

Being Happy



The Pursuit of You

Chuck Trunks

Being Happy

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Nampa, Idaho

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Who do I think I am? What gives me the right? I'm no Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, or Viktor Frankl, yet I've written a book about finding happiness by controlling emotions, investing in the present moment, and having a meaningful purpose. The nerve!

More than 100 billion human beings have lived and died on this planet, and I'm guessing that every one of them wanted to be happy. I'm also guessing that very few of them wrote books about being happy. *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You* is an open and honest journey. By sharing real events from my life, I hope to entertain you and make you think while revealing how I came to discover and harness the happiness and fulfillment that had been hiding inside me all these years.

I offer my humble story in the hope that it'll help you find yours, too.

This book is dedicated to those who started off life from
behind the eight-ball yet stayed in the game.

*“This work was written independently by the author without
the use of generative AI.”*

—Chuck Trunks

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Preface

Why would anyone read about being happy from a guy whose Zen stems more from contemplating the Buddha statues inside Chinese restaurants while waiting to be seated than practicing actual Buddhism? In fact, I don't subscribe to any particular religion or associated mind-set, having abandoned my Catholic upbringing to become an unwashed heathen soon after I left home at seventeen. And I don't have a degree in psychology, sociology, or philosophy; however, I do have a Bachelor's Degree in Biology from North Carolina State University. But for the purposes of this book, it could've been a degree in 19th Century French poetry since I only refer to the self-sacrificing and personal suffering that it took to earn it. I haven't attended a single Tony Robbins seminar, and I didn't do a year of eat-love-pray under the guidance of an Indian swami. Heck, I haven't even read Dale Carnegie's, *How to Win Friends & Influence People* for crying out loud. But guess what. I'm not only qualified to write about being happy, I'm *supposed* to write about it.

I can still remember the moment when the search for happiness and fulfillment began for me over fifty years ago,

my eight-year-old face pressed into the dirty sweat-stained t-shirt of my alcoholic father soon after he'd come home from working as a telephone lineman. I wasn't glad to see him, and I didn't want to hug him either. But if I knew what was best for me, I'd put my mask on and greet him at the door with a, "Hi, daddy. I'm glad you're home!" He'd come through the back door an hour or two after the rest of us had already eaten dinner, the sound of his heavy boots on the peeling linoleum in the laundry room filling me with dread. I couldn't predict what kind of mood he'd be in, but I knew what he'd smell like. It was a mixture of unhappiness and unfulfillment masked by the stench of cigarettes, beer, and sweat. Little did I know back then, with my arms around his waist, that he'd infect me with his demons of low self-esteem, non-existent self-worth, and a lack of identity.

By the time I set off on my own after high school, my father's canvas duffle bag slung over my shoulder containing everything I owned, distrust and self-reliance were my only companions. I remember sitting in a Greyhound bus station in a seedy part of Philadelphia waiting for the non-stop to take me to Raleigh and thinking how ironic it was that both of us began our lives carrying the same bag. He was eighteen when

it was issued to him by the Army, and I was almost eighteen when I stole it from his bedroom closet. Even more ironic was that it contained the same baggage.

“Chuck,” I replied after the young African American lady sitting next to me on the bus asked me what my name was. It was the first time I didn’t answer with, “Charlie,” thinking that if I changed my name, I’d forget where I came from. Although she was traveling from New York City to Macon, Georgia to visit her folks and I was traveling to get away from mine, we shared a common belief that once we earned our slices of the American Dream, all our troubles would melt away and we’d be happy. But I learned that achievement doesn’t teach you about compassion, loyalty, empathy, trust, tolerance, generosity, humility, love, or how to be happy. I set out to be the first person in my family to earn a college degree, to begin my journey through the world without having experienced those virtues, growing up somewhere between anger and disgust.

My upbringing prepared me for the personal sacrifice and suffering that’s required for high achievement, but I was woefully ill-equipped to accept myself or others or know my

place in the world. Of course, I realize that we all have our sad stories, and that I'm not unique in that regard. But my story of finding happiness and fulfillment is unique because I found what my father couldn't. *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You* is my story, but it is also your story. The answers are there. Let me show you the way.

Introduction

Whenever I sit down to write, I always envision the iconic scene in *Gladiator* where Russell Crowe's character, Maximus, shouts, "ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?" to the frenzied arena crowd after killing five gladiators in less than a minute of action. Whether I'm writing a book about gratitude, the impact of dogs on our society, or about being happy, I never forget my cardinal rule of writing: Entertain first, edify second. How else will the pages turn? Not only do I think these pages will flip fast and furiously, I truly believe you'll love this book because I did something I normally don't do. I penned this introduction after I finished writing *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*. In a nutshell, the book exceeded my expectations.

Is this a self-help book? An allegorical tale based on real life experiences? Or is it my version of John Irving's *The World According to Garp*? To me, *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You* is simply a humble and entertaining narrative of how I found a sense of peace and happiness in a world that at times seems fractured beyond repair. I believe there are lots of people like me, asking the same questions, wanting more from this gift of

life than what the prevailing societal construct and its current regime can offer. This book is about hope and presents a first-hand account of one man's path toward a feeling of spiritual satisfaction, an enlightenment that can only come from circumventing the "road most traveled."

Even though I don't have an Ivy League doctorate, millions of followers, TV appearances, or a single celebrity endorsement, I know in my heart that I will reach the reader because my many failures and meager successes are relatable. Plus, I'm banking on the premise that people tend to listen more to those who've actually risen from the ashes over those who've merely studied the subject of personal redemption. In Parts I, II, and III of *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*, I will explain how controlling our emotions, investing in the current moment, and having a meaningful purpose can directly impact the quality of our lives and the lives of those around us. I also offer a twist of sorts in the conclusion of this book that I believe will bring the reader to an even higher position of awareness and enlightenment.

My journey began with thinking that happiness was something that I needed to look for outside myself and ended with

discovering that it was inside my heart the whole time.

Part I: Controlling Emotions

“You’ve always had the power, my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself.”

- Glinda to Dorothy from the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*
(1939)

You don’t have to be a graduate of Dr. Phil University to understand that behaviors are influenced by thoughts which are, in turn, influenced by emotions. When I think of the emotional nerve center in my brain, I imagine something similar to what’s revealed from behind the big green curtain in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. I see a mini-me busily pulling levers, pushing buttons, and turning valves, releasing the very emotions that give rise to a reactionary experience that offers proof that I’m truly living in any given moment. However, if there is a lack of moderation at the control panel, my mini-me will send me straight back to Kansas *without* the happiness I had hoped to obtain from the Emerald City.

Only new tools and methods can set a new philosophy into motion if different results are desired. If happiness is what

results from having better control over *all* of our emotions, then I'd need to find the skills to temper the impulsive and frequent lever pulling, button pushing, and valve turning that has held me back from living my best life. In Part I of *Being Happy*, I will take the reader on an eclectic journey that will not only show how I came to acquire a meditation practice and prescribed moments of free thought, I'll show why I needed them.

Chapter 1: The Center of It All

White Rabbit

Halfway through a bowl of granola and raisins in milk, I noticed the white rabbit eagerly munching on something leafy in the middle of my back yard. It wasn't hard to spot from the breakfast table chair that faced the large plate-glass patio slider, my typical starting place where I began each day in Camarillo, California. I watched how its heaving white fur contrasted sharply against the damp green grass while oddly thinking I most likely chewed my cereal in the same manner as this woodland creature. Weeks earlier, I had seen this same rabbit, but the moment was short lived since the sound of my chair being pushed back as I stood up to get a better look made it scamper away immediately. Having learned my lesson the first time, I gently laid my spoon on the table and thought to myself, *I bet I can catch this little guy.*

The plan was simple. I'd move like a trained ninja in slow motion, taking extraordinary measures to not make a sound. Once outside, I'd carefully pick up the empty five-gallon plastic bucket on the other side of the slider. Then I'd pick up

one of the many uncooperative pebbles that always seem to find their way from inside the adjacent flowerbed to being scattered on top of the distressed brick pavers that outlined the patio's kidney-shaped cement pad. When close enough, I'd toss the pebble against the wood fence, making the rabbit dart in the opposite direction of the sudden distraction and straight into the positioned bucket. When I was a middle schooler in suburban Philadelphia, I was able to bag our family's pet rabbit, Snowball. So, if I was successful in this scenario, I'd be given credit for having captured not one but two white rabbits.

By the time my hand was opening the sliding glass door ever-so-slowly, I could already sense the anticipatory elation that would come from having outsmarted a wild animal and the satisfaction I'd feel from taking the caught rabbit over to my neighbor's house so their two young boys could have it as a pet. *This oblivious little guy is a sitting duck*, I thought to myself as I approached the rabbit from behind, the bucket in my left hand and a smooth pebble in the fingers of my right hand. However, a sudden jangle of the metal bucket handle put an immediate kibosh on my meager fantasy of becoming a repeat bunny bagger. The disappointment was so great that I could taste it in my mouth. Only a partially chewed dandelion

leaf and a patch of flattened grass no bigger than a six-inch sub from Subway remained as proof that the rabbit wasn't a figment of my imagination. There would be no triumphant delivery of the cute critter to a pair of curious young brothers down the street.

I was still looking at the spot under the fence where the rabbit had disappeared when the wind kicked up, making the large fronds of the three queen palms I had planted fifteen years earlier wave in the same direction. While looking up, it dawned on me that the fronds had the same chance of catching the wind as I had of capturing a slippery white rabbit whose sole purpose was to avoid being touched by me. As I put the bucket down and tossed the pebble back into the flowerbed, I had to smile at the irony of it all. The rabbit reminded me of the elusive nature of happiness. If it wasn't hiding from me, it would tease me with its cruelty by pretending to be there for the taking. Then, just when I thought I had a chance, happiness would dart away in the last possible second knowing I'd never be quick enough or deserving of it. And while I poured what remained of the soggy granola cereal down the running garbage disposal, little did I know that I had it all wrong.

Pillars of Creation

About a year before I purchased the new property that came with a nothing-but-dirt back yard that would eventually become lush enough to attract hungry neighborhood critters, I began my weekday morning in the same way I always did in my one-bedroom apartment in 1995 – eating a bowl of cereal in front of *Good Morning America*. Back then, it wasn't an elusive white rabbit that made me put my spoon down in mid crunch. It was hearing Charles Gibson announce that there were new pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope, a deep-space instrument launched by NASA in 1990 to capture fascinating images of our universe. Knowing that my eyes were about to turn into spinning pinwheels and that my mind was preparing for its own kind of liftoff, I abandoned my bowl of soon-to-be-soggy cornflakes on the kitchen counter to stand closer to the TV.

The pictures were not only stunningly jaw dropping and unforgettable, they easily come to mind twenty-seven years later while writing this book and imagining the birthplace of the emotions within each of us. One of the pictures, “Pillars of Creation,” reveals magnificent columns of mostly hydrogen

gas and dust that give rise to newborn stars in the Eagle nebula. The picture is so amazing that the only way to describe it is to imagine three brightly colored lava lamps submerged within a much larger lava lamp, the orange, purple, and pink plumes contrasting beautifully against the backdrop of deep space accented with splashes of gold and turquoise. While these amazing photos made their way from inconceivable distances to televisions all around the world from a telescope named after an American astronomer famously credited with discovering that other galaxies existed beyond our own, I found myself thinking that they offered proof that the universe is truly alive. I was still thinking about the spectacular NASA images as I drove to work twenty minutes later, but instead of gushing over a scientific marvel that would've made every contributing theoretical physicist from the early 20th century spin in their graves, I was gripping the steering wheel and wondering, *How do I even know that I'm truly alive?*

Scott

Back when I was watching *Good Morning America* hosts, Charles Gibson and Joan Lunden, present new and exciting updates about the Hubble Space Telescope, I was beginning a

new career as a business analyst for the same biotech company where I had worked in research as a genetic engineer and as a section supervisor in drug manufacturing. The new job would challenge me like no other and take me to many new places in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean over a twelve-year timespan. During those years between 1995 and 2007, I calculated that I had over a dozen different bosses; and as you can imagine, some made guest appearances in my worst nightmares while some conducted master classes on the fine art of managing people – and there were a few who pushed me to the point where creative resourcefulness beyond my wildest dreams was the only option.

While working for an IT senior director who seemed to have no concept of how overloaded I was with all the assignments he'd already given me, I was tasked with having to conduct all the initial one-on-one interviews with candidates he preselected for his open director position. I can still remember our conversation that began with his trademark single knock followed by him immediately opening my closed office door:

“Hi, Chuck. Are you busy?”

“What can I do for you, John?” I asked while silently saying goodbye to a productive morning that would’ve saved me from missing a fast-approaching deadline.

“Would you mind working with my administrative assistant, Cathy, to set up one-on-one interviews with these candidates? I want you to meet them first. Of the ones you like, have Cathy schedule them for interviews with me,” he said as he casually added the beefy stack of resumes to the other stacks of paper on my already cluttered desk.

“No problem, John. Any particular timeframe?” I asked.

“Sometime this month.”

“You got it,” I replied while trying to mask my exasperation with as much forced enthusiasm as I could muster.

Within a few days, Cathy presented me with an interview schedule that included eighteen individual screenings over the next three weeks. If I was going to have any chance of finishing my other projects on time, I was going to have to come up with a way to make this as easy and less time

consuming as possible. On the Sunday before the interviews were to begin, while on a long run of about fifteen miles in preparation for the upcoming Los Angeles Marathon, I came up with *the* perfect plan: I simply wouldn't read their resumes, and I'd ask them only one question.

One of my last interview candidates could be heard coming toward my office from the lobby where Cathy would meet and escort the potential directors. From her girlish giggles, I could tell this next guy was a real charmer. Outside my closed door, I caught fragments of their conversation which included the candidate telling Cathy that he worked for a credit reporting agency and had recently married. When the verbal exchanges ceased, I knew a knock on my door was imminent.

“Hi, Chuck. Are you ready for Scott?”

“I am. Send him in. Thanks, Cathy,” I replied while confirming that I had Scott's resume on my desk.

Right away, I noticed that Scott reminded me of a Hollywood actor but I couldn't decide if he looked more like Ryan Gosling or Ryan Reynolds. He was likeable, easygoing,

comfortable in his own skin, and had a personality that made you want to help him climb to the top within five minutes of meeting him. After shaking hands over my desk, we settled into our respective seats almost at the exact same time.

“Thanks for making the time to come out today,” I said. “This interview is going to be fairly brief since I only have one question to ask you. But before I proceed, I want to know if you have any questions for me.”

“Really? Just one question? I did have some for you, but I’d rather hear yours,” he replied curiously.

“Okay. Fair enough,” I said while scooting my chair closer to my desk.

Next, I picked up a yellow highlighter and scanned the resume in search of two words. Even though I had not read his resume prior to the interview, it didn’t take me long since one would be hard-pressed *not* to find the words “process” and “system” on a resume that was angling for a director position in IT. After highlighting the words with over-the-top flare to make a dramatic moment even more dramatic, I spun the resume

around and pushed it toward Scott and asked, “What’s the difference between these two words?”

Like the others before him, Scott looked confused for a moment before managing to blurt out, “That’s it? That’s the one question?”

“Yes. And try to give an answer that a sixth grader could understand,” I added.

“Huh? How old are sixth graders?” he asked.

“Eleven.”

After a few minutes of squirming in his chair and scratching random phantom itches, Scott said, “I can’t believe I’m having such a hard time answering that.”

“Take your time. You want to walk with me to get a coffee?” I asked.

“Sure. I need to think about this a little more.”

On our way back from the on-site Starbucks, he gave his best shot at answering the question. I remember thinking that his explanation had more starts and stops than a game of “red light green light” that I played most summer evenings with childhood friends on the street in front of my house at an age where I should’ve been able to understand Scott’s rambling discernment.

“So . . . what do you think? Did that make sense to you?” he asked as we both returned to our respective places in my office.

“Cathy will get in touch with you next week. By then, we should . . .”

“C’mon . . . seriously, how did I do?” he interrupted.

“Off the record?” I asked.

“Sure. Off the record,” he replied.

“That was terrible,” I said.

“I’m not surprised,” he admitted. “What was the right answer?”

“There isn’t a right answer. I was looking for the conviction behind an explanation that clearly offered a distinction between the two words,” I replied. “I didn’t get it, and I’m pretty sure a sixth grader wouldn’t either.”

“That was such a tough question. Do you mind telling me what your reasoning would be?” he asked.

“Sure. A process is a series of steps performed in order to accomplish a desired outcome. A system is anything added to the process to make it cheaper, faster, or better.”

“Nice. But why ask that particular question?” he asked.

“I can’t imagine an IT director saying any other words more often than “process” and “system,” and if he doesn’t have a philosophy that can clearly separate the two, then I’d have to wonder about his ability to lead others successfully. See where I’m coming from, Scott?”

“I do,” he said while getting to his feet to meet my extended hand.

“Thanks for coming in today. I wish you the best.”

“Same to you. Thanks.”

“One more thing, Scott . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I overheard you telling Cathy that you just got married. When you’re having dinner tonight, ask your new wife to tell you the difference between being a wife or a live-in girlfriend. I’ll bet she wastes no time offering a clear distinction between the two and says it with enough conviction to leave no doubt where she stands philosophically when it comes to being your wife.”

I can still remember the expression on Scott’s face when he turned to exit my office more than twenty years ago. I probably have that same look as I sit here writing a book about happiness, facing a similar question that all eighteen pre-screened applicants faced back in the early 2000s. Can I

convey the difference between the words “alive” and “living?” And can I do it with conviction? But more importantly, will an eleven-year-old get it?

Alive or Living?

There were no signs of nervous anxiety coming from the proverbial chair that Scott and the other seventeen interviewees sat in all those years ago. That’s because it was my turn to be challenged in the hot seat to offer an answer to a difficult question that would give a fictitious interviewer (and the reader) insight into how I plan to unravel the complexities behind *Being Happy*.

“So . . . Mr. Trunks, can you explain to me how some-one would know that they’re living as opposed to just being alive?” asked the interviewer in my mind.

“I can!” I replied excitedly.

“Settle down, Mr. Trunks. I’m not done. I’d like for your answer to make sense to a sixth grader, too.”

“Okay. I can do that!”

“I find your enthusiasm annoying, Mr. Trunks. Why are you so eager to address this?”

“I’ve had LOTS of time to prepare for this strange interview; plus, I knew the question beforehand!”

“Got it . . . Okay, let’s hear it, but please stop with the exclamation points already.”

“Sure thing! Oops . . . I mean, sure thing.”

“Proceed, Mr. Trunks,” said the impatient figment of my imagination.

“Okay. Whereas senses can tell you that you’re alive, I believe it’s your emotions that not only offer proof that you’re actually living, they can influence *how you’re living*. For example, while writing this paragraph, I heard some kids playing outside in an adjacent back yard. At first, I quickly became perturbed like the quintessential get-off-my-lawn grouch thinking, *How dare they shout, laugh, and squeal at decibel*

levels far beyond what my foam earplugs can block! On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, no less! But in less time than it takes to reheat a slowly-sipped cup of after noon coffee, I started to appreciate the sound of the neighborhood kids, choosing instead to indulge the wave of nostalgia I began to feel in my heart while recalling some of the good times I experienced with childhood friends when the only rule back then was to be home before dark.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means that the ruckus from the shouting kids confirmed I was alive because I could hear them while the underlying emotions of annoyance, followed by appreciation and nostalgia allowed for an evolving experience that gave proof that I was truly living in that moment.”

“Not bad, Mr. Trunks. Any more words of wisdom before I send you off to finish your book?”

“You KNOW I do. I want to reiterate that emotions give rise to a reactionary experience that offers validation that a life is being lived in that very moment. I’ll dive deeper into that

beefy sentence later in the book; but before I go, I want to extend your question to two other words if that's okay with you?"

"You have one more minute, Mr. Trunks. I'm timing you."

"Thanks. Although most people would correctly identify the word 'happy' as one of our many emotions, I think they get it wrong when defining the word 'happiness' as an extended period of the 'happy' emotion. To me, 'happiness' is what ensues when one is able to control *all* of their emotions. See where I'm going with this?"

"Sort of. No need to say anything more. I'll wait for the book," replied my made-up interviewer who somehow turned out to have the same prickly manner as Judge Judy.

And with that, I said goodbye to Debbie Downer, leaned back in my chair with my hands clasped behind my head, and resumed thinking about how emotions are at the center of it all. Meanwhile, the kids on the other side of my backyard fence continued to shout, laugh, and squeal, filling the modest neighborhood with the sounds of happiness.

Chapter 2: Easy Does It

Have It Your Way

“Really? Again?” I said loud enough to make the thirty-something woman in Winnie-the-Pooh pajama pants turn around. “Oh, sorry. I wasn’t talking to you. It’s just that I always seem to get that one shopping cart that wants to pull hard to the left. Don’t you hate that?”

I didn’t think much of it when she just stared at me with the most expressionless face and vacant eyes before making a sharp turn down an aisle that mixed protein powders with feminine hygiene products. After all, I was in a Walmart in Boise, Idaho on a Tuesday. I may be writing a philosophical book that seeks to unravel the algorithmic mystery of what constitutes happiness, but far be it from me to attempt a rational explanation for Walmart’s curious customer base and product placement choices.

Soon after pushing and pulling my rebellious shopping cart away from the checkout register, its belly and undercarriage full of plastic bags containing personal and household items

ranging from a two-pack of shaving gel to a reflective sun shield for my truck, my nose picked up the most glorious aroma that wasn't bacon. It was the smell of flame-broiled hamburgers emanating from the Burger King near the exit of the Walmart. Suddenly, an extended hunger pang roiled in my stomach, reminding me that I hadn't eaten very much since an early morning breakfast of a Yoplait strawberry yogurt and a banana. *When was the last time I had a Whopper?* I asked myself.

I couldn't have found a better table inside the Burger King because I could keep my full shopping cart next to me; plus, I had an unobstructed view of an eclectic slice of humanity that was filing into and out of the busy Walmart. A feeling of muted surprise came over me when I saw the woman in the pajama pants shuffling toward the exit. Oddly, I remember noticing her slippers had a face on them that I didn't recognize as a Winnie-the-Pooh character. *C'mon, lady . . . If you're going to outfit yourself in sleepwear to run errands, at least try to keep a central theme!*

As I waited patiently for my order of a Whopper without cheese, small fries, and a medium diet Coke to replace the

plastic number thirty-six that was given to me at the counter, a strange but interesting thought came over me. In a way, the urge to eat, whether it emanated from a hunger pang, a scheduled lunch hour, or from the smell of flame-broiled hamburgers, reminded me of how emotions are triggered in the same way. And just like hunger, sleepiness, or feeling frozen from having underdressed for a Boise State football game in late November, you can't tell yourself to be anxious, depressed, elated, or disgusted. You don't find feelings and emotions; *they find you* – like the wave of disgust I soon felt after stepping into a Cheesecake Factory men's bathroom in San Bernardino, California and finding a guy puking his guts out into the sink and seeing it splash up on the mirror. Naturally, I couldn't finish my meal, and it was at least a year before I could eat anything resembling macaroni and cheese.

Although I was still relishing how good my Whopper tasted while driving home from Walmart, my mind kept circling back to thoughts about emotions. Whereas there are only five senses (six if you include intuition), Dr. Brené Brown, a long-time researcher and Texan academic, claims that human beings have eighty-seven emotions in her best-selling book, *Atlas of the Heart* (2021). I understand why empathy,

vulnerability, and shame made her list of emotions, but I'm not following why she included "social justice" and "storytelling." Regardless of whether there are eighty-seven, fifty-seven or a hundred-and-seven human emotions, I believe most would agree that our emotions have evolved right alongside our senses and physiology. And if you subscribe to the theory of evolution like me, then deductive reasoning would support a Darwinian premise that the emotions within us today are present because they serve our ability to survive in a world that suddenly feels like an unsolvable Rubik's Cube.

After arriving home and putting everything away and winning what had to look like a wrestling match between me and a possessed new sun shield, I slid out of my truck to retrieve the mail from the end of the driveway. On my way back toward the house, I stopped to close the open doors of my truck before locking it. If you were watching me from across the street, you would've seen me stop again before reaching the front door, my head bent down looking at a small stack of mail in my hand. What you wouldn't have known was the mild, serendipitous jolt I was experiencing from the irony of having just come across a promotional flyer from Burger King, and

the fleeting thrill from discovering it was a buy-one-get-one-free coupon for two Junior Whoppers.

Steady As She Goes

In just one-and-a-half chapters, buried within a few colorful literary vignettes, I stated that emotions find you; and when they do, they give rise to a reactionary experience that offers validation that a life is being lived in that very moment. From my experience, there's really no way to totally suppress an emotion which is why I added the word "reactionary." A good example would be the shame that instantly permeated throughout my body when I was caught pilfering a couple of Krispy Kreme donuts from the big box in the breakroom after I had come up with excuses for not bringing in pastries the last two times it was my turn. I remember wanting to scurry under the refrigerator like the little rat that I was for not holding up my end of the unspoken contract between me and my coworkers.

I also stated that 'happiness' is what ensues when one is able to control *all* of their emotions. And since we don't have a choice when it comes to reacting to an emotion, control in this

case is relegated to the amount of time and investment one chooses to commit toward an emotion. If the commitment is not excessive, the emotion one feels in a given moment would be considered “under control” and would either contribute to that person’s overall feeling of happiness – or not diminish it. Conversely, if one’s commitment toward an emotion is deemed excessive, or “out of control,” then that person’s overall feeling of happiness *would be* diminished. And to me, this holds true for any emotion between euphoria and devastation.

Have you ever been to lunch with a group of friends where something funny happens and someone at the table keeps laughing about it after everyone has moved on? *Umm . . . check, please.* Or have you had a perpetually chipper coworker constantly tell you to smile and who would start each morning by saying, “Happy insert-day-of-the-week!” *Ugh . . . there has to be a body count buried in their basement.* And then there’s the remember-when-we-did-that-thing-in-high-school guy who seems to live in a constant state of nostalgia. *C’mon, dude . . . just let it go.* But the best example of overindulging an emotion that would wreak havoc in the given moment and obliterate any semblance of happiness comes from yours truly

on a dusty cross-country course in Santa Clarita, California in 1997.

College of the Canyons

As usual, the sun had no competition in the early morning sky since clouds were nowhere in sight. The parking lot nearest the track and field area was lit up and bustling with anxious runners. If you were stretching next to Dan and me, you would've seen runners darting every which way. Some were doing their pre-race warmups. Some were desperately searching for a vacant Porta Potti. Some were dashing to the registration tables to become last-minute participants in the fast-approaching start of the 5K race.

“Today might be your day,” said Dan.

“Really? What makes you say that?” I replied.

“It’s a hilly course, and I’m not seeing the usual competition around here.”

After running with Dan for a couple of years, he understood

me. He, too, was considered a late bloomer in the world of competitive distance running; but in Dan's case, he was a freak of nature. Within only a few short years, Dan became one of the top runners in a county that swelled with over a million residents. If he wasn't winning races outright, he was routinely securing one of the top spots in an age group that I unfortunately shared with him. Having seen me regularly finish fourth or fifth in our age group, Dan knew how much it would mean to me to win one of the medals that were slated for the top three finishers in each age group.

“Did you hear that?” I asked after listening to what sounded like the garbled voice of Charlie Brown's teacher coming from the race director's megaphone near the registration tables.

“Yep. It's showtime,” he replied.

The race turnout was fairly sizable at what looked to be about two hundred or so runners ranging from dads jogging with their kids and new moms running to shed the last few pounds of stubborn baby weight to the more hardcore types like Dan and me. The cross-country course at College of the Canyons was adjacent to the track and field area and required runners

to make three laps on the serpentine dirt course before exiting toward the finish line situated between the parking lot and the registration tables. While Dan toed the white chalk at the center of the starting line, I took my usual position of two to three runners deep from the front which most likely had more to do with having a personality type that preferred invisibility than from what I had to offer as a competitive distance runner.

The start of the race was business as usual. I allowed the overzealous “happy jacks” to sprint past me knowing I’d be reeling them in one by one throughout the race while focusing on keeping my first mile time between six-ten and six-twenty. At the top of one of the many steep hills, about halfway through my second lap, I saw Dan, who was, of course, in the lead. From the way the race was laid out and because there were so many hills that allowed for sweeping views of the competition, I was able to gauge my position in the race. By the time I was halfway through my third and final lap, I had moved into second place overall and began having visions of grandeur. I was mere minutes away from not only standing on the podium with a running legend, I would be going home with one of the top medals.

As I descended the last hill of the third lap, I noticed a young man in his early twenties holding up his left arm and pointing. At first, I grumbled to myself, “Who the hell is this guy, and where did he come from?” But after a few mind-clearing seconds, I remembered I was running a 5K that veered back toward the parking lot where I’d find a shocked Dan, the mayor of Santa Clarita holding a key to her fine city, hordes of adoring fans, and TV reporters fighting each other to get a one-on-one exclusive from the “new kid in town.” However, little did I know that I was only thirty seconds away from having the Super Bowl winning touchdown pass go through my hands and bounce off my chest.

You Cannot Be Serious

A quick scan of the pointer confirmed that he was affiliated with the 5K since he had some sort of brightly colored identification tag attached to a lanyard around his neck, and he was wearing the same race t-shirt that was waiting for me inside my car in the parking lot. He was pointing to the left, so I veered left and careened past him at a clip that had to be under a six-minute-mile pace. A slight wave of panic washed over me when I realized that there were three choices at the

junction where the pointer stood. *Did I take the wrong left? Was I supposed to take the middle path?* I quickly put those doubts aside, chalking it up to nerves since I had never been one of the frontrunners before.

Half a minute into the course change, the panic that I was already trying to suppress quickly morphed into full blown dread, bypassing alarm all together. *I went the WRONG WAY!* My only option was to turn around and retrace my strides toward the pointer who I now saw as “public enemy number one.”

“What the HELL are you doing?” I screamed as I approached him. “Which way do I go, you IDIOT?”

I must have scared the pointer because he took several steps backward while still pointing.

“So, it WAS the middle path! What an effing IDIOT!” I screamed loud enough for several runners who I passed earlier to look my way.

I should’ve been exhausted from having completed ninety-

five percent of my greatest 5K effort, but I had emotionally transitioned from mild-mannered Bruce Banner into his raging alter ego, The Incredible Hulk. Normally, I'd be running on fumes at that point, but it was boiling blood that served as my new fuel source. The first person I saw at the finish line was Dan who was surrounded by at least ten runners that I had reeled in during the race. *No effing way!* But instead of congratulating him and finding out what his time was, I made a beeline toward the registration tables where the race director was standing. He wore sunglasses under his floppy beach hat and looked to be around ten years older than me.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” I yelled.

“Whoa. Settle down. What’s the problem?” he replied.

“You have an effing IDIOT out on the course! THAT’S the problem!” I screamed. “He’s directing people to run in the wrong effing direction! This whole race is a joke! You’re a joke!”

“Watch your language! Can’t you see there are kids around here?” he shouted.

“Eff you!” I yelled back.

Suddenly, I felt a hand grab my left arm and another hand grab my right shoulder. Both were pulling me away from the director who stood behind the registration tables. When I made eye contact with the owner of the two hands, Dan’s expression told me that I was indeed a raging lunatic. Weirdly, even in the midst of my own personal meltdown, I could see similarities between my condemnation and John McEnroe’s infamous, “You CANNOT be serious!” tirade at the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament in 1981.

“Chuck. Dude. Relax. What’s your problem?” asked Dan.

“I had second place wrapped up and this effing IDIOT effed it up!” I replied while noticing that I had become quite the spectacle.

“You need to leave right now. We can talk about it later.”

Dan made it a point to walk me to my car while onlookers gawked and said things that included words like, “psycho,” “spaz,” and “poor sport.” Now my rage was focused on

wanting to fight these strangers. I was still seeing red when Dan practically shoved me into my Nissan Maxima.

“Go on! Get out of here!” he shouted from the other side of the rolled-up driver’s side window.

I thought the hour-long drive back to Camarillo from Santa Clarita would’ve calmed me down, but I was still reeling from what had happened when I pulled into my garage. Of course, as soon as I stepped out of my car, the bib number and commemorative t-shirt went directly into the waste basket between the washer and dryer. For the remainder of the weekend, I stewed about it, walking around the neighborhood in a daze, chastising myself for allowing glory to graze my fingertips before landing in someone else’s lap.

By the time the first of two track practices began in earnest on the following Tuesday at Agoura High School, most members of the track club had heard about my implosion at the College of the Canyons 5K. Some saw it as true passion for training and racing, like when Tom Brady comes off the field after a three-and-out and throws his helmet while screaming at the receiver who dropped the ball that would’ve given them a first

down. Others saw it as a distasteful show of unsportsmanlike conduct, making me feel embarrassed and acutely self-aware. Dan was there, too. But I wasn't worried about him since he was a lot like the TV character, Jerry Seinfeld. He never seemed to get too amped up or too maudlin about anything.

“Hey, Dan. Thanks for saving my ass at the race,” I said while we prepared to run drills with the rest of the club members.

“Wow. I never saw that side of you, Chuck. You were insane,” he replied not knowing that was the last thing I wanted to hear.

“Yeah . . . well . . . not my finest hour. That's for sure. By the way, what place did I come in?”

“Eleventh,” he replied.

“What about in our age group?” I asked.

“Fourth.”

“Figures.”

Chapter 3: Tools of the Trade

Chance

To get Brian and Janice off my back, I reluctantly agreed to ride Chance at the end of the week. I didn't understand their insistence but after careful consideration, I thought it best for me to face my fears instead of avoiding them. Their modest ranch house was situated far back from the street, making the front yard look huge. A white wooden fence outlined the entire perimeter of the property which included a barn with four stalls that backed up against twenty acres of shared pasture. After several morning jogs around the unincorporated community just outside of Allen, Texas, it seemed that most houses were accented with a fence, a barn, and animals.

Since I lived in Los Angeles, it had been a while since I saw my good friend from college who met Janice during our senior year at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. My plan was simple. I'd spend a week with them before continuing on to Cancun, Mexico where I'd soon discover the world's finest beach with white sand that would feel like melted butter under

my feet and crystal-clear warm water that would make Malibu's Zuma Beach feel like I was boogie boarding in cold sewer water.

On the day before I was to ride Chance, I did what I had been doing all week long – bringing the great black beast handfuls of celery stalks and carrot sticks in an effort to win his affection and make me feel like we agreed that he wouldn't kill me as soon as I got on his back. Even before Janice told me, I had heard that horses will buck the rider off of them if they sense fear and self-doubt. And if low self-esteem was detectable as well, I was less than twenty-four hours away from landing in a wheelchair like Christopher Reeve.

“Just put your left foot in the stirrup and swing your right leg over the saddle,” said Brian.

“You're holding him, right?” I asked with a voice that clearly said I wasn't ready for this.

“You got this,” chimed Janice as she took my picture with a clunky Polaroid.

“Do NOT take my picture!” I demanded, knowing it was already too late. “So, what am I supposed to do now?”

“Just use the reins to guide him like I showed you,” said Brian.

“Like this?” I asked while directing Chance back toward the barn.

But before Brian could respond, Chance immediately broke our deal which had been signed, sealed, and delivered with the help of at least thirty pounds of vegetables over the last five days. My shrieking drowned out whatever my friends were yelling as Chance bolted for the openness of the pasture in the same way a cat goes nuts over catnip. In that moment, I instantly knew it was Chance’s world and that my safety and security was merely collateral damage. Before I knew it, the horse had made it to the pasture and was in full gallop toward what looked to be another open gate. Years of long-distance running and gym workouts that typically focused on low-weight-high- rep routines allowed me to successfully cling to the possessed animal in the same way Shaquille O’Neal’s hand can palm a basketball.

The sheer power of the horse beneath me was something I could not have ever imagined. Feeling it was both terrifying and exhilarating – but mostly terrifying – nearly a thousand pounds of pure muscle energy working together beautifully like a choreographed ballet of thunderous movement and speed. I could have been magically teleported into the middle of an NFL game as a running back and not have felt more helpless and unprepared as I was in this real-life version of Disneyland’s Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride.

Behind me, the barn that Chance shared with an older blonde horse named Sundance was becoming smaller and smaller while the world on either side of me was nothing but a blur. Up ahead, I could see the open gate that appeared to be Chance’s target. Whatever heightened level of white-knuckle fear I was experiencing quickly graduated to DEFCON 1 when crude mental calculations told me that the gate opening was wide enough for Chance to squeeze through, but narrow enough to shear my legs off just below each knee. *Should I jump off? Shriek like a thirteen-year-old girl? Pee my pants? Or do all three simultaneously to begin my new life as a quadriplegic in dramatic fashion?*

It was clear that I had one choice and one choice only. I was going to have to yank the reins back as hard as I could and take the chance that this enormous beast wouldn't rear upward and fall on top me, forever stopping me from feeling the creamy white sands of Playa Norte on Cancun's Isla Mujeres. Moments ago, I was just another uncomfortable guy sitting on a horse like a nervous eight-year-old on top of a donkey at the county fair, both of us wondering what we'd be having for lunch. Now I was smack dab in the middle of a life-or-death situation with a wheelchair in the balance.

Oddly, I thought of the dark blue t-shirt that was still folded in my suitcase as I pulled back the reins. On it were the words, "I'm all in." And that's exactly what I was feeling as I continued to pull the reins with the same strength as someone lifting the back end of a burning car to save a pinned loved one. In this case, it was my own sweet ass. Shockingly, with only ten yards to go before reaching the open gate, Chance came to an abrupt stop allowing me to slide off of him like a poached egg from a serving spoon. In the distance, I could see Brian and Janice running toward me while Chance stood by, looking like it was just another day at the park.

“Oh my god! That was hysterical!” shouted Brian.

“What? Are you kidding me? I almost died!”

“Relax. You were never in any danger. Chance was just having a little fun with you.”

Just then, Janice finally came running up and positioned herself while still holding the camera. “Say cheese!” she said while laughing and catching her breath at the same time.

“Great. Glad my near-death experience gave you a good laugh.”

“Got it!” shouted Janice while still laughing. “Now I have the before AND AFTER shots of your ride. Instant classics!”

Years later, as I reminisced about my trip to Texas to see Brian and Janice, I mostly thought about how the soft white sand of Mexico’s Yucatan made my feet feel like they had died and gone to heaven; but now I have nothing but gratitude and appreciation for a rambunctious young horse that felt the need to give me the ride of my life while handing over the perfect

metaphor to explain the unbridled power of the mind and the emotions that make us want to wildly sprint toward our own open gates of self-indulgence.

I'll Call You

It wasn't until I moved to Boise, Idaho from Los Angeles in the summer of 2015 when I realized I had not only ridden Chance *before* that fateful Friday back in 1995, I continued to earn frequent flier miles from allowing him to take me whenever and wherever he wanted. During one of those rides, I remember heatedly snatching my slide deck off an overhead projector in mid presentation and throwing it in the face of a colleague during a staff meeting for insisting that my proposal wouldn't work without offering a valid reason or alternative. And while on another ride, I found myself walking home from the Boise airport with a backpack, duffle bag, and rolling suitcase in tow, a seven-mile journey, just to make a show of how furious I was that my friend forgot to pick me up. And when art commissions started drying up despite shameless marketing and abject groveling in 2013, Chance actually made it through the open gate, putting my love of graphic art on a three-year bitter hiatus.

In that moment of realization, I had to face what was staring back at me from the foggy bathroom mirror – a middle-aged guy who was no closer to controlling his emotions than a seventeen-year-old girl who finds a few budding zits on her chin on the morning of her junior prom. Chance was running the show, and it didn't take months of therapy, afternoons spent perusing books in the self-help section at Barnes and Noble, or an epiphany to figure out that this undisciplined and impulsive equine needed to be taken back to the barn, placed in his stall, and told, "Don't call me. I'll call you." Similarly, it wasn't like I dropped to my knees in overacted revelation as did Charlton Heston's Moses in *The Ten Commandments* when I concluded that if I wanted to control my emotions, I would have to learn how to control my thoughts. And, like anyone who would want to know their credit score after being told they didn't qualify for a lower interest rate, I was curious to know just how comfortable I had become to being enslaved by unchecked thoughts and emotions.

By equating the impulsive rambunctiousness of an undisciplined animal to my tendency to indulge any and all thoughts and emotions, I naturally imagined this metaphorical horse in its two most extreme positions – either at rest in its

stall or roaming free in a pasture without gates or fences. With the imagery set in my mind, two new practices would have to be introduced into my life. I would need to start meditating and prescribing moments of free thought, and it wouldn't require shaving my head, wrapping a sheet around me, or babbling about chakras.

Chasing Butterflies

“Wow. That’s pretty lame,” I said to myself while looking at the sheet of paper still underneath my left hand. More than a dozen penciled slash marks, each one representing a split-second departure from the simple task of concentrating on a blue Aquafina water bottle cap in the middle of my kitchen table, made it clear that my work was cut out for me. The premise of the two-minute test was exceedingly straightforward and designed to provide a rough estimate of one’s focusing ability. Based on the corresponding chart at the bottom of the magazine article, ten or more slash marks confirmed what I had been dreading all along – my mind, when it wasn’t chasing butterflies until something shiny caught its attention, was as disciplined as a wild horse eyeballing an open pasture gate.

Since our conscious minds aren't capable of thinking of nothingness, meditative practices are designed to help focus all of our attention in a given moment on a particular object or abstraction. For me, I already knew I wouldn't know how to wrap my thoughts around an abstraction like love, light, scent, or a tone emanating from a vibrating Tibetan bowl. I would need to center my mind on a particular object; and since rifling through my kitchen's junk drawer didn't produce a single amethyst crystal, my journey toward a more enlightened state would begin with a blue Aquafina water bottle cap.

Although the number of pencil marks was decreasing through routine practice, I had to admit that I needed a little more engagement than what a little blue cap could offer. Oddly, as I watched the tossed cap arc through the air on its way to the bottom of a recycling bin, I was feeling the same sense of loss that Tom Hanks' character displayed as he watched his beloved volleyball, Wilson, float away from him and what remained of their sea-ravaged raft in the movie, *Cast Away*. I tried focusing on different pieces of fruit, the eraser end of my pencil, the flame of a lit candle, but I was steadily losing interest because my mind needed to munch on something more substantial than inanimate objects with the same

nutritional value as Styrofoam. Little did I know that would all change after a serendipitous find in an area of the Barnes and Noble book-store that was the farthest away from the self-help section.

Fuhgeddaboutit

I don't know why it caught my eye. I was hell-bent on picking up a book about black holes with the unused Barnes and Noble gift card I rediscovered behind an expired auto club card in my wallet when the bright orange cover made me stop in my tracks. It was a crossword book touting fifty easy puzzles from the pages of *The New York Times* with the attractive price of less than ten bucks, leaving me more than enough to buy a book about the mysteries of the universe and get a latte in the coffee shop situated in the center of the store.

While I irresponsibly jacked up my mind and heartrate on a work night by watching an episode of *The Sopranos* right before going to sleep, the two books that I bought at Barnes and Noble patiently waited for my attention on the nightstand beside me. Once the show was over, it was literally impossible to stop thinking about Tony curb stomping a fellow gangster

to death for disrespecting his daughter in a restaurant. Even the notion of time travel in the first chapter of my new book couldn't stop me from replaying the gory scene over and over and making me yearn for the next week's installment. But after exchanging it for my glossy new crossword book, I noticed something even more puzzling than a nine-letter word for "hasty."

Suddenly, my thoughts were no longer scattered between reruns of a mob boss's tasseled loafer making one of his captain's faces look like a pan of picked over lasagna and what I was going to say at the next day's staff meeting when it was my turn to give a progress report. Instead, my mind was wrapping itself around the clues needed to solve an easy crossword puzzle, leaving behind the usual late-night cacophony of worry, regret, anticipation, and self-loathing. Within minutes, I could almost feel the vibration of the heavy metal latch of the stall door lock into place, the once freewheeling horse finally done for the night. Sleep began to slowly overtake me as my eyelids grew heavier and heavier, a peaceful nothingness welcomed only by a quieted mind.

Better Sleep on It

Besides going to bed with me each night, the spiral-bound orange crossword book started accompanying me in the kitchen while I munched on cereal that could've moonlighted as trail mix, in the bathroom while I brushed my teeth over the sink, and in my briefcase on the passenger seat when I drove to work. Being able to corral my thoughts and pin them down with a crossword puzzle clue whenever I wanted became an obsession of sorts. Whereas counting the number of ridges on a blue Aquafina water bottle cap was pushing me closer to the edge of madness, noodling over a five-letter word for "massage" was bringing me the meditative command I was seeking. Not only was I able to better control my thoughts and the cocktail of messy emotions that went along with them, I had unwittingly enrolled myself in a year-round vocabulary development course.

After months of carrying around a crossword puzzle book that was fast becoming more and more battered looking by the day, I noticed another phenomenon that was taking place if I didn't succumb to peeking at the answers on the back pages. Upon returning to an unfinished puzzle that had rendered me dead-

in- the-water hours earlier, I discovered that my refreshed mind could break the stalemate by miraculously coming up with an answer or two. When stymied again, I would repeat the same process until every square of the cross-word puzzle had a letter in it, taking about two weeks to complete a single puzzle, and about two years to finish a book.

Along with being able to limit the number of loop-the-loops I was experiencing on any given day's emotional rollercoaster, the meditative practice of solving cross-word puzzles also validated the wise old adage, "Don't do anything you'll regret. Better to sleep on it. You might feel differently about it in the morning." So, in my case, not only was I able to control how far down the rabbit hole I went, I could skip that rabbit hole all together if I sat with my feelings long enough before acting on them.

By the way, I started doing crossword puzzles in 2004, beginning with a book edited by Will Shortz titled, *Easy Mondays: Select Puzzles from the Monday Pages of The New York Times*. I later learned that the day of the week determined the level of difficulty in the series of crossword puzzle books, topping out with a series containing the newspaper's

notoriously difficult Sunday puzzles. If you're wondering what day of the week I'm on after eighteen years of crossword puzzle meditation, the cover of the current book on my nightstand reads, *Best of the Week Saturdays: Crosswords from the Saturday Pages of The New York Times*. And despite nailing a key eleven-letter entry for a much-joked-about cafeteria offering on a partially completed puzzle number sixteen, I'm still at least three years away from impressing the ladies at the local coffee shop.

“Oh my. Is that the Sunday New York Times crossword you're working on?”

“Is it? Oh, wow. I guess so. I hadn't noticed. Say . . . maybe you could help me out?” I'd ask.

“Okay,” replied the enamored woman in my fantasy.

“What's a three-letter word for, ‘Would you like to join me?’”

“Sure . . . I mean, ‘YES!’”

Vine Man

Just as I was to begin my third year of a meditative practice that required an ever-present crossword puzzle book with a mechanical pencil clipped to its front cover, my twelve-year run as a competitive endurance athlete ended at the finish line of the Vine Man Half Ironman in Paso Robles, California, surprising myself as much as those who had only known me to be an in-tense, unidimensional training and racing fanatic. Forty minutes before clocking a respectable 5:59:33 finishing time, I passed my training buddy, Mark, who looked wobbly enough to warrant handing him my last two Fig Newtons from my faded purple fanny pack. No words were exchanged between us as he took the energy-packed bars since it was clear that Mark had no shot at breaking six-hours, a goal we had set for ourselves twelve months earlier. Twenty minutes after that, with only three miles left in the race, panic set in as I began to feel the effects of what my training partner was most likely experiencing back at mile seven of the thirteen-point-one mile run portion of the race. But just as the sickening hypoglycemic kiss-of-death began to permeate throughout my body, evaporating the last of the fumes that were keeping me upright, an angel appeared out of nowhere from behind a

flimsy card table.

From twenty yards away, I couldn't tell if I had made eye contact with the older Hispanic woman since my vision had faded as fast as my cognitive skills. We must have connected because I watched her pick up one of the dozen or so white paper cups that were neatly lined up on top of the table in front of her while getting up from a metal folding chair that reminded me of the kind found in middle school gymnasiums. She positioned herself in front of the table, the white cup held at the bottom by the fingertips of her outstretched right arm, giving me the impression that she had done this before. With the few crumbs of cerebral activity that remained, my mind was telling me, *Dude, DO NOT even think about drinking whatever is in that cup*, since it was obvious that she had just pulled her whole set up out of a nearby battered Toyota Camry. Yet, despite knowing she wasn't affiliated with the race, I found myself angling toward her, the tantalizing white cup looking more and more like an ill-advised gamble than a brass ring to a carousel rider.

Like most of the liquid-filled paper cups grabbed over the years, I snatched the cup from her hand without spilling a

drop, the fingers of my right hand pinching the top just as she let go of it. A well-executed pinch would turn the rim of the cup into a spout-forming crease, and this time was no different. After mouthing the words, *Thank you*, I returned to the middle of the road to inspect what the woman had just handed me. Instead of finding bright orange or neon yellow Gatorade as was customary during endurance races, I was staring at the color of beef broth. Alarmed but still unable to stop myself, I brought the cup to my face half expecting to smell a solution of toilet bowl water mixed with a poisonous tub and tile cleaner. To my astonishment, it was a smell I had known since I was a kid and befitting since only my favorite child-hood cartoon character, Popeye, could relate to what would happen next.

As soon as the surface of the first drop of Coca-Cola touched my tongue, I felt the Lazarus effect in all ten toes, making them happily fan out and stretch as if they had been awakened by the aroma of bacon after a wonderful late-morning nap. Out of nowhere, vital organs that were as uncooperative as a lawnmower that refused to turn over no matter how many times its starter rope was yanked began to sputter and reengage. Halfway through the cup of flat soda, the symbiotic

relationship between my muscles, tendons, and cartilage that had degraded into an all-out family feud beginning on mile nine suddenly let bygones be bygones and resolved their differences. My whole body was arm in arm with itself, humming the words to Kumbaya and relishing the weight of the last remaining gulp of the magical elixir swirling around at the bottom of the cup.

Ironically, draining what remained of the de-fizzed Coca-Cola reminded me of when I topped off my gas tank at a Chevron station in San Luis Obispo two days earlier while driving up to Paso Robles for the race. As I turned to toss the empty cup toward the curb, I glanced back at the angel expecting to see her handing out cups to other lottery winners. Instead, she was just looking at me from where she handed me the drink, prompting me to give her an emphatic little wave that I hoped would convey a lifetime of gratitude. With a brain that could once again perform simple mathematical computations, I quickly deduced that a sub-six-hour finishing time was still on the table if I repented my evil ways and ran the remaining three miles in under twenty-one minutes.

By the time I reached the street that led to the city park where

the race ended, I realized I wouldn't know if I achieved my goal until I was actually crossing the finish line since I was too wild-eyed and out of my mind to trust what was displayed on my Timex. Even when race officials directed me toward the footpath that led to the park, I still couldn't see the finish line because of all the trees and tall shrubbery. More race officials appeared, making sure I exited the footpath through a break in the trees. Now I could see the finish line for the first time, and it was nothing short of spectacular.

Are You Not Entertained?

Besides being hit with the typical brouhaha you'd expect from hundreds of gratified finishers with their families and friends trying to talk over loud, thumping music, I was most taken aback by the enormous scaffold and truss assembly that supported forty to fifty empty wine barrels along with an oversized digital clock that would ultimately decide whether or not I'd be back next year with Mark. In front of me, the grass looked like a rolled-out green carpet since spectators, two and three deep in some places, were behind a set of white barriers that lined both sides of the remaining fifty yards. As I exited the clearing between the trees, I realized that there were

no other runners in front of me or around me. *Am I seriously going to run to the finish line all by myself? I'm not Chuck Trunks. I'm Julius-freaking-Caesar returning to Rome!*

Within two or three strides onto the grass, I experienced the first of two radically opposing moments that occurred almost simultaneously. My euphoric high was about to be met with an awesome nitrous oxide surge followed by what Chevy Chase would do to get laughs on Saturday Night Live in the 1970s. Just as I was straining to see the digital readout from the 'judge, jury, and executioner' that was suspended high above the finish line by electrical cables attached to two wine barrels, the voice of the race emcee boomed, "And here comes our last competitor to finish under six hours! Let's hear it for Chuck Trunks from Camarillo!" *No-freaking-way!*

I'm not exactly sure but I believe my left foot caught an unseen tree root just as my name was being blasted from four hefty speakers secured to both sides of the finish line scaffolding. Within the blink of an eye, I went from feeling like I had just won the Colosseum crowd like Russel Crowe's Maximus in *Gladiator* to being the Skipper's little buddy, Gilligan. To not go down on my face required nothing short of a dazzling

Cirque du Soleil move performed by what had to look like an epileptic Gumby on ice. As I regained my balance, my heart immediately went out to the innocent bystanders for having witnessed something that was both miraculous and cringeworthy.

From twenty yards away, I could see that I had time to do a couple of cartwheels to make up for my near-gaff and still make it under six hours but thought better of it since I possessed as much showmanship as a pet rock. *Hadn't I put these poor spectators through enough already? Did they really need to see me hobbling across the finish line from pulling a groin muscle after the first cartwheel?*

A quick glance upward while striding across the finish line not only confirmed the sub-six-hour time, it punctuated and validated an intense year-long training regimen that allowed a single day of rest once every two weeks. However, the buzz of the high-octane cocktail of exaltation and redemption also included a sobering ingredient that I hadn't experienced since running my first marathon back in 1997. I was surprised by the tears but not about why they were flowing.

“Great job, Chuck!” said a training friend who came out to support his friends despite being sidelined by an injury.

“Unbelievable finish, Chuck!” said another friend who finished ten minutes before me.

“Dude! That was awesome!” said the girlfriend of a guy who occasionally trained with Mark and me.

“Sweet time, Chuck. I’d be emotional too if I came in under six hours at Vine Man,” said Jana, another long-time friend and training partner.

“I’m not crying because of my time, Jana,” I replied. “I got the brass ring.”

“Huh?”

“The flame is out,” I said.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” she asked with noticeable concern.

“It means I’m finally done with this.”

Surf’s Up

By the time I stopped for gas in Pismo Beach while on the way back to Camarillo from Paso Robles, I knew in my heart that my training and racing days were truly behind me because I was already fantasizing about sleeping in and eating pizza again. And when I reached the stretch of Highway 101 between Santa Barbara and Ventura, I moved into the right lane and set the cruise control to the slowest speed I could get away with so I could steal glances at the Pacific Ocean through the passenger side window. I can still remember how the rippling surf picked up the last of the day’s fading light, innocently distracting observers like me from thinking about the teeming life just below the surface. I wasn’t disappointed when the highway began to veer away from the coastline since an orange sliver of sun was all that remained, making it too dark to see. My mind was elsewhere anyway. All I could think about was the teeming life inside of me.

In some ways, I felt like a prisoner who’s suddenly shown the door to freedom and told, “You could’ve left whenever you

wanted.” The truth of the matter is that I tried walking away from the sport several times without sustainable success. Deep down, I knew there was more to life than exhausting myself in a pool, on a bike, at the track, and at the gym. Whereas I was ripped and collecting accolades to prove I was somebody on the small stage, I realized that in the bigger picture I was addicted to a cycle of running away and punishing myself for it. Until I crossed the finish line at Vine Man, all I wanted to do was suffer.

And just like a prisoner who’s been released after being on lock down for more than a decade, I wanted to eat what normal people ate. I wanted to eat a piece of bread from the basket at Olive Garden, give a thumbs up to the girl behind the counter who asks if I want butter on my popcorn, and devour a three-piece meal from KFC off my lap while idling in the parking lot. I felt like a heat-seeking missile cruising at high altitude; but instead of heat, I was seeking pleasure. I wanted to dust off my boogie board, wax it, and show those thirteen-year-olds who’s boss in Malibu. Besides wanting to go on a date where I didn’t have to call it a night at nine o’clock, I wanted to watch the sun come up instead of getting up with it. I wanted to make friends laugh by talking smack while playing cards,

horseshoes, and driveway basketball. I simply wanted to look at my watch to know what time it was instead of what *my* time was.

It didn't take long for me to get back to exercising since fitness was always one of the key parameters that factored into an internal algorithm that determined if I felt happy or not. Long, leisurely walks replaced six-mile tempo runs; nature hikes replaced hill-repeats; jackknifing into pools to splash unsuspecting sunbathers replaced mile-long freestyle slogs in swim lanes; and touring around on a new hybrid bike replaced struggling to hang on at the back of a fast-moving peloton. There was no better symbol of my departure from the world of competitive endurance racing than being seen on a tank of a bike that had a bell, a basket, a kickstand, and a design that couldn't have cared less about aerodynamics. Even though the new bike was at least thirty pounds heavier than my old racing bike, I found it ironic that while I rode the two-wheeled beast, what was on my mind was a hundred pounds lighter.

In the Moment

“Hey, Jeff. How’s the training going?” I said while pouring myself a lukewarm cup of horrible Monday morning coffee in the staff kitchen.

“It’s going well. Thanks for emailing those ocean swimming tips.”

“Sure thing. Did you do the training sessions over the weekend like we talked about on Friday?” I asked.

“No, but I did a ton of yardwork, helped a buddy move, and played Ultimate Frisbee on Sunday. I figured that was enough exercise.”

“Doesn’t count, dude,” I deadpanned.

“How so?”

“Your training needs to be prescribed moments dedicated to focusing your body *and* your mind on the *planned* workout. Believe me, Jeff . . . you’ll thank me after your race,” I said.

“I hear you, Chuck. But there’s more to life than just training. See you ’round. I have a meeting in five,” he said while taking the most direct path out of the kitchen.

“Aww . . . c’mon, Jeff. Don’t be that way. We’re still running after work, right? Jeff?”

It wasn’t until I started going for afternoon walks instead of morning training runs and bike cruises instead of recovery rides that I began to realize how much of my thinking was restricted while training for races. Prior to Vine Man, my mind would be relegated to thoughts about my form, pace, breathing, heart rate, hydration, electrolyte intake, and anything else mission control deemed necessary to monitor in order to keep astronauts from losing steam before splashing back down to Earth. Now my body was on autopilot while my mind went from drafting a future email to revisiting an unpleasant exchange with a friend to contemplating the possibility of time travel to a particularly funny scene in the movie, *Groundhog Day*. Instead of admonishing myself for being so unfocused, so scatterbrained, I relished the creative license to dream, the freedom to explore forgotten corners in my mind, and the time to come up with more than one solution

to the same problem.

I also noticed that when the carefree walks, hikes, and rides came to an end, my thoughts would return to whatever was in front of me. If I was weeding the backyard flowerbeds, my mind was focused on making sure I pulled them out by the roots. If I was paying bills online, my attention wouldn't waver while transcribing the same deductions on the register inside my check-book. If I was working on a new art project, my thoughts were immersed in the meaning, styling, and color scheme. A pattern was certainly developing but the aha moment wouldn't hit me until a few weeks later while riding on a section of bike path that connected Mission Oaks Boulevard to Upland Road.

To my left, I careened past housing developments and business parks that steadily improved in aesthetics and landscaping as I traveled north toward Upland Road. To my right, the Arroyo Las Posas looked as bone dry as it always did this time of year, mounds of gray sand, pebbles, rocks, and boulders reminding me that Southern California was truly a coastal desert. Although plastic in its construction, the white fence that kept the careless from plummeting down the steep

slope of the creek bed made me think of the wood fencing that blurred past me all those years ago in Dallas when a rambunctious young horse decided to take me for an unplanned ride.

Whereas a two-year old meditative process of cross-word puzzle solving had taught me how to quiet and reduce my mind to a singular thought, putting Chance in his stall so to speak, the other half of the equation was being met with each walk, hike, swim, and ride that wasn't an investment toward an upcoming race. Twelve years of relentless training not only opened my eyes to the necessity of having prescribed moments, it engrained in me the lesson that all moments have a beginning and an end. The wild rides on the back of an impulsive horse toward an open pasture gate finally came to pass. In their place, I learned how to let my mind roam freely in an even bigger pasture, one without fences or gates. No longer was there a need to rush to have everything at once. I could take my time and truly have it all. I could just stroll, do the backstroke, or coast on my bike for as long as the moment allowed.

Part II: Investing in the Moment

“What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered?”

- Phil Connors to the town drunk, Ralph, from the movie,
Groundhog Day (1993)

Although it's been nearly thirty years since the movie, *Groundhog Day*, debuted back in 1993, I can still recall practically every scene of Bill Murray's portrayal of crotchety Phil Connors, a narcissistic weather reporter who couldn't have cared less about the present moment in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. While other guys fantasized about how their lives would change after winning the lottery, doing aerobics with Jamie Lee Curtis, or belting a grand slam to win game seven of the World Series, I was busy imagining all the possible ramifications from having to relive the same moments over and over again. Of course, my mind was in lockstep with Phil's self-indulgent pleasure-seeking when he first learned that there were no long-term consequences to his actions. And I was still with him when, by the end of the

movie, he transformed as a person, won the admiration of all the townspeople *and* got the girl.

After leaving the theater, I soon discovered that I was asking myself the same question that everybody else was asking, “How many times did Phil Connors repeat the same day in Punxsutawney?” Whereas most moviegoers would cite Phil’s acquired piano playing and ice-sculpting skills as an indication of how long it took him to go from being an egocentric lout to an enlightened lover of life, I preferred to think that the amount of trial and error that would’ve been necessary during each and every moment that led to Phil being the life of the party at the end of the movie was a much better gauge of how many days he spent repeating February 2nd.

But you don’t have to spend more than twenty years repeating the same day over and over to uncover the key elements that helped Phil finally escape an endless loop of Groundhog Day. You only need to read Part II of this book. In it, you’ll not only come to understand what constitutes a moment, you will see how your decisions and resulting actions in the current moment can affect your future and past moments. But, unlike Phil Connors, you only get one shot at it.

Chapter 4: Where Life Happens

Batter Up

In the previous chapter, I wrote about failing a simple test designed to measure a person's ability to sustain a single focus for two lousy minutes. Failure was determined by the number of penciled slash marks on a piece of paper, each one representing a split-second departure from the task of concentrating on a plastic water bottle cap in the middle of my kitchen table. Although the number of slashes filed me under 'cuckoo-for-cocoa-puffs,' the real question that remained was, "*Where* did my mind go more than a dozen times in a two-minute time period?" According to Eckhart Tolle, if my thoughts were no longer in the current moment, they could only be in one of two places. They were either in the past or the future.

"Oh my god! Of course! The past *or* the future. Effing brilliant!" I recall exclaiming over the soothing voice of Eckhart Tolle wafting out of my car speakers. More than fifteen years have passed since I first heard those words and I can still remember where I was like it was yesterday. I was

sitting in the driveway after commuting home from work, unable to pry myself from the car seat because I couldn't stop listening to *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, a series of cassette tapes a friend reverently passed on to me like an Olympic torch. The message was so unforgettably mind-blowing that it could only be compared to the ending of the original *Planet of the Apes* where Charlton Heston's character drops to his knees after realizing he's on a post-apocalyptic Earth. I still get chills down my spine when I catch reruns and hear, "You maniacs! You blew it up! Damn you!"

As a self-admitted analogy junkie, the concept of 'the current moment versus the past and future' enticed me like a fastball down the middle of the plate, looking as fat and crushable as a beach ball. But putting this juicy Buddhist premise into the centerfield seats with one mighty swing of symbolism was not as easy as I had first thought. In the end, it came down to a two-horse race between an hourglass and a film projector, an edge-of-your-seat-nail-biter where even a photo finish couldn't determine the winning analogy. Ten minutes later, it was official. It was a tie.

One Shining Moment

For me, the attractiveness of the hourglass analogy went beyond its obviousness. Besides its universal appeal and undeniable simplicity, this rudimentary, sand-filled device holds a place of historical significance somewhere between the sundial and the pendulum on the timeline of time keeping. If you were to distribute the past, the current moment, and the future along the horizontal x-axis, there would be a high probability that you'd place the past on the left, the current moment in the middle and the future to the right. Now, if you were to apply a ninety-degree counterclockwise rotation of the x-axis so that it was perfectly vertical, you'd have the skeletal premise of the hourglass. Sand that has yet to fall through the narrow "current moment" throat would represent "future moments" while the sand at the bottom would be, of course, analogous to "past moments." Seeing each grain of sand as a *moment in time* as opposed to a *measure of time*, allowed me to embrace the hourglass analogy since time is just one of the many components needed to constitute a single moment.

"Isn't this great?" gushed Chad from behind a pair of recently purchased Ray Bans that reflected the vibrant pink and orange

California sunset in each lens.

“It’s so amazing, babe,” replied Pam as the salted warm air whipped her long blonde hair toward the back seat of their rented midnight blue Chevy convertible.

“Look at us! Cruising through Malibu in a Camaro on Pacific Coast Highway like a couple of bosses!” he shouted over the wind.

“Totally! And the ocean view makes the drive even more romantic. Can you see the . . .”

“Turn it up!” interrupted Chad.

“What?”

“Quick! Turn up the volume on the radio!” he said with more urgency.

“Oh my god! Sweet!” said Pam.

“I know, right? How perfect is this background music, babe?”

We're literally driving through Malibu while listening to Don Henley's 'Boys of Summer.' I'm never going to forget this moment!"

When I imagine asking people what a moment means to them, I suspect they'd describe something as special and memorable as Chad and Pam's bitchin' ride through one of Southern California's most iconic cities. But to me, moments are not handpicked selections of life's greatest hits – or worst nightmares. They literally account for every second of every day of one's life; plus, they're uniformly scalable in that moments can be as small as returning a text message or as large as working a double shift – but no larger than an entire day. It simply depends on an individual's preference and perception of what begins and ends a discernible moment.

Whereas one person may see trimming the hedges in the front yard as a single moment, another may see trimming the hedges, weeding the garden, and mowing the grass as *their* single moment. And someone like me would see a single moment as retrieving the hedge clippers from the tool shed. In all three cases, every second is accounted for within single, distinctive moments that make sense to each person. Based on

the preferential differences between the three individuals, each would have a different number of moments accounting for every second of their sixteen-hour day. If the first two had thirty and sixty moments, I'd most likely have a hundred. And since the last second of each person's last moment of the day falls through the throat of the hourglass at the exact same time, the number of moments is of no consequence. Indeed, the hourglass analogy is a beautiful concept; however, its one fatal flaw forces me to pick the lock on the employees-only door at a movie theater so I can have a better look at the film projector analogy.

And . . . Action!

Next to an hourglass, the film projector looks as out of place as yellowtail sashimi served with a side of onion rings; but on closer examination, they share key elements. Whereas future and past moments are represented by sand grains in the upper and lower ampules of an hourglass, spooled film on the supply and take-up reels of the projector accomplish the same congruence, respectively. And instead of a current moment being compared to a grain of sand falling through the neck of an hourglass, the projector's here-and-now is represented by a

frame of film passing between the lamp and lens.

Since the duration of moments differs throughout the day for an individual, how does that change the mental imagery of the hourglass and film projector analogies? Sand grains in the upper and lower ampules would be of varying sizes and spooled film on the supply and take-up reels would consist of varying lengths of frame segments associated with each momentary scene. And what if I make both analogies obey the normal progression of time? Would that affect the visual, too? Larger sand grains would *appear* to fall slower through the neck of the hourglass than smaller ones and the projector's origin would give off a rummage-sale vibe for missing its fast-forward and slow-motion buttons.

As much as the film projector and hourglass analogies conceptually seem like identical twins, they're actually more like fraternal twins with the same genetic defect. Like two silent elephants in the room, neither one addresses the notion that our choices within the current moment can have a profound effect on future moments and, to some extent, on past moments, too. To make the film projector analogy work, one would need to imagine that the film spooled around the

supply reel is made up of blank and unfinished frames that become completed just as they're about to pass between the lamp and lens, affecting both the length and number of momentary scenes of a person's life in the course of a day. Unlike the nice-and-tidy image of the tweaked film projector analogy, the reimagined hourglass turns out to be the less attractive sibling.

When a person chooses to behave in a certain way within a given moment, the corresponding grain of sand has the potential to increase or decrease in size since moments shorten or lengthen based upon the consequences of one's chosen actions. And because every unrealized future moment sand grain in the upper ampule of the hourglass would be affected by the outcome of the current moment, they, too, would be adjusting in size accordingly, making the timekeeping device appear more like an inverted lava lamp filled with pulsating marbles. Although that image will most likely be conjured up the next time I reward myself with a piece of mind-altering dark chocolate, it's more of a mental distraction than an aid helping to level the playing field when discussing something as important and abstract as moments.

“Did you hear that, Chuck?”

“Hear what?”

“Hope you didn’t tear up your claim ticket.”

“Why?” I asked.

“The race officials took another look at the photo finish. The film projector won.”

Déjà Vu All Over Again

By now, I’m sure the reader suspects that I have an abnormal infatuation with the current moment because I can’t stop gushing about it like a hormonal schoolboy. But in my defense, not only is the current moment the only vessel in which every concept in this book plays out, it’s the only place where life actually happens. And, as it turns out, I’m still not done writing about it. Earlier in this chapter, I casually mentioned and glossed over four meaty statements, half expecting readers to accept them without question as if I had suggested pairing an oaky Cabernet Sauvignon with a medium

rare rib-eye. *Good grief! Where are my manners? I can be such an unwashed heathen at times!* By clarifying these four remarks, everybody wins. The reader will get an even deeper grasp of the significance and complexity of moments, and I'll be satisfying an obsessive-compulsive urge to clean up conceptual loose ends.

How can a moment be defined as a short segment of time when time is just one of the many components needed to constitute a single moment? In the case of Chad and Pam's drive through Malibu, Chad wouldn't be sitting back at home in wintery Ames, Iowa reminiscing about a bitchin' half-hour he had two years ago on the second Tuesday afternoon of June. He'd be thinking of Pam's reaction to the foamy surf washing up on the near-empty beach, the whip of the wind through her hair, how the candy-colored sunset mirrored off the surface of the glassy ocean, the cool sound of seagulls in "Boys of Summer," the purr of the Camaro's engine, and how he had hoped Pam thought he looked like Tom Cruise from *Top Gun* in his new shades. It's the coalescence of all these elements *within* that particular thirty-minute timeframe that *makes* it memorable for Chad.

Of course, there aren't such things as hourglasses and film projectors that dispense our future moments and capture the past ones. So, where are they? Where do future and past moments reside? I'm fairly certain most readers could indicate where the current moment is as they read the words in this paragraph. The reader might be sitting on their backyard deck reading this book with a cup of coffee while the sound of gentle agitation emanates from the washer in the closet between the kitchen and back door. But if I interrupted them and asked, "Do you know where your current moment is right now?" they'll either think I'm nuts or appreciate being reminded of the New York Yankee legend, Yogi Berra, who would say things like, "It's déjà vu all over again." But what if I asked, "Do you know where your future and past moments are? They're obviously not in the ampules of hourglasses or on the reels of film projectors. So, *where* are they?" They reside in the exquisite, upper ether of the universe and in our memories, respectively.

In the last section, I stated that our choices within the current moment can not only affect future moments, they can actually have an impact on past moments. What would happen if Chad chose to go through his wife's phone in his current moment

and found out that she was having an affair during their vacation in Southern California? I'm guessing that his recollection of that memorable past moment in the Camaro would be forever tarnished, causing him to call a divorce attorney in his very next moment while creating an unhealthy distrust of women that will affect many more of his moments to come. But what if Chad had seen texts showing that Pam had delayed telling her husband about her cancer diagnosis before the trip to Southern California so he could enjoy his vacation without worry? The impact would be of the same magnitude but the ramifications would be very different. I could imagine Chad's memory of the drive through Malibu suddenly adopting a slant whereby the selflessness of his wife upstages the magnificence of the shimmering Pacific, making him want to show her how much he appreciates her as soon as possible, and to make it a habit in his foreseeable future moments.

Unfinished Business

Previously, I expressed that in order to make the film projector analogy work, one would need to imagine that the film spooled around the supply reel is made up of *blank* and

unfinished frames that become completed just as they're about to pass between the lamp and lens. Why would I divide the frames into two categories? Why not one or the other? To answer these questions, I need to take you back to the reader I mentioned in the last section, the one who's reading this book on their backyard deck while sipping coffee and listening to the soft hum of the washer through the open back door.

Robin knew she was going to spend some time reading this book after she returned home from a mid-morning spin class; but as she settled in to start reading, she noticed how nice it was outside and eyeballed a sunny spot out on the back deck. As she got up from the couch, she suddenly had a hankering for a second cup of coffee and decided to make one using the new Keurig she bought at Costco earlier in the month. While she waited for the coffee to brew, her attention drifted to the basket full of dirty towels she had placed on top of the washer before leaving for the gym that morning. She had planned to read for about an hour so it was a perfect opportunity for her to start a load of laundry. After pressing the start button, Robin returned to the kitchen to add a splash of cream and just a little bit of sugar since she liked the taste of strong coffee. With the insulated mug in her left hand and this book tucked under the

same arm, she walked out onto the deck where she proceeded to drag one of the heavy deck chairs toward the sunny spot between the grill and the gardening tools she had forgotten to put away. As she settled in for the second time, she secretly congratulated herself for opting to buy the more extravagant deck chairs, the ones that came with built-in cup holders.

Since Robin knew she'd be reading for about an hour after her spin class, the unfinished frames associated with the upcoming reading moment were partially populated with this book and her usual spot on the living room couch. But as the initial unfinished frames began to approach the space between the lamp and lens, the couch was replaced by the deck chair and a mug of coffee was added to the mix while the cadence of the washer's agitator became the unplanned soundtrack – all within the last few fleeting minutes before the future reading moment became the current moment.

Whereas the *unfinished* frames of Robin's future reading moment and subsequent moments would be found on the shallowest part of the supply reel, *blank* frames would be closer to the deepest part, near the reel's spindle. This is a logical premise since we know more about our immediate

future than what the future holds for us in a year from now, and even less about the future in five or ten years. As the *blank* frames of deep future moments unspool and get closer and closer to being realized as current moments, they become partially populated with various elements, turning them into unfinished frames that eventually become completed frames just as they enter the space between the lamp and lens. But Robin isn't thinking about blank and unfinished frames of film reels. She's still reading about a horse named Chance in the previous chapter.

Spies Like Us

Although I may sound like a broken record by reiterating that our choices in the current moment create outcomes that can affect the quality and quantity of our future moments, there is *still* one last conceptual wrinkle that needs to be ironed out before moving on to the next chapter. The reader is probably thinking, *What more could this author possibly say about moments that hasn't been addressed already? Wasn't this discussed in the story where Chad looked through his wife's phone?* Earlier in this chapter, I stated that the hour-glass and film projector analogies would need to be reimagined if they

were to account for future moments being constantly impacted by the results of current moment decisions. In one, the upper ampule of the hourglass would appear to be filled with lime green Jell-O embedded with various palpitating fruit chunks while the other's supply reel would vacillate between being an hour-long dry documentary and a full-length adrenaline-pumping action film. But why would I go through the trouble of introducing these apropos yet imperfect analogies only to toss them in the dumpster behind a Taco Bell? To answer this question, we'll need to go back to spying on Robin again.

As we watch Robin reading on the deck through the oversized windows of her living room, we occasionally see her stopping to peer up into the canopy of mid-summer trees with leaves only slightly smaller than the book in her hands. What's going through her mind? If we were Robin's best friend since childhood, we would know that she's just now coming out of a year-long funk that began when her mother suddenly passed away from a severe stroke. Back then, the shock of it pushed her to end a personal relationship that had already been teetering. And it caused her to need time away from work, too. Going to the gym for the past few months had been good for her, and she especially enjoyed the spin class. She made new

friends but like a lot of women, Robin kept comparing herself to others in the class. When she looked at herself in the big mirror behind the way-too-amped spin instructor, she couldn't help but notice the undeniable contrast between her pasty white legs and the Caribbean-bronzed physiques of the other ladies.

The only other death that affected her as much was when her mother's father died of the same affliction. As a child, Robin always looked forward to seeing her grandfather because he was upbeat, funny and wouldn't complain when she messed up his thinning hair so he'd look like a crazy person. And like her mother, he was calm, smart, compassionate, and comfortable in his own skin, making her want to heed his advice whenever he offered it. Even as recently as two weeks ago, she spoke of him to a new friend from the gym, telling her about his take on time management over a delicious new brand of dark roasted coffee she had never tried before.

By knowing a part of Robin's history, we're in a position to account for everything we see out on the back deck, giving us a clear understanding of how past moments, which were once current moments, can impact our choices in the moments at

hand. She's sitting in the sun to get some color so she's not so self-conscious while standing next to the other ladies at the gym. She's enjoying the coffee that her new girlfriend turned her on to a couple of weeks ago. The sound of the washer's agitator going back and forth is a result of adopting her grandfather's penchant for putting time to good use. And she's reading this book because she saw it on her Facebook feed and liked the title of it; plus, she feels ready to be happy again.

Not all past moments greatly affect the current moment or echo across future moments, but they all leave an impression of some kind.

Chapter 5: No Dress Rehearsals

La Colonia

A sigh much longer and wearier than I had anticipated surprised me as I pulled out of the crumbling parking lot that, in some ways, seemed more broken and sadder than me. Other than the few parked trucks and delivery vans with logos that matched the ones that hung high above nearby warehouse doors, there were no other vehicles rolling through the deserted business park, giving it a ghost-town feel even though it was only seven o'clock on a Thursday evening. After having worked for a legendary Fortune 500 company in nearby swanky Thousand Oaks, California for nearly twenty years, the struggling start-up in Oxnard was like the ugly stepsister who not only wouldn't be going to the ball, she was slowly killing me one day at a time.

Having notched another day at a job whose only purpose was to appease my live-in girlfriend, I was glad to see what felt like a prison for the criminally insane in my rearview mirror. Normally, I'd be in a better mood while driving back to the house in mid-town Ventura, but my relationship was

embroiled in a cold-war stalemate that began three days earlier. Even the drive through Oxnard did nothing to lift my spirits since the city could easily be thought of as the love-child between Virginia Beach and Salinas, California, combining the stigmas of towns that center around military bases and seasonal agriculture. For twenty-five minutes, I'd be subjected to disintegrating county and city roads that bore the brunt of heavy tractor trailer traffic with license plates that differed from the semis in front of it and behind it. Scenery oscillated between strawberry fields that separated gritty apartment complexes and sprawling industrial operations that seemed to always be spewing something acrid into the marine layer from metallic smokestacks.

Halfway into my commute home, when I'd see the tenth Spanish-language billboard that was advertising either legal services or affordable loans, I'd automatically make sure the windows were rolled up and that the four doors of my Nissan Maxima were locked. Ever since having been made aware of the Colonia Chiques, a notorious street gang affiliated with the Mexican Mafia, I always drove through the La Colonia barrio with my eyes wide open and my head on a swivel. From time to time, I'd drive past gang members who were easy to identify

from the Dallas Cowboys' jerseys they wore, reminders that I didn't belong in this city and that the actual team's spring practice facility was located just a few miles away.

I remember always breathing a sigh of relief when I'd cruise through the most dangerous-looking intersection, making me feel like I had cheated certain death and that I was home free to live another day. When I did catch the red light in the middle of the barrio, I'd go from feeling like a sitting duck to a pork chop amongst ravenous wolves before the light turned green again. To the right of my white knuckles gripping the steering wheel, small single-story homes with even smaller front lawns marked by sagging chain-link fencing filled a square mile of housing developments that had seen better days, before the harsh salt air, high turnover, and surging crime rate reduced them to scenes straight out of the movie, *Boyz N The Hood*. To my left, a decent-sized, treeless park served as a gathering place for small clusters of jittery young men and agitated man-boys instead of the usual joggers, dog walkers, and families.

As I approached the anxiety-producing intersection in the center of La Colonia, I remember noticing the inverse of what I'd typically see in this area at around five-thirty on a weekday

afternoon. Since I normally didn't stay at work beyond the bare minimum of what was required of a salaried manager, I was surprised to see so few cars out on the road. And instead of a smattering of people interspersed here and there, there seemed to be three times as many people out and about. There were the usual questionable groups in the park, the antsy guys on street corners looking every which way at once, forty-something-year-old men riding bicycles way too small for them, and kids playing soccer in the streets while the sound of mariachi music emanated from car speakers.

An audible, "Dammit" escaped me when the traffic light suddenly turned red as if it had been waiting for me so it could use its vantage point to witness the gyrations of a nervous wreck. "Not tonight," I groaned as my car rolled to a stop, the only one at the intersection. While my eyes darted from side to side and my fingers drummed anxiously on the steering wheel, little did I know that an uneasy sixty-second delay was about to balloon to sixty minutes of fear, smack dab in the middle of La Colonia.

What's Your Emergency

It's amazing how much life can be lived in just one second – and how much information can be collected in only a fraction of that time. In the nanosecond before impact, my rearview mirror painted a picture that not only didn't look right, it was something I never wanted to see again. In it, a woman was holding a venti-sized, white Starbucks cup in her right hand while the other pressed a cell phone against the side of her face, prompting me to conclude that she was using the less popular 'five and seven o'clock' steering positions – with her knees. Not only could I see that she wasn't paying attention to what was in front of her, I could tell she was fully engaged in the conversation she was having. Most surprising was that I learned that our 'fight or flight' survival instinct comes with a built-in radar gun because I was able to gauge the speed, moment of impact, and resulting carnage. My car wasn't going to make it, but I would.

She must not have seen me in time to brake because the impact was harder than I anticipated, catapulting my Nissan out into the empty intersection. Having braced myself by pushing my back into the seat with leverage from both my arms and my

legs, I was able to avoid injury despite being hit from behind by a car moving between thirty and thirty-five miles an hour while at a complete standstill. Even with a handful of menacing new noises hemorrhaging from the sedan's battered skeleton and not-quite-circular rear wheels that spun like they came off of the Flintstone's mobile, I was able to pull my car onto a barrio side street and park in front of the very houses that haunted the worst-case scenarios of my imagination. While wasting no time in calling the police, I watched the metallic green Chrysler 300 limp to the other side of the street, finding just enough remaining juice to park alongside the curb before dying in jerky movements that made me think of overacted death scenes in high school drama class.

“Oxnard Police. What's your emergency?” said the dispatcher.

“I just got into an accident at the intersection in front of the park entrance in La Colonia,” I replied while half expecting to hear, “Dear Lord! Get the hell out of there!”

“Is anyone injured?”

“I don’t think so. I’m okay. And the lady who hit me from behind is already outside of her car, and she’s on the phone. Look for a silver Nissan Maxima and a green Chrysler 300,” I said.

“I’ll have an officer there in twenty minutes,” she said.

Twenty minutes? Then have the officer look for a dead body lying next to the silver Nissan when he gets here! “Okay. Please have him hurry. Her car is smoking pretty bad,” I pleaded.

By the time I stepped out of my car to assess the damage, people were already starting to gather nearby to do the same thing – or to assess the ease in which they could separate me from my wallet. From across the street, the thirty-something African American woman could be heard talking excitedly into her cell phone while pacing back and forth in front of her smoking vehicle. Oddly, I remember noticing she was no longer holding the coffee cup. After determining that my fifteen-year-old Nissan was totaled, I walked across the street to inspect the other vehicle while avoiding eye contact with onlookers saying things to me in Spanish that I didn’t

understand.

“Are you all right?” I asked from behind the pacing woman.

“Are you injured?” I repeated since she didn’t turn around.

“Huh? What?” she replied.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Diane.”

“I’m glad you’re okay, Diane.”

When Diane resumed her phone conversation, I took that as my cue to go back to my vehicle but not before noticing that her car *was* brand new and that the bike rack hitch I paid to have welded onto the back of my car years earlier had performed a crude lobotomy on the Chrysler’s engine block.

After more than twenty minutes of standing alongside my car watching Diane punctuate her sentences with whichever hand wasn't holding her phone, I realized that I didn't need to pretend to be on the phone anymore since the locals either lost interest or decided that I had been handed enough personal calamity for one day. *Hmm . . . no return call after leaving two messages with the girlfriend and still no police. Batting a thousand over here.*

“Oxnard Police. What's your emergency?”

“I called thirty minutes ago about an accident near the park entrance in La Colonia. I've been waiting for the police to arrive. Do you have an ETA?” I said while restraining myself from saying that I was wearing a sandwich board that read, “Free laptop computer, credit cards, and cash!”

“An officer will be there shortly,” replied the same dispatcher that I spoke with earlier.

Twenty minutes later, I decided that it was time to go since non-injury car accidents obviously didn't register on the Oxnard Police Department's radar screen. But before I could

get back into my car and limp the rest of the way home, an old school Lincoln Continental came barreling around the corner and parked directly in front of Diane's car in such an abrupt manner that I wouldn't have been surprised if Starsky and Hutch jumped out of it. Instead, a hulking, forty-something African American man stepped out from the boat of a car that was the color of pea soup, making Diane immediately put her phone in the back pocket of her jeans.

Yabba Dabba Doo

While leaning against my car with my arms folded and looking as if I was in the car return queue at an airport Hertz, I watched the brute of a man take one look at the Chrysler and then another at Diane before turning his attention to me. As soon as I gave him that little wave that said, "You're probably looking for me," he started walking toward me. But he wasn't just walking, he was advancing, making me stand up straight and prepare for the next helping of misfortune. Even without the work boots, I could tell he was taller than the six-foot-four brute that raised me. The faded blue do-rag on his head was the perfect complement to an ensemble that consisted of worn-out jeans and a white t-shirt, making me think this was his

everyday uniform while telling other men from the neighborhood what to do. A busy mosaic of cryptic tattoos cascaded down from both shirtsleeves and ended at each wrist. I could barely see them against the dark skin of his arms; yet the ominous meanings behind them clearly stood out, giving me the impression that they told even darker tales.

While contemplating if I should offer a white guy handshake or an awkward fist bump, I instinctively knew it would be neither after seeing the teardrop tattoo under his left eye, a well-known indicator of having done serious time in prison. Because my previous experience with guys that have facial tattoos was limited to a few movers and a dude who made my twelve-inch Italian BMT at a Walmart Subway, I wasn't sure if this encounter was going to end badly or *very* badly. As he got closer to me, I noticed that his gait wasn't slowing down, forcing me to come up with a last second Hail Mary pass and hope for the best.

“Diane’s okay. She isn’t hurt,” I blurted out while imagining the football arcing upward toward the end zone.

“Oh yeah . . . right,” he said as I watched him visibly catch

himself.

“In the end, it’s just stuff anyway. I’m Chuck. What’s yours?”
I asked while envisioning a referee with both arms extended up in the air and double zeros on the game clock.

“Robert.”

“Her car looks brand new,” I said.

“It’s mine. Bought it last week.”

“That sucks. Think we can exchange insurance information and get out of here since the police aren’t coming?” I asked.

“Yeah, man. Let me get it from my car.”

I watched Robert transcribe my information on the back of an envelope and remember noticing that he was a lefty like me. His hand was the size of a catcher’s mitt, making the pen look as big as one of those skinny coffee stirrers you find next to the sugar dispenser in every gas station convenience store. And even though we were using the hood of my car as a table

surface, he still had to fold his body in half as though he was getting something out of a bottom drawer.

A “Good luck” followed by a “You, too, man” served as the proverbial handshake that ended the five-minute meeting between Robert and me. As I slid back into the driver’s seat of my crippled Nissan, I watched him walk toward Diane who never left her side of the street. After an awkward four-point turn so I wouldn’t have to drive through the sketchy neighborhood to turn around, I waved to Robert and Diane as I slowly rolled by. They waved back without smiling before returning to what looked like an impromptu funeral for a shiny new Chrysler that still had paper tags.

While making the right turn at the same intersection that I tried to pass through more than an hour ago, I noticed the last remnants of what had to be a brilliant sunset. Pink and yellow streaks had deepened to red and orange, their trails reminding me of claw marks from a sun that wasn’t ready to go down. Although I didn’t have to use my feet, the once soft ride of my Nissan Maxima really did feel like I was in the Flintstone’s mobile. However, there were no shouts of “Yabba Dabba Doo.” I had bigger problems waiting for me at home than a

busted-up car.

A One-Two Punch

When I think back to the accident in La Colonia, I'm reminded of something Eckhart Tolle said about the current moment. He said that the more you invest in the current moment, the more likely your next moment will be a good moment. In using the word, "invest," I believe he's insinuating that we should invest all of our focus on what's happening right in front of us, turning our casual focus into supreme focus. When I imagine the "driving from point A to point B" moment followed by the "arriving at point B in one piece" moment, I think Mr. Tolle is absolutely right, but I'd add one more component to his philosophical premise. I'd add that you also need to control your emotions in the current moment as well.

I believe readers would agree with me that I spun the dial to "maximum investment" during the moments that followed the car accident, but I don't think I reacted in a way that deserves any special credit since I believe most people would've reacted similarly. When it comes to perceived or actual threats to my personal safety, financial stability, or community

standing, my senses naturally heighten while my brain pushes everything else on the stovetop to the back burners. Intrinsicly, I know this is a primal biological response that's on par with what happens when the doctor hits your knee cap with that creepy little hammer. The will to circumvent physical harm, financial loss, or public humiliation in the current moment takes the shape of absolute investment, a supreme focus that gives me, and every other human being like me, a fighting chance. Now if for some reason I had a spread of cold cuts in my car at the time of the accident, I probably would've asked Robert what he'd like on his sandwich when he approached me the first time. Remember, I'm Chuck Trunks – not Chuck Norris.

In the moment immediately following the crash, an intensified awareness of the emotional state of Diane, my surroundings, and what it looked like to others led me away from exacerbating the situation to alleviating the amped energy of an already chaotic scene. Asking Diane for her name and inquiring about her physical condition instead of laying into her with, "Are you insane, lady? You could've freaking killed me!" required both restraint and awareness brought on by a combination of heightened investment *and* controlled

emotion. By using the one-two punch of high investment and low emotion in that moment with Diane, I not only set myself up for success in the subsequent moment with Robert, I inadvertently validated what I had surmised in regards to emotional control and what Eckhart Tolle promised if one chooses to fully invest in the current moment.

I'm certain most readers would agree that my decisions and resulting actions in those initial moments following the accident not only had a direct impact on how they played out, they clearly influenced how the next moments unfolded. Would readers agree with me that the situation was intense and challenging? Yes. Would they agree with me that bodily harm, financial loss, and public humiliation were on the table at some point? Yes. Would they agree with me that this kind of supreme focus and emotional control is also necessary while ordering a pound of the honey-roasted turkey breast to go along with the quarter pound of macaroni salad at the deli counter? Probably not. But this is where the real challenge lies, believing that each and every current moment is deserving of the same kind of attention and self-discipline that ensues when you're interviewing for a job you really need, seizing the opportunity to ask your secret crush out for a first date, or

needing to be invisible when it's the only option to stay out of harm's way.

If an improved likelihood that your next moment is a good one results when supreme focus and controlled emotion are applied in the current moment, what happens if this perfect combination defaults to a lesser derivative? What if the investment is high but the emotion is out of control? What if the investment is low but the emotion is under control? Worse yet, what if the investment is low and the emotion is running rampant? The answers to these questions await the reader in the next chapter, inside what I call the investment-emotion matrix.

Chapter 6: Investment and Emotion

Quadrants One and Two

I can still remember the first four-quadrant matrix that didn't put me to sleep. It was the time management matrix from Stephen Covey's 1990 book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I was so intrigued by his breakdown of the relationships between urgency and importance that I created my own matrix two years later to form the bedrock of a proposed Process Change Notification System – a management tool through which operating procedures are kept up-to-date with the latest process improvements. Like Dr. Covey, I found a correlation between what a manufacturing operator needed to know or do after a task change and whether the delivery of corresponding training should be administered through an aggressive or passive means. Matrices not only serve as clean structures to categorize every conceivable scenario; they have a way of legitimizing an already strong philosophical premise.

Thirty years later, here I am again with another four-quadrant matrix, one that's associated with bettering the odds that your

next moment is a good moment instead of a training program that keeps a drug manufacturing facility in compliance with the Food and Drug Administration. Depending on which of the four quadrants of the investment-emotion matrix you find yourself in during any given moment, the likelihood that your next moment is a favorable one is based upon your level of focus and self-discipline. In the upper left square of the matrix, Quadrant 1 is where strong investment meets poor emotional control within the current moment. A good example of this kind of behavior was written about in Chapter 2. Despite exhibiting supreme focus throughout the race, my unseemly outbursts after taking a wrong turn during the College of the Canyons 5K in Santa Clarita, California ensured that the following moments with the race director, the spectators, Dan, and myself were cringeworthy.

Next to Quadrant 1, Quadrant 2 sits in the enviable upper right position where strong investment chillaxes with demonstrated emotional control. As indicated at the end of the last chapter, my moment with Diane followed by the subsequent moment with Robert after the traffic accident are valid Quadrant 2 examples. In both cases, the wherewithal to stay highly invested in each moment while choosing not to succumb to the

pull of the emotional rabbit hole not only improved my chances for more desirable outcomes, the successful one-two punch made me wonder what would've happened if my approach was from a different quadrant.

Quadrant Three

Quadrant 3 is the first of two quadrants where investment is low, where attention to the current moment is diverted to the past or future either because the present moment bores you or can't compete with what's occupying your mind. In today's world, this isn't hard to imagine since multitasking is no longer something that's relegated to the job description of a short-order cook or air traffic controller. People sit in meetings while secretly texting under the conference room table. They're on the phone while putting groceries away. Worse yet, they're corralling everybody for moment- to-moment group selfies to prove to strangers on Facebook that they're truly winning in life instead of simply enjoying the fellowship of friends during the backyard barbecue. As annoying as that is when you're trying to connect with those people, what does it look like when there's an uncontrolled emotional element added to the mix, the second and final identifier of what

constitutes a Quadrant 3 response to the current moment?

“Phone for you,” Mike deadpanned as he settled back into the leather recliner closest to the TV.

“Okay. Thanks,” I replied while springing off the couch to bound toward the kitchen where the phone hung on a sliver of wall that separated the kitchen from the pantry.

I already knew who it was since I only gave Mike’s parents’ phone number to my girlfriend, Sarah, who decided to stay back at her apartment in Raleigh instead of visiting her folks in Greensboro over fall break. Even though it was only the fourth day of being apart, I already missed my first real girlfriend of six months.

“Sarah?” I said after snatching the receiver off of the 13-inch black and white TV that dominated the kitchen counter between the stove and refrigerator.

“So, how’s Asheville? Are you getting along with Mike’s parents?” she asked.

“It’s been great. We’ve been hiking a lot and Mike’s dad gave us a tour of the Blue Ridge Mountains in his single-engine Cessna. My first time in an airplane,” I replied.

“That’s so cool!”

“Tonight, his parents are taking us out for some authentic Appalachian food and then to a clogging dance show,” I continued.

“What’s that? Is it like shagging?” she asked.

“I don’t know. So, what have you been up to?”

“Not much. Just getting caught up on school work. The pool’s closed so I can’t swim. I can’t wait for you to get back. You’re like the best guy ever. I miss you so much,” she said.

“I miss you, too. I’ll see you when I get back on Sunday.”

“Okay. I can’t wait. See you soon. Bye,” she replied.

“Me, too. Bye, Sarah,” I said while thinking something was

different about her.

After hanging up the phone and reclaiming my spot on the couch, I heard Mike mumble, “Was that Sarah?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s she doing?” he asked.

“I’m pretty sure she’s cheating on me.”

Clogged Brain Cells

I was glad our seats were far back from the stage in Asheville’s Civic Center auditorium. The shroud of darkness was a welcomed reprieve from lights that were bright enough to perform open heart surgery in the restaurant, making me feel even more aware that mine had been ripped out of me only hours earlier. I had tried my best to push the ill feelings aside during dinner but it was clear to Mike and his parents, Jeannie and Nelson, that I was nowhere to be found after having swallowed the red pill from a movie that wouldn’t debut for another fifteen years. Whereas they were sitting in a darkened

entertainment venue wondering what happened to the happy-go-lucky demeanor of their young houseguest, I was busy spiraling deeper into an emotionally dark rabbit hole.

If you don't know what clogging is, it's a type of folk dance that, to the novice, not only looks and sounds like a combination of rhythm tap dance and Irish stepdance, the performance has an uncanny ability to sour your mood. At least that's what I was feeling while stomaching the six pairs of men and women who were percussively striking the stage floor in unison. *Thank God*, I thought to myself when the houselights came on; but instead of signaling the end of the show, the sudden illumination was giving the performers a clear view of their victims. I looked on in horror as they spilled off the stage like cockroaches on a kitchen counter when the light switch is flipped on in the middle of the night. Even from my seat in the back, I already knew I was in danger of being dragged into what I dreaded most – audience participation. *Please, God. Not tonight. Please.*

Performers must have an evil internal GPS that leads them to the least willing audience member to join them on stage because there she was, standing in front of me with both arms

extended, welcoming me to an early death-by-embarrassment. I wasn't fooled by her red, white, and black square-dancing dress with poufy sleeves or by her braided blonde hair that framed a fresh, smiling face. She was the devil seizing the perfect opportunity to make me dance like a monkey for the amusement of strangers when what I really needed was to be left alone. I didn't feel bad at all declining her invitation more than once since I was repeatedly saying, "No thanks" from a seat that I was obviously trying to become one with.

While the other performers were already returning to the stage with their captured prey, the stubborn girl kept urging me to go with her, causing everyone around me, including Mike and his parents, to turn up the heat in the pressure cooker that was beginning to rattle inside of me.

"Just go. It's no big deal," said Nelson who was sitting next to my aisle seat.

"C'mon, Chuck. It'll be hilarious," said Mike from the other side of Jeannie.

"Don't leave her hanging!" said some loudmouth from behind

me.

“Don’t be such a pussy!” said another jerk from the across the aisle.

Just then, I could feel the glass lid of the pressure cooker wanting to shatter into a thousand pieces. Knowing that an explosion was imminent, I rose to my feet and shouted, “NO MEANS NO!” at the girl while shaking off Nelson’s grip on my right arm. After handing out a venomous “EFF YOU!” to the jerk and loudmouth while heading up the aisle, I punched through the exit door feeling like an enraged Tony Montana from the movie, *Scarface*. The empty lobby made it easy to see the sign for the men’s room. I quickly made a beeline for it where an innocent bathroom stall door awaited its undeserved fate. The single spastic punch was followed by the sound of the door hitting the bathroom wall, followed by another distinctive sound, the sound of someone rushing in from the lobby.

It’s Not Your Fault

At six-foot-four and weighing at least two hundred and fifty

pounds, the bespeckled fifty-five-year-old looked like a structural engineer who either designed building foundations or worked for mob bosses who buried unwise guys in them. Either case, you wouldn't want to mess with Nelson. The coke-bottle lenses in his wire-frame glasses only added to his duplicitous appearance, giving him the look of a supervillain to rival Batman or a nerd who spent too much time crunching numbers on spreadsheets. And no matter what he was doing, he wore the same style of dress. Whether he was reading the newspaper at the breakfast table, smoking a cigarette on the back deck of his A-frame house, or flying his airplane, he always looked like he just stepped off the set of *Mad Men*. Even after only being around this man of few words for four days, I understood that something had to be on fire to get him to raise an eyebrow.

“What’s going on, Chuck?” he said while filling half the bathroom with his size.

“No means no! That’s what’s going on!” I shouted.

“Calm down, Chuck.”

“YOU calm down!” I yelled back.

“Come on. Let’s go for a walk,” he said calmly while taking a step toward me.

With clear, rational thought having left my brain when I stood up from my seat, I lunged forward to push my friend’s dad away from me. If anyone was in the bathroom with us, my actions would have appeared comical since Nelson’s body had the density of wet sandbags. Despite my explosiveness and the element of surprise, he didn’t budge. A second attempt prompted him to grab my arms, push them down while driving me into the metal partition that separated the first stall from the three urinals. It wasn’t a violent act on Nelson’s part. It felt more like something you did to smother a small fire.

“I think my girlfriend cheated on me,” I said while nose-to-nose with his pocket protector that held a mechanical pencil and two pens.

“Let’s walk,” he replied.

After a few steps out of the bathroom, I suddenly felt the

weight of a bag of rice on my shoulder. Nelson didn't remove his hand from my shoulder until we exited the lobby to walk in the empty plaza that separated the venue from the parking lot. Under the cover of night, I was able to explain my actions to him and apologize for the insane outburst and resulting embarrassment.

After lighting a cigarette, he said, "It's not your fault."

"Thanks for saying that."

"Here. Take the keys. It'd be better if you waited for us in the car," he said while plopping them in my hand.

"I was just about to say the same thing."

"See you in a little bit."

"Thanks again, Nelson."

"You bet."

More than a dozen years later, I was reminded of that moment

with Nelson in the men's room while watching a scene from the movie, *Good Will Hunting*, during its opening weekend in a packed theater in Thousand Oaks, California. Although there was only a whisper of familiarity with what transpired between Will and his therapist, Dr. Sean Maguire in the climactic exchange where Robin Williams' character is able to reach Matt Damon's self-defeating character by saying, "It's not your fault," it still reminded me of how Nelson was able to bring me back to reality through compassion and understanding. And nearly twenty-five years after watching both of them receive Oscars at the Academy Awards for their roles in the movie, I'm still reaping the benefits from a man who stepped up to act as my father figure when I needed it most, putting him smack dab in the middle of Quadrant 3 with me.

Earlier in this chapter, Eckhart Tolle and I promised that a Quadrant 2 response of high investment and controlled emotion in the current moment will most likely result in a favorable next moment; but after reading my Quadrant 3 story that unfolded between me and my college friend's dad, I hope the reader will understand that outcomes from quadrants other than Quadrant 2 don't necessarily mean unfavorable

subsequent moments are a given.

Quadrant Four

Despite sharing controlled emotion, Quadrant 2's downstairs neighbor in the lower right corner of the matrix couldn't be more different from the most lauded quadrant. Whereas Quadrant 2's high investment in the current moment provides an opportunity for personal growth, Quadrant 4's lack of focus is all about surviving the moment at hand. Survival? What am I talking about? What situations would cause someone to disappear from the current moment while being in perfect control of their emotions? What does that even look like? From my experience, Quadrant 4 choices in the given moment have left me looking muted and emotionally distant. But the more interesting question is, "What else can you do when you find yourself in a toxic environment?"

I know that I'm not alone in having grown up in a toxic family home, where love and support were both fleeting and conditional. For those of you who are survivors of absent parents and cruel siblings, you can relate to what it was like spending most of your childhood dreaming of the day you

could leave the madness behind and never look back. It's no surprise that children of dismissive parents are often introverted, driven deep within to create and nurture an enriched inner life that's safe, rewarding, and necessarily predictable. Even though you may have sidestepped the coldness of a loveless childhood, I'm still confident that you've experienced your fair share of toxic environments within homes, jobs, and relationships – places where patience and numbness become your allies.

I believe everyone, to some degree, has an inner life that provides the perfect forum to privately close the gap between who we *think* we are and who we *really* are. However, the degree to which we're insightful and truthful with ourselves determines if it's an enriched inner life that's aware and enlightened or delusional and defiant. Even though the internal dialogue within me seems to be based on honest, unbiased introspection, how would I even know if my inner life was an *enriched* inner life? For me, the proof became evident in my current moments. I began experiencing more of the promise of Quadrant 2 outcomes and less of what Quadrants 1 and 3 had to offer while past Quadrant 4 experiences have become distant memories that serve as

lessons. It's what happens when your current moments are within the context of having a meaningful purpose.

Part III: A Meaningful Purpose

“I’ve got to keep breathing because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?”

- Chuck Noland to Wilson from the movie, *Cast Away*
(2000)

What would keep Tom Hanks’ character alive on a deserted island for over four years? For that matter, what would keep anybody alive in times of desperation, loss, or hardship? For Robert Zemeckis, the director of *Cast Away*, it was the eternal love that Chuck Noland had for his fiancé, Kelly Frears, as played by Helen Hunt. This was made abundantly clear in scenes where Chuck looks at and talks to the picture of Kelly inside the pocket watch. And in a later scene, the audience is reintroduced to the inside of his cave where etchings on the walls reveal a calendar, a sun chart, and an impressive recreation of the photo from inside the watch. But love wasn’t the only thing that kept our hero alive.

During the movie, my eye kept finding the one FedEx box that Chuck wouldn’t open, an obvious symbol that represented his

commitment to surviving and returning home. Besides desperately wanting to reunite with his beloved Kelly, he needed to deliver that package, too. Love and a noble cause not only kept him alive and hopeful, they gave him purpose. I could understand how devotion toward a perceived soulmate could make someone live off of a steady diet of coconuts and crab, but I related more to the strength of his conviction to not open a box for four years that could've contained a knife, rope, or a GPS.

In Part III of *Being Happy*, I'll show you how knowing the difference between a passionate endeavor and a meaningful purpose allowed me to escape my own uninhabited island out in the middle of nowhere – and I didn't need a raft with a plastic Porta Potti door as a sail to finally be rescued.

Chapter 7: The Search Begins

A Friend in Need

“I’m sorry to be so high maintenance, but could you help me find this book?” I asked while handing a slip of paper to the librarian sitting behind the reference desk.

“Sure. Is this the location?” she replied.

“Yes. And the system says one is checked out but the other book is here,” I continued.

“Okay. Let’s go find it,” she said with an eagerness that also made me think she was grateful to have an excuse to get up from her chair.

For more than two years, I witnessed the construction of the Camarillo Public Library from my bike while riding back and forth along Las Posas Road, a busy thoroughfare that connected me to my art reproduction guy, Jim, at Museum Quality Framing in midtown Camarillo. Even after hearing great things about the new library after its doors opened in

2007, it still took me three years to lock my bike in the Spanish style courtyard and take a look inside. But I wasn't there for a tour; I was there because I needed to make friends.

When you're suddenly laid off from a job where you gave your heart and soul for nearly twenty years, you lose much more than just an income. The unraveling of your life begins with the annihilation of any semblance of a routine followed by the stark realization that your social life, friends, and identity were the true costs of being handed a severance package. Although a sexy-sounding new career in commercial art was filling my time for three years since the layoff, it was more isolating than satisfying since I was experiencing just enough tepid success to stop me from torching everything inside my home art studio while laughing maniacally. In retrospect, I didn't think there was anything more difficult and more frustrating than trying to get art collectors, gallery owners, and online retailers to take an interest in my brand of art; but then again, I never tried acquiring friends in my mid-forties either.

In only a few years, I went from being recognized as a respectable member of society to drawing suspicion for being

on my bike in the middle of a workday, to eventually not carrying enough weight to register on anyone's radar screen. It was a slow and torturous banishment from everything I knew; but instead of dying from a thousand paper cuts, I was disappearing more and more each day. Ironically, by choosing to pursue a lifelong dream of becoming a working visual artist after the company-wide dismissal, I had un-wittingly backed myself into becoming an *invisible* visual artist. And since I was a transplant from Philadelphia working from home on things no one was asking for in a city I didn't grow up in, it became apparent that if I wanted to make friends, I'd have to take desperate measures. I'd have to get a *real* job.

Thank You for Your Submission

“Well, it's not here,” said the gray-haired librarian who looked like she took the reference desk job to combat the boredom that settled in soon after retiring from a thirty-year accounts receivable job with the state.

“Really?” I asked, already knowing it wouldn't be there since I had checked that location less than five minutes earlier.

“Let me check the return section. I know the book you’re looking for.”

“Great. Thanks for doing that.”

“What made you want to read this book?” she pried while leading me toward an area of the library I hadn’t seen before.

“I don’t know. It was referenced in another book I was reading. Just curious I guess,” I replied from a step behind her while thinking I couldn’t blame her for asking since the title of the book practically begged for an inquisition.

The three-mile bike ride to the library that day was brought on by sheer frustration and an epiphany. After receiving only two automated thanks-but-no-thanks emails in exchange for weeks of submitting online job applications through soul-crushing third-party websites, I realized that I was just as invisible in the virtual world as I was in the real world. With no useful feedback accompanying the cryptic emails, I was left to wonder if prospective employers saw me as damaged goods since I was laid off from a company that was one of the richest in the world. Or maybe it was the nefarious-looking three-year

gap on my resume, covered up by the ubiquitous “independent consultant” followed by the midlife crisis sounding “commercial artist.” Whatever the reason, I was going to have to do something to stand out.

Because I could imagine myself shouting, “Wait! Let me explain!” each time the doors to Human Resources closed in my face, I decided to rewrite my cover letter and title it with the same exclamation. Later on, after giving it some thought, I changed it to “If My Resume Could Talk” since I didn’t want to come off like Fredo pleading his case to his younger brother and head of the family, Michael Corleone: “It ain’t the way I wanted it! I can handle things! I’m smart! Not like everybody says . . . like dumb . . . I’m smart and I want respect!” Along with a more honest cover letter, I also decided to step away from the lifeless and aseptic format of the traditional resume, opting for a refreshing oh-no-he-didn’t graphical layout. In the end, when push came to shove, I was more comfortable channeling my inner George Costanza from *Seinfeld*: “You wanna get nuts? Let’s get nuts!”

There are only so many weeks one can be stationed behind their laptop at the kitchen table converting precious life energy

into online job applications before it begins to make you feel like you're literally shoveling your hopes and dreams into the internet equivalent of an abysmal black hole. What better way to escape the self-imposed solitary confinement of my kitchen than by going to the library in the middle of the afternoon where the homeless, jobless, and hopeless go to find refuge from the summer heat and icy stares that say, "Get a job, you bum!" I figured it couldn't hurt to do a little research on how to write eye-catching and persuasive cover letters; plus, I thought the new scenery would boost my moral which had been steadily sinking since taking on water for three consecutive years.

"There you go!" she said.

"You found it! That's great. Thanks," I replied while taking the book from the beaming librarian.

"You're welcome. If you're wanting to check it out, you can do that with me."

"I'm not sure. I'll let you know. Thanks again," I replied.

When I returned to the table where I left my things, I had to admit that I fit right in with the other overly tanned guys that had situated themselves equidistant from one another. Like them, my bike helmet, back-pack, water bottle, notepad, folders, books, pens, and highlighters were all spread out as if I had claimed the public space as my own personal campsite. After shoving everything back into my backpack except the book that the librarian found for me, I settled into an oversized reading chair within a different section of the library, one with less creepier guys around and with visible signs that read, “Shh! Please be considerate of other readers.” As I began to peruse the preface, little did I know that I would end up reading the whole book in one sitting and coming back to the library the very next day to read it all over again.

Viktor Frankl

It’s been more than a dozen years since I read Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* twice in two days and I still don’t own a copy of the book. But why would I? I don’t own much of anything anymore; plus, the book’s sentiments are forever stored in my mind with a backup copy secured in my heart. Only a handful of books have changed my life for the better

and my fortuitous encounter with *Man's Search for Meaning* reigns supreme at the top of the list – all because the title made me think that Viktor Frankl had found the personal redemption that I was so desperately seeking. But after only a few minutes of reading, I began to feel a strangeness come over me, like I was sipping on a curious concoction made from two ingredients that I didn't think could ever be mixed together – shame and inspiration. Whereas I was yearning for invitations to backyard barbecues from newly acquired friends, Viktor Frankl was transcending to a much higher level of consciousness – and doing it while witnessing unspeakable atrocities in a Nazi concentration camp.

Soon after the annexation of German-speaking Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938, Frankl's life began to unravel like the rest of the Jewish population in his hometown of Vienna. Not only did the accomplished neurological doctor and groundbreaking researcher of the overlap between psychotherapy and philosophy lose his thriving practice, he was forced to throw away an unpublished manuscript that addressed the prevention of suicide and crippling depression through a meaning-centered approach toward mental healing. As a prisoner of the Third Reich for three years in four

different concentration camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, Frankl was able to find the will to stay alive by reconstructing his manuscript on slips of paper stolen from camp offices. But because he was no longer studying and interviewing subjects in the relative comfort of hospitals and well-appointed rooms inside Victorian-style homes, his version of psychotherapy, called Logotherapy, was being rewritten through the lens of daily observations of his fellow prisoners within the worst of conditions, under the most outrageous of circumstances.

What makes Viktor Frankl so special? To me, anyone who survived the Holocaust from inside the barbed wire fences of any of the hundreds of Nazi concentration camps is a person with an amazing story behind their incredible will to survive; but Frankl is just one of a quarter of a million prisoners liberated by the Allies in 1945. Again, what is it about this man's story that understandably captivated me in the Camarillo Public Library? Was it because a renowned expert of his caliber found himself living in the very nightmare of despair that tormented his patients? Was it because he had to self-administer his own brand of psychotherapy in order to find meaning and purpose in his own survival? Was it because

he heartbreakingly validated that having meaning and purpose are more integral to one's survival than anything else? Or was it because he lived through that undeniable horror so that he could dictate *Man's Search for Meaning* in nine days after returning to Vienna in 1946 so that he could save and inspire a rudderless, middle-aged guy like me sixty-four years later?

After reading the book the first time, I felt assured of being in sync with the premise of Viktor Frankl's book. After all, wasn't the quest for steady employment to gain fellowship with others a worthy pursuit? Good enough to help me survive and escape from my own prison of detachment? But by the time I closed the book after reading it for the second time, I was rethinking everything. I could easily imagine people saying, "Attaboy, Chuck! Sounds like a good plan," after telling them that I wanted to recreate the magic of having a social life from sitting in a cubicle from nine to five. But did it really qualify as a purpose? And was it even meaningful? According to Viktor Frankl, I didn't need friends – I needed a meaningful purpose.

Chapter 8: Meaningful Redemption

Cookie

At the end of Chapter 6, I said that I believe everyone has an inner life, a relationship we have with ourselves manifested through an omnipresent internal dialogue. And, I don't think I'm going too far out on a limb when I take it a step further and say that I believe most people would want an *enriched* inner life over a plain old inner life, right? But would you even know if you had an enriched inner life? It's not as if you could compare it with someone else's nor have it measured or scanned in an MRI machine. Although the distinction between the two is purely subjective, I offered the means through which I could tell I had created an enriched inner life within myself. I was experiencing more Quadrant 2 outcomes by talking myself down from Quadrant 1, 3, and 4 behaviors.

But what about having a meaningful purpose? Just like an inner life, I believe most people would say that they have a purpose – and that a *meaningful* purpose would be more preferable than a run-of-the-mill purpose. But it begs the question again. How would anyone know if their purpose was

meaningful or not? Once again, this distinction can only be clarified through personal discernment. However, if you wanted to measure the meaning behind your purpose against what Viktor Frankl had to say about meaning, then your meaning would have to come from purposeful work, love, or courage in the face of difficulty. Or you could measure it against what constitutes meaning for me: improving the quality of people's lives through a noble, passionate effort that utilizes your natural talents and acquired skills. Even though my take on meaning simply puts Frankl's succinct thoughts into the form of a mission statement, it's still a valid way to measure the relevance and impact of the meaning behind your purpose since passion alone cannot be your guide. Passion can be an excuse to escape.

“Really? You're going to run the LA Marathon next year without taking one walking step?” replied my office coworker, Walter, the male version of Debbie Downer from the popular *Saturday Night Live* skit.

“I know I can do it,” I continued.

“Did you run cross-country in high school or college?”

“No. Just gymnastics in high school.”

“Oh . . . Good luck with that. I’ve heard that people really hurt themselves running that far,” he said.

Just then, I imagined a television camera zooming in on Walter’s face while two sad sack notes from an off-camera trombone sounded off in the background. “I’ll be careful, Walter.”

Two weeks prior to meeting my chipper office mate in the hallway kitchenette that separated our two offices on the second floor, I vowed to such an endeavor while still in my bathrobe on a Saturday afternoon. “Well, it’s just you and me, now,” I announced to the two-year old black and white cat that was staring back at me from across the couch. “She even left you behind,” I said while reminding myself that this was *her* cat. The decision to divorce was mutual, yet the finality of the marriage dissolution the day before was still hard to accept after saying, “I do,” on a catamaran off the coast of Santa Barbara less than two years earlier. Despite the amicable separation, later rebranded as “conscientious decoupling” by Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin eighteen years later, it felt

like another colossal failure to put next to the one that had just blown up in my face at a job with a company that held all the chips.

When I heard the familiar opening to ABC's *Wide World of Sports* while hunched over the kitchen sink, I quickly finished my second bowl of cereal and returned to the couch just in time to see and identify with the iconic Slovenian ski jumper spilling out of control, personifying Jim McKay's somber voiceover, "... and the agony of defeat." The broadcast took me to a race I had never heard of before at a location I had heard of but never visited – the 1995 World Triathlon Championship in Kailua-Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii. The cat and I sat stone-faced, transfixed to what was being shown on the television. Mere mortals were swimming more than two miles in the ocean and biking more than a hundred *before* moving on to run a full marathon. *This is insane!* If legends like Dave Scott, Mark Allen, Greg Welch, Scott Tinley, and Paula Newby-Fraser could do all that before running more than twenty-six miles, I remember thinking that I could definitely run a marathon.

The hope that permeated my body felt like chugged ice water

after having been out in the heat all after-noon, shocking at first but satisfying a few seconds later. *Finally . . . a goal I could control that required zero cooperation from others*, I thought to myself. Something I could focus on and dedicate myself to while letting the slightly-less-mediocre rummage through what remained of a mediocre life without acclaim. “Things are going to be different from here on out,” I said to the cat in the same robe that now felt like the toga of a Roman Emperor. “From this day forward, I shall begin each day . . . Really? Oh god. Now what?” I said out loud just as the doorbell rang, putting the kibosh on what would’ve been an impromptu speech for the ages.

“Oh . . . hi. What’s up?” I said to my ex-wife who had moved out a week ago.

“I came to get Cookie.”

“Oh, right. Hold on. I’ll get him.”

“There you go,” I said while putting the slinky cat in her outstretched arms. “Do you need his other stuff, too?”

“No, I got everything. Thanks a lot.”

After closing the door, I walked into the sparsely furnished living room and watched her get into the car we bought ten months ago through blinds that hadn't been opened in a week. *Hmm . . . So, she didn't forget about the cat after all.* Just then, as I turned to reclaim my rightful place back on the couch, I suddenly felt a television camera zoom in on my face as the sound of two sad sack notes from an off-camera trombone sounded off in the background.

Run, Forest, Run

Training for the LA Marathon gave me the feeling that I had traveled back in time to my days as a college student at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, where success seemed to depend more on how hard I worked rather than who liked or loved me. Strangely, the feeling of being in the saddle again wasn't based solely on taking back the control in my life – it included the familiar self-sacrificing and personal suffering that seemed to go hand-in-hand with anything worth accomplishing. Back then, by focusing only on earning a self-financed degree in biology while pedaling between part time

jobs, classes, and labs, I learned that life's decisions were much easier to make. If whatever I was thinking about distracted me from maintaining a three-point-six or better grade point average to keep my academic scholarship paying for half of my tuition, it was automatically pushed aside and dutifully ignored.

Although I was no longer studying into the wee hours after evening shifts at the downtown Radisson working as a bellhop or living off of tuna fish and apples when the dining hall meal plan became too expensive to eat *and* buy text books at the same time, marathon training was having the same effect on my social life as well as my waistline. Steamed broccoli, brown rice, and baked chicken may have replaced macaroni and cheese from boxes and peanut butter sandwiches, but the denial of food was the same. And whereas my polite yet predictable "Sorry, but I need to study" excuses made future invitations become as scarce as extra cash on a college budget held together by shoestrings, my appeals of "Sorry, but I need to train" more than ten years later all but obliterated an already-anemic social calendar. But once again, I felt the world shift from gray to black and white, making decisions between 'good and best' ratchet down to being between 'good

and bad.' If whatever I was doing or thinking about distracted me from obtaining my lofty marathon goal, it was denied and quickly forgotten about.

Early success was immediate and felt like an awakening of my self-esteem which had been on hiatus for years. Like a guilty hand slowly slipping into a found bloody glove from a training regimen with clear rules that governed advancement toward a well-defined goal, it fit perfectly. Mounting evidence was proving that if I depended solely on myself, I could actually get somewhere with real, tangible results that had eluded my personal, social, and professional lives since graduating near the top of my college class. In less than two years, and to the astonishment of many Debbie Downers, I accomplished my goal of running my first marathon without taking a single walking step in three hours and thirty-one minutes, setting the stage for further suffering and sacrifice to feed a ravenous appetite that had become addicted to having self-worth and an identity.

The odyssey that began with an announced decree with arms akimbo while still in a bathrobe and ending at the 2003 Vine Man Half Ironman finish line in Paso Robles, California eight

years later included triathlons, duathlons, bike races, as well as countless five and ten-kilometer races to go along with an even stronger second marathon on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. And although previously established friendships became strained by my training compulsion, they were replaced by new friends from running clubs who also obsessed over things like percent body fat, age group standings, and all four significant figures of a sub-forty 10K time. Every now and then, I'd hear, "Run, Forest! Run!" from the shotgun seat of a passing car and marvel at the thought that I was actually attracting attention. I didn't grow up secretly hoping to be recognized as the guy who was in perpetual motion, but at least I was showing up on radar screens again – something I hadn't experienced since acing exams back at school with tip money still in my pockets.

Even though a singular focus on training and racing initially brought a means through which I could make sense of and make peace with the slower moving parts of me, I knew there had to be more to life than exhausting myself for ribboned medals and bragging rights. There's no doubt that getting the last sub-six-hour brass ring at the popular triathlon in Paso Robles was a terrific and satisfying way to conclude my time

as an endurance athlete. But I had to admit that what started out as a comic book tale that had Clark Kent becoming Superman ended with the Man of Steel feeling addicted to a cycle of running away and punishing himself for it. As you recall from Chapter 3, tears were shed at that finish line because the flame of passionate suffering had finally been extinguished, releasing me from a self-imposed purgatory that was no longer purposeful or meaningful.

Rotten Eggs

“Did you see the email from Kevin?” asked Daphne from behind her desk as I breezed past the open door to her office.

“No, I didn’t. I’ve been hiding in the cafeteria all morning trying to get some work done. What is it this time? Wait! Don’t tell me. Was he wearing his suit jacket?” I shouted over my shoulder while dropping a small stack of colorful but frayed folders on my desk in the office next door.

“No . . .”

“Okay . . . Was he wearing a cardigan?” I asked while

returning to stand in her doorway.

“No. He was wearing a dress shirt without a tie,” she replied.

“Oh no. Bad news, right?”

“The worst,” she answered.

The worst? I thought to myself as I waited for my computer to come to life after punching in my pass-word. *How bad can it be? Daphne, the textbook drama queen, is probably overreacting as usual.* As soon as my email screen opened up, I quickly scanned past the “PLEASE ADVISE” and “STOP BY MY OFFICE” subject lines that had ceased having any effect on me soon after it became standard practice for coworkers to cry, “Wolf!” at anything just to get people to open their emails.

After I found and opened Kevin’s message from earlier in the morning, I wasn’t surprised to see a video in lieu of an attached Word document since he seemed to prefer the look and feel of fireside chats from inside of his opulent, yet masculine, office setting. And just like Daphne said, there was

no sign of his signature red cardigan, like the one he was wearing when I met with him one-on-one in a small conference room next to his office a few years earlier. Instead, he had on a blue dress shirt that paled against his deeper blue eyes that never lost contact with the camera lens. And I agreed with Daphne. It *was* the worst thing I had ever heard from a chief executive officer in my nineteen years with the company.

“So . . . what do you think?” asked Daphne while leaning against the metal door frame with her arms folded.

“You’re right. This *is* bad news . . . really bad news,” I stammered.

“Think you’ll be one of the ten percent who’ll be laid off?” she asked.

“I already got the email,” I said while looking at her and through her at the same time.

“What? What does *that* mean?”

“It means I’m out.”

So, this is how it's going to end, I thought to myself. This wasn't the way to treat a "made guy" in the mafia family, whacking me when I least expected it. I had practically earned the right to commandeer people's lunches in the employee cafeteria after having been part of the company's humble beginnings. Not even a work history that was as pure as the driven snow and peppered with notable contributions could stop me from having the scarlet letter painted on my chest. Being shown the door after almost twenty years with the corporate giant felt more like losing a game on the *Price is Right* than winning a severance package from an industry leader whose layoff formula consisted of a calculation that required only two criteria – age and years of service. *Huh?* Suddenly, a wave of resentment washed over me like a gust of wind that smelled like rotten eggs, the source of the unpleasantness emanating from a collection of carefully arraigned recognition awards displayed on the file cabinet opposite of the large office window.

For the next several weeks, while a third-party company processed my transition from "staff member" to "community pariah," I grew increasingly aware of what it would be like waiting for a stay of execution while incarcerated on death

row. Even if I had turned down the severance package, there was a strong chance that my whole department would be ousted in the second wave of corporate downsizing. If my department was on the Island of Misfit Toys from 1964's *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, I was Charlie-in-the-Box with no hope that Santa would come and rescue me. What was once dubbed "Charbuck's" because of its ability to attract coworkers with the sound and smell of brewing coffee, my office began to be avoided in the same way that my eyes were as word got around that I was "one of them."

Although I'm sure the company didn't intend for the 2007 exodus to be cold, calculating, and devoid of anything resembling empathy, it sure felt that way. More than ten years earlier, I was dismissed from a marriage, making me the first in my family to get a divorce. Now I was the first to be laid off from a company that had given me much more than just a paycheck. In the time that it took to watch Kevin's video and read the layoff notification, I went from thinking that I had a corporate family to feeling like an obsolete widget in the middle of a moving conveyor belt programmed to mindlessly discard its contents into the reject bin.

Not Cleared for Takeoff

“Hello, old friend,” I said out loud while hunched over a wobbly art table that was pushed against an upstairs bedroom window that overlooked the subdivision’s community pool. To the uninformed, it would’ve appeared as if I was referring to the act of creating artwork, an intermittent lifelong hobby backed by natural talent since realizing I could draw butterflies, flowers, and hearts better than most girls in my middle-school class. And I wasn’t saying it to Jim Rome either whose voice emanated from the radio of a Panasonic boom box that had been tagging along with me since college like a persistent kid brother. Unless your job took you to a Southern California construction site or a Jiffy Lube, you wouldn’t be able to listen to his hilarious and snarky comments during the three-hour sports talk radio show. I was saying it to a feeling I hadn’t felt since mothballing my training logs and racing accolades four years earlier – a twisted sense of control that came from sacrificing and suffering after going all in on a passion you hope will redeem you.

Hearing about my fellow rejects getting picked up by other companies and layoff survivors having to work even harder to

pick up the slack after the mass exodus elicited no detectable signs of congratulations or sympathy inside my blackened heart. The news had only deepened my commitment to the mantra, “success is the sweetest revenge” after deciding to redefine myself as a commercial artist. Like the early stages of my marathon quest years before, success came early and swiftly, landing a licensing deal with a Canadian company that produced adhesive “skins” for handheld electronics and selling three paintings to an art gallery in Malibu that came within a hair’s breadth of hanging in Adam Sandler’s house. However, unlike my goal of crossing the finish line without taking one walking step, I needed the cooperation of others if I was going to feel the satisfying weight of a finisher’s medal around my neck from the commercial art world.

Thankfully, I met and befriended the owner, Jim Brent, of Museum Quality Framing in midtown Camarillo soon after being punted like an old soggy lettuce head off the tasseled loafer of an HR executive. Whether I needed reproductions, framing, or lessons toward transitioning from illustration and painting to graphic art, Jim could do it all – and crack me up at the same time with a wit that was sharper and more sarcastic than mine. If hanging out at Museum Quality Framing was

like the TV show, *Cheers*, Jim would be Sam, the bartender, while I'd vacillate between portraying Norm, the beer-loving defeatist, and the annoying postal worker, Cliff. Like a weather forecast of abundant sunshine with tasty three-to-four-foot swells setting up nicely in Malibu, the future looked promising. Why wouldn't it? I had talent, passion, early success, and Sam, the bartender.

Within a few short years, partly cloudy skies and choppy surf replaced the bright blue heavens and perfectly sculpted waves, making me as grizzled and hardened as any war-torn veteran would be after experiencing the bloody carnage at ground zero. Nothing in life had prepared me for the topsy-turvy conundrum that *is* the commercial art world. In school, if you pass all your classes, you graduate. At work, if you meet your quotas, you get promoted. In the competitive sports world, if you train hard, you win races. But in the world of art-for-money, if you score a win for the ages, you're back to square one. *Huh?*

My inner George Costanza's "Yeah, Baby!" after winning an international contest to have my artwork, bio, and signature plastered on tens of thousands of 1800 Tequila bottles would

be short lived since big breaks like that would be followed by head scratching moments like being unable to get an LA art dealer to peek inside my portfolio. *Huh?* Or, how about receiving cryptic “Thanks but no thanks” emails in response to the City of Ventura’s “Call for Artists” after pulling off an only-in-your-dreams sellout of surfboard art at a local business earlier in the same year? *Huh?* I can still remember being told, “Not interested” twenty-two times in one day by gallery owners in Culver City who focused on up-and-coming Los Angeles artists, the last one saying it without looking at me while typing from behind a giant Apple computer screen. Even the little white Pekinese dog that was between her and her keyboard didn’t look at me. I wanted so much to tell each one of them (including the dog) that I had met pop art icon, Peter Max, at a swanky Brentwood art gallery only a week earlier. Even *he* took the time to look at my portfolio before handing me his business card and inviting me to his studio in New York City – but I wanted to do it in the style of Will Ferrell’s Ron Burgundy from the 2004 movie, *Anchorman*, “Umm . . . I don’t know how to put this, but I’m kind of a big deal.”

Although the duplicitous and contradictory nature of

commercial art success baffled and frustrated me beyond belief, it continued to spur me on by throwing me a bone once in a while. And it would do the trick – just like how young kids will do one melt-your-heart sweet thing that erases dozens of moments where their little necks should’ve been wrung. After six consecutive years of six-to-twelve-hour days, I realized that only one thing surpassed my passion for creating art that characterized popular social phenomena – it was an incessant need to monetize my work and pander to the naysayers who stood in my way. Pushing my dream of becoming a somebody in the art world back into the hangar was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. But there was a reason why my dream couldn’t stay airborne – it no longer had the lift of a meaningful purpose.

Anywhere But Here

“So . . . did, you tell him?” asked Jeff as he put his computer bag and morning coffee on his side of the shared office desk.

“Just sending the email now,” I said from behind my laptop.

“You mean you’re not going to do it face-to-face?”

“Dude, I already did that like ten minutes ago. Now I just made it official,” I replied.

“So, what did he say?”

“Nothing. He’s still ignoring me.”

Nine months earlier, I had passed on an opportunity to go on a three-week international business trip, making my boss act as if I had refused a direct order from the commander in chief. But this wasn’t the military. It was a small drug manufacturing company housed inside a warehouse-sized building that looked exactly like all the others in the forgettable business park. Even though my office mate was joined at the hip with Tux, his little black poodle, sharing my workspace with Jeff was one of the few highlights of a depressing job that stopped me from calling in “sick for life” and never returning. What Jeff knew and my passive-aggressive boss, William, didn’t know was that the request to fly to China at a moment’s notice was the elusive yet necessary third calamity to complete the trifecta for the perfect storm.

“I can’t believe you’re moving to Idaho. And you *really* don’t

have a job lined up or any friends or family there?” asked Jeff.

“Nope,” I answered while looking at my email to see if word was spreading that I just turned in my resignation.

“That’s crazy, dude.”

“Not really. I hate this job, hate where I live, and nobody loves me,” I said while counting on my fingers for emphasis.

“Oh my god! You just described *my* life. Take me with you!” joked the husband, father of two, and part owner of the company we both worked at.

“Hahaha . . .”

Back then, since I didn’t know *what* would make me happy, I came up with a simple tool to measure and evaluate my current state of *unhappiness*. After receiving positive feedback from a few friends, I felt confident enough to try it out on acquaintances who didn’t know me as well. It was a resounding hit. I told them that they’d be in the game of happiness if they *at least* liked where they lived, liked what

they did, and liked who they were with. Each question could be answered with a “like,” “love,” or “hate.” Three “loves” meant they were either lying, delusional, or had found nirvana on earth. Any combination of “like, love, and hate” meant they knew what they needed to work on while three “hates” indicated you took a wrong turn and kept on going.

“What’s in Boise that makes you want to move there?” asked Jeff.

“A fresh start. I need to see something different outside my kitchen window,” I replied.

“Yeah, but you won’t know anyone,” he continued.

“That’s the best part about it.”

“So, what’s the plan when you get there?” he asked.

“Four things . . . Get a job, buy a house, get married, and be a Boise State Broncos season ticket holder.”

“You got it all figured out,” he replied while getting up to take

Tux outside for his morning bathroom break.

The only way out is up when you're at rock bottom, dude, I thought to myself as I watched Tux spring into action when he heard the jangle of his leash. I couldn't think of another time when I found myself besieged within a perfect storm. There were times that I got close, like when I got a nasty virus that lasted six weeks while living out of my truck, and trying to turn a temporary job into a permanent one at the same time. *Close, but no cigar*, I remember thinking. In order for the meteorological phenomenon to have a chance, the perfect storm needs the mixture of warm air from a low-pressure system and cool, dry air from a high-pressure system to be bombarded by tropical moisture from a raging hurricane.

Nine months earlier, I felt that seething tempest move over me, pulling me into an unimaginable force that was fueled by cosmic anger rather than atmospheric pressure. I can still remember where I was as the storm closed in around me. I was arguing with my boss over the phone about the trip to China in the middle of the back yard of the house I was renting in midtown Ventura. At the same time, I was trying to communicate with the Mexican guy who was directing eight

other Mexican guys who were digging up the yard to install a sprinkler system, neither of us capable of speaking the other's native language. And while I was yelling on the phone and using my hands to talk to Hector, the supervisor of a crew of restoration guys who were taking their sweet time bringing the one bathroom back into service was telling me that it was going to take a few more days. *Mayday! Mayday! We're going down! Repeat. We're going down!*

Off The Wagon

During a perfect storm, winds as fast as seventy miles per hour can produce waves as high as one hundred feet, sending anything in its path on a completely different trajectory if it isn't demolished by the storm's incessant fury. Such was the case when my personal meltdown brought me to Boise, Idaho in the summer of 2015. I had survived the eight months of heartbreak that ensued after a disastrous end to a relationship that allowed me to taste what I thought was love for the first time in my life. I lived through the soul-crushing charade of pretending to enjoy wearing long pants again at a nine-to-five job for eighteen months after having lived the "short pants dream" for six years. And I emerged relatively unscathed from

residing in a seaside city in Ventura County for two years that dispelled the myth that opposites attract. Imagine living within the crumbling infrastructure of a city where your onboard radar can't distinguish the surfers, artists, and eighty-percent of the local residents from the hordes of shuffling homeless people. I survived my perfect storm by landing in Boise with a new plan but little did I know that I'd accomplish none of it.

After a four-day reconnaissance mission to secure an apartment in Boise a month earlier, I knew I would like my new home, especially after putting my feet in the river that serpentine through the city, a year-round flow of snow melt released from a reservoir less than ten miles away. And, despite a dry climate consistent with what you'd expect in other high desert communities, the city planners of Boise beguile its visitors and transplants by using the river water to feed the numerous arboretum-like parks that border miles of banks comprised of sand and silt overlaying cobbles and gravel. Along most of those banks, bike paths swoop in from places like the North End, Harris Ranch, Garden City, Warm Springs, Boise State, and downtown, connecting the "City of Trees" in a way that makes you want to explore it on two wheels. Whereas most normal people would view the

hundred-plus-miles of dedicated bike paths and bike lanes as ways to have fun, beat traffic, and get exercise, I saw them as an invitation to fall off the wagon. *Hi. My name is Chuck, and I'm addicted to movement.*

Since wanting to become a homer of Boise State foot-ball games was part of my four-goal plan, I chose an apartment building that was within walking distance to Albertson's Stadium, home of the Broncos and the iconic blue Astroturf they played upon. The building was so close to the stadium that I had to close my blinds during night games just so I wouldn't feel like a wanted fugitive, cornered by what felt like the invasive search-lights from an FBI helicopter. *Affirmative. We can see the filthy rat scurrying around now. Over.* And, my top floor apartment had a partial view of the city skyline, a constant reminder that a better-fitting job, a real soulmate, and a home instead of housing were waiting for me and within reach.

In a matter of weeks, daily morning bike rides became morning *and* evening rides, the extra mileage stemming more from a summer sun setting well after nine o'clock than an addiction to feeling my body move. Plus, I had grown fond of

seeing the fluffy white seeds from shedding cottonwood trees catch the last colors of twilight, the feathery parachute-like structures floating down much slower than snowflakes, like manna from the heavens. Having become accustomed to only noticing and pointing out what relentless sunshine, pounding surf, and salt air can do to beach cities in the coastal desert biosphere that *is* Southern California, I relished living in Boise, a comparatively much smaller metro-polis of four seasons with year-round civic pride. Not only were my senses more in tune with my surroundings, they amplified a calm cohesiveness I hadn't felt since my days as a teenager growing up along Philadelphia's Main Line.

The tall, stately trees flanking the majestic-looking State Capitol welcomed me with open arms, the whole scene an impressive testament to those who willed the territory into a state in 1890. The section of river running past White Water Park spoke to me in a language comprised of babbling and gurgling, sounds exclusive to rocks and boulders being polished by rushing water. And the smell of livestock mixed with the aromas of barbecue and funnel cakes filled my nose and my imagination while riding past the Western Idaho Fairgrounds. All of it – the sights, sounds and smells – a

barrage of sensations making me want to extend my bicycle tour beyond Boise to the nearby cities of Eagle, Meridian, Nampa, Emmett, Kuna, Mountain Home, and Idaho City.

Wherever You Go, There You Are

Just one more year, I'd tell me myself soon after the spring thaw would ignite the rebirth of Eden, bringing with it hiking and biking temperatures above forty degrees. *Just one more year of adventure travel, and then I'll get serious about getting a job, a wife, a house, and a couple of seats between the forty-yard lines.* The only issue was that four years had gone by, and I was still reminding myself of that original goal since moving to Idaho's capital city. Unlike training for marathons, triathlons, or bike races, adventure travel involved thinking about daylight hours as opposed to time, self-reliance as opposed to self-loathing, and life or death rather than medaling or not medaling in a race. At times, the stakes were foolishly high, but the uncertainty and spur of the moment planning was intoxicating.

In my inebriated state, day trips turned into ten-to-fourteen-day odysseys that would cover hundreds of foot and bike miles

while excursions to cities and towns all over Idaho extended to the entire Pacific Northwest. What started out as bike rides from one side of Boise to the other eventually turned into full-blown, solo campaigns across state lines and along coasts toward mostly forgotten places – 20,000 bike-miles and 5,000 foot-miles in five years of adventure travel made for some awesome stories to share. Except for having the legs of someone you’d find in the middle of the peloton during a Tour de France stage race, skin damage from too many exposure hours in the heat at high altitude and bitchin’ bike photos on Facebook and Instagram, what did I have to show for it? I had solved worst-case-scenarios with enough unconventional fixes to rival MacGyver *and* make me believe I could pull rabbits out of a hat. And despite experiencing at least one hardship and one miracle from just about every series you’d find on the Discovery Channel, including *Naked and Afraid*, I could feel the return of my restless and discontented self.

Scaring me more than encounters with territorial big animals, bike breakdowns fifty miles from civilization, impromptu homeless encampments, hillbillies using road signs for target practice, and fully loaded logging trucks hell-bent on making good time was the feeling that after years of accumulating tens

of thousands of adventure miles, I was no closer to having a meaningful purpose than I was when I left California five years earlier.

Passion Versus Purpose

“Oh hey, Kyle,” I said to my apartment neighbor from across the breezeway as I carried my bike up the stairs.

“Good trip?” asked the thirty-two-year-old man of few words.

“I only came close to dying twice . . . so, I guess it was,” I joked.

If you came across Kyle more than a few times, you’d notice that he always wore the same outfit, a plain white V-neck t-shirt over worn-out jeans with old sneakers you’d earmark for yardwork duty, all of it looking like he’d woken up that way. One hand would be stuffed inside a front pocket in an aw-shucks sort of way while his other hand would be gripping a medical textbook. From a distance, he looked like a taller, stronger version of Matt Damon from the movie, *Bourne Identity*, and as uncomfortable around strangers as Matt

Damon was in *Good Will Hunting*. But once you've closed the gap and started a conversation with him, you'd get the sense that he was as mysterious and lethal as Jason Bourne and as smart as Will Hunting.

"Where'd you go this time?" he asked.

"Halfway across Oregon," I replied while patting each compartment of my cargo shorts to figure out which one had my keys.

"Impressive."

"Please . . . piece of cake for you, dude," I said to the former Army Ranger field medic who attended medical school during the day and ran in the Boise foothills at night.

"So . . . when's the next trip?" he asked in a weak attempt to deflect the obviousness of what I just said.

"I think that's going to be it for a while. I need to do more than just live the life of a well-financed middle schooler, you know?" I said as I opened the door to my stuffy, one-bedroom

apartment.

“Ha-ha . . . So, now what?”

“Beats the heck out of me,” I said while closing the door behind me. “See you ’round, Kyle.”

The view from my apartment balcony was different than the one I had moved from a couple of years earlier. Instead of looking at Albertson’s Stadium and half of Boise’s downtown, I had a bird’s eye view of the Boise foothills, pretty hillsides that always looked to be one season behind what the surrounding trees were showing. Although it was only a few miles away, it felt more like lightyears from my original goal of finding a job, a wife, a house, and season tickets. *Hmm . . . Maybe I lost sight of my goal because I literally lost sight of my goal. Out of sight, out of mind, right?*

The fact of the matter was that I no longer wanted those things. Besides, I already had all four of them in previous lifetimes. And where did it get me? What started out feeling like a plan everyone could agree with began to feel more like a series of societal masks hiding a willingness to conform for approval. I

trained for races for eight years to deal with being handed a divorce decree. I produced commercial art for six years to deal with being emailed a severance package. And I biked like a possessed madman for five years to deal with the aftermath of a perfect storm. Had you asked me, in the midst of those pursuits, if I had a meaningful purpose, I would've replied, "Absolutely." But as I leaned against the balcony railing watching the foothills slowly turn from orange to pink, I knew that wasn't completely true.

The training, artwork production, and biking started out as meaningful purposes since they were opportunities to reclaim personal redemption when I needed it the most. However, by continuing with those pursuits *after* suffering and sacrificing enough to reinstate a sense of self-worth and self-esteem, I reduced what started out *feeling* like meaningful purposes to 'passionate endeavors.' Don't get me wrong. Passionate endeavors can be wonderful, especially if they can strengthen meditative practices and instill an enriched inner life like they did for me. But they can also lull you into believing that your passionate endeavor is your purpose when it's actually an escape from needing to do the real work.

Like Prince Charming trying to find the foot that belongs inside the glass slipper, I could see how training, producing artwork, and biking wouldn't fit the definition of what constitutes a meaningful purpose for me: improving the quality of people's lives through a noble, passionate effort that utilizes my natural talents and acquired skills. I knew it was time for me to get to work, but it took watching a ten-second video on Instagram at three o'clock in the morning by a remarkable Boise State student to get me off my ass.

Chapter 9: Above The Clouds

Namaste

“Un-freaking-believable,” I said to my phone while sitting on the sofa in my apartment’s darkened living room, the only other light coming from above the stove in the adjacent kitchen. I sounded like a broken record, saying the same thing each time I tapped the replay button on the illuminated screen. Suddenly, I didn’t feel so bad succumbing to mindless social media entertainment in the middle of a restless night. The short Instagram video featured a young man walking with what looked to be a heavy dark blue backpack slung over his right shoulder, his right hand gripping the strap. In his left, he was holding his phone out in front of him, the lower angle making him appear more important and bigger than he was. The long blonde hair and backward trucker hat seemed more befitting for a man-boy who couldn’t say goodbye to his skateboard than a college student at Boise State.

While looking ahead and not at the phone’s camera lens, the striding young man who somehow looked younger than his years despite never having laid eyes on him before, said,

“Man, the last few weeks have been crazy busy! Studying for finals. Writing papers. Busy as hell at work. Training every day at the gym . . .” Then, while still walking, he looks directly at his phone and says, “Now it’s time to get to work!” *What the hell? That’s it? No follow-up videos? What kind of work?* From the pictures and captions on his Instagram page, I could see that he was nearing graduation, taught martial arts, and was a budding swami who had something to teach me.

Although my better judgment was trying to stop me from posting a comment on Zach’s Instagram video, I did it anyway, writing something to the effect that I knew exactly what he was getting at but didn’t have a clue as to what he was talking about. As confounding as my message was, it matched the overarching weird feeling of reaching out to a kid I didn’t know who was at least thirty years younger, making me feel old enough to be his elderly father. I didn’t have to second guess myself for very long because he wrote back to me before the sun came up. And after a few text exchanges over the course of a couple of days, I found myself out-side of a small gym in downtown Boise, shivering in my truck at five-forty-five in the morning, waiting for it to open so I could meet this intriguing kid who also led a CrossFit class that began at the

crack of dawn.

Right away, I noticed that he was much more subdued and diminutive than what his Instagram photos and videos depicted. Gone was the impish smile, replaced by a more contemplative expression that reminded me of how I must look when trying to solve a math problem in my head. Even if I didn't know he was a kick-boxer, I could tell just by looking at him that this pocket-sized, wiry young man could put me on the ground in two seconds. And instead of appearing detached and bored with me and the other middle-aged men and women who had their reasons for exchanging morning coffee for electrolytes, Zach was engaged, mindful, and present, making me even more curious about what he knew that I didn't.

Never in my life did I have such deep conversations immediately following a torturous, forty-five-minute CrossFit workout, but I highly recommend it. Was it because there were residual endorphins still coursing throughout my body? Or was it the euphoria from knowing I wouldn't have to revisit the pain again for two whole days? Either case, my talks with Zach were profound enough to tip over the first of many stubborn dominos that needed to fall if I wanted to move

forward in life.

Despite looking like he rode a skateboard to a job at Jimmy John's, he had all the qualities of what you'd expect from a spiritual guide. His demeanor was calm and relaxed. He talked about meditation, mindfulness, movement, breathing, and community. He told stories about expanding his consciousness through intensive meditative retreats in Mexico, Cambodia, and Thailand. He was particularly excited about an upcoming pilgrimage to Peru to learn about plant medicine ceremonies from shamanic healers because his dad was going with him. *Who IS this kid?*

If I had to describe Zach as a celestial body, I couldn't do it with just one. If you saw him walking down the street, he would blend right in like a floating rock within an asteroid belt full of floating rocks. But if he started talking to you about quieting the mind, he'd come off like a supernova. And if he was listening to you, he'd quickly morph into a black hole, taking in everything you were saying with a genuine and sincere focus. Such was the case when I shared parts of my own journey with him, conveying for the first time my ramblings about having an enriched inner life over an inner

voice and a meaningful purpose rather than a passionate endeavor.

But deep down, I knew I wouldn't be able to follow Zach or anybody else to a meditative retreat since I already had a long history of being resistant to "opening the kimono" or "getting jiggy with it" at *any* event that asked to see what's behind the mask. Heck, I couldn't even relax at department off-sites where the only goal was to get to know each other better. I didn't need a spiritual approach. I needed something more practical, something that would appeal to my sense of logic and need for control. I needed a career coach.

Emily

Right away, I felt like I was being greeted by the owner of a dress shop from the 1950s rather than a career coach of the current millennium when I first met Emily at her front door in Eagle. After a cordial exchange, I followed her through the house toward her office while taking note of the persistent theme of flowers and elegance in each of the well-appointed rooms that matched both her dress and how she carried herself. *I like her already*, I said to myself after quickly deducing that

her no-nonsense, in-person demeanor wasn't different than the vibe of her website or how she sounded over the phone. And she looked to be around my age, too. I took my place on the couch and flirted with the idea of reclining on it like I was in a psychiatrist's office to be funny but thought better of it. Emily sat in her executive desk chair which could face the couch or her desk in short, easy swivels.

“So, Chuck, tell me more about yourself. What are you hoping to get out of working with me?” she asked.

I had anticipated this question and made it my one thought during the twelve-mile bike ride to Emily's house from Boise. “I'm basically a very creative person trapped inside a body that has only found sustainable success in the corporate environment, a space I never truly felt comfortable in, like being at the popular kid's high school party and wishing you were back home watching *The Love Boat*. I'm looking for a meaningful purpose rather than a passionate endeavor – been there, done that. My natural talents are being communicative, creative, and analytical. I don't have any certifiable hard skills to speak of, and I've figured out that having emotional intelligence and a boat load of soft skills doesn't make the

phone ring. I'm a Myers-Briggs INFJ all day long and I recently went from 'three hates to one love and two hates' and I'm hoping to graduate to 'one hate and two loves.' Umm. . . I'll explain that last thing later."

"Wow. You certainly were prepared to answer *that*," she joked. "Now I see what I'm working with here."

"Uh oh. . . Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all. Have you ever created a mission statement before?"

"Yes," I replied as if she had conjured up old memories of when I was tortured and held captive in a vacant warehouse. "At least a dozen times at various department off-sites over the years, back when I still wore long pants."

"I mean . . . did you ever do one for yourself?" she continued.

"No."

"Would you be open to creating one while we're working on

other parts of the program?”

“Sure, of course. You’re the expert here,” I said.

Mission Not Impossible

This, has to be an engineering feat, I remember thinking to myself while looking down at the clipboard that I had secured to my bike’s handlebars two months earlier using only three bungee cords. However, the feeling of pride was short-lived, tempered by the fact that it made me and my bike look even more homeless than usual. My way-too-dark-tan and faded clothing that had lost their brilliance years ago were a perfect match to my fifteen-year-old modified comfort bike that had an embarrassing number of bungees stretched on it. Besides the three on the handlebars, there were six more that secured the heavy wire basket I found at Walmart to the rack over the back wheel and two more bungees making sure the blue canvas backpack didn’t fly out of it.

If someone were to see what was written on the thirty or so pages on top of the clipboard, they would’ve noticed the curled, weathered edges first, followed by the rambling scrawl

of a madman, making them want to alert the authorities immediately.

“911. What’s your emergency?”

“There’s this homeless guy on an old bike on the path near Warm Springs Golf Course. He’s got a creepy looking manifesto strapped to the handlebars of his bike. You know . . . like the Unabomber.”

“Can you describe him?”

“Real tan, like he’s been outside forever. And he’s wearing shorts and an old faded t-shirt like he’s on his way to play two-on-two driveway basketball.”

I wouldn’t have blamed them if they did, but it had been the best way to answer the many questions pertaining to the mission statement work that Emily had asked me to address. I needed to respond to at least seventy-five of the two-hundred provided questions where the answers would ultimately be collated and distilled down to the essence of my personal mission statement. Riding on the bike path next to the Boise

River allowed me to think more deeply about each question; and with all the benches and picnic tables between Municipal Park and Lucky Peak, it was the perfect route to stop and write down the answers. The questions were easy but the answers were difficult, questions like:

“Who’s your favorite family member, and why?”

“When was the first time you experienced joy?”

“What do you want to be remembered for?”

I can still remember writing the answer to one of the questions while sitting on the biggest of five boulders just steps off the bike path at Harris Ranch, the shade of the overhead tree branches protecting me from the midday sun but not from the jarring sounds of earth-movers grinding the pasture land in front of me into dusty townhome lots like alien machinery programmed to destroy life on this planet. The question had prodded me for my earliest recollection of feeling embarrassed.

“Is Charlie going to sing for us?” I heard through the open

window while I was looking for a chair in my grandparents' kitchen.

“I think so. He's probably looking for a chair to stand on. He likes to do that when he sings,” said another family member.

The mini family reunion was gathered outside in the modest back yard, some standing, others sitting in flimsy lawn chairs, most smoking either a Newport or a Benson & Hedges. The last of the pots, pans, and dinner dishes had been washed, dried, and returned to their proper places in the kitchen cupboards. The air still felt heavy after a day of high humidity despite the slight summer breeze under a darkening sky whose purple and blue colors reminded me of a bruise. I must've been six years old because my brother was walking at that point. As I was about to drag one of the heavy metal kitchen chairs through the screen door, my father's father intercepted me.

“What are you doing, Charlie?”

“Getting ready to sing,” I replied.

Thinking he was coming in from the back yard to use the

bathroom or to grab a fresh pack of cigarettes, I said, “Don’t be too long. I’m going to start soon, and I don’t want you to miss it, Grandpa.”

Just then, he leaned down from the waist and shocked me by asking, “Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You know . . . everybody looking at you; plus, nobody asked you to sing.”

At six years of age, I had already experienced what Adam and Eve must’ve felt when told that they had been running around naked in the Garden of Eden. They probably couldn’t grab fig leaves fast enough, and I couldn’t drag that chair back into the kitchen any quicker than I did. I wasn’t mad at my grandfather for saying that to me. How could I be? I figured he was looking out for me, stopping me before I made a complete fool out of myself. It worked perfectly because I never sang in front of anyone ever again.

Do You Believe in Miracles?

I always enjoyed strolling around the downtown area of Boise on Sunday evenings when the streets and side-walks were free from noisy cars and task-oriented pedestrians, the eerie emptiness inviting my mind to fill the void with thoughts, ideas, and plans. Typically, I'd have my keys, wallet, and phone stuffed into the pockets of my cargo shorts so I could swing my arms with nothing in my hands; but on this particular Sunday, I was clutching a pen and a thin tattered-looking spiral-bound notebook. It contained the evidence of a week-long distillation process that had boiled forty pages of answers to over ninety questions down to a half-page mission statement that was still too long.

Then, out of nowhere; it hit me. I can still remember where I was when it happened. I was standing on the corner of 10th and Main, in front of the Zen Bento Japanese restaurant. Thinking that it would scamper away as fast as the white rabbit did in my back yard over twenty years earlier, I threw myself onto a nearby bench and frantically scribbled down what the universe was dictating to me. And then, just like that, it was over. After three months and over fifteen hundred bike-miles, my mission

statement was staring up at me from my lap, an elusive abstraction finally introduced to the world in the form of chicken scratch. I remained seated on the bench while a feeling of immense satisfaction overtook me in the deserted city, making me think of Tom Hanks' character after he finally started a fire in the movie, *Cast Away*. He danced in the firelight even though there were no witnesses.

Seriously? Again? I thought to myself when I woke up the very next morning. I had fallen asleep in the after-glow of a miracle the night before only to wake up to another one. "This is crazy!" I said to myself while fumbling for the phone on the nightstand between the bed and bathroom door. Before the white rabbit could dart under the fence, I opened a drawing app on my phone and, without hesitation, used the tip of my right index finger to sketch a heart acting as a prism. It was the image that came to mind as soon as I opened my eyes that morning, an idea for a logo that was part of the mission statement homework for Emily. Despite using the wrong hand in my haste to avoid losing the fleeting idea, I still loved it. *Oh my god. . . it's perfect!*

"All right, Chuck. You've done a great job of making me

excited to hear your mission statement. Let's hear it!" said Emily from her usual position in the executive desk chair.

"Sure. But don't forget about the logo. I need to show you that, too," I replied from the middle of the sofa that I knew I'd miss after our work was complete.

"Of course, I need to see that, too," she said.

"Okay. Here goes. . . My life's purpose is to expose others to new ways of seeing the world, information, their work, and themselves in a way that leaves them feeling empowered and better about who they are through my natural abilities to understand, simplify, and convey complex entities and abstractions using logic, creativity, communication, humor, empathy, knowledge, nature, and love."

"Chuck, that's fantastic," she said in the sincerest way imaginable. "Let me see the logo."

"You're right. It's absolutely perfect," she added after taking my phone from me to get a closer look.

“I’m so happy that you like it, Emily.”

“Chuck, I more than like it. I love it. I’ve done this exercise with countless people over the years, and this is the best one I’ve ever been a part of. Would you mind if I share your statement and logo with my other clients? Including how you biked for months with the questions attached to a clipboard? Anonymously, of course.”

“No. Not at all. I’d be honored.”

As I entered Garden City from Eagle on the bike path that ran along the south side of the Boise River, I relished the coolness of the shade from the dense riverside trees, the cottonwoods, river birches, and maples transforming my ride back home into an ad-venture through Middle-earth. While underneath the protective canopy, my thoughts went back to all the work I did with my career coach, Emily. I had new insights, feedback from a real professional that I wasn’t a lost cause, and a mission statement that would serve as both a sail and a rudder. But when the bike path veered back into the hot sun, where the potholes and rutted asphalt made the ride jarring and unpleasant, I worried about having a purpose that was nothing

more than a poetic sentence with a nifty logo.

Miracle on 10th Street

What is it about this section of 10th Street? I thought to myself while locking my bike to an ornate wrought-iron cage that wrapped around the one tree that sprouted up from the sidewalk in front of the District Coffee House in downtown Boise. Not only did I find my mission statement two blocks away from where I was weaving the cable lock through my bike's frame and the openings in the heavy metal structure, the best Indian food outside of London's Kensington district, the Bombay Grill, was steps away on the next corner, inside the historic Idanha Hotel. And, if I walked across 10th Street from the hotel, I'd find my meticulous, travel-loving Korean barber, Sue, located in a ground-floor business called – you guessed it – The 10th Street Barber Shop.

“What are the chances?” I mumbled to myself after walking inside and eyeballing a prized table location. I quickly tossed my backpack and helmet on top of the empty two-seater that was situated against one of the large floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a front row, panoramic view of the corner of 10th

and West Bannock Streets that would make a surveillance camera jealous. As usual for a midmorning weekday in early fall, the District Coffee House was at full capacity, hopping with relaxed business meetings, get-togethers with friends, serendipitous encounters as well as the ubiquitous smattering of individuals riveted to their laptops, some with headphones, some without. Nobody so much as looked at me as I weaved through the noisy array of crowded tables, oversized reading chairs and pleather couches to stand in line and place my coffee order with one of three twenty-somethings behind the counter, each looking like they had just returned from a week's worth of self-expression at the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada.

Despite the success I had while working with Emily, I found myself doing more bike riding than job seeking since hearing her say, "Best of luck to you," two months earlier. The hiatus from looking for work didn't make filling out online job applications any less soul crushing. I still had that sinking feeling that hours of tediousness would vaporize into the ether as soon as I pressed the "submit" button; yet, there I was at my favorite Boise coffee shop preparing to do it all over again. After requesting, "a drip coffee for here," I quickly stepped

aside to get out of the way and await my order, not realizing that my life was about to be forever changed before I took one sip of my coffee.

“Chuck!” bellowed the barista who looked like every *Survivor* finalist from the last three seasons.

“Thanks,” I said after sliding the cup and saucer off the counter and taking a position behind a large lady in a navy-blue pantsuit.

Relax, dude. Let her finish, I thought, reminding myself that there’s nothing worse than feeling the impatience of a self-important jerk breathing down your neck while you’re trying to perform chemistry with cream and sugar in a crowded, frenetic coffee shop. When she turned around, I waited for her to return my gaze so I could give her that acknowledging nod that says, “Thanks for not taking your sweet time,” but she didn’t look my way. *Oh well . . . such is the life of Boise’s only invisible man,* I thought to myself as I left the on-deck circle to step into the batter’s box of coffee condiments. Knowing I was literally standing between surly strangers and their caffeine addictions, I didn’t waste time tossing a couple of raw

sugar packets on the saucer, picking up a spoon and reaching for the tall, stainless-steel carafe of cream. With the deftness of a seasoned magician, I plunged the spoon into the cup before the splash of half-and-half could dissipate beyond the surface, a practiced stir that occurred at least once a day since finding a coffee pot in the breakroom at my first real job. As I watched the color go from black to perfect, the swirling coffee mesmerized me in a way I had never felt before.

In that instant, I felt something leave my body, or my mind, or both. It felt like my shadow had left me, but not the kind that follows you around. It was the shadow that holds you back. Suddenly, I was no longer a man ensuring that the proper amount of cream was added to his coffee. I was a man who now understood what it must feel like when people say they found Jesus, or died and came back to life, or experimented with ecstasy for the first time at a music festival in the California desert. The swirl of my coffee was still in mid-swirl when I felt all my senses heighten and come back to me like they were sitting on the edge of a swimming pool, their legs dangling in the water, waiting for me to come up for air.

Nobody knows. Nobody knows that the most incredible thing

just happened to this forgettable, grungy-looking bike rider with strips of duct tape on his faded yellow windbreaker, I thought to myself as I retraced my steps back to the coffee shop table of my dreams. Replacing the din of caffeinated conversation was the sound of rushing air, like I was in an airplane that had just punched through heavy clouds to reach its cruising altitude, the turbulence giving way to smooth peacefulness, blue skies, and vision. From my window seat on the plane, everything made sense to me – the blue sky, the endless floor of cloud cover, and the distant mountain top protruding through the white, cottony blanket completing the scene. Not only did I realize that I had been depressed for more than a dozen years, I knew exactly when and why it started.

I was still smiling to myself when I reached my table after what had to be the most surreal walk through a coffee shop in the history of mankind. And I was still smiling while stirring the coffee to dissolve the sugar that I had just added. I remember looking around to see if I could catch someone's eye because I wanted so much to tell someone – anyone – what had just happened, even if it was through mental telepathy. When no one met my gaze, I turned my eyes to the bustling intersection while secretly reveling in an overwhelming

feeling that felt like it would never leave me. It wasn't the thought that I'd be happy from here on out; instead, it was the feeling that I'd never be unhappy again.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

The Scourge

When I biked away from the District Coffee House after experiencing what felt like a cataclysmic shift in my personal consciousness, I decided to take the long way home to think more about what had just happened over a simple cup of coffee. Instead of going down 8th Street toward the river, I headed up 13th Street toward Camel's Back Park because I enjoyed riding past all the locally owned restaurants and specialty shops in the North End's Hyde Park Historical District. By the time I reached Goody's Soda Fountain, I knew that the epiphany wasn't some kind of reward from the cosmos for having written a bitchin' mission statement or from knowing the difference between a passionate endeavor and a meaningful purpose. It came from more than two decades' worth of risk taking, seeking help, being vulnerable, listening to my heart, reading books, aligning myself with people who could teach me something, and closing the gap between who I thought I was and who I really am.

By receiving one heck of a bone from the universe after

lamenting to the heavens for twenty years to toss me one, you'd think the powers that be would've started cooperating with me. Not only did I suffer the biggest betrayal in my professional life a year later, I faced an even worse betrayal in my personal life in less than a year after the first one. Then there was the slew of spurned women determined to get their pound of flesh, more roadside bike breakdowns than ever before, a destroyed left hamstring, and a six-week bout with COVID-19 served with a side of bronchitis. However, the universe *did* hold up its end of the bargain because I didn't feel unhappy once during the period of time that I refer to as, "The Scourge."

There's no denying that the moment of enlightenment inside the coffee shop was an event that I'll never forget, but I'm also not one to make too much of anything. Was it divine intervention? Or was it the same feeling I had when I finally really understood how to do long division in elementary school math class? I put in the work to better understand who I was and my place in the world, "So, yeah. I believe I racked up enough points for at least one major epiphany." And let's continue to keep it real. The world won't smile upon me or you and give us less than our fair share of grief just because

something inside of us changed for the better. I don't feel shortchanged by my epiphany either. I walked away from it knowing I'd never be unhappy again – even if there's a sequel in the works. *Coming to theaters this summer. . . If you thought The Scourge was horrifying, wait until you experience, The Scourge Part II!*

Happy or Not Unhappy

At the end of Chapter 5, I was able to agree with Eckhart Tolle's statement regarding future moments on the condition that emotional control be included. He said that the more you invest in the current moment, the more likely your next moment will be a good moment. Again, I agree; but I'd expand it to read like this: The more you control your emotions while investing in the current moment, the more likely your next moment will not be an unhappy moment. After reading that last sentence, I can imagine the reader recalling Parts I and II of this book and saying to themselves, "Yep. That's right in line with what the author has been saying about emotions and the current moment, but why doesn't he change the end of the sentence from 'will not be an unhappy moment' to 'will be a happy moment?' Isn't this a book about being happy?"

I don't know about you, but I've been around chronically happy people and, to me, it comes across forced, disingenuous, and quite frankly, a little creepy. For the purposes of this book, I prefer to communicate from a position of having lived in the real world, thinking that most readers would agree with me that it's more realistic to aim for a life that vacillates between states of feeling happy and "not unhappy" rather than to delude oneself into thinking that it's possible to feel happy all of the time. If you don't believe these perpetually happy people exist, just look at your Facebook or Instagram feeds.

And guess what? Things get even more interesting for this statement when the current moment is within the context of having a meaningful purpose. The statement would change to: The more you control your emotions while investing in a current moment that's associated with your meaningful purpose, your next moment will not be an unhappy moment. It's subtle, but do you see the difference? Happiness *is* what ensues when you have control over your emotions while investing in a current moment that's within the context of your meaningful purpose. The end? Not so fast. Reaching nirvana only means you'll be handed a whole new level of work.

Last Words

Who doesn't remember the iconic diner scene in the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*, when Meg Ryan's character loudly reenacts the sounds of unbridled passion prompting a customer to famously say, "I'll have what she's having"? Believe it or not, I hear that same sentiment directed toward me more often than not after sharing my story of redemption. *Chuck, that is so inspirational! Dude, you got me rethinking everything! Chuck, you're my new life coach, and I won't take no for an answer!* But why shouldn't I receive these wonderful comments? Not only did I spend decades of my life solving the puzzle of who I am as a person and where I belong, I even came up with three different ways to give my best gift to the world.

My writing, artwork, and photography each embody the same central theme of wanting to expose others to new ways of seeing the world and themselves in a way that leaves them feeling empowered and better about who they are. I literally wake up each day in the sweet spot of the Holy Grail in the middle of nirvana. So, when does my induction into the winner's circle start? Does it happen before or after the parade

in my honor? Shouldn't I be briefed on how best to handle the paparazzi? At this point, I'd be happy just to get a small kitchen appliance or a Starbucks card as a parting gift to go along with my fifteen minutes of lukewarm social media fame.

For people like me who are actually trying to launch and sustain an intentional brand based on the belief that there *is* an underlying and recognizable talent behind the gift, social media has been both a godsend and a curse. I often tell people that before the internet, I was like a grain of sand at the bottom of the ocean. Then, out of nowhere, an underwater earthquake caused a tsunami wave to form and lift me from the cold black depths and onto a sunlit beach – only to realize that I'm joined by eight billion other grains of sand.

Although social media gives me the impression that my gift has been given, it remains largely unseen and unheard. With five hundred million photos being uploaded every day along with five hundred million comments every minute, my gift quickly becomes the equivalent of sedimentary rock within seconds of posting. And to make matters worse, no one is watching or listening anyway. That's because the seats are empty. From my perspective, it looks like everybody wants to

be on stage whether or not they have a talent or something truly noble to give. I wish they'd realize that without an audience there is no context for gifts to be given.

In Chapter 8, I described coming up with a simple tool to measure and evaluate my current state of *unhappiness*. I said that I'd be in the game of happiness if I at least liked who I was with, where I lived, and what I did with my life. But that was a long time ago, and I've changed since then. To myself and to you, I say at least like who you are, your place in the world, and your meaningful purpose. Concern yourself only with giving your gift whether it's received or not. Believe me. The world wants and needs your best gift.

The End

About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on.

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