it out on these treadmills for the past month. If you don’t mind me asking, are you training for anything specific? I’m Chuck, by the way.”

“I’m Phillip,” he replied while extending his right hand. “I signed up to run a marathon through the Leukemia Society.”

“Which one?” I asked, shaking his hand.

“The LA Marathon.”

“Isn’t that in March?” I asked.

“It is,” he replied. “I still have seven months of training left.”

After finding out that Phillip had only been training for a month, giving him a measly eight months to prepare for a 26.2-mile marathon, I didn’t have the heart to tell him that if he completes it, he’ll earn a finisher’s medal along with two extra parting gifts—at least one lifelong injury and a burning hatred for running. Over the following four weeks—prior to going silent—I shared my first marathon experience with Phillip, even going as far as offering training tips I had learned from veteran coaches in my former running clubs. To his credit, he never hit me up for a donation to support his efforts for the Leukemia Society.

Phillip and Christine weren't the only members I regularly approached to say hello to. There was Monica, the 70-year-old grandmother getting in hiking shape for a two-week stay in Yosemite National Park with a group from her church. Buster and Julia, a retired married couple, were regulars at the gym, too. They were easy to spot since they always opted to pedal side by side on a pair of recumbent bikes. Jonathan, a music teacher at the local high school, was recovering from back surgery and spent most of this time stretching on mats outside the PT treatment area. Silvia was an aerobics instructor who liked to work out somewhere where she wouldn't run into the people who participated in her classes at the YMCA and other commercial fitness centers. When I asked her why, she replied, "Sometimes, I just need to feel like I'm off the clock for a while—like it would be great if I had one of those little signs in the window that I could spin around from 'open' to 'closed.' You know what I mean?"

Of course, I knew what Silvia meant, but I had to shake my head at the irony of her admission more than two months later. Back then, despite having a well-lit "open for business" sign around my neck, I still had to be the one to make the first move for any acknowledgment or dialogue. Now that I had purposely closed the shop without explanation in the middle of the day—when customers expected it to be open—I wondered why no one was banging on the glass door shouting, "Yoo-hoo! Anybody home?" Unlike Silvia, I wasn't trying to hide from those who knew me. Instead, *my* customers could actually see me on the other side of the glass door, and still nothing—no acknowledgements, no inquiries, no anything.

Birds of a Feather

"Did I really go nearly five weeks without saying a single word?" I asked myself the rhetorical question out loud while sitting in my car in the gym's parking lot just to hear how crazy it sounded. More than a month ago, I had predicted that the experiment wouldn't last more than three workouts. Instead, it ballooned to 23 and probably would've blown past 200 if I didn't put it out of its misery. From the

start, I felt hopeful someone would eventually ask me why I had stopped talking, but now I couldn't even imagine that happening. What was painfully obvious to me seemed routine and mundane to the confounding people of Body Tech. But just because I didn't get the results I wanted didn't mean the experiment was a failure. I gained a valuable lesson about the nature of people, and in less than a minute, I was about to put the experiment into overdrive and flip the script.

I stepped out of the car and opened the rear door to retrieve my gym bag and quickly realized it wasn't there. Panic set in, but it didn't last long after remembering I had put it in the trunk to keep it out of sight while I ran a couple of errands earlier. I reached back into the car and popped open the trunk with the push of a button. It was then, after closing the trunk, that I noticed flocks of birds flying around the swaying eucalyptus trees on the other side of the fence. Had there not been an eight-lane freeway bisecting what was once pristine farmland, I would've heard the sounds of bending branches, fluttering leaves, and chirping birds. Instead, I walked to the gym's entrance, listening to the steady roar of engines, preparing myself for what should come as a shocker to Jake, Walter, and whoever else was behind the counter in the reception area.

"Hey, guys!" I beamed as I walked into the rectangular vestibule, acting as if the weirdness of the last five weeks didn't happen. "I hope these gusty winds go away before the weekend. I'm planning to ride from Ventura to Santa Barbara this weekend." I was mildly shocked to see Jake, Walter, and Katie behind the counter—the same three people I began my first experiment with. *What are the odds?* Now, they'd be the ones to start the clock on my second social experiment—a test to see how long it would take for someone to notice that I was suddenly talking again.

"That sounds awesome, Chuck," chimed Jake. "If you're riding through Carpenteria, I heard they're having a big festival this weekend."

“Avocados,” blurted Katie.

Jake peered over his flat-screen monitor at Katie. “Avocados?”

“It’s the avocado festival,” she clarified without looking away from her screen.

I signed in, scanned my membership card, and pulled the door open, but before I walked through it, I added, “Hey, Walter. Thanks again for all the stretches and exercises you showed me. My shoulders and hamstrings are so much better now.”

“No problem. I’m glad I could help,” he replied as he began to make a call on his desk phone.

On my way to the locker room, I saw Phillip running awkwardly on one of the treadmills and approached him. “Hey, how’s the training going? I think I saw you running on Lewis Road last Sunday. Was that you?”

“Yeah,” he gasped. “I was doing my long run. I’m up to eight miles now.”

I pressed Phillip for additional training metrics like his weekly mileage and invited him to a Friday morning workout on the track at Camarillo High School. After he declined, saying he had to work, I sauntered over to Buster and Julia on the recumbent bikes to say hello. “All is right in the world when I see you two putting in the miles. Do you guys ever miss a day?”

“Well, I guess we’re creatures of habit,” laughed Julia.

“We don’t come here on the weekends,” added Buster. “We walk on Saturdays and take Sundays off.”

I made sure to verbally acknowledge as many people as possible, hoping to create opportunities where someone would say something like, “What? He speaks?” or “I noticed you weren’t your usual self. You seemed so withdrawn.” By the time I reached the locker room, I had spoken to 10 people directly, and not one of them so much as raised an eyebrow. “But this is only the first day,” I told myself. My behavior was so radically different from the past five weeks, someone—at least one person—would be bold enough to call me out on it. Maybe it wouldn’t be Jake, Walter, Katie, Phillip, Buster, Julia, or anyone else at the gym that day, but I knew someone would eventually step up. *Someone had to notice, right?*

After two weeks of initiating acknowledgements and conversations like a glad-handing politician, I knew the experiment was over but decided not to make it official until it had reached 23 workouts or five weeks—whichever came first. I figured if I were to ever write about this experience, the mirrored timeframes would make the experiment sound more robust, elegant even. Plus, it satisfied my obsessive-compulsive need to weigh and balance most everything. The extra weeks would not only allow me enough time to engage with everyone at least twice, but they would also extend my dream of sounding like Gene Wilder’s Willy Wonka at the end of the memorable 1971 movie should someone actually notice I was talking again. “You’ve won! Don’t you see? The chocolate factory is yours! You’ve passed the test!”

I continued going to Body Tech long after the experiments were over. No one ever did ask me why I was or wasn’t speaking over those 10 weeks. I simply went back to existing among the staff and gym members from behind a smile, a wave, and lighthearted banter, knowing I’d always have to be the one to initiate acknowledgement and engagement to prove to myself I wasn’t invisible. In a way, after months of experimentation, I could imagine how the birds and eucalyptus trees must feel as the drivers race past them on the 101 Freeway—sometimes seen, rarely appreciated, and silenced by a frenetic society too self-involved to slow down and say, “I see you,” and too preoccupied to hear, “I see you, too.”

The End (of Chapter 5)