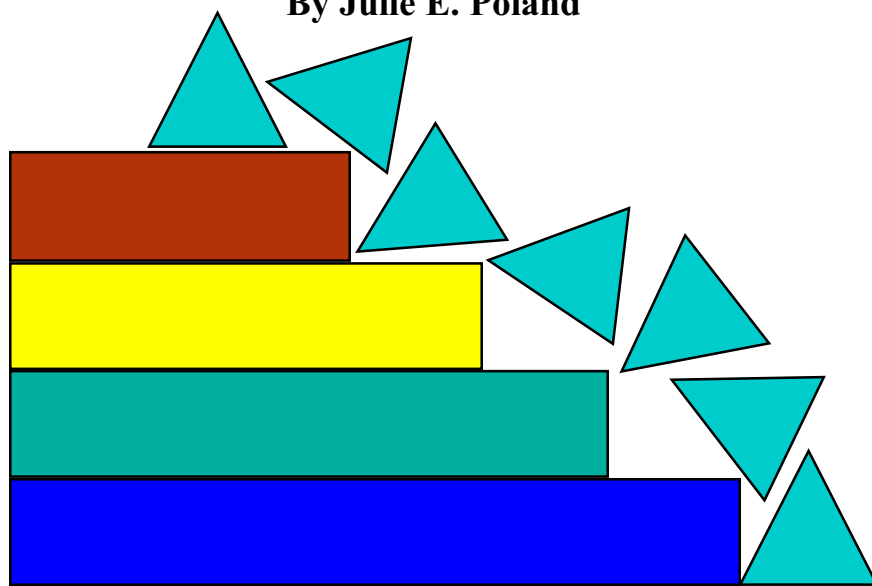


# **Secret Messages**

**How Your Inner Voice Might Be  
Holding You Back,  
And What To Do About It**

**By Julie E. Poland**



Secret Messages: How Your Inner Voice Might Be Holding You Back, And  
What To Do About It

Copyright ©2002 Julie E. Poland

Written by Julie E Poland

Edited by Tina L. Miller

Published by Julie E. Poland

Cover design and layout; page layout by Tina L. Miller

ISBN: X-XXXXXXXX-X-X

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published in the United States of America

## Table of Contents:

Preface .....	4
Chapter 1 - The SECRETS are inside you .....	6
Chapter 2 - <b>S</b> – Secret messages are inside you, influencing your actions. ....	21
Chapter 3 - <b>E</b> – Each of your gifts and assets is waiting to work for you. ....	39
Chapter 4 – <b>C</b> – Create your future by visualizing it in detail. ....	54
Chapter 5 – <b>R</b> – Rewards and consequences are what motivate you to act. ....	70
Chapter 6 – <b>E</b> – Each obstacle has a solution when you use your creativity. ....	83
Chapter 7 – <b>T</b> – Talk to yourself to shape your habits. ....	97
Chapter 8 – <b>S</b> – Step-by-step action is what makes your dreams come true. ....	114
About the Author .....	129

## PREFACE

My grandfather was an Optimist in every sense of the word—both a club member and also a man endowed with an upbeat temperament that influenced our entire extended family. As far as I know, he never drank anything stronger than black coffee, and late in his life he gave up a lifelong pipe smoking habit. Grampa Martin never used strong language. He was always on an even keel, the moderating voice in a large family of opinionated, outspoken personalities. My uncle claims my Grampa exploded at least once, shouting “cheese and rice!” when he was frustrated, but that isn’t the phrase I remember as being characteristic of him.

“Well, that’s all-l-l-l right,” he would say in a quiet, almost whispered tone. I think it was partly the deep resonance of his voice that made the phrase so memorable. Looking back, I think sometimes it didn’t even matter to him whether anyone heard him say it. When things were going well, like when my aunt disclosed that she was expecting a baby—“Well, that’s all right,” he would drawl. When a grandchild trudged into the room, grimy and sobbing over a broken toy—“Well, that’s all right,” he’d say, accompanied by a comforting pat on the shoulders. It’s all right.

My grandfather lived until age 80, not miraculously old by today’s standards—but he lived despite prostate cancer, skin cancer, hardening of the arteries, high blood pressure, and a bad back and knees. During the last six months of his life, he hosted holiday meals, walked through the woods for a Halloween pumpkin festival, and went to his deer hunting camp, just as he had done since the ‘50’s. His daughters only learned that he needed four hours to get himself ready for his doctor appointments by accident. He had to rest on each of the seven steps to his kitchen, going up or going down. How did he will himself to get on with things despite the effort and pain he experienced?

In the last four or five years of his life, Grampa Martin enjoyed sharing many stories from his younger days with me and my husband. We found out, among other things, that he had always wanted to go to college and become a physical education teacher. But his father owned a family business installing and cleaning septic tanks and told my grandfather he couldn’t go to college. Instead of pursuing his dream, Grampa joined the family business, wielding a shovel alongside his brothers scooping noxious substances from customers’ tanks into barrels and hauling them away. How could he not feel resentful about giving up on his dream?

---

Later, after his father died, Grampa worked and collected to pay off thousands of dollars of debt accumulated by the business under his father's management. He developed relationships in the community and built a business that supported his wife and seven children and the families of his two brothers, as well. One of his sons and a nephew still carry on the legacy he created.

Work and health were not the only factors that could easily have sent Grampa plummeting into a litany of self-pity. During their early adult years, his sister ran away from town—abandoning her husband and young daughters—creating a family rift that lasted decades. She contacted Grampa to say she was safe and only revealed where she was after he promised not to tell anyone where she had gone. Because he had given her his word, he carried the burden of her secret for more than 40 years.

My uncle, Grampa's third child, died at age 35 from surgical complications. My grandmother suffered a near-fatal heart attack during the drive home from my uncle's viewing, and Grampa managed to resuscitate her during the frantic drive to the hospital emergency room. She died only three months after that of heart disease.

Relatives skimmed money out of the business that he worked so hard to revive and build into prosperity.

Now everyone has his or her own share of sad events, downturns in work and/or home life, and situations over which they have no control—but why was this one person able to overcome all these things and become an optimist, a kind and generous great-grandfather, and a loyal friend? What are the characteristics and skills that helped him and other optimists stay focused on what's right with the world and on what they can be rather than focusing on the negative?

For the past 12 years, I've worked with businesses and individuals helping them achieve their goals and aspirations. I've also done a lot of reading—and I've found many life stories of successful business people and how they reached the height of their commercial success. What I don't find so often are profiles of regular people like my grandfather and how they are creating daily success on their own terms. The stories used as examples in this book are about everyday people and what they are doing to fulfill their potential—techniques you, too, can use to change your life.

I believe that every individual has a gift *and* a responsibility to make the best of themselves and their life. Observing my grandfather and others like him convinced me that it is possible to take any set of circumstances and mold it into success. That's what this book is about—helping you overcome thoughts that might be limiting you and developing the tools you need to build success in your life—however you define your success.

*Julie E. Poland*

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Secrets Are Inside You**

*“All that a man achieves and all that he fails to achieve is the direct result of his thoughts.” – James Allen*

---

I have long been convinced that an individual's self-talk determines the actions they will take (or fail to take) to achieve success in all areas of their life. Regardless of whether a person defines success as money, prestige, stopping a bad habit, finding a life partner, or graduating from high school, self-talk drives their actions (or inaction) and ultimately their success in that area.

Success is within reach of all of us if we channel our thoughts—our “inner conversations” with ourselves—and our subsequent actions toward the results we want to see in any given area.

When we truly believe in our ability to create a positive outcome in a particular area, we tend to follow through and take actions that will result in a positive outcome. On the other hand, when we do not believe, deep down, that good things will happen to us, we unintentionally find ways to sabotage ourselves. We often tend to blame others for our lack of positive results. But in actuality, our need to be right is a powerful need—so powerful that we unconsciously pursue the outcome we expect to get, whether it's to our advantage or not to do so, so that we achieve exactly that.

One of my cousins is not particularly athletic—and everyone knows it. Even as a young teen, she was rather unsure of herself on a two-wheeled bike. One day, while she and her family were on their annual weeklong vacation at a seaside resort, she set her sights on riding her bicycle. Though unsteady and shaky, she set out down a side street near our hotel. Before long, she noticed there was a vehicle along the street—just one vehicle, mind you—a pickup truck parked in her path about halfway up the block.

Instead of focusing on her goal—to navigate the street successfully—she started mumbling to herself, “Don't hit the truck, don't hit the truck, whatever you do, don't hit the truck...” Well, I'm sure you can guess what happened. Even with the entire width of the street to navigate and with no other traffic to negotiate around, she nailed that truck smack dab in the middle of the rear bumper!

This story has become somewhat of a joke in our family over the years, but most of us do the same thing my cousin did in other areas of our lives on a daily basis. We think about what we *don't* want rather than focusing on what we *do* want. If something troublesome or scary looms ahead, we worry relentlessly, lose sleep at night, or engage in pointless activities trying to relieve our tension. The problem is—these activities actually nurture our negative thoughts—and negative thoughts generate negative action or no action at all. When we allow a potential undesirable outcome to dominate our focus, we unintentionally act to make it happen.

This is a natural principle—the thoughts that are foremost in your mind bring forth actions, which in turn create results. If you plant corn seeds in your field, corn will grow there—you will not harvest tomatoes. If you sow wheat seeds, wheat will grow.

But even if you sow the seeds of what you want to harvest, without the help of sun and rain and fertile soil and regular weeding, you cannot achieve your maximum yield.

If you think about the ideas in this book, work through the exercises, and then use them to take positive actions in your daily life, you will see positive results that far exceed your expectations. The principles of positive self-talk and goal-directed action will work to your advantage at home, in your personal life, and in your career. You will begin an upward journey to success in all areas of your life.

### **Why Don't We Naturally Help Ourselves Succeed?**

We developed most of our habits of thought and our attitudes when we were young—and we learned most of them from our parents. Intent on exploring our world as young children, we were enthralled with the magic of discovery and unaware of the potential hazards out there in the world. In order to keep us safe, our moms and dads set limits for us, but in doing so, they filled our heads with don'ts like these:

- ◆ Don't touch the stove;
- ◆ Don't talk to strangers;
- ◆ Don't speak until spoken to; and
- ◆ Don't cross the street without holding my hand.

Most of us can think of countless “don't” messages we received as small children, all intended to protect us from the world.

The habits of thinking those messages developed in you early in life led to certain habits of doing you probably still use today—they didn't expire just because you reached a particular age. You still look both ways (I hope) before crossing the street. You still use caution around the stove and other hot things. Your early conditioning created patterns of thought and action you still use regularly even though you don't consciously think about them.

But some of the messages we received in our childhood that are still retained deep in your memory bank today no longer serve you well. These same messages that protected you as a child now cause problems for you as an adult. Today you are old enough to assess your own risks and make your own decisions. But your parents' “don't” messages are still in there influencing your actions and decisions even when the information is no longer relevant.

You probably never heard your mother say, “OK, now you're old enough to talk to strangers, so go right ahead and talk with them,” did you? You've probably never actually been given permission to talk with strangers even though the kind of danger that



---

was present to you as a child talking to a stranger is no longer relevant to your life in the same way now that you are an adult.

What did you do with that habit of thought—the perception that strangers are somehow dangerous or you shouldn’t talk to them—now that you are an adult? How does it play out in your life today?

If you are like many of the salespeople and customer service reps I’ve worked with during the past 12 years, you still avoid talking to people you don’t already know. The phone feels heavy when you have to make those prospecting calls. If you are single and searching for Mr. or Ms. Right, the “don’t talk to strangers” message may still cause you to avoid the very situations that could enable you to meet that special someone.

The problem with those early “programmed” messages is that they stay in our subconscious mind, evolving from childhood “don’t’s” into adult “can’t’s.” That’s why I like to call them “secret messages.” These messages are generally below our level of conscious awareness, but they’re still sending us signals and influencing our behavior. We probably don’t even fully recognize those internal influences that are pulling us away from growth-oriented actions and limiting us. Those secret messages have been so internalized from our early conditioning that we are often unaware of the things we’re doing to stand in our own way. We see only the current results—whether good or bad—that our thoughts and actions are generating. But we can’t see how we can change those thoughts and actions and thus change the corresponding results.

Some experts in early childhood conditioning estimate 77 percent of the early messages we received were negative. It’s no wonder we get used to thinking, talking, and acting from an “I can’t” perspective rather than “I can.”

Right now you’re probably thinking, “So what? I have baggage—we all have baggage. I just deal with it.”

Well, let me ask you this: Why compromise? Why settle for less than the life you really want? Why don’t you achieve the success you deserve? Why not live up to your full potential?

Becoming aware of your internal programming, those “secret messages” we still harbor from our past and our own “self talk” that generates the results you see in your life, is the first step in improving your life.

The challenge, of course, is that your early programming—your predominant habits of thought as they are today, based on what you learned years ago—won’t change unless you *decide* to change them. Changing your thoughts and thought patterns requires an intentional effort. You’ve got to change those secret messages—disable those that no longer fit the life you want to have and reprogram some new ones into your subconscious

to help you achieve the life you want. But just deciding to change a limiting attitude isn't enough. If you truly want to remodel your mind, you must also take action. You need to work to replace obsolete habits of thought with ones that are more compatible with the person you want to become.

### **Shouldn't I Just Work On Being Happy With Who I Am?**

My answer to this question is yes...and no. Before you can begin your journey to greater success, ask yourself these two big questions:

- ◆ Who am I now, and how can I feel more comfortable in my own skin?
- ◆ Who do I want to be, and where do I want to go?

You can be happy with who you are right now because each of us has a unique combination of natural gifts and assets—some physical, some mental, some social, and some spiritual. Each and every one of those gifts and assets have value.

Never judge your natural gifts and unique assets by someone else's standard in considering those that have value. Have confidence that *your* gifts and talents are already valuable in their own right. Developing a sense of confidence and grounding in your own identity is key to your success.

At the same time, don't shortchange yourself by settling for the status quo. Much of your potential for success will go untapped until you actively do something to unleash it. It's estimated that the *most* fully developed people only use about 25 percent of their potential. Some of us are only using 3-10 percent of what's inside us, ready and waiting to go to work for us. You might have the capabilities of a budding athlete, a musician, a scholar, or a community visionary hidden inside you just waiting to emerge if only you will let them be discovered.

I am endlessly amazed at the broad spectrum of people who undertake the task of defining and achieving success for themselves. Watching people and helping people develop themselves into "more of who they are" is one of my biggest passions. The people I work with aren't celebrities—they are just regular people like you and me. It amazes me to watch them grow and see how far they've come.

Here are a few examples of people I've worked with who have very different gifts. Each has developed her or his own idea of what it means to live a successful life and each is working daily to that end.

**“Nell”**

Nell is a high school geography teacher. She is bright and speaks two languages fluently, but her most immediately noticeable gift is her serenity. Her face has a glow and a gentle smile, and I’ve never heard her say anything unkind about anyone. Her family says they rely on her to be the level headed, stabilizing force in their household. Nell is focused on living a simple and spiritually based life.

I asked Nell one day where she gets her serenity. With a slow smile and a faraway look in her eyes, she told me about her memories of her grandmother baking bread. When Nell was just a girl, her grandmother told her how the long, rhythmic process of kneading the bread dough created time for prayer and meditation. When she was finished baking, Nell’s grandmother gave the fresh golden, warm loaves of bread away to other people.

She taught Nell her secret recipes and bread making techniques, and she used to take Nell along when she delivered her homemade bread to a sick neighbor or to a friend who needed a listening ear. Her grandmother’s customs became the model for Nell’s adult life.

Nell said her grandmother gave her a belief in every person’s unique contribution to the world. She said that almost every school year a few students approach her with the same question I asked her. They want to know how she got to be so peaceful. She tells them about the Bible and kneading bread.

**“Jorje”**

Jorje has the gifts of vision, persistence, and physical endurance. A record-setting salesman and an Inc. 500 business owner and father, Jorje has run several marathons, including the trek to the top of Pike’s Peak. All of his gifts worked together for him during the time-consuming, energy burning startup and growth phase of his company. They also sustained him through the grueling training sessions in preparation for his 26-mile races.

Jorje has the ability to “see” the results he wants to achieve and to get other people excited about achieving those goals, too. He selects key employees and surrounds himself with people who have one thing in common—a “blue flame” of motivation and a burning commitment. After some questioning, Jorje admits that he works constantly to develop his leadership skills so he can help their blue flames burn even hotter.

Jorje has passed along his “blue flame” and drive to achieve to his children. His daughter is a business owner in her own right, and his son is in college with one published music CD already to his credit. Jorje recently reached a long-term goal to sell

his successful business, and now he's focused on training for his next goal—to participate in the Iron Man (a marathon run *plus* a bike ride and distance swimming event).

### **“Maxine”**

Maxine is gifted with an artistic sense, a love of animals (especially cats), and a green thumb. She has been a retail merchandiser for 20 years, but also has several consuming outside interests. She's always had a soft spot for homeless cats, and she can't stand by without at least putting food and water on her porch when she notices one in the vicinity. Her current household cat inventory is five, but she has often provided temporary housing (and paid large vet bills) for one or two strays until homes were found for them, as well. Active in her local animal rescue, Maxie rides three miles on her bike four days a week to go feed feral cats in the shelter. As part of her volunteer efforts, she also telephones pet food manufacturers to solicit donated food for the animals.

Artistically, Maxine specializes in making old things new again. She has created and sold bracelets and picture frames produced with antique buttons and recycled vintage handkerchiefs into decorator pillows and architectural elements into garden and home décor. A 1960's-era mannequin stands in the hallway of her home modeling an ever-changing wardrobe of vintage clothing.

Maxine's love of plants and natural things led her to create custom topiaries from unique dried plant materials and decorative pots. She commuted 1 ½ hours to attend the several courses she needed to earn her master gardener designation. Maxine says her next pursuit will be to start a garden design business using her artistic sense and knowledge of plants to create beauty for other people.

### **“Nell, Jorje, and Maxine”**

The thing that impresses me most about Nell, Jorje, and Maxine is that each of them is intentionally active and working to become more of who they are and more of who they want to become. They are satisfied with their lives because they are celebrating their God-given gifts and developing them more fully. But they're also striving for more.

### **What If “Who I Am” Isn't Enough to Reach My Goals?**

Most successful people have one thing in common: they are constantly working, learning, and trying to make themselves better at what they do and who they are. Truly

successful people are humble, because they never truly feel they've arrived—they think of their life as a process of continuous improvement. The successful people I know are rarely content with their gifts “as is.” They consider their natural talents a starting place from which to begin the process of becoming all that they want to be. Success at one level merely inspires them to raise the bar to a higher level. They climb one mountain and then see three taller ones in the distance—and they set out to climb them, too. Successful people progress toward the next mountain the same way they progress down a smooth sidewalk—one step at a time.

You may need to shift some of your thinking to achieve your goals. It can be tempting to focus on who you are today and to worry about all of your perceived shortcomings. To grow toward your goals, you need to consciously shift your focus to where you want to be tomorrow or next year. Based on your vision of tomorrow, figure out what kind of person you will need to be and what knowledge, what skills, and what habits you'll need to become that person. Your next step will be logical—to work, bit by bit, to acquire all that is necessary to get you from here to there.

### **But I Don't Know What I Want!**

What if you don't know what you want? Many people have different reasons for not knowing what they want—or saying they don't know what they want. Some people simply haven't stopped long enough to think about it. They are so caught up in the momentum of daily life—pursuing whatever finds its way in front of them—that they've never considered what life might be like if they could create the life of their dreams. In some respects, this has served those people well—it has certainly kept them busy and in constant motion. What is less certain is whether that motion is also considered progress. Are you moving faster than ever before, but seeing little progress? Are you so busy with current day living that you've never considered anything else?

Some people can't define what they want, because they are forever focused on what *other* people want. They put their own wants and needs on the back burner to help parents, spouses, children, bosses, and countless others—and they've done it for so long that they've never really thought about what they could become. I'm not talking about situations where giving selflessly is the natural gift people are choosing to use. Those individuals seek and receive enjoyment from seeing others grow. I'm talking about the situations where someone *surrenders* his or her inner vision. When someone continually gives up their own dreams and goals to help others achieve theirs, they become very discontented with their life. Months and years pass, and it never seems to be the right time for them to take care of themselves or follow their heart—and resentment gradually builds beneath the surface.

You can only live your life according to someone else's agenda for so long—and the length of that time will vary from situation to situation. But at some point, your own wants and needs and your aspirations will start bubbling to the surface.

If you do things today that cause you stress, or if you're having a hard time feeling motivated, think about why. Is it simply because what you're doing isn't your idea? Are you following an agenda someone else created? Could it be that your life—and what you're doing with your life—is out of alignment with your assets and gifts? Do they conflict with your values? In Chapter 3, we're going to explore your assets, gifts, and values more in depth.

In the meantime, you can start to determine where you want to be by answering these questions:

- ◆ How do you define success? I'm not asking how society defines success, but how do YOU define it?
- ◆ If you were to describe the characteristics of a successful person, what would your list include?

The law of physics says that a body in motion seeks to stay in motion. The same is true of personal growth. When you set your first mini goals and achieve them, your confidence will propel you forward into more action and more success—on *your* terms.

### **I Have More Than Myself to Consider...**

A president of a client company once told me that he believes in “evolution, not revolution.” No one is suggesting that you change your entire life or try to become a totally different person.

I am a strong believer in the concept of commitment. I believe your commitment to marriage, parenthood, and other key relationships should not be taken lightly, no matter what your individual aspirations. If you make a promise, large or small, do your darnedest to keep it. It's one of my own secret messages from childhood, but it's still one that I want to live by and cultivate. Am I successful in doing this 100 percent of the time? No, but because it is important to me, I work hard to live by that guiding philosophy more often than not. For instance, I avoid making casual promises—I prefer to surprise someone with something that pleases them.

For most people, the decision to be more “on purpose” in the pursuit of personal excellence does not require a total departure from their current life and connections. It doesn't mean that you turn to your family one day, suitcase in hand, and say, “Well, it's been real but not very,” then walk off alone into the sunset.

Becoming more of who you are more often involves a series of tweaks and small steps, all focused toward a defined vision. It doesn't mean you have to do a total overhaul overnight. The people currently in your life can help stabilize you and give you continuity, support, and structure while you grow.

My clients tell me their relationships with spouses, parents and children, and friends improved when they started living "on purpose." Their personal self-confidence helped them become more open, more understanding, and more accepting of the imperfections in others.

A few people may choose to take more dramatic action to begin living a life that feels more consistent with who they are—it all depends on where you are now and how far you want to travel.

### **I Know Where I Want to Be—What Should I Do Next?**

In order to create different results in your life, you have to do different things. Did you ever try to enter a store or other public establishment and push and push on the door to no avail? No matter how hard you pushed, the door wouldn't budge. Then you looked down and saw the word "pull" painted in bold lettering about six inches from your nose! You changed your action; a light-handed pull on the handle opened the door, and you were in!

The same thing happens when you are working toward your goals. You are where you are today because of the actions you took up until now. If you're not achieving what you desire, take a look at what you're doing. Are you pushing against a door that just won't open? Unless you stop what you're doing and try something different, you will never get inside the building. There's a lesson to be learned here, and until you learn it, you are only wasting time and precious energy.

So how do you start developing new, effective actions and keep going until you reach your destination? I've been involved in many discussions about whether people get better results in self-improvement when they:

- ◆ *Think* themselves into new ways of *behaving*, or when they
- ◆ *Behave* themselves into new ways of *thinking*.

The two concepts are actually very much interrelated. Your thoughts drive your behavior, yet sometimes experimenting and testing the waters with your actions is what convinces you that a new way might work after all.

Your learned habits of thought—your secret messages—influence your actions. You react in certain ways to certain cues automatically, without consciously thinking

about them, because of the way you were conditioned. Imagine you are in a movie theater watching a suspense film. The heroine is alone in her house, it's nighttime, and a thunderstorm is brewing. The lighting is dim, and you can see the silhouettes of trees blowing violently outside the windows. The background violin music transitions from smooth and mellow to jagged and screechy—and it gets faster and louder. Then as the heroine walks down the hall toward a concealed doorway, you spontaneously shout, “Don't go in there!”

The actress can't hear you. You know it's only a movie, and that it's not real. In the plot, nothing has actually happened yet—but your pulse is racing, your tension is growing, and you call out to her anyway. The effects in the film work on your emotions and your behavior, because at some point, you learned what they are supposed to mean. You know that dark and stormy means threat and evil in the movies. Even though the villain can't pop out of the screen and get you, you react with jumps or shrieks of fear just the same.

To think your way into new actions, you must interfere with your automatic pattern of stimulus and response by *consciously choosing* a different, more effective action to use the next time a similar situation arises.

This concept reminds me of when I got my CPR certification in college so I could aid heart attack victims at my job if the need arose. Prior to taking this course, my conditioned reaction to health incidents of *any* severity was to run from the room and hide. Seriously. (I hope you don't think less of me for that!)

To change my actions—to become helpful in a crisis situation rather than running to hide—I had to consciously choose and learn a different, more effective action to use in this circumstance. So I took the class, and I practiced the chest compressions and rescue breathing in CPR training until I had it down perfectly. I have since forgotten some of the details of the training because it was so long ago, but to this day, I am better in crisis situations because I know what to do and can consciously choose to do it.

Acting your way into new habits of thinking reminds me of the motto for the State of Missouri: “Show me.” When you first begin a new venture or try something new, it's hard to feel confident. You can tell yourself, “Self, be confident!” but your self replies, “Yeah, right. I'm freaking out here!” right back at you.

You can use action to “shake up” your habits of thought by setting small, manageable action goals. With each small action goal you achieve, you prove to yourself that the bigger goal is also within reach. Each time you take it a little farther, stretching your capabilities inch by inch until the skeptic inside you becomes confident and self-assured.



Using both methods to develop yourself will increase your chances for good results—especially at the beginning when this is all new to you and you really need to see some positive growth and development to motivate you further along your path.

Daily positive self-talk will remind you of the actions you must take to achieve your goal. Self-talk can spur you on to take the *first* action, often the hardest step in the process.

On the other hand, when you start with “baby” action steps, you begin to accumulate small victories early on—and those victories will build your confidence.

As you progress further and reach some of the bigger milestones toward your goal, the positive results prove that you *are* capable of more than you previously thought possible. Your mind will begin creating new, energizing habits of thinking, and your progress will come progressively faster and easier.

The key to success is to make your thoughts and actions conscious—to take yourself off autopilot and *decide*. In personal growth, there is no such thing as trying. There is only deciding. There is a crucial difference between the two.

Have you or a loved one ever embarked on a “food intake management” program? What were the results? If *trying* to lose weight and *deciding* to lose weight were the same thing, I doubt there would be so many companies making billions of dollars selling diet programs and special foods!

### **How Can I Make Sure I’m Deciding, Not Just Trying?**

There is a big difference between deciding and just trying.

In order to succeed, you must understand *why* you are working toward a particular goal. Your willingness to adapt your actions and try new things is far greater when you have a lot at stake. What is the benefit you seek by achieving this particular goal? Your reason for wanting to achieve a particular goal may be more money, time, toys, improved relationships, recognition, spiritual growth, better health, or any of countless other motivations. What’s in this for you? What will be the positive outcome for you if you achieve your goal? Determine what your true motivation is and you’re well on your way to making a conscious decision.

Some people are more motivated to change because they want to avoid negatives. Perhaps they feel at risk in a particular area—financially, physically, or emotionally. Sometimes people feel a greater sense of urgency and a commitment to change if something they value is in jeopardy. For instance, a person might not be very motivated to change their eating habits just to lose 20 pounds, but if a health condition dictated a change in eating habits to prevent premature death, most of us would comply!

Changing our lives—through changing our actions and changing our secret messages—isn't as easy as waving a magic wand and poof—your dream has come true! There are obviously some obstacles you will need to overcome to achieve your vision. If there were no such obstacles, you would already be enjoying the rewards of success you dream of.

Everyone—even abundantly gifted people—has obstacles to overcome. This is why it's so important to be very clear on what you want and why you want it. How badly do you want it?

If you allow obstacles to stop you, you're just trying. You have not yet *decided* to pursue your goal. When you consciously *decide* to pursue your goal, you will move forward *despite* the obstacles—and you'll figure out how to deal with them along the way.

Remember the three successful people earlier in this chapter? Each one has obstacles that stand in their way—but they don't let those obstacles *stop* them from moving forward.

- ◆ Nell has a 15-year-old stepson overseas who keeps getting into scrapes with the law. Nell's household often receives middle-of-the night phone calls—her stepson pleading to be bailed out of jail. She has to work at staying centered, and sometimes she bakes a LOT of bread!
- ◆ Jorje dealt with numerous business obstacles on his way to the Inc. 500. He overcame a lack of capital, slow sales cycles, new competitors, and poorly producing sales reps. He rarely mentions his ongoing struggle with dyslexia, which makes it difficult for him to read the business books he loves to devour, and his long work hours make it difficult for him to make time to train for his marathons.
- ◆ Maxine, the master gardener, just recently celebrated five continuous years of sobriety. She has to choose every day not to drink, and she gets up at 5 a.m. to fit a daily Alcoholics Anonymous meeting into her busy schedule.

When you are focused on a positive future outcome and committed to moving forward, you can weather whatever challenges come your way. Roadblocks that would have stopped you before become merely small detours or delays in your journey. People, whose petty annoying habits used to ruin your day, will no longer take you off track, because your eyes are trained on something bigger and more important.

You *can* do this. You *can* invent your future. You *can* create new results in your life. You *can* change your habits of thought and remodel your habits of action—if the future you envision is important enough to you.

Now is the time to draw upon your inner resources. Now is the time to draw upon the support system of people who love you. Now is the time to draw upon your faith—a faith that God promised to provide you in abundance—and all you have to do is ask.

Your thoughts today are creating your actions tomorrow, and your actions are carrying you closer and closer to your goal. Unlock the potential that's waiting inside you!

### **How Can I Become More of Who I Am?**

By picking up this book, you're already headed in the right direction—toward changing and improving your life in some way—toward creating the life you want to live. Obviously, you're looking to make some changes in your life—whether that change is continuing personal growth and development to become the best you that you can be or whether that change is more specific and dramatic, like a change in career or lifestyle.

Congratulations on sticking with me this far. So far we've focused on developing an awareness about how your habits of thought are created and developed, explored your dreams for your future, and identified your desire to make some changes in your life to create that future of your dreams. You're already well on your way to seeing positive results because awareness, intent, and desire are the first steps to improving your life.

But while awareness, intent, and desire are critical to your success, they are not strong enough to overcome your secret messages on their own. We've already discussed how some of your early conditioning maintains the ability to influence your actions today—20, 40, or more years later—even without conscious thought.

In order to change those preprogrammed thinking habits, you will need to undergo a process of self-discovery, decision making, refocusing, planning, and disciplined action—to exchange automatic patterns of thinking and behaviors you have used up until now for new and conscious patterns of thinking.

This book will become your guide as you embark on a process to define a clear purpose and a destination for your life. As you become more focused and discover more about yourself, you will clarify this purpose and it will take shape in your mind—in a very detailed and real way. You will learn more about yourself—including why you selected this particular destination. This is likely to be a rather long trip—getting from where you are now to the destination of your choosing. Your high level of motivation now will help you sustain your energy for a trip that might contain roadblocks and detours. Once you decide on your destination, you will plot a route toward it—a route that might be somewhat similar to, or may be very different from, the road you are on today.

Ultimately, your ability to reach your destination and create the kind of life you want will directly correlate to whether or not your daily actions are consistent with the outcome you desire. Attaining the big dream will become a matter of completing the goal-focused items on your “To Do” list. It may take a while before you see results—not all actions result in an immediate payoff. And it will take time for you to think, decide, and learn along the way. You won’t get there overnight, but you *can* get there.

This book contains proven concepts to help you learn to develop and live the life you want. It will help you understand your own secret messages more fully and show you how they are impacting your life today. It will provide you the opportunity to uncover your natural gifts and assets. It will teach you how to build upon your strengths to create a foundation for your future success. It will help you consciously acknowledge the value of what you already have going for you so that you will feel more confident and able to take new actions into uncharted territory.

I’ve developed a simple acronym to help you remember the keys to unleashing your potential and creating the life you desire. I call it my SECRETS—and I want to share those secrets with you so that you can begin today—to embark on your journey toward the destination of your choosing.

**S** – Secret messages are inside you, influencing your actions.  
**E** – Each of your gifts and assets is waiting to work for you.  
**C** – Create your future by visualizing it in detail.  
**R** – Rewards and consequences are what motivate you to act.  
**E** – Each obstacle has a solution when you use your creativity.  
**T** – Talk to yourself to shape your habits.  
**S** – Step-by-step action is what makes your dreams come true.

Together we will begin that journey—a journey of self-discovery and learning that begins with and inside of you—for that is where the SECRETS really lie. This book will help you travel your own unique path, develop the thought processes necessary to create the future you want, design a step-by-step action plan to advance you on your journey, and take the actions that will make your fondest dreams come true!

Let us begin together—with you. Because the SECRETS are inside you.

**Chapter 2**  
**S – Secret Messages Are Inside You,**  
**Influencing Your Actions**

The human mind is an amazing thing. Like other complex mammals, humans are designed to live in the care of parents for a long time. There is so much growing to do and so much to learn. During the first few years of your life, you learn to walk, talk, hold a spoon, ride a bike, climb steps, make a friend, and hundreds of skills that will help you function as a human being.

You absorb all of this information and put it into long-term storage somewhere in the back of your mind to be accessed as needed. Whenever you require that knowledge or information, you bring it to the forefront of your mind because it is still in there. An adult who learned to roller skate or ride a bicycle as a child can go years without doing these things, but if they are so inclined, they need only put on a pair of skates or hop on a bike, and with a minimal amount of practice, they can do it just like they did years before. The skill and the knowledge are still there waiting to be accessed and used.

It's incredible to consider how much information is inside your brain, ready and waiting for the moment you will need it or want to use it. It's also interesting to realize that this internal reference library of yours doesn't distract you from the things and events that are right in front of you now. It just waits there in the background until you call it to the forefront.

You use some of the skills and information you accumulated as a child every day: when you brush your hair, hold a fork, button a button, or go to the refrigerator or freezer when you are looking for particular foods. This knowledge is so ingrained in you that you aren't even aware that you're accessing the information from your mind's storage system—you use it unconsciously.

Though it requires no conscious thought at all now, that basic set of knowledge and those basic skills that you use every day didn't come easily or automatically. As a child, your parents took you gently by the hand and guided you. They taught you things about the world around you. They showed you how to brush your hair, hold a fork, and button a button. They told you which things belonged in the refrigerator and which items should go in the cupboard. They repeated difficult words so you could model the sounds they made, and they pointed to the objects the words represented until you made the connection. They balanced you when you took your first steps and picked you back up the first 50 times you stumbled and fell.

Almost all of the things you learned as a child that you still know today, you learned through a process of repetition. You tried, failed, tried again, failed again, and so on until you mastered the skills or remembered what you needed to know.

Your parents' patience was sometimes tested when you forgot to wash your hands with soap after using the bathroom (again) or when you left the front door standing open and the dog escaped from the house. And they reminded you when you didn't

---

automatically say thank you after opening a birthday present from a grandparent. But they prompted you on all these things, over and over again, until you learned their expectations—the set of norms for your world—and you did them every time without reminders or prompting—automatically.

Most of us were encouraged by our parents and praised or congratulated when we accomplished something new. Some of their messages to us were things we should do, like picking up our clothing off the floor. Many of them were messages about what we should *not* do, to keep us safe. Still others were words of frustration or disappointment.

“Good boy, Joey! You are such a big boy!”

“Why are you such a pest?”

“You are the laziest kid I have ever seen!”

“Never cross the street without holding my hand!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Don’t spend your money all in one place.”

“You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.”

In addition to the skills and knowledge you learned and now retain in your subconscious, your brain stored these messages, too. These messages formulated your attitudes and your habits of thought. They, like skill information, wait in the recesses of your mind until the situation warrants them. Then they pop to the surface and influence your actions—sometimes at the forefront of your mind and other times lying just below the subconscious, but influencing your behavior nonetheless. This is why, so often, our behaviors often reflect our parents’ words.

As we were growing, we didn’t only learn by being told; we also learned by observing. Our parents weren’t always aware that we learned things from them that they hadn’t intended. By observing their behaviors and their reactions to certain things, we probably learned a lot of things they never considered—like bosses are mean or that football is the most important thing about Sundays. We learned that wives should be kissed—or shouted at—based on what we saw in our homes. We learned that money is an abundant resource for security and enjoyment—or that it is scarce and that those who have a lot of money shouldn’t be trusted. We watched our parents make dinner for a sick neighbor—or swear at a referee. We saw them drink beer—or pray. We absorbed and internalized what we saw—and our environment became the norm for us.

**I Didn't Like What My Parents Did, So I'm Doing Things Differently.**

As adults, we have the ability to choose different actions from the ones we learned as children—*if* we decide to do so and act on purpose.

Left to habit, however, our actions automatically reflect the things we heard or saw being modeled when we were young, even if we don't fundamentally agree with them. As a parent, most of us promised ourselves we would never say certain things to our kids—the things we hated hearing while we were growing up. But in the heat of anger or frustration, we hear ourselves yelling those same exact phrases before we even realize what we've said. Does “because I said so, that's why!” sound familiar to you?

It's hard to change many basic “habits of doing” that we learned—especially those we learned at a young age—because we're not always aware of the habits of thinking, or the conditioned attitudes, behind the actions.

Some examples of thought processes that influence our actions unconsciously might include:

- ◆ Spare the rod and spoil the child.
- ◆ Keep a stiff upper lip.
- ◆ It's not what you say, it's what you do that counts.
- ◆ Time waits for no man.
- ◆ A penny saved is a penny earned.
- ◆ Respect your elders.
- ◆ You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

The values and beliefs we learned when we were small are influencing our habits of doing, even today. If we have the “silk purse” attitude ingrained inside us, we may think people either “have it” or they don't. We might not look for the hidden potential inside them or think about how we could help them tap into it. We would simply assume that people are what they are, never destined to change—at least not much.

If we learned to run our lives by the clock, we may tend to be very reliable and prompt, or we may compromise our relationships when they interfere with our daily schedule of events.

At some point, your parents and others who were important in your young life noticed your skills, interests, and physical characteristics and reinforced them by talking about them—either positively or negatively. Sometimes they boiled them down into labels they attached to you or generalizations about the kind of person you were.



Individuals and different generations sometimes had very different views and values about what traits were desirable in a person—and it's very likely they communicated those views and values to you through the things you heard them say. It's also very likely these opinions still influence your behavior today.

You're an adult now, but are you still acting in accordance with how you were labeled as a child? Do you still play the part of "the smart kid," "the fat one," "the jock," or "the tomboy?" How do you feel about that now? Do you still think of *yourself* in those terms?

### **"Anthony"**

Anthony just received an invitation to his 15<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, and he doesn't think he wants to go. When he was younger, his "awkward stage" lasted into his early 20's. In high school, he was teased about his small stature, bad skin, and offbeat taste in clothing—and didn't go to sports or social events. Instead he chose to stay at home and mess around on his dad's computer. He got so good at using software that he started to develop his own games. Anthony created a new computer game and submitted it as his senior project.

Fifteen years later, Anthony is 6'3" tall, and his teenaged acne is long gone. Thanks to his creativity and computer programming skills, he is now the vice president of an internationally recognized game development company. He is married and has three children. But despite his current financial and family-based successes, Anthony is still nervous about the reunion. All this time later, he still remembers the heckling and teasing from high school and wonders whether he will fit in.

Sometimes, like in Anthony's case, we are tempted to make decisions in our current lives based on old messages. Memories of the feelings we had back then stick with us long after the circumstances that created them are gone. When we take the time to be aware of the old habits of thinking that are influencing us now and think about where those habits of thinking came from, we can choose to think in a new way based on our current circumstances instead. We can decide to take action despite the old feelings and secret messages and prove them obsolete.

### **"Sarah"**

Sarah was always "the princess" in her group of friends. Her parents gave her the best of everything. Every day she spent two hours in front of the mirror perfecting her billowy blonde hairstyle and extensive makeup regime. Sarah's mother, in particular, expected Sarah to look good all the time and to act with the poise of a beauty queen.

When Sarah tried out for the Junior Miss title at age 16, she didn't win, and her mother's harping on the subject reminded her daily that she had disappointed her. Sarah dated the quarterback of the football team and married him right after high school.

Sarah had two children in quick succession, both "surprises," and she was not prepared for the sacrifices she would have to make. After years of flaunting her physical assets, Sarah's body refused to return to its pre-baby slenderness, and she hardly had time to shower each day, much less to apply makeup and fuss over her hair. Her husband's salary as a schoolteacher meant that her customary fashion buying binges were out of the question, and she was constantly exhausted from the demands of caring for her children. She grew irritable with them and sometimes smacked them in her frustration.

For a while Sarah despaired. Then she started blaming her circumstances on her husband. She didn't believe she should be deprived of the luxuries she had grown up with, so she began to go out at night with her girlfriends, and her starving ego led her to shameless flirting and trying to pick up men. Finally Sarah moved out of town, abandoned her husband and children, got a job as a cosmetics consultant in a department store, and started again on her own.

Sarah's life is a clear example of how difficult it is to live in conflict with your deep-down habits of thought on a long-term basis. Sarah's mother's expectations that Sarah be physically perfect as a girl still tormented her as an adult, and Sarah had grown accustomed to the self-absorbed life she had in her young years. She married to maintain her popularity and live out a romantic fantasy, imagining that her sweetheart would grant her every wish. But real life just wasn't what she expected. As time passed, the pull toward self-centeredness was so strong that she was willing to uproot her life and destroy her family to satisfy it.

### **What Do I Do When My Life Doesn't Meet My Expectations?**

Most of us will experience times in our life when our current life situation doesn't meet our expectations. When this happens, you have several choices about how you'll handle that. You can:

1. Change your expectations;
2. Change your life; or
3. Live with the stress that the mismatch will cause.

I don't recommend option number 3. Long-term stress usually has a negative impact on your health—in the form of tension headaches and excess stomach acid, just to name a few problems. Some studies have even linked it to heart disease and cancer.

The effects of stress also become evident in the way you talk to people and in the way you act. It can cause you to overreact to ordinary small problems, and it creates a gray haze that clouds your view of the world.

If you are living with constant stress, you start expecting to be stressed out (it becomes a habit of thought). When it really gets bad, you can become apathetic and lose the will to try to change your circumstances—or you start unintentionally recreating the same stress-inducing crises you have grown accustomed to and you begin a downward spiral.

We'll talk a lot about option number 2—changing your life—later in this book. It is the intent of this book that the ideas introduced here *will* help make a difference in your life. And if you want to change parts of your life or some things about yourself, I'll share some proven tools you can use to create those changes.

Option number 1 is changing your expectations. Your expectations, or your habits of thought, are the assumptions under which you are operating—the assumptions under which you currently make decisions, take actions, and live your life. They are secret messages conditioned into your memory based upon past experiences or upon information you internalized long ago.

Somehow along the way, you learned that things should be a certain way. Either you saw them happen that way or someone told you that's the way they should go. Now those ideas have become an unwritten rule inside your mind—*that's* the way it's supposed to be. When things don't go the way you think they should—according to those unwritten rules—you feel uneasy, get angry, or feel down in the dumps.

Did you ever notice that some of the most fun times you have are the result of ideas that come to you at the spur of the moment? You don't have time to think about it and process it according to your unwritten rules. The joy of the idea takes you by surprise—and you're right there doing it, not thinking about it.

Have you also noticed that sometimes the long-anticipated vacation or holiday gathering doesn't measure up to what you imagined? You've probably built it up to such a level of perfection in your mind that you set yourself up to feel cheated if everything doesn't go exactly right—like if Aunt Margaret says something rude or if it rains during your week at the beach. And really, how often do things go off perfectly without a hitch?

### **What's Wrong With Having High Expectations?**

There's nothing wrong with having high expectations. In fact, having high expectations about your own actions and the things you can control is usually a good thing. When you expect a lot from yourself, you behave accordingly, and you reach to

meet the level of performance you expect from yourself. When you have high aspirations or big ideas about what you want to create in your life, you feel energized and motivated to act. That's terrific!

It's appropriate to issue a word of caution about expectations, however. Sometimes your expectations can be so unrealistic that you can't help but be disappointed. For instance, if you expect yourself to ski without even one fall your first time out on the slopes, you're guaranteed disappointment. Unless you have some foundation of skiing-related skills or an incredible degree of talent, you simply need to accept the fact that either you will never leave the bunny slopes or you will indeed fall at some point. It's inevitable.

The other way high expectations are a downfall is when they get twisted into some sort of sense of entitlement. That drives me ballistic! I've seen this occur with recent graduates when they are newly hired employees. Perhaps this person's parents or one or more of their siblings work in high-paying jobs and lead prosperous lifestyles. Or maybe this person was the beneficiary of someone else's income, having received a brand-new sports car at age 16 or unlimited spending privileges at a favorite store.

Whatever the reason, this rookie assumes he or she will automatically receive the same rewards or live the same lifestyle—and do it the first day on the job. Perhaps you've seen this, too—when an employee expects to be paid top dollar before proving himself and paying his dues in the business. He's the one who says, in effect, "Pay me \$50,000 now and *then* you'll see what I can do!"

Whenever you have unrealistic expectations about conditions over which you have no control—whether they be the weather or someone else's actions—you've created the perfect setup for disappointment. You *can* control your own choices and your actions, but other people's actions are up to them. And of course, no one can control whether a thunderstorm will ruin your perfectly good plans for an outdoor picnic. On the other hand, it's up to you whether you cancel the picnic or just move it indoors.

### **My Mother Told Me Never To Settle For Second Best...**

Imagine a treadmill at the gym. You walk and walk, but you always stay in the same place. Turn the speed up and you're running—you're burning more energy—but the scenery still hasn't changed. Something similar happens in your life when your primary focus is on having more, newer, better, faster, or whatever somebody else has. You pick up speed, but you're not really getting anywhere. No matter how fast you try to fill it, your cup will never be full—because you always want more.

---

You can increase your performance *and* increase your peace of mind when you learn to differentiate between:

- ◆ Having what you want, and
- ◆ Wanting what you have.

To succeed at having what you want means you need to plan and work, strategize and prioritize. You should think—really think—about whether the things you want are things you are choosing or things you think you *should* want. “Shoulds” are born of attitudes you learned—like thinking that a big house or big jewelry signifies success. But is that attitude really who you are now? It might be time for a little self-discovery.

Every goal requires some sort of investment from you—whether that is in money, time, or energy. If you don’t fully consider the return on your investment before you set out to acquire something, you may get what you thought you wanted only to find it is an empty victory. Is the end result worth what you will need to invest to achieve it? You need to weigh what you want against what you will need to give in order to get it.

One of the ways you can increase your level of satisfaction and happiness in your life is to feel good about who you are already. Consciously doing this also increases your energy level so you can work on your goals and focus on creating the life you really want.

If you didn’t learn this earlier in life, you may need to teach *yourself* to want what you already have. This is a habit of thought—and like any other, you can teach yourself to think in a particular way through repetition, just like the other things you know and internalized since childhood were learned through repetition.

You can teach yourself to look at your face in the mirror, for instance, and say, “You know, I have a pretty good nose,” instead of, “My hair is thinning.” You can teach yourself to look at the good qualities your spouse brings to your marriage instead of focusing on the ways they fall short. It takes purposeful action to change your expectations, but through practiced repetition, it can be done.

### **If I Change My Expectations, Aren’t I Compromising My Values?**

Changing your expectations doesn’t mean abandoning the things that are important to you or compromising your views of right and wrong. Values that are important to you now will continue to be important to you in the future.

But consider how many things we have pre-conceived ideas about that really don’t matter. Think about how many expectations you have about situations that are really value neutral—expectations that only interfere with your feeling satisfied with

your life. I mean, who cares if you use a walk-behind mower and your neighbor tools around on a lawn tractor? What does it really matter if your family wants to drown your fabulous cooking in pools of ketchup? And do you really need a new car every two years? What do any of these things really have to do with your values? And where did these expectations come from, anyway?

### **Don't Some of My Childhood Messages Help Me?**

Yes, many of the secret messages you received in childhood are good. They served you well as a child, and some of them still help you as an adult. Some of them are simply outdated—they were appropriate for your safety and well-being as a child, but they are no longer necessary to your success as an adult.

Other childhood messages aren't so helpful. Experts estimate that more than three-fourths of the messages we received as young children were negative—a series of “no's” and “don'ts.” However, your family may not be statistically average. You might know families whose members seem to be more positive or more confident than most other families you know. You, in fact, might be one of these people. Certain empowering family characteristics appear to pass from generation to generation like a continuous thread. While positive parenting is sometimes influenced by hereditary factors, most positive habits of thinking are learned. In other words, people with positive habits of thinking influence their children to think positively, as well—and these habits are passed along further through the daily interaction of family members.

### **“Gerard”**

Gerard was born into a long line of intellectuals and community activists. At the age of seven, he began standing next to his Aunt Helene while they served hot food to homeless children and adults in Chicago. During his annual month-long summer vacations with Helene, he went to ethnic festivals and visited urban churches with her. While trooping around with his aunt, Gerard mingled with people he never would have met in his own quiet suburban neighborhood outside Boston.

Almost every relative Gerard could think of had completed graduate studies in one or more subjects, but their education didn't make them snobbish and unreachable. Like Aunt Helene, they were always open to learning new things and practical in their thinking.

Gerard's family contributed to society by volunteering and by giving funds to the charities they favored. Through their charity work, they hobnobbed with the wealthy and influential personalities in their communities—in addition to working directly with

---

people who were not affluent. As a result, they were pretty much comfortable interacting with anyone, regardless of their social or financial status.

Gerard finished his master's degree in public administration and got a job working on economic development in a small city in the northeast. His education and family experience in volunteer service helped him in his diversified role. He felt comfortable whether he was chatting with the most impoverished citizens on the street or lobbying for his economic stimulus proposals with community leaders.

As in Gerard's case, the secret messages you learned as a child influence the picture of yourself you hold today. Those messages may impact your choice of schooling or your choice of career. They may help you mix and mingle with a diverse group of people, or they could be causing you to automatically filter certain types of people out of your life.

### **I Like My Own Habits of Thought, But My Spouse...**

Things get more complicated when your set of secret messages bumps up against someone else's. This happens at work, in social settings, and among close friends. But it has the biggest impact in marriages and families.

Almost all of our most closely held beliefs were developed in our childhood family setting. They defined our perception of the roles of mother and father, husband and wife, child and sibling. They determined what was important to us and what we perceived as right and wrong. Because so much of our time as children was spent in the family setting, our secret messages about family—and what a family is, does, means, and is all about—are probably the largest group of secret messages or patterns of thought we hold in our minds.

Secret messages also have such a huge influence on our lives with our own children and spouses because we are most “real” when we are with our families. Outside our homes we are much more conscious of our setting, and we adapt our behavior to suit people we are with. At home, on the other hand, we can let down our guard and we don't have to be anyone in particular. Our habits rise to the surface because we're not really looking. We're just living.

As a teen, I heard a lot about the importance of having backgrounds in common with my future husband. I'm sure I was like most teenagers in that I rejected the idea as being old-fashioned. While in college in a much larger city than my hometown, the most interesting people to me were the ones who were different, not the same as me.

When my fiancé and I went through premarital counseling, our pastor touched upon the importance of shared values, but I was in love. Things as mundane as views

about money and child rearing were not on my agenda. I had already picked out my dress and planned my big day. It took me a while after the wedding to understand how my husband's and my differing secret messages in certain areas would impact our relationship. Fortunately, we had very similar perspectives on some of the biggest issues.

### **Is My Marriage Doomed if We Don't Agree on a Lot?**

If you and your spouse don't agree on a lot—or your backgrounds are very dissimilar and you don't share many of the same secret messages—it doesn't necessarily mean your marriage is doomed. But it can make your marriage and family life more difficult—and you may have more hurdles to overcome than couples that share similar backgrounds.

Only a family counselor and the two of you can arrive at a definitive answer on this question.

In general, it probably depends more upon the specific topics you disagree about and how you handle opposing views than anything else. Consider also how you solve your problems, how well you get past disagreements about other issues, and how deeply you are both committed to being married.

Habits of thought toward marriage itself and beliefs about its central importance to your life and purpose vary tremendously from person to person. They've also changed dramatically in our culture over time. In earlier years, marriage was overall an economic transaction—two family fortunes were legally bound together to create a larger farm or more diplomatic power. Love was often considered irrelevant in selecting a spouse. Roles for the husband and wife were clearly defined and almost universally accepted: the man was the undisputed head of the household and the woman kept the household running. Women didn't have the economic wherewithal, for the most part, to consider any course other than to endure whatever circumstances their fathers and husbands created for them.

Today, of course, the possible roles of husband and wife cover a vast spectrum. It makes things easier in some ways, because more people have the opportunity to fill the roles for which they are best suited. Not all women are natural housekeepers, and not all men enjoy the thrill of the economic hunt. But this change to a more individual-based and flexible social setting has created more potential topics for conflict, as well. A wife's habits of thought might go head-to-head with a husband's assumptions governing the institution or bonds of marriage. One or both of them may still be carrying around the “unwritten rules” they got from their parents.

In addition, women and men today have more choices about whether they will enter into a relationship and if so, when. They also have more options if they choose to



leave a relationship. Economics are no longer the glue for marriage that they were in earlier years. More emphasis is placed on the quality of the love relationship between spouses. The biggest tests of the relationship, ironically, can occur over the little day to day things—like who will take out the trash, who has the authority to make which decisions about money, or who mows the lawn. This comes back to the question of what assumptions each partner brings into the marriage—what secret messages each brings from their upbringing—and it comes full circle.

### **“Regina and Don”**

Regina was upset. Lately, she and her husband, Don, seemed to be arguing constantly, and she worried that the ongoing conflict was beginning to gnaw away at the foundation of their relationship. When the couple married, they were both 34 years old, and Regina felt confident that their maturity and their two years experience living together prior to the marriage would virtually guarantee their success. She believed strongly in the “till death us do part” portion of their wedding vows, but despite her concern about the couple’s two young children and their eight years of marriage, she recently started fantasizing about finding an escape route.

Regina and Don’s premarital life was romantic and fun. Both professionals, they met after both were promoted out of their hometowns and into lucrative jobs. They were dazzled with one another and made a quick and relatively smooth transition to their live-in relationship. Together they built social and community contacts in their new environment, and they spent their evenings mingling with friends and weekends water-skiing and cruising the nearby river on their motorboat. When they decided to marry, Regina and Don pooled their resources to buy a luxurious home and made plans to merge their bank and investment accounts.

But soon after the wedding, Regina noticed that she was feeling annoyed with Don over small and silly things. She didn’t like the way he turned all of his t-shirts inside out before he put them in the laundry. She didn’t like his apparent assumption that she would be responsible for washing his clothing. After all, Don did all that for himself before he said, “I do.” Although she felt badly about it later, Regina picked fights with her new husband about things like house cleaning, bill paying, and brands of toothpaste. She felt she should clear things up right away to make sure their marriage would start off on the right track.

After the first six months or so, the newly married couple stabilized into a new routine, and they appeared to be almost back to their premarital tranquility. Their next big shakeup came three years later when their first child, Lindsey, was born. The couple was overjoyed at the arrival of their daughter, but the fighting began again—over

diapering duties and who should do the 2 a.m. feeding (both were still employed full-time). Regina was outraged that Don expected to continue participating in the golf league, Lions Club, and daily racquetball matches while she juggled work and child care demands. Don was disappointed that Regina didn't quit her job and devote herself to being a full-time mom. Regina continued in her career, partly to fund nice things like their family's country club membership. She admitted that she also kept her job because, for her, work was a lot less stressful than parenting.

As Lindsey grew and their son, Adam, arrived, the couple's disagreements covered the same territory over and over. Don was a strong believer in large hot breakfasts and extensive on-the-floor playtime with the children. Regina loved her children dearly, but felt overwhelmed just trying to get *anything* on the table before work. She flew around the house every morning getting herself and the children clean and dressed in something presentable. Then she drove 10 miles out of her way to drop them off at a quality day care center. After working a full day, she fought traffic, racing to pick up the kids before the day care closed. While Don played with them, she nuked something easy for dinner or ordered take-out before tucking the kids in and collapsing into bed.

The couple's recurring arguments were clues to their conflicting secret messages. Each had ingrained attitudes about the way children should be raised, and each made assumptions about what mothers and fathers should do—but their assumptions were very different. Their child-related disagreements were particularly severe because they did share at least one attitude about parenting—that parents should go to any lengths to protect the interests of their children.

Although they never directly talked about it, Don thought Regina didn't care about the kids the way she should because she didn't choose to be a fulltime mom. She thought he was being unreasonable in his expectations of her—she tried to balance work and motherhood for the sake of the family. He believed in making children clean their plate and insisted on them eating vegetables; she let them eat as they please because she wanted their dinner experience to be positive and stress-free. She believed in early bedtimes; he didn't worry about the clock if he and the kids were having a good time.

Things weren't getting any better. Regina realized they were bickering about the same few issues over and over again without making any progress. Their disagreements were creating distance between them. Regina convinced Don to go to counseling with her. She loved her husband and didn't want their marriage to end.

During counseling, the couple was able to identify some of the reasons their relationship changed when they got married. Living together wasn't difficult for them, because there had been no prior expectation of roles to follow—they made their own rules. Once they got married, however, the old scripts from their families of origin

---

started to run: what does a wife do, what does a husband do, attitudes toward child rearing, money, running a married household, etc. Their arguments about the same things—over and over again—were the result of conflicting habits of thought.

Regina and Don focused on rediscovering their common ground. The couple successfully overcame some of their differences, because they identified them and made decisions on how to handle them. Regina changed her work schedule to a three-day week. She was happier and more involved with the kids because she wasn't so rushed and tired all the time. By maintaining some work life, she still had the opportunity to keep her skills fresh and talk to grownups. Don was more content because the children were now getting more of their mother's time, and the household climate was far less stressful and a lot more fun than before.

Regina and Don didn't completely mesh their thought processes. They still disagreed about certain topics. What did change in their relationship is that they no longer tried to force the other to agree. They showed their affection for one another by consciously making a point to accommodate the other's preferences from time to time. They let things ride a little more, no longer feeling the need to challenge every area of difference. But their biggest achievement was their new, shared habit of thought: that the quality of their relationship was the most important thing.

### **Why Do I Feel So Guilty All The Time?**

Feelings of guilt arise when you subconsciously judge yourself, your actions, or your emotions against your secret messages and you are not measuring up to them. Guilt feelings can be helpful in situations when they urge you to do the right thing, even if it's difficult or inconvenient to do so. On the other hand, unfounded guilt can erode your confidence, sometimes preventing you from taking action toward your goals.

If you feel uneasy and guilty more often than you'd like, or you don't know why you feel guilty, try to identify the habits of thought you are using as a yardstick. Remember that your habits of thought were developed through repetition, and they were stored without being evaluated by your brain. Some of your habits of thought might be obsolete and not relate to the person you are today. They are in there and can't be unlearned; however, you can reduce unreasonable guilt feelings by working to overshadow the old, outdated messages with new, supportive ones.

### **“Teresa”**

Teresa, a petite and vigorous woman without a speck of gray hair, was the first American-born child in her Italian family. Her grandparents and parents immigrated

together to Philadelphia from Naples, Italy, during the 1920's. Teresa was born in her grandparents' house in 1932 at the height of the Great Depression.

When she was a young child, her grandmother tended her while both of her parents worked 12- to 14-hour days in a local restaurant. Her father baked Italian pastries, and her mother waited tables. They worked hard, because every penny was needed to sustain the family. Under her grandmother's care, Teresa learned to scrub the house till it gleamed, to cook, and to grow vegetables in a garden behind the house so the family always had food. "Remember, little one, there's nothing more important than family," her grandmother would say. "We work hard and sacrifice to provide for them."

Teresa grew to love plants during the time she spent in the garden and dreamed of studying botany. She decided not to marry and instead went to college, the only girl from her neighborhood to go. Teresa thought she noticed some sadness on her mother's face when she announced her plans to move away, but her parents encouraged Teresa to follow her dream, and they worked extra hours to fund her tuition.

Although she loved college, Teresa felt guilty that she was placing an extra burden on her parents. Many of her girlfriends from school already had families of their own and provided for their aging parents as well. Others had taken jobs so they could contribute money to the rent or buy groceries.

Teresa couldn't shake her uneasiness about the financial strain that her college bills were placing on her parents. During a visit home at Christmas break, she told them she planned to quit college and get a job. Their reaction amazed her. "This is a new world, Teresa. We came to America so you could have a better life. We want to do this for us as well as you. Live your dream."

As a child, Teresa's grandmother taught her about the value of hard work and sacrifice for the sake of family. Teresa was so concerned about doing her own part for her family that it hadn't occurred to her that the best thing she could do for her parents was to succeed in her own way.

### **How Can I Tell Whether My Secret Messages Are Holding Me Back?**

Are your secret messages helping you or hindering you? Are they holding you back? Read through the statements below, and place a check mark next to any that apply to you.

- I am not getting the results I want in my life.
- I seem to make the same mistake over and over again, even when I know a better way to go.

- 
- ❑ It is hard for me to talk about my successes.
  - ❑ I feel guilty when I place my priorities ahead of someone else's.
  - ❑ My spouse and I seem to rerun the same arguments over and over again about the same issues.
  - ❑ I have a lot of great ideas, but I don't seem to get around to doing them.
  - ❑ I'd rather agree than argue, even when I know the other person is wrong.
  - ❑ I go along doing the right things; then I suddenly sabotage myself by doing something stupid.
  - ❑ There are things I think I could do if I wanted to, but I just don't want to stick my neck out and risk failing.
  - ❑ I have a track record of bad relationships.
  - ❑ I seem to be on a new diet every month, but I still don't lose weight.
  - ❑ Life is hard, and I feel gloomy a lot of the time.

Every person has his or her strengths and weaknesses, so it's likely that you checked at least one item on the list above. But if you checked more than two or three, your habits of thought may indeed be limiting you and holding you back.

Your thoughts direct your actions. If you are talking to yourself regularly about your shortcomings, you are reinforcing them. Have you ever used one of your habits of thought as an excuse for ineffective behavior? For example:

“I am what I am—deal with it.”

“The stupid slow drivers made me late.”

“Good riddance. Men are scum.”

“I almost started my own business.”

“I'm big-boned, that's all.”

“I didn't get the promotion because it's all political.”

“If only I had saved more money earlier in my career.”

The good news is that there are several ways you can overcome your prior programming. The bad news is—only you can decide to do it, and you have to follow through by taking action.

**How Long Does It Take To Change, And How Much Change Is Possible?**

Our society these days expects everything to be like instant pudding—throw in the ingredients, give it all a quick spin with the mixer and a short time in the fridge, and it's ready to go. But personal change isn't like instant pudding. It just doesn't work that way.

The secret messages you've carried with you since early childhood are deeply ingrained. What's more, the messages that were most important to you at one time will be hard to override. The timeframe required for change will depend largely on you and your commitment to changing.

Victories from continuous personal improvement are measured inch by inch. Right now you spend the vast majority of your day doing things automatically, without really being aware of them. In order to improve habits of thinking or doing, you have to turn off the autopilot and become conscious—of almost everything you think and do. It takes time and repetition of desired thoughts and actions for them to become your new secret messages.

You have a greater likelihood of success if you choose only one or two items at a time to work on, so you can concentrate your energies more effectively on them. If you are considering a particularly challenging life change like getting sober or overhauling your eating habits for the long term, devote your inner resources to just that one top priority.

The depth and breadth of attitudes within you is much greater than you know—and many rarely, if ever, surface in your awareness. You will always be you. Even if you decide to transform part of yourself, the whole of you is such a complex and miraculous creature that you need never worry about losing your identity in the process of change. At the same time, you have far more potential inside you than you will ever use—there are no limits on your capacity to excel.

**Chapter 3**  
**E – Each of Your Gifts and Assets is**  
**Waiting to Work for You**

In the last chapter, we drew a parallel between society's expectations today and making "instant pudding"—that train of thought that suggests that absolutely everything can be quick and easy. Society today also wants us to believe that if only we can become quicker and busier, we will snag the brass ring of success. But is it really better for you to do more and do it faster than ever before?

During the last five years or so, I've seen a groundswell of support for the idea of simplifying and slowing down. People are getting tired of the whirlwind lifestyle that finds them committed to too much with no time to rest, much less to think. They feel like the car that hasn't been getting routine maintenance or oil changes—their gears are starting to grind, and their worn tires are losing traction. They have been doing, doing, doing and haven't stopped consider why.

Many of the people who are the most dissatisfied with their lives have something in common: they all feel as though outside forces are controlling them. They're trying to handle expectations that are coming from all different directions, and of course, everyone of those seem like they should be at the top of the list. The other thing these people have in common: They are so caught up in responding to others that they've forgotten they have choices.

By now you are probably aware of several secret messages that have influenced your past actions. This chapter is all about stepping back and slowing down for a moment—it's about thinking about who you really are and what you have locked inside you. This chapter is all about you and self-discovery. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions and exercises here, and you don't have to share this with anyone unless you choose to do so.

### **How Do I Figure Out What My Gifts Are?**

There are a number of ways to identify your natural talents. People are usually automatically attracted to activities they have a natural knack for doing and avoid doing things where they don't have natural gifts.

Let's take a first cut at it. Start by thinking about the last time you were playing or working on something and totally lost track of time. Ask yourself:

- ◆ What was I doing at the time?
- ◆ Was it a hobby?
- ◆ Was it a specific task at work?
- ◆ What was it about the task that got me so absorbed that I didn't want to stop?



- ◆ What were the pieces of the task that appealed to me the most?
- ◆ Are there other, similar tasks I seek out or skills I enjoy using?

Your answers to these questions probably identified one or more talents you can apply and develop to achieve greater success. For your purposes right now, it doesn't matter whether you identified one item or ten. It doesn't matter whether or not the items you identified are ones you can clearly associate with making money. The value of your gifts and talents cannot be measured solely in monetary terms.

Another way to do a quick assessment of your gifts is to consider the external feedback you receive from other people.

- ◆ What do people compliment me about?
- ◆ What positive things have I overheard someone saying about me?
- ◆ What nice things has somebody said directly to me about me?
- ◆ Is there some skill, attitude, or technique I have mastered that they appreciate?
- ◆ Is there something about my personality that they like?
- ◆ Do I frequently get asked to volunteer to do certain things? Why?
- ◆ Do I notice any common themes in the positive feedback I get from other people?

You might not give yourself as much credit for your gifts and assets as other people do, but you probably should. Listen to what people say, and then draw your own conclusions, but don't be too quick to dismiss the positive feedback in the name of humility. There is often real validity in what people tell you or say about you—and these kinds of comments can often help you identify gifts you can build upon.

### **How Can I Figure Out Who I Am and What I Could Be?**

No human knows yet what you are capable of becoming, but most people are capable of becoming far more than they are right now—just by continuing to use and build on the gifts and assets they already have. The foundation of all that you can be is already inside of you—it's just a matter of taking time to do a self-assessment so you can more readily identify your talents, skills, assets, and gifts. Most people don't consciously think about these things until they embark on a program of self-improvement such as this one. You will be pleased to discover that most people find this kind of exercise a very positive experience—it usually helps them realize they have a lot more going for them and a lot more options than they ever thought possible.

This process of self-discovery is extremely important because:

- ◆ If you plan to be the architect of your own life, you are in a better position to evaluate yourself than anyone else is;
- ◆ You will be the most successful when you build upon your natural abilities; and
- ◆ Your perspectives and abilities change over time, so it's useful to revisit your answers periodically.

Let's start by identifying *your* specific gifts and assets. Answer the questions below as completely and candidly as you can. Don't worry about whether your assets are inherited or learned—they are yours either way. These answers are only for you, (unless you choose to share them) so there is no such thing as bragging. Remember to include both personal and business-related assets and gifts.

### **My Assets and Gifts Inventory**

1. What are the top three successes I've had at work/in my career?
2. What are my top three victories in my personal life?
3. I have natural abilities in the following areas (check all that apply and add specifics in the space provided if it will help you recall later):
  - Logic and math \_\_\_\_\_
  - Speaking and writing \_\_\_\_\_
  - Getting along with other people \_\_\_\_\_
  - Physical activities and athletics \_\_\_\_\_
  - Understanding myself and who I am \_\_\_\_\_
  - Music \_\_\_\_\_
  - Dealing with plants, animals, and nature \_\_\_\_\_
  - Imagination and visual arts \_\_\_\_\_
  - Developing new ideas \_\_\_\_\_
  - Adapting ideas for new uses \_\_\_\_\_
  - Organizing and implementing \_\_\_\_\_
  - Getting things done quickly/on time \_\_\_\_\_
  - Making sure details are in order \_\_\_\_\_

- 
- Handling crises while staying cool \_\_\_\_\_
  - Perseverance and endurance \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ability to get positive results \_\_\_\_\_
  - Caring hands-on for others in need \_\_\_\_\_
  - Mobilizing groups toward a common goal \_\_\_\_\_
  - Dealing well with “distasteful” situations \_\_\_\_\_
  - Concentration and focus \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ability to balance multiple priorities \_\_\_\_\_
  - Track record of setting and achieving goals \_\_\_\_\_
  - Seeking out change and improvement \_\_\_\_\_
  - Maintaining consistency and continuity \_\_\_\_\_
  - Identifying security risks \_\_\_\_\_
  - Financial management \_\_\_\_\_
  - Understanding how things work \_\_\_\_\_
  - Hand dexterity and fine motor control \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ability to memorize \_\_\_\_\_
  - Teaching and training others \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ability to group similar ideas from diverse sources \_\_\_\_\_
  - Ability to notice differences among similar objects or ideas \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. In what specific skills or knowledge areas have I received formalized training?
  5. In what specific skills or knowledge areas have I taught myself?
  6. What desirable qualities or personality traits do I possess?
  7. How do I rate my self-confidence? Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High
  8. What is my current view of the future? Bleak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Sunny
  9. What beneficial habits do I have?
  10. What support systems or allies do I have?

Take a look at your answers. Then underline those skills and assets you are already using to your advantage. Place a star next to any skills and assets you would like to draw upon further to increase your success.

How do you feel about your answers to the questions? Do you have more going for you than you realized?

### **Why Did You Include Self-confidence And Future View as Assets?**

Self-confidence is key to self-improvement. Sometimes it's easy to focus on our weaknesses—for many people, it's a conditioned secret message to magnify flaws and ignore or hide strengths. But when you are confident instead of self-critical, you are more likely to risk sticking your neck out and doing something different to improve yourself and your life. Along the same lines, when you have faith in a positive outcome, you are more likely to venture into uncharted personal territory. The positive impact of confidence and faith is documented in countless sources throughout history—from Bible stories to present day testimonials; people only get to see it *after* they believe it.

### **Does It Matter That My Answers Fell Into A Narrow Little Clump?**

Some people possess a broad range of skills and knowledge—others possess a more narrow range of related skills. This is the primary difference between people who are specialists and those who are generalists. One set of technical skills or assets really has no more intrinsic worth than another. Each has a purpose—just as a live theatre has actors, a backstage crew, ushers, a director, and a producer—and all are vitally important. One group may have a more visible role than another, but one cannot complete a production without the others. Each is equally important to the success of the performance.

In the business world, the highest paying jobs often go to people who have unique or hard-to-get skills. They may be so highly valued because their skills are highly specialized and require a great deal of natural talent. They may be valuable because their roles require a higher investment in education or training. Regardless of their technical skills, their ability to get positive business results is usually what takes them to the top of the company's organizational chart.

Some of the most talented people in the world are very deeply developed and focused in one area, but not equally developed in all facets of their lives. A world-class pianist, for example, may be so intent upon perfecting her playing technique and

repertoire that she may not spend time or energy developing personal relationships. She may travel so much that she hasn't even considered whether she would enjoy or be talented at gardening.

One of the potential risks of having a very focused set of skills in one or two specific areas is that, if something goes wrong in one of those areas, your whole life can go into a tailspin. For instance, some people theorize many men go through midlife crisis because traditionally a man's central purpose is to achieve financial success for his family. In other words, he is almost exclusively focused in one area—toward one goal. The traditional male role model sacrifices almost anything for career advancement—then at some middle-aged point he:

- ◆ Realizes he's as high on the career totem pole as he's going to go,
- ◆ Questions whether all of his sacrifice was worth it, and
- ◆ Decides to make up for lost time in other areas of his life, sometimes to extremes.

So the guy in the throes of midlife crisis buys a sports car, perhaps has an affair, or finds other ways to swing his focus away from his now unsatisfying work life. The same thing happens with an empty-nester woman whose sole purpose used to be child rearing; now that the kids are away at college, she feels lost and empty, and she searches for a new center for her life.

### **I've Been Told I'm a Jack of All Trades—And It Feels Like an Insult!**

If your inventory showed a wide range of skills and assets, you might wonder if that makes you a “jack of all trades and master of none” as the old saying goes. That saying really tries to put a negative spin on having a wide range of skills, assets, and interests, doesn't it? Don't believe it for a minute! You already know firsthand that diversity and balance in skills and assets can be a great strength. Maybe you're the type of person who likes to dabble in a lot of different areas, or maybe you are on a continuous quest for knowledge, a modern-day Renaissance man or woman who knows a lot about a lot. Knowing a lot can never be a bad thing!

One set of parents was particularly intentional about wanting their four children to become well-rounded adults, to have grounding in a lot of areas. They took their kids on educational car trips, visited museums, and participated as a family in scouts and other organized activities. Now that the children are grown, each has his or her own career specialty, yet their broad familiarity with learning, travel, science, interpersonal skills, the arts, and sports has become a strength in itself. All the kids have vocations they enjoy, and they also have many relationships and hobbies that enrich their spare time.

Now that you've listed your values and personal strengths, are you pleasantly surprised? At this stage of the process, most people I know and work with start to realize they vastly underestimated both their own achievements and their internal resources. Nobody else has exactly the same combination of attributes you have. You are unique.

### **I Don't Look That Great Compared to Most People I Know.**

We compare ourselves to other people every day. We assess how we look, what we earn, and what kind of car we drive, etc., all in relation to them. We live in a social network, tied to one another by relationships and by the give and take of daily interaction. So it is natural for us to try to define our "place" in the order of things. We value the opinions of others, especially those of the people we love and respect.

But one of the pitfalls of the comparison game is that it sets us up for feelings of inadequacy. It erodes our confidence in what we do well. To make things worse, we don't just select one person as a benchmark for our life—instead we compare ourselves to many people. We look at each of them and tend to compare ourselves with each individual's one or two best talents or characteristics. No wonder we fall short when we place ourselves toe-to-toe with only their most outstanding features.

- ◆ "I don't earn as much as Harry."
- ◆ "I'm not as outgoing as Wanda."
- ◆ "Kailin is much more fit than me."
- ◆ "I'll never bat as well as Franco."
- ◆ "I could never be as patient as Beth."

In effect, we are comparing ourselves to a composite person, made up of the best of the best. We compare ourselves with the best features of each person we know and wonder why we fall short of that ideal. In reality, no person is an all-around winner—every person has flaws. If we're going to compare ourselves to anyone, we need to look at the whole picture, not just a snapshot of that person's strengths.

### **I Think My Skills Are Good, But I'm Struggling Because I'm Too Stressed Out.**

Even the best set of skills has limited benefit if it doesn't get used. Stress can undermine your confidence and sap your energy. Sometimes stress is caused or magnified by a mismatch between your skills and your job or a misalignment between your actions and your values and beliefs.

Modern life is complicated, and you have a lot pulling at you every day, but you might want to take an especially close look at the next inventory if you're experiencing symptoms like:

- ◆ Sleep problems—either too much or not enough,
- ◆ Under- or over-eating,
- ◆ Tension headaches,
- ◆ Excess stomach acid, and/or
- ◆ Feelings of irritability or depression.

All of these symptoms can be indicators of stress. If your problems are severe, or if they continue over an extended period of time, there might be other contributing factors, as well. In that case, you should consult a physician or psychological professional for help.

This next set of questions is designed to help you identify your basic values and beliefs. This *isn't* the place to record everything your mom and dad told you when you were small. Instead focus on what YOU choose to believe now as an adult and the values YOU believe are important.

This exercise works best if you're in a quiet spot with no interruptions. Record your answers in a journal or notebook or other safe place, and be sure to include the date you complete this exercise so you can check back later and remember how you were thinking:

**My Purpose and Values Inventory**      Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is my true purpose in life, the real reason I get up in the morning?
2. What are my three unwavering rules for living—three principles that I do not ever violate?
3. If I were to find out I had only one week left to live, what are the five things I would make sure to do?
4. What do I make a point to do every day (beyond basic personal maintenance)?
5. What actions or characteristics in other people upset me the most? Why? What, if anything, do my negative feelings about them have to do with my core values?

6. In a 24-hour day, how many hours do I spend

- \_\_\_\_\_ At work
- \_\_\_\_\_ Doing home chores
- \_\_\_\_\_ Interacting with family
- \_\_\_\_\_ Doing hobbies
- \_\_\_\_\_ Playing and recreation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sleeping
- \_\_\_\_\_ Learning and personal development
- \_\_\_\_\_ Exercising
- \_\_\_\_\_ Watching television
- \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteering
- \_\_\_\_\_ Praying or other spiritual activities
- \_\_\_\_\_ Socializing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Doing nothing

\_\_\_\_\_ **TOTAL** – (This can't add up to more than 24 hours! If your days vary a lot, just try to estimate as closely as you can.)

7. If I could cut anything out of my life, it would be \_\_\_\_\_, and here's why:
8. If I could add anything to my life, it would be \_\_\_\_\_, and here's why:
9. What is the largest category of spending I see in my checkbook? The most frequent?
10. If I were to carve my personal motto into the mantel over my fireplace, how would it read?
11. In what ways does my daily behavior accurately demonstrate my values and beliefs?
12. In what ways are my actions inconsistent with my values and beliefs?

When you are not values-driven and your priorities are not in the foreground of your thinking, you run the risk that someone else's messages—or their values or priorities—will lead you off-course. On the other hand, when you have a clearly defined purpose and values, it is easier to make decisions. You can reduce the internal conflict in



---

your life by testing your actions or new opportunities against them. (See Chapter 4) There's an old saying that goes, "You've got to stand for something, or you'll fall for anything."

### **I Feel Worse About Myself Now Than I Did When I Started This Chapter!**

If you don't feel as successful as you'd like to be, consider your answers to the inventories and questions in this chapter. Are you currently working or pursuing a role that really doesn't tap into or mesh with your natural assets and gifts? Are your actions and habits consistent with your true values? Or are you trying to fit yourself—and your life—into a mold someone else created for you?

If you're reading this book because you've already decided to pursue a personal change in your life, you might just be feeling "creative tension"—a common feeling of discomfort that arises when you start to see the difference between what is and what could be. Creative tension is natural, and it has two remedies:

- ◆ Lower your goals, or
- ◆ Raise your baseline performance to reduce the gap.

I don't suggest lowering your goals without thinking carefully. You don't want to look back someday and say "If only I..." The next few chapters outline a planning process to help you make even big dreams real. Concentrated action may be all you need to make them come true. On the other hand, maybe the assessments in this chapter made you realize the goals you had until now require an investment you are no longer willing to make. In that case, you may want to intentionally adjust your goals and dreams to reflect what you really want out of life—and what you're willing to sacrifice to get it. For every goal we set, there is a corresponding trade-off we must be willing to make.

### **I'm Too Old For All of This!**

Several people have asked me if I think there is a maximum age for developing personal gifts and assets. Sometimes the question arises because a person feels really good about where they are already and doesn't want to feel guilty about relaxing. Other times the person claims that they don't want to work so hard any more—they've earned an opportunity to coast. Still other times somebody is tired and frustrated because they've been battling long-standing habits, and the habits are winning.

The "becoming" process is continuous—from birth till death—if you choose not to stagnate with the circumstances, problems, and limitations associated with any given

point in your life. There is no max-out point or “finish line” you will reach before you die—unless you decide to finish early.

Even if you try to stay in the same place you are now, the world around you evolves; it moves faster every day. Despite a resolve not to change, your place in the world order will.

### **“Justin and Jared”**

Justin and Jared are fraternal twins, now aged 41. Very close as youngsters, the boys did virtually everything together. They almost never fought and were best friends, exploring the creeks and pastures near their Kansas home side by side. As teens they shared dreams of high-paying jobs, great-looking wives, and sports cars.

After college they got jobs in their respective fields; Justin became a music teacher at a local high school, and Jared worked in the circulation department of a magazine publisher. Jared married at age 24, and he and his wife (yes, she was good-looking) produced four children. Jared and family moved into a restored farmette and rode horses and raised chickens as hobbies.

Unlike his brother, Justin still remained unmarried at 30—and he was the first twin to buy a sports car. After eight years teaching school, Justin was ready for something new. He decided to quit his job, pack up his belongings, and go to graduate school several states away. He phoned his brother to tell him the good news.

“How is it going, Jared?” Justin asked.

“I’m terrific, Justin. The kids are growing like weeds, and I’m coaching baseball this season—wasn’t sure if I told you. I was just thinking the other day about how well things are going—I have my wife and kids, a great house, a nice job—I’m set for life!”

Justin replied, “I’m glad to hear you’re so happy,” but he thought the situation sounded positively depressing. The very idea of believing he was already set for life at the age of 30 would have made him want to curl up and die. He told his brother his own good news and, predictably, Jared thought he was nuts.

Justin finished graduate school and got a college-level teaching position in a resort town. He had loads of opportunities to play music in addition to teaching it, and his social life was full. Two years later Justin received a phone call.

“Hey, Jus. It’s Jared. Listen, I’ve just quit my job. I have this opportunity to go into business for myself, and I’d be an idiot to pass it up. I’m going to have a couple of weeks off in between, so if it’s okay with you, I’d like to bring the wife with me and stay with you for a little grownups-only vacation. Whaddaya say?”

Justin said, “Sure—of course. Just say when.” He was smiling inside knowing that, far from being “set for life,” the call of change and personal development had finally caught up with his brother.

At some point, even seemingly ideal situations can become like golden handcuffs. The constant repetition of the same thing day in and day out, however good it is, can make you feel confined. You might start taking people and things for granted. Finally you come to a decision point where you either consciously renew your commitment to your present condition or you begin to struggle toward taking yourself in a new direction.

Another way to look at the concept of change is to think about nature for a moment. A piece of fruit is always in one of two modes:

- ◆ Green and growing, or
- ◆ Ripe and rotting.

I don’t know about you, but given the alternatives, I choose *not* to rot!

### **At What Point Do the Opinions of Others Become a Trap?**

In modern society you undertake multiple roles in your life: parent, spouse, child, sibling, boss, employee, church member, and community volunteer. You have relationships with several very different categories of people who have the potential to influence your behavior. They often ask very different things of you and on occasion even directly conflict with one another. Their requests are most likely based upon their needs, not yours.

It can be tempting or seem easiest to assume they all know what’s best for you. It may even relieve you of feeling responsible if things don’t work out. In some cases, they may very well have your best interests at heart when trying to convince you to take a certain track.

But what happens when your employer expects more of a time commitment at work and at the same time your family wants to see more of you at home? Your community service organization asks you to take a leadership role, and your church choir director wants to know where you’ve been for the past month. If you try to meet all of their diverse expectations, how can you possibly be successful—even if you bend yourself into a pretzel trying to do so?

Only you can decide what your priorities are, regardless of external pressures. It also helps to keep your innate gifts in mind. If you possess the skillset of an eagle, it’s more natural for you to fly than it is to run.

**How Can I Keep My Confidence in Myself, Even when Things Go Wrong?**

As you saw in your inventories earlier in this chapter, you are already endowed with the capabilities you need to succeed—all you need to do is apply them and build upon them, which is a lot easier if you have confidence in yourself. There are many successful techniques you can use to maintain a positive, productive frame of mind. Affirmations are highly effective—and are the topic of an entire chapter later in this book. Here are some other tools people use to feel good about their lives right now:

**“Allison”** — the gratitude journal

One of my favorite examples of someone who has mastered self-awareness and the skills and attitudes of thinking positively is Allison, a health care executive. She keeps a gratitude journal, a written record of her life with an emphasis on things that have gone well. At the end of every day, just before she goes to sleep, Allison writes in a book she keeps on her nightstand. She documents personal victories from the day (large or small,) positive developments she notices in people around her, and things for which she is thankful.

Allison’s health care expertise is not the biggest contributor to her success. Allison attracts people and helps them feel better because she is uplifting to be around. She performs well in a caring field because she looks happy and talks about upbeat things. Her mindset is contagious, and employees seek to work in her department.

Allison told me she started her journal five years ago so she wouldn’t become so intent on daily striving that she’d lose perspective on how many things are already right with her and her life. She said it is important to her values that she thank God for her talents. Writing daily in her journal is how Allison expresses her beliefs and how she bolsters her confidence while keeping her heart humble.

**“Carlos”** — reframing a negative situation

Another helpful technique is to reframe a difficult situation. Despite the difficulties of a problem or situation, consider the positive benefit to be gained from the situation rather than just focusing on the negative.

My friend, Carlos, was recently laid off from his job as a bank loan officer following a merger. He worked hard to become an officer at the bank, going to night classes at the local college to complete his Bachelor’s Degree while working fulltime during the day. So Carlos was stunned when he was notified about staff cutbacks and the elimination of his position. Although his wife earns a small income working in a local

coffee shop, they have three small children to support in their household, and his ailing elderly mother lives with them.

He is looking for another job, but Carlos talks mostly about how happy he is for the unexpected chance to spend some time with his children and his mother. He realizes he doesn't have an unlimited opportunity to be with them, so he wants to make the most of the present.

**“Janice”** — listing learnings

Janice is a relatively new salesperson. She is paid on commission, so it's important to her finances that she get good sales results—and soon. She is not very outspoken—not the talker you might expect in sales. She's not particularly quick with jokes and retorts and is actually more analytical. Still, Janice has a fantastic start and is getting good sales results despite her inexperience.

Janice has a method for recovering quickly from mistakes and maintaining a positive outlook. She keeps a list of learnings. Here's how it works: when Janice leaves a sales meeting, she sits for a moment in the car and reruns the meeting in her mind. She thinks about the points at which she missed an opportunity or where she could have been more effective with a different approach. She considers potential solutions and then records what she learned on a special tablet she keeps in her car.

Janice is staying positive and improving fast because she is consciously managing her learning process.

You can also minimize the impact of adverse situations on your attitude by creating a list of the things you learned from them. Thomas Edison is credited with saying he discovered 1,000 ways *not* to make a light bulb! He was ultimately successful, because he chose to learn from every attempt and to persist until he accomplished what he set out to do.

## **Chapter 4**

### **C – Create Your Future by Visualizing It In Detail**

**B**y now you recognize some of the secret messages in your mind, and you know how they impact your actions. You completed an inventory of your assets and gifts and clarified your values and beliefs. You understand the value of self-confidence and the importance of acknowledging how much you already have going for you as a prerequisite to making changes in your life.

And you've probably identified one or two small or even huge possibilities for self-development.

Let's draw an analogy here—one we've actually already used several times. If we compared your life and your goals for the future to a roadmap, the inventories and questions you completed show where you are now—your point of origin. Your goals for the future are your desired destination. This book—and what you do with it—will create the route you choose to get you from your point of origin to your desired destination.

But what if you don't have a clear vision of your destination? It's pretty hard to create a route to an unknown destination. Moving is really only effective if you are moving *toward* something. Sounds simple, right? But unless you have your destination firmly in focus, how do you know if you're moving closer to what you want or if you're actually drifting further from your goal or simply going around in circles? You don't want to drift aimlessly—you want to have a direction.

If I told you to drive to Dallas, Texas, you'd probably consult a map, and starting from your current location, you'd chart a route. You might select your roads based upon the quickest speeds and lack of construction zones, or you might choose a more scenic route with natural landmarks to visit along the way.

But if I simply told you to drive for 1,000 miles, where would you end up? You might arrive in Dallas or back home or maybe in Montana somewhere. You might backtrack or drive in circles. If you don't know where you're going, any road will do.

If you want to realize your dreams for the future, you've got to be very clear and detailed about what you want—what that future will look like. You have to *know* where you're going before you can get there.

### **“Vanessa”** — lifelong dream

For as long as she could remember, Vanessa wanted to be a veterinarian. She had pet dogs and cats as a girl and begged her mother for hamsters, goldfish, and the occasional lizard. She often played veterinarian on her very patient golden retriever, Sadie. When she was seven years old, one of Vanessa's favorite pastimes was to wrap Sadie's front legs very carefully and thoroughly with long strips of old sheets and give her pretend injections.

As she grew through her teen years, Vanessa volunteered at the local humane society, feeding animals and cleaning cages. She studied hard in school to get the grades she needed for vet school. When her dog, Sadie, developed glaucoma, Vanessa was responsible for administering the daily eye drops and medications Sadie needed to maintain her sight.

After graduating at the top of her high school class, Vanessa headed to a prestigious school where she studied hard, although she also found time for some dates and parties. In the last year before she earned her veterinary license, Vanessa fell in love with a young electrical engineer. She wanted to get married but was not willing to sacrifice her dream. After a long search, Vanessa found a position in a veterinary practice with three other women. The four shared the long hours so each could have a life outside work, and Vanessa married her engineer sweetheart. They now have a 2-year-old son who visits her at the veterinary office at least once a week.

Vanessa knew what she wanted, and her goal gave her focus and motivation. She was fortunate to have such a clear vision of her desired future at such a young age. Vanessa had an ideal daily schedule laid out in her mind, and she even knew what she wanted her office to look like. She knew what types of animals she wanted to treat and what kinds of colleagues would suit her well. She even planned in advance how she could fit her family priorities together with a career that might otherwise easily consume all her time and energy. Vanessa succeeded because she visualized her future in detail and took the actions to make it happen.

### **“Rowan”** — the wanderer

Rowan has tried on marriages like some people try on suits. At age 48, he is now in marriage number four, and after only 18 months, this one has already taken a serious downhill turn. Rowan can't understand why he keeps choosing the wrong mate. He loves women and is very romantic. He goes all out to demonstrate his feelings during the courtship phase of his relationships, writing poetry and giving elaborate gifts. Ironically, his professional success evolved out of the same natural sales skills that have been his downfall in marrying women.

His first wife, Peggy, was his high school sweetheart; they got married before graduation because she was pregnant. He was positively moony over Peggy—she was petite and quiet with a sweet smile, and he assumed they would live happily ever after. Reality struck when his child arrived. His new daughter was cute, but a lot of trouble from the day of her birth. The mind-numbing grind of caring for her squeezed the last bit of romance out of Rowan and Peggy's young relationship. Not ready for the daily responsibilities of parenthood, Rowan got a divorce.



Wives two and three were career builders. Wife number two, an outgoing and curvaceous redhead named Estelle, had charisma Rowan could not resist. They met sitting in adjacent seats at a baseball game. After their wedding, she worked assembling air conditioners in a factory so Rowan could attend college full-time. Once he graduated and got a job in an insurance brokerage firm, Rowan found Estelle's coarse behavior to be embarrassing. Her lewd sense of humor and sailor-caliber swearing left his colleagues' wives open-mouthed with shock at a company Christmas party. Rowan left her without waiting for the holidays to be over.

Nicole was wife number three. A sleek, well-bred interior designer, Nicole's impeccable taste helped Rowan package himself for success in Armani suits. She decorated his house with the elegant, yet comfortable furnishings perfect for entertaining his clients. She was an excellent hostess, but she was constantly critiquing him and giving him tips on how to improve himself. After a while, Rowan wearied of being someone's "project." He questioned whether Nicole was in the marriage for the relationship or just for the perks that came from his rapidly increasing salary. Rowan dumped her.

Rowan recently discovered that Brenda, wife number four, was having an affair. Rowan believes the source of their problem is his demanding work schedule. He's on the road four nights every week, so he doesn't get to spend time with her the way he did at the beginning. Although he feels hurt, he doesn't fully blame her for seeking attention elsewhere.

Brenda owns a successful computer sales and service business, and she is smart and opinionated. Rowan met Brenda at a charity auction almost two years ago and was captivated by her no-nonsense style. He wooed her with his usual bag of tricks, and they married after dating for only three months. Rowan has decided he doesn't want to waste another chance for happiness, even if it means he has to earn less money. He has convinced Brenda to end her affair and attend counseling with him.

What is the likelihood that Rowan will succeed? The marriage/divorce statistics are not working in his favor.

At the outset, Rowan didn't know what he wanted from a marriage. He didn't stop to think about it. The first one came and went before he was a full-fledged adult. In marriages two and three, he allowed himself to be swept along by his feelings and needs of the moment—he loved the adrenaline rush he got from the chase. Rowan paid a high financial and emotional toll going in and out of relationships rather than figuring out what he really wanted and needed in a lifelong partner.

**“Loretta”** — but I can run

Loretta Claiborne is currently an international spokesperson for the Special Olympics. She is a world-renowned motivational speaker and has been a three-time guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Loretta regularly rubs elbows with the likes of Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Olympians Nadia Comaneci and Scott Hamilton. She won the 1996 ESPN ESPY Arthur Ashe Award for Courage. An office building has been named after her in her hometown. She finished 25 marathons and placed twice in the top 100 women in the Boston Marathon.

Loretta is partially blind, mildly retarded, and a world-class runner.

She grew up poor, the middle of seven children in a single-parent family. She didn't walk or talk until age 4, and other children taunted her. Along the way, Loretta learned to use her speed and strength to defend herself; she was expelled from high school and fired from a job for her angry behavior.

Loretta was introduced to the Special Olympics by a social worker, Janet McFarland, and found a channel for her gifts. Claiborne credits the Special Olympics with helping her realize she could use her talents for good. Walt Disney Productions aired a TV movie about her life story, starring Camryn Manheim from *The Practice*. Loretta says, “I figured if it could change a person's mind about another person, or especially a child's mind about another child, then it was the right thing to do.”

Loretta's outstanding athletic performances and her willingness to put herself on the public stage as an advocate for Special Olympics have earned her international recognition. She wants to continue helping people with mental retardation and physical disabilities succeed. “If it weren't for sports, I wouldn't be the person I am today. Find an opportunity and seize it, and never let anyone doubt you.”

### **I'm Not Psychic - How Can I Predict the Future?**

I'm sure you've heard the saying that there are three kinds of people:

- ◆ Those who make things happen,
- ◆ Those who watch what happens, and
- ◆ Those who wonder what happened.

We certainly can't predict the future, but we do influence the future by what we do today. Our current attitudes and actions are the cause, and our future results are the effect. Only by defining our desired future at the beginning can we be certain we're taking the action that will result in the desired outcome.

---

When we start to define our vision for the future, we immediately face a challenge:

1. Should we focus on what we think is *most likely* to happen, or
2. Should we focus on what we *want* to happen, even if we think it's not very likely? (Not very likely—now *that's* a limiting secret message!)

If you want to take the path of least resistance, select number 1. Your current behavior and current momentum is probably already taking you there. If you are satisfied with your direction and the outcome you expect is positive, you can concentrate on accelerating the positive results.

If you are not satisfied with your current circumstances, or if you want more of a challenge, select number 2. To get there, you will need to change some of your daily actions. You will also need to replace some of your current secret messages with intentional messages more in line with the future you desire.

### **How Far Is Too Far To Reach?**

You are the only one who can decide how far you want to reach. Some of your gifts will never change—like the fact that my aunt is 5'0" tall. Unless she decides to wear heels or she suffers some injury that impacts her posture, my aunt will always be 5' tall. She will never be a center in the WNBA—for her, the height requirement is an automatic professional basketball deal breaker.

On the other hand, some of your gifts and your assets can be developed—like the ability to make speeches or woodworking skills. If you want to become a nationally known speaker or master carpenter, you are limited only by your willingness to learn and apply the techniques that produce high quality results.

When you set your mind to achieving something and focus on a particular result, you can usually reach farther than you think. In fact, your brain is prepared to help you get the information you need to move ahead. Through a mental process called selective perception, you will begin to notice opportunities or information related to the overriding focus in your mind.

For instance, have you ever noticed that when you buy a new car, you suddenly notice more of those cars are on the road? It's not that other people purchased similar cars overnight—you just became more aware of them because you were thinking about your car.

Here's another example, in small form, of the way selective perception works. A few months ago my husband was interested in making a flower box out of old salvaged

wood. He likes the rugged appearance of chipped paint, wormholes, and scars from old nails. All of a sudden, as we drove along some of the rural roads near our home, we started seeing piles of old barn planks beside the road with signs that said FREE WOOD. No kidding! Some of the piles had probably been there for quite a while, but until my husband drew up his flower box idea, we didn't notice them.

Once you clearly define your destination, paths, helpers, and resources will begin to appear. They were always there, but now you will see them as you never did before.

### **I Have Some Ideas, But They're Still Hazy**

If you're not 100 percent clear about what you want, you can clarify your vision through creative visualization. Creative visualization helps you harness the power of your imagination. Through creative visualization, you plant the seed of an idea in your mind and then develop it more fully into a desirable image—in great detail—in your head. You can tweak the vision in your mind until it clearly takes shape in a way that is pleasing to you. In other words, you create the future you want in your mind before you create it in your life—you “see” it in your mind before you see it happen in real life.

Holding this visual image in your mind enables your subconscious to then develop ways you can create the image in reality. Creative visualization might take some practice for you to master, but athletes like Michael Jordan, Olympic Gold Medal winners, and many other successful people in all walks of life find it very effective.

### **That Sounds a Little Bit New-Agey to Me...**

Feeling a little skeptical? What if I told you that you already use visualization, just not necessarily in a creative and positive way? Think about the last time you had to attend an event you dreaded. In your mind, you could already picture yourself yawning of boredom or wearing the wrong type of clothing and feeling out of place. Perhaps you imagined being cornered by the company bore who droned on and on or feeling shy and uncomfortable surrounded by people you don't know well. If you had really negative feelings or fears about the event, your brain might even have dramatized it for you—in exaggerated detail—like a mini video in your mind seeing your car plunging off of a cliff with you inside it!

To illustrate the benefits of creative visualization, think about the last time you saw an advertisement for your favorite soft drink. The ad usually shows a crystal ice-filled tumbler dripping with condensation from the cool, fizzing liquid inside. Can you see what I'm describing? Now involve more of your senses to make the picture more real. Feel the cold wet smoothness of the glass in your hand as you pick it up. Imagine

hearing the sound of the bubbles and the clinking of the ice in the glass as you take a sip. Feel the carbonation tickling the inside of your nose. Taste the coldness and the sharp sweetness of it. Is the image making you thirsty? That's creative visualization at work.

Your brain does not differentiate between imagined and real input. It responds naturally to sensory images. That's why you jump in alarm when a movie villain lunges suddenly from behind a doorway or crashes through the hero's apartment window. When you mentally rehearse events related to your ideal future and what it will be like, you help your mind and body develop a path to accomplish it. It helps to actively visualize what you desire to achieve on a regular basis, sometimes even several times a day, to keep the image foremost in your brain. Remember, your subconscious will work overtime to help you achieve that which you think about the most.

### **I'm Not a Really Visual Person**

Slightly more than half of the population is comprised of visual thinkers, but you don't have to be one of them to use creative visualization successfully. This technique works well for non-visual thinkers when you incorporate multiple senses into your image, like we did in the soft drink example. Here's another example of creative visualization, without much visual input at all:

Imagine yourself lying with your eyes closed on an oversized towel at the beach. The sun is hot on your skin, and you can feel small trickles of sweat running down your back. You are relaxed, and your arms and legs feel heavy against your fluffy towel. Your fingers sift through the warm sand. It is as fine as cake flour and coats your damp palms. When you take a deep breath, you can smell the cool air blowing in from the ocean, carrying mixed scents of salt and fish. You also smell coconut in the sunscreen you are wearing and the yummy-oily aroma of french fries from the boardwalk that someone near you just purchased. You hear the rhythmic crash of the waves and the seagulls shrieking, begging for nibbles of vacationers' goodies. A vendor is calling "telescope pictures!" for people who want to have a souvenir photo taken at the water's edge. (Excuse me a minute while I call my travel agent!)

See how easy it is?

### **How Can I Make Visualization Work for Me?**

Why not try a few visualization exercises for practice before you try to visualize your entire ideal future? Visualization works most effectively when you are in a relaxed, focused state of mind. That's why the beach description above works as a warm-up for me—I can feel my blood pressure drop and my muscles relax as I think about it.

Begin by visualizing something you've seen before so you have a foundation of experience to draw upon. Think about all of the different sensations you experienced at that moment and describe them one by one in your mind. You can do this by remembering a recent moment during a vacation or what it felt like to drive somewhere in your car this morning. You might focus on what it feels like to lie in your bed at night just before you fall asleep or what it's like in the morning when you first wake up. The important thing is to become conscious of how each of your senses responds when you begin relating it in your mind in detail. This is the same thing you'll do when you begin visualizing the future you want.

When you're ready to begin visualizing your ideal future, do the same thing. Create a clear and complete picture in your mind—as if you were looking at a photograph or video of someone else's life—only you are the center of this picture. Where are you? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What can you smell? How do you feel? Bit by bit expand the image in your mind and fill in all the details in sights, sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and feelings. You can visualize a big picture of a day in your future life or practice something as specific as successfully shooting a basketball from the foul line.

Don't get discouraged if negative thoughts creep in around the edges of your visualization. Your negative secret messages have been in there for a long time. You will be the most successful in pushing them aside if you stay focused on your desired future and combine your visualization with other techniques like affirmation and goal planning. We'll cover both of those techniques in later chapters.

### **I'm Trying to Visualize, But My Mind Goes Blank**

Creative visualization is an open, free-wheeling way to think about your future. If you're drawing a blank, use some of the questions and prompts below to help you get the ideas flowing. Select a date sometime in the future to use as your center of focus. Grab a blank piece of paper or open a brand new word processing file and document your answers to these questions *as though you're already there*:

- ◆ What is your ideal day like?
- ◆ How old are you?
- ◆ Where do you live, and what does it look like?
- ◆ What time do you get up?
- ◆ What is the view outside your window?
- ◆ What do you eat for breakfast?

- 
- ◆ Where will you go today and what will you do?
  - ◆ Which of your assets and gifts are you using most?
  - ◆ How much do you earn per year?
  - ◆ Who are the most important people in your life, and how old are they? (Be specific, person by person.)
  - ◆ Are your days similar to one another or do they vary tremendously? In what ways?
  - ◆ What are your top priorities?
  - ◆ What are your most highly prized possessions?
  - ◆ What is your purpose in life?
  - ◆ What is the goal you're working on right now?
  - ◆ What have you done recently for or with your:
    1. Family
    2. Friends
    3. Community
    4. Church
  - ◆ What was your most recent success? (Remember, this is from the future, looking back.)
  - ◆ How has your life changed since you wrote about your vision?
  - ◆ What hobbies have you pursued?
  - ◆ What places did you visit?
  - ◆ What new skills did you learn?
  - ◆ What did you do to become more valuable to yourself?

Did you take time to imagine your vision in detail? If not, remember—you cannot hit a target you can't see. Write your answers down and develop these ideas fully to get the maximum benefit from them. The clearer your vision is, the better you can define the course of action you need to take—and the better and more effectively your selective perception will work on your behalf.

In addition, the more thorough, specific, and detailed your vision, the more believable it becomes. You can see it so clearly in your mind that it starts to *feel* real.

That gets you excited, and your excitement will help you overcome any fears you may have about taking action to make it come true.

### **I'm Trying to Move Forward – Why Talk About Fear Right Now?**

No one wants to rain on your parade, least of all me. I'm trying to help you move forward and to reprogram those old secret messages that continue to impede your progress as an adult, remember? But I'm willing to bet that fear has a bigger hold on most of us than we like to admit.

So it's time for a secret messages test: How much did you *really* stretch when you defined your vision? If you didn't really stretch yourself, why not? Is there a fear factor still influencing you? Perhaps there is a particular memory or secret message that still has a hold on you—something that is stopping you from letting go and telling yourself what you really want.

### **“Ruth”**

After 25 years of service with the company, Ruth was 57 years old and on the verge of being fired from her job. She had become the company “wet blanket,” always shooting other people's ideas down and thinking in terms of how “it won't work.” Her employer was an up-and-coming company with aggressive goals, and Ruth resisted. She was vocal in meetings about how goals are useless.

Fortunately for Ruth, her employer gave her one last chance before letting her go. He involved her in a self-development process that included an assessment of her attitudes and beliefs. During a discussion about attitudes and goals in the third workshop, Ruth finally spoke up to the group of her peer supervisors. “I gotta tell you, I hate the word goal. I don't know whether I ever told you, but my parents died when I was three. For most of my childhood, I was a ward of the state, and I lived in an orphanage. I used to get my hopes up—my goal was to be adopted and have a Mom and Dad. I remembered this week that adults would tell me over and over, ‘Don't waste your time on a bunch of dreams and goals. Be practical.’”

Over time Ruth's performance improved and quite a bit. She didn't have a problem with the idea of positive change—she was conditioned to fear the word “goal.” Ruth changed the name of her targets to “objectives” and changed her mindset along with it.



---

Fear can develop from any number of different secret messages:

- ◆ “Don’t get your hopes up.”
- ◆ “Whatever can go wrong will go wrong.”
- ◆ “Money is the root of all evil.”
- ◆ “Men don’t make passes at girls who wear glasses.”
- ◆ “It takes money to make money.”

I hope a couple of these made you chuckle, because when you take time to evaluate your habits of thought, you will probably find a few habits of conditioned thinking that are downright silly. Ridiculous as they might seem when you stop to think, they are still influencing your behavior when you are on “automatic pilot.”

Fear in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing—it’s what you do about your fear that can make the difference between achieving your vision and falling short. When you have faith in a positive outcome, fear provides the motivation for additional preparation to help you manage your risks. But when your habits of thinking create the expectation of failure, you probably won’t “waste your time” taking the very actions that could clinch your success.

Sometimes fear arises from the huge gap you see between where you are today and the destination you envision. You can overcome this kind of fear by developing a detailed road map for your journey. Once you know the route you plan to take, you can estimate the amount of time needed, establish a budget, pack the appropriate wardrobe, and make arrangements for your stopover points. Your detailed plan creates tangible proof that you *can* do it, adding believability to the creative visualization you did earlier.

### **How Can I Tell That This Vision is “THE” One?**

It’s natural to see several very real possibilities, especially if you’re looking into a future timeframe that seems very far away. Test your options against several criteria and see which one of your dreams stands out as the best destination for you and the people who are important to you. Try using these test criteria to weigh each of your options:

1. Would doing this be consistent with my purpose?
2. If I decide not to do it, will I truly be living according to the values I say are important to me?
3. To what extent is this aligned with my gifts and assets?
4. How does this vision impact the people who are important to me?

### **My Vision Is About Who I Want To Be, Not About What I Want To Be Doing...**

While your vision may focus on what kind of person you want to become rather than what you want to do, you still need to create a clear idea of what that means in your mind. “Becoming” visions are intangible—they often fall in the “I’ll know it when I see it” category. “Becoming” visions can be moving targets—which, of course, are very difficult to hit—unless you translate them into something tangible upon which you can take action.

Here’s an example for you. I have been an adoptive mother for nearly 6 years. Although I always had a vision that I wanted to be a mother, I *assumed* that being a mother meant certain things—that I would become pregnant, go into labor, and produce an infant that was the combination of my and my husband’s DNA. (“Assumptions” are secret messages.) When that didn’t work out the way I thought it would, I became frustrated.

I needed to rethink my vision a bit, so I started to evaluate what being a “mother” means to me, and I realized that the biology of motherhood wasn’t important to me. I developed a totally different tangible definition of what “mother” means, based upon things a mother does *after the baby comes*. According to my definition, a mother changes diapers, makes breakfast, teaches, kisses boo-boos, and finds surprises at the store. But it was only after I got specific about my definition of motherhood that I took action to pursue it. (And if they were here right now, my husband, family, and friends would tell you I was a MANIAC about my vision of diaper changing and boo-boos—and boy, did I take action!)

I planned three major goals related to my vision:

1. Getting the finances together;
2. Completing the paperwork (about a mile of it!); and
3. Converting our (then) office into a nursery.

I started writing a journal to my future daughter telling her about every step of the process and how I felt anticipating her in my life. My little girl was placed in my arms exactly one year from the date of my first journal entry.

A compelling vision stated in tangible terms can make you unstoppable!

### **Your Vision Had Three Goals – How Many Goals Do I Need?**

While I planned three major goals related to my vision, we actually planned many other smaller goals that were less critical and more flexible in deadline. Everyone’s

---

vision is unique, so the goals you plan related to your vision will also be unique. You will customize your goals to your specific vision.

To begin, define—to the best of your ability—what your vision entails. You might need to do some research, just as we did to find out specifics about adoption costs and paperwork. Every vision requires a different set of goals, but your goals might fall into one of these major categories:

- ◆ Project completion goals (like my three above);
- ◆ Establishing new habits goals (i.e.: Eat four to five servings of fruits and vegetables every day starting June 3, 2002.); or
- ◆ Personal development goals (i.e.: Complete business writing class with an “A” grade at community college by December 31, 2002).

Your goals should all relate to the vision you want to achieve. There may be many possible routes you can take to accomplish your desired end, but unless your goals directly relate to your vision, you might just make yourself very busy without making progress.

### **I Have Goals – I’ve Just Never Written Them Down...**

I also recommend putting your goals down in writing! Unwritten goals are actually harder to achieve. First, they tend to get altered over time or as conditions change, and then you don’t complete them as originally intended. Secondly, when you’re under pressure or stress, your memory is one of the first faculties to be affected, so you are least likely to remember the specifics of your goal and your plan when you need it the most.

If your goal requires conscious changes in your habits of thought or action, it must stay in the forefront of your mind. It’s much easier for distractions to push unwritten goals aside.

When your goals are in writing, they’re also more concrete—more real. You can also post them on your computer, the dash of your car, or your bathroom mirror if you want to, so that you’ll see them frequently and maintain your focus.

Finally, it’s a great feeling to see your goals being checked off one by one on your physical list—it’s tangible proof that you’re making progress toward your vision—and it’s a great way to reinforce your self-confidence and see how far you’ve come!

### **Is There a Foolproof Way to Plan a Goal?**

There are some proven principles that help increase the likelihood that you will achieve your goal, and do so within your planned timeframe:

1. Make sure your goal is within your control or influence. Your goal should be contingent on *your* willingness to take action to achieve it—nobody else's. You are really the only person you can control. You can't make anyone else do what you want them to do. You can successfully establish and complete a goal as part of a team, as long as all of the parties are just as committed to achieving the goal as you are.
2. Do your homework. You may need to do some research to create an action plan for your goal. Your plan has the best chance of succeeding when you build that plan on solid information and knowledge. For instance, if your goal is to build an addition onto your house, you will need to start somewhere—with a budget, a blueprint, potential contractors, or do-it-yourself instructions. Unless you know material costs and time needed, you can't construct a solid budget, progress checkpoints, or a target date.
3. State your goals in tangible, positive terms. Your goal can be a result you want to achieve or a habit of action you want to develop in order to get your result. You can experience the thrill of victory and a rush of confidence sooner if you express your goal in a way you can see, touch, or measure. For example: "I will walk briskly for one hour per day, five days a week, beginning March 15, 2002." Stay away from "I will not..." or "I will avoid..." goals. Negative statements aren't effective, because they don't tell you what you *should* do to replace your unwanted behaviors. And remember, you don't want to focus on the negative when you're trying to create something positive.
4. Give yourself a target date. Someday Isle isn't a very motivating place to be. Your target date should be a very specific date—expressed in day, month, and year. Selecting a calendar date creates a sense of urgency for you to complete your action steps and hit your deadline. If you use the phrase "within three months," your brain can't see the actual date approaching. Instead, it views the three months as constantly rolling forward.
5. Arrange your goals in priority order. Some of your goals may compete with one another for your time, attention, and resources, so make a conscious decision about what comes first, second, etc., in priority. You can rank them according to how they relate to your values, life balance, importance, urgency, or some other system you create.

- 
6. Set aside time every day to work on your goals. Time and energy are the biggest resources you will need to take action—whether the goal itself is large or small. If your energy level is highest at a particular time of the day, reserve that time to focus on your highest priority goals.
  7. Keep your goals right in front of you. Earlier we talked about the importance of being conscious and on purpose to achieve better results. Keeping your goal statements on index cards, written on lists, recorded on tape, or posted in strategic spots around your home and workplace can help you maintain that conscious focus. No matter what methods you use, the frequent repetition of your goals helps your mind concentrate on achieving them.
  8. Engage your support system. It's helpful to have cheerleaders who will help keep you on the right track. Your support system may include a spouse, coach, family members, close friends, colleagues or a mastermind group. They can point out even small steps of progress toward your goal and can help recharge your enthusiasm when you hit a rough patch. They might even be able to provide some expertise to help you overcome roadblocks along the way—or direct you to resources you can use.

Now your vision is really starting to take shape! You defined the “what” you’re setting out to do. You’re starting to see the “how”—that your goals will be the vehicles to help you do it. The next chapter will help you understand the importance of knowing “why” you’re doing it.

**Chapter 5**  
**R – Rewards and Consequences Are What**  
**Motivate You to Act**

---

I never make New Year's Resolutions. Does that sound contradictory to the "create a vision" mindset in this book?

First of all, what is so important about December 31<sup>st</sup>? Year after year many people get fired up about the idea of an annual fresh start and pronounce their self-improvement ideas to the world in the form of a resolution, a commitment. Notice that I said self-improvement *ideas*, not goals.

But most people never really think about them—or whether they are, for each of us, sufficient reason to uproot our current way of doing things. Some people make resolutions just because they think they should—not because they really want to. And more often than not, New Year's Resolutions are broken and long-forgotten before the month of January is even through.

If I am not *truly* committed to the pursuit of a specific goal, if I have not planned it in detail, and if it's not right in front of my face every day—I know I'll forget it or sideline it when it's not convenient.

I believe in setting goals that are meaningful, well thought out, and focused toward a vision of what you want your life to be. Goals should be created *on purpose*, not just because another year is coming to a close.

I need to know why the goal is important enough that I should interrupt my habits and act on purpose, even in times of difficulty. I need to know what secret messages I must overcome to achieve my vision.

### **"Stuart"**

Stuart almost bought a condo at a golf resort with three of his friends. He backed out at the last minute, withdrawing his \$30,000 share of the downpayment. His buddies lost the deal, because the seller received another offer while they scrambled to find another partner. As a result of his actions, Stuart had to find another foursome to play with on his ritual Sunday morning 18 holes.

The idea of having his own luxurious place to crash after a hot day on the South Carolina course really appealed to Stuart. Unlike his friends in his foursome, he didn't grow up with country club golf—he spent his youth playing on the fried fairways of the public courses. As a kid, he caddied to earn the money to pay his greens fees, and he always walked.

Now that Stuart's accounting practice was booming, *he* paid kids at the country club to carry *his* bag during his rounds—and he walked the course for exercise, not out of necessity. Stuart enjoyed the status of being recognized at the club, and his investment in his membership there helped him acquire some of his best accounting clients.

Stuart reveled in the affluent lifestyle he built for himself and in the elite social circle in which he now ran. But he just couldn't bring himself to part with \$30,000 for a vacation home he would only use once a year. His new young wife didn't play golf, and she was only marginally tolerant of the time he spent now. Regular golf trips were out of the question in her book. He had to admit that it felt pretty good to keep the extra thirty grand in his investment account; his financially lean years didn't feel that far behind him.

After almost being swept along with the crowd on the condo deal, Stuart really stopped to think about why the investment did or did not make sense. On the "do it" side of the equation, the condo offered the rewards of vacation time, luxury, status with pals, and tee-time priority at internationally known courses. On the "don't do it" side, Stuart would have dealt with problems like his wife's annoyance and a substantial hit on his cash resources. The money part really bugged him; Stuart worked so hard to achieve financial success that he wanted to hold onto it. The golf resort area was so overbuilt that he couldn't picture the four partners making any decent return in rental or resale on the condo investment.

He knew he was risking his friendships with his golf buddies when he backed out, but Stuart didn't regret his decision not to move forward. He only regretted that he let himself get talked into it in the first place.

### **"Donna"**

The numbers on Donna's most recent lab results were excellent, and she felt proud of herself. Her cholesterol was down from 250 to 165, and her fasting blood sugar showed a reduction from 252 to 100. One year earlier, her doctor had told Donna she needed to lose some weight and get more exercise or she would be at serious risk for diabetes and/or heart problems.

On the fateful day at the doctor's office, Donna weighed in at 225 pounds. She had always been a little overweight for her 5'2" frame. She reached her weight "high water mark" when she gained 75 pounds during the first nine months after a job transfer carried her three states away from her family and friends.

Donna knew her weight gain was caused by the stress of the change and the loneliness she felt being separated from her loved ones. She filled her emotional empty spot by cooking gourmet creations that consumed entire evenings and weekends of free time. With every pound she gained, Donna became more worried about whether she would ever meet a man who was willing to appreciate, or even accept, her well-cushioned self. The worry made her hungry, and the weight gain continued.

The doctor's warning about the potential health consequences of her lifestyle was just the wake-up call that Donna needed. She could be very disciplined when the



situation warranted, so Donna created a change plan. She joined the local YMCA, starting slowly by taking an aqua aerobics class right after work. She adopted a rescued two-year-old golden retriever for a walking companion and rose early each morning to take her dog, Spinner, on 40-minute treks around a nearby lakeside trail.

Donna's new exercise program of walking and aerobics lifted her spirits, as did Spinner, a playful guy with an endless hankering to chase Frisbees. She still loved to cook but spent her creative energies finding healthy alternatives to the fat- and salt-laden dishes she used to crave. She dropped 60 of her 75 job transfer pounds within a year and is determined to continue her program and lose 25 more.

In cases like Donna's, people get caught up in negative situations and feelings and use pre-conditioned habits to cope. Donna's family had a history of being overweight, and when she analyzed her own situation, Donna realized that she was using an old family remedy to handle her stress—food.

Donna developed new habits of regular exercise and healthy eating because she decided to do whatever she could to avoid the negative consequences of ill health. She discovered the rewards of her actions (higher energy, greater self-esteem, etc.) once she began to see the results of her new lifestyle.

### **How Do I Decide What's Important Enough?**

People develop the internal motivation to take action on their goals for one or both of two major reasons:

- ◆ To obtain a reward, or
- ◆ To avoid negative consequences.

One motivator or the other may be predominant for you. Here's a quick quiz to give you clues about what motivates you most. Write "yes" or "no" in the margin.

1. Did you finish term papers for school on the last possible minute of the due date, maybe even after negotiating extensions?
2. Do you hit the snooze alarm until the last minute possible to race to work and still reach your desk on time?
3. When driving, do you regularly speed, run yellow lights, or lean on the horn when a leisurely driver interferes with your rush to an appointment?
4. Do you often feel "under the gun?"
5. Is an empty underwear drawer your cue to do the laundry?

6. Do you get up before the roosters to start your day at your own pace?
7. Do you pride yourself on saving money and paying off your debts early?
8. Would you describe yourself as a self-starter?
9. Have your friends commented that they notice your house is always spotlessly clean and tidy?
10. Do you regularly arrive at functions before the hosts are showered and dressed?

If you answered yes to questions 1-5, you probably find it more motivating to avoid negative consequences than to attain rewards. If you answered yes to questions 6-10, it's the rewards and benefits that are your driving force. It is estimated that as many as four out of five people are more motivated by consequences than by rewards.

### **Why Am I More Motivated by Consequences Than by Rewards?**

Your primary motivation can usually be traced back to your early negative conditioning. When you were a child, external motivation was the primary way you learned to behave properly. You also had internal driving forces that helped you grow and develop your skills in areas like walking and language. But a huge external motivator—the feedback from your parents—was one of the biggest influences on your actions. Your parents' lessons reined you in when you went astray, and if you were like me as a child, you went astray all day long. In some cases, you may have misbehaved intentionally to test the consequences or if you figured that negative attention was better than none at all.

Given our early negative conditioning, we tend to believe in the reality of consequences because we experienced them personally. On the other hand, we don't always have the same degree of faith in the availability of the rewards. Many of us are conditioned from childhood to believe that rewards are scarce, elusive, or a scam. So for many of us, consequences have become the biggest drivers in our lives.

### **Why Does It Matter What Motivates Me?**

You will only take action to the extent that you feel motivated, so it is critical to your success that you understand what drives you. Once you identify your motivators, you can use that information to help you achieve your goals. You can also hedge your bets by covering both rewards *and* consequences if you think about and document both of them when planning your goals.

When you're focusing on rewards and consequences and what motivates you, it's important to identify your own internal motivation to achieve your vision. As children, our parents and others provided us with external motivation to influence our behavior. Whether that was through positive rewards or negative consequences, the end result for most of us is that we grew up looking to external sources for motivation and approval.

As adults, many of us continue to look to external sources for motivation and approval—from our parents, our bosses, our friends, our spouses, our colleagues, and others. Often, we rely *too* heavily on feedback from others. We need to motivate ourselves based on our personal vision, values, and definition of success.

No matter how loving and supportive your relationships with other people, each person has their own set of values that will influence the feedback they give you. They may not have the same definition of success that you do, yet you are giving them the power to make decisions about your life when you seek their approval.

External motivation based on consequences really boils down to fear. When you are motivated by fear of others or their reactions, life is no longer enjoyable. As you become used to and adapt to a certain level of fear and stress, it becomes necessary to up the ante to produce the same level of motivation to get you to act. Responding to or allowing those kinds of external motivations based on consequences ultimately conditions you to live in a hostile environment. When you act only to avoid externally imposed consequences, situations can become downright desperate or unhealthy before you do something to change them. This really is no way to live.

Even external motivation based on rewards has its drawbacks. In the workplace, I've seen many companies make the transition from a consequences-based environment to incentive-based motivation. While reward based external motivation doesn't inspire fear and isn't necessarily harmful, it still has its shortcomings. Like negative consequences, incentives are external and are only temporary motivators.

External motivation—whether based on consequences or rewards—reinforces a parent-child relationship, rather than an adult-adult relationship. Once the external reward is gone or out of sight, the motivation to act is gone.

### **I'm Confused. External, Internal, Consequences, Rewards – What Will Keep Me Motivated?**

The single best, longest lasting motivation to achieve your goals and your vision—or anything you set your mind to—comes from within you, from your habits of thought. In Chapter 2, you learned that you can develop habits of thought to help you take action toward your goals.

When you set goals for yourself, evaluate those goals based upon the benefits associated with achieving them and the negative consequences in store for you if you don't get there. Then you decide. Fix that vision firmly in your mind, use affirmations, and rely on all of your internal sources of motivation to get yourself started and keep yourself moving forward. Internal motivation is much more effective in the long run than relying on any kind of external motivation for your push to move forward.

### **How Do I Go About Evaluating Rewards and Consequences?**

If you've been applying what you're reading to your own life, by now you should have a list of several prioritized goals for yourself. If you're still having difficulty deciding which should come first, however, this next exercise should help you prioritize those goals. This exercise will help you evaluate both the payoff for reaching each goal and the downside if you don't.

#### **Rewards**

First take time to examine each of your goals in terms of rewards, and be sure to write your answers down so you don't forget them. Answer these questions:

1. What are the positive things that will happen as a result of achieving my goal?
2. In what way will my accomplishment help me "walk the talk" of my values and beliefs?
3. How does this help me use my gifts and assets more fully?
4. How will the achievement of this goal strengthen my belief in my ability to change, grow, or succeed?
5. What will I, or the people I love, gain by my accomplishment?
6. In what way will my improvement positively impact the balance in my life?
7. What are the benefits that will come from the rewards already on my list? (For example, if one of my rewards is more available relaxation time, what will I do to relax?)

Your rewards will be most motivating if they are very specific. As in the last chapter where we talked about creative visualization, rewards have the most power to drive you when you can visualize them so clearly that you almost see, hear, feel, touch, or even taste them in your mind.

---

When you compile your list of rewards for a goal, more is better. Make an extensive list. Sometimes the first rewards that pop into your mind aren't the *real* motivators that drive at all; you may need to dig a little to identify your true motivation. From a practical perspective, seeing a long list of benefits can also help you through the tough days. Don't forget to include the "obvious" rewards on your list, as well. When you're under stress, they might not be so obvious—and that's when you'll need to see them the most.

### **"Dwight"**

Dwight was working on a lifetime goal—he was in the process of renovating a Victorian-era 5,000 square foot home with a carriage house and stable on 10 acres of land for his family. When asked why he was willing to make such a huge investment, Dwight said he planned a fully equipped woodshop for himself in the carriage house. He always wanted to build fine furniture and had completed a few small projects in his cramped, limited basement shop in his current house. When he moved to the new shop, he planned to buy a new table saw and a drill press so he could broaden his capabilities.

Dwight's second reward for achieving this goal was to fulfill his wife's desire to have a commercial-grade kitchen. She liked to entertain and wanted enough room for caterers or family and friends to maneuver alongside her in the area. The expanded kitchen plan for the new house featured a Viking stove, several sinks and work areas, and a butler's pantry for storage and ease of serving guests.

He explained that Kimberly, his 13-year-old daughter, was excited about the stable that was already equipped with three stalls in good condition. Though she had taken riding lessons since she was eight, Kimberly didn't have immediate access to a horse of her own. She wanted to get her own horse and then planned to compete in dressage competitions.

When pressed with the question, "So what?" five or more times, Dwight finally admitted his big reward will be to feel like the successful husband and father provider he has always wanted to be. Aha! The *real* reason Dwight was going to scrape, save, and work long weekends to restore this property was now revealed. Once he became aware of his deepest motivation, Dwight reminded himself of that any time his aching muscles begged him to quit early on a weekend afternoon.

Many of the rewards you identify in your goals will be intrinsic rewards, meaning they will be a natural outgrowth of achieving the goal. If you succeed in your goal to save \$1,500 per month from January 2002 to January 2003, you will be rewarded with greater financial security—it naturally follows. Some of these built-in rewards are the "becoming" or intangible parts of your vision. If you reach your goal to spend one hour

of dedicated playtime with your child every day in February 2003, you will feel like a better parent.

You can also create an arbitrary reward for yourself when you hit your goal—a prize of sorts you decide to give yourself for meeting your goal. If your goal is to earn \$150,000 in sales commissions during calendar year 2003, you might promise to reward yourself with a new car or a piece of jewelry if you meet that goal. Rewards are most motivating when they are specific and engage you, so describe your reward car in year, model, color, interior details, etc. Hang a picture of it on the refrigerator door, the bathroom mirror, or beside your desk where you will see it frequently throughout your day.

### **Consequences**

Even if you don't believe you are part of the majority of people motivated primarily by consequences, hedge your motivational bets by answering these questions for *each* of your goals. Use these questions to make a list of consequences—things that will happen if you don't achieve your vision:

1. So what if I don't achieve this goal?
2. What negative fallout do I expect if I don't make it?
3. Will I be contradicting my values and beliefs if I don't do this? What difference will that make?
4. In what way will I let myself or someone else down if I don't achieve this?
5. How will failing to meet this goal impact my belief in my ability to change, improve, and succeed?
6. What's the worst thing that could happen if I don't hit it?

The purpose of listing the consequences is to identify the things worthy of running away from; the sole purpose is to make yourself take action toward your goal. Wanting to avoid consequences will push you to act even when you feel less certain of the rewards or when your self-confidence and drive are weak.

My husband and I were talking about football, believe it or not, and how it relates to the actions you take based upon the rewards or consequences associated with a goal. He sees it this way: a pass receiver has a desire to catch a long throw and score a touchdown. The thing that really makes him run, though, is the sight of the Olympic-quality sprinting, rock solid, 285-pound lineman who will pummel him if he doesn't

---

run—and fast. The receiver doesn't want to get injured and miss game time, and he certainly doesn't want to suffer the physical pain he felt the last time he got pounded on the field. The receiver wants the reward, but his desire to avoid the consequence gives him speed.

List the consequences completely; then, don't dwell on them. Focusing on the consequences can create a negative affirmation, a negative habit of thought. I can't think of a single person who benefits from creating another limiting secret message. I'm going to take the risk of sharing another weight loss example; the ideas in this book are not intended to relate just to dieting, but it's one of the most frequent (and most elusive) goals I hear about from my clients.

### **“Serena”**

Serena was constantly on a diet, although she couldn't remember the last time the numbers on the scale went down for more than three days in a row. She tried every new weight loss scheme she read or heard about: juice diets, all fruit diets, protein diets, drinks, and crazy fat-burning combinations—but with no sustainable results.

To remind herself not to overeat, Serena bought a pig magnet at a craft show and hung it on the front of the refrigerator door. The pig held a little sign that said, “A moment on your lips, forever on your hips.” Serena looked at him morning, noon, and night, reminding herself of the consequences of large portions and unchecked snacking—and she continued to gain weight.

Serena sabotaged herself by turning what she thought would be a motivating consequence message into a reinforcement of her image of herself as a fat person. Don't add more negative conditioning to your brain! Instead, focus your self-talk on the rewards of your goal, your commitment to your action steps, and your belief that you *can* improve, even if it's a little bit at a time.

The rewards and consequences you associate with your goals are very significant. They are the reasons you decide whether or not to commit to a particular goal. You demonstrate your level of commitment to yourself by the actions you take, or don't take, to achieve progress toward your goals. Your lists of internal motivators—the rewards and consequences—should be as comprehensive as possible. After all, deciding to pursue your vision means you'll probably need to make some personal changes—and that can be uncomfortable. Your reasons to keep trying—and making those changes—must be stronger than the barriers you will inevitably encounter.

**Isn't It Better to Try and Fail Than Not to Try at All?**

Often people ask me, "Isn't it better to try and fail than not to try at all?" My answer is that it depends upon your definition of the words *fail* and *try*. I think the only real failure is when you give up on something that is important to you. It may take many attempts to get the results you want. You may have to explore many options to make it work. Your willingness to persist and endure setbacks relates directly to the mental comparison you do when you weigh the rewards and consequences of the goal against the discomfort or difficulty of the actions required.

But the idea of trying (rather than deciding) means two things to me. Either:

1. The goal isn't really important enough to me; (The rewards and/or consequences aren't significant enough.) or
2. I don't really believe I'm capable of achieving it.

When you make casual promises to yourself (i.e., "I'll try to do that.") and then don't keep them, you eat away at your self-image. It's hard to see yourself as a person who keeps his or her word. It's hard to see yourself as a successful person who *can* follow through on his or her commitments. You unintentionally reinforce some of the negative habits of thought buried deep inside that tell you that you can't. You create habits of action that demonstrate to you (and others) that you don't necessarily mean what you say.

**I'm in the Middle of a Goal Plan, and I Think I Want to Bail Out.**

Sometimes we find ourselves caught up in a vision and planning goals when suddenly we have an overwhelming desire to bail out. Should we bail out? Or should we force ourselves to move forward? Before you decide to give up on your goal, go back and take another look at it. Is this a goal you wrote from a sense of "I *should* do this" or did you create this goal because you really wanted it? If it's a "should" goal, review the rewards and consequences associated with it. Are the rewards really for you? Or will the rewards benefit someone else?

If you want to feel successful about how you live your life, it's important to maintain the responsibility for your life. You are responsible for your life and what you do with it. No one else can make your decisions for you. You are not a victim. You are the creator of your life. You have choices.

Although some of the choices may be extremely difficult to make, you make a costly sacrifice if you don't make them for yourself. When you give someone else the power to make choices for you or refuse to accept responsibility for your own choices,



---

you sacrifice your self-confidence and your influence over the outcome. You live your life according to someone else's agenda and within their limitations—and that's no way to live.

I'd rather you make a conscious decision *not* to pursue a particular goal than to make a half-hearted attempt. When you reassess your goal, if you decide the rewards are not great enough or the consequences are not sufficient to push you to action, make a decision to stop kidding yourself and learn from the experience. Use your energy and your creative power elsewhere, on goals that really matter to you.

### **How Do I Help Other People Get Motivated?**

There's a reason why this book focuses on you and your goals, your rewards and consequences, and your secret messages. You can only truly motivate yourself. Ultimately you are going to do what you are going to do, regardless of what anybody else tells you. In the same way, another person is ultimately going to do what they are going to do, regardless of what you think they should do.

If you want to help others get bigger and better results, the best you can do with other people is to:

- ◆ Try to understand what internal motivators spur them to take action; then create supportive external conditions to the best of your ability. For example, if you manage an employee who really enjoys digging into new projects, give him or her the opportunity to spearhead an initiative. If they like to work solo and inside their own brain, give them room and privacy to do so if you can.
- ◆ Help by providing external rewards and consequences in certain cases. If they need a positive result and are in the habit of relying on external motivation, you can help them achieve their initial victories by offering incentives or by holding out negative consequences. After their initial emotional reaction to the outcome of their efforts, ask them questions to help them recognize the actions that got them good or bad results. In this way, you can help them learn for next time and at the same time help them begin to wean themselves off of their reliance on external motivators.
- ◆ Help them find the source of their internal motivation rather than reinforcing yourself too much as an external motivator. For instance, don't provide external rewards for every positive action your child takes. Give them the opportunity to feel good inside themselves about the things that *they* think went well. As they mature, they will develop inner strength and not rely on someone else's opinions to drive them to high performance.

- ◆ Stand back and allow them to make mistakes (within reason) and learn from them, rather than preventing them from learning by pre-empting their errors. If you allow them the struggle, their eventual victory will mean more—they will be more confident because they did it on their own. Examine your leadership practices to make sure you're not penalizing people when they make honest mistakes. If you are, you are creating fear and preventing them from learning. (I'm not referring to situations where someone is making the same mistake for the 20<sup>th</sup> time.)
- ◆ Buy this book for them!

An incident with my six-year-old daughter, Lauren, last July 4<sup>th</sup> illustrates the complex relationship between all the factors that motivate people. Lauren is very visual and loves pretty sunsets and such, but she *hates* loud sounds (unless, of course, it's blaring music by one of her favorite recording groups). Her dad and I are big fans of fireworks and enjoy attending the big annual Independence Day concert and fireworks display at our local fairgrounds. In addition to the music and the fireworks, it's also a nice opportunity for us to visit with acquaintances we rarely see otherwise. We must enjoy the event a lot, because the traffic jam we sit in consumes more time than the actual fireworks display!

The first time we took our daughter to the fireworks was three years ago, and we sat far enough away (we thought) to muffle the loudest bangs. But—apparently not, because she screamed bloody murder, and we promptly left. Two years ago we tried again, taking ear protection for her to wear, but with the same result, even though we held her close and tried soothing her. Last year we skipped the big fireworks event altogether, and she got to see a small display from her bedroom window.

Right now, she's thinking about starting first grade, and Lauren is very focused on anything and everything that proves she's a big kid. She rides a two-wheeler, a skateboard, a scooter, and is learning to roller-blade. She jumps off the high diving board at the swimming pool. She went back and forth about this year's July 4<sup>th</sup> extravaganza—"Will it be loud?" "How many people will be there?" "What color do you think the fireworks will be, Mom?" and again "Will it be loud?"

I'm not quite sure what finally motivated her the most—internal or external factors. All I know is she finally said, "I think I'm ready to see them this year, Mom," and that at one point I had helped her remember the cool glow necklace she bought the last time she was there. Whatever did it, she went with us to see the fireworks—without earmuffs—and sat through the whole thing without making a peep. She was really proud of herself and bounced along as we talked about courage on the way back to the car. The next day, I gave her a couple of glow sticks to reward her because she had been willing to try it one more time.

**Chapter 6**  
**E – Each Obstacle Has a Solution**  
**When You Use Your Creativity**

**W**hat's the difference between a dream and a goal? As I see it, a goal starts with a dream (your vision) and adds three components:

1. Commitment;
2. A plan; and
3. Action to implement the plan.

In the last chapter, we talked about rewards and consequences and how they provide the internal motivation for you to commit to your goal. This chapter is devoted to the second component listed above: your plan. The quality of your plan is critical if you want it to succeed. It must be well thought out, thorough, and complete—outlining all the necessary steps to achieve your goal from start to finish. Your plan will be the map that shows you exactly how to get from where you are now to your destination—success. A good plan also increases your confidence. Once it's complete, you can feel certain you will succeed because all you really need to do is complete the steps one at a time.

A detailed, step-by-step plan can reduce a seemingly insurmountable mountain to a series of manageable day hikes.

I'm not trying to fool you into thinking your plan will proceed as effortlessly as a duck gliding on a pond. You will probably feel more like the duck's feet, paddling like crazy under the surface. Obstacles will arise—anticipated obstacles and perhaps also ones you couldn't possibly have predicted. The key to a successful plan is to consider every known and potential stumbling block you can think of ahead of time and have solutions ready to implement. Then even if the unexpected events arise, your motivation and confidence will not be eroded by “yet another problem.” What's more, you won't lose valuable action time having to stop and think in the midst of the problem, when you may be feeling negative and distracted.

### **“Gregor”—overcoming obstacles**

Gregor is a carrot-topped eight-year-old with twinkling eyes, a quick mind, and a wicked sense of humor. Born with cerebral palsy, Gregor's ankles and feet were malformed so that he could not stand or walk for the first five years of his life. His parents adopted him knowing his ankles required major surgery and realizing he might never be able to walk independently. After the procedure, he spent months in casts, months in a wheelchair, and more months using a walker. Now he usually relies on the stability of a single cane to keep his balance. But one memorable Sunday, less than one year after his surgery, Gregor walked carefully to the front of his church using nothing but ankle braces for help.

---

Whenever I think about Gregor and the determination I see on his face, the obstacles in my own path seem insignificant. How can Gregor endure the fatigue that comes from the extra effort he must make just to get through his daily routine? How can he endure the teasing and unkindness of the kids in his school? If I were Gregor, I might be depressed. Yet every time Greg is around, giggling erupts or he shrieks in silly surprise when he pops out from his hiding place around the corner. He *isn't* depressed.

Obstacles are the problems we must solve to achieve our goals. When we anticipate them and develop solutions to handle them *before* we start to take action toward our goal, we can greatly reduce the resistance associated with forging ahead.

I'd like you to select one of your top priority goals—one that has a lot of internal motivation for you to achieve based on the rewards you stand to gain or the consequences you want to avoid. Now answer these questions about your goal to develop a list of current and potential obstacles:

1. Why have I not achieved this goal already?
2. What stands between me and my goal?
3. What resources do I not yet have that I need in order to work toward my goal?
4. Who besides me could prevent me from achieving my goal?
5. What is it about me (my habits of thinking or action, my skills or my faith in myself) that could interfere with my achieving my goal?
6. What is not currently an obstacle, but has the potential to become one before I complete my goal?
7. What thing, if it happened, could slow my progress down or even prevent me from achieving my goal at all?

Obstacles to our goals come in many sizes. Did you notice that many of the obstacles relate to you personally? You are the single biggest factor in determining whether or not you will reach your goal. Here are some of the obstacles I hear most often:

***“I don't have time.”***

This usually really means, “This isn't as high a priority for me as \_\_\_\_\_ (some other item, issue or action) is.” Examine your priorities (and the rewards and consequences of your goal) to determine whether this goal is truly what you want. You will find the time to pursue goal-related actions more often when they are aligned with your *actual* priorities, not the ones you think you *should* have.

Sometimes the time obstacle arises because the goal setter is not using a means to stay organized—such as an organizer or time planning system—to help budget the time available each day. They respond to situations that come up (someone else’s) and get so wrapped up in handling those situations that they forget about their own agenda for the day. Even if your job requires you to be available to respond to emergencies, it is almost always possible to find time for goal-focused action. You just might need to plan more carefully or set aside “do not disturb” time slots to make sure you get the time to take action.

If you’re already over committed in your obligations, you probably do have a legitimate time obstacle. Then it’s time to take a close look at each of your current activities and determine whether it is more important than the new goal you want to pursue. In other words, examine whether your other commitments provide greater or lesser rewards and/or prevent more negative consequences than your new goal does. You might need to make a choice to drop something less rewarding from your schedule to pick up the time to pursue your newest goal.

***“I don’t have enough money.”***

This obstacle is similar to the time obstacle in that it is often a matter of priorities and budgeting. Your spending habits may be so ingrained that you don’t even notice them. Attitudes about money, like attitudes about your time resources, are often linked to very deeply held secret messages. For instance, you might have established long-term habits of eating Sunday dinners in fine restaurants or attitudes about the importance of buying high-end clothing or throwing things away to buy new. When you look at your money habits in light of your goals, you may decide your spending patterns are worth modifying if it can help you, for example, get the capital together to start your own business.

The key to overcoming the money obstacle is often in tracking data: where is the money you earn now going? If you are used to having a fair amount of disposable income, you’re probably not accustomed to keeping track of all the little places it goes. There may be a number of things you currently spend money on that would be easy to give up—and giving up those particular expenditures may be all that is necessary to solve most of your money obstacle.

Unlike time, money is not a limited resource. Some of your solutions may come from thinking creatively about outside sources of funding for your goal.

---

“\_\_\_\_\_ *won't like it.*” (Fill in the name of your choice.)

If this is an obstacle for you, it's time to consider for whom you are living your life—for them or for you. I don't mean you should shamelessly disregard the feelings and preferences of the people you care about. Of course, it's important to demonstrate your love for them by adapting your behavior to some extent to please them. But you have to draw a line in the sand somewhere, or you'll give up your creative power over your own life and your happiness.

If the name you filled in the obstacle blank is not a loved one, why should their preferences stop you from fulfilling your dreams? As long as it's legal and ethical, you can pursue your goal with a free conscience. Others will not always like what you choose to do; however, they won't have to live with the unanswered question “What would have happened if I had \_\_\_\_\_?” in their minds.

Sometimes this obstacle is actually a cultural issue. “Culture” refers to the total set of values, beliefs, and customary practices shared by a group of people. Your family, ethnic, or organizational culture may dictate that it is more or less acceptable to pursue your independent agenda. In some cultures, there is an unwritten rule that the good of the whole is more important than the good of an individual. Even if this is the culture you live in, you still have the power of choice. Just understand that if you rebel against the unwritten but accepted rules of the group, you might be ousted from close association with them or at least create a strain in your relationship. Only you can decide whether your goal is worth the investment.

These are just three of the obstacles I see on a regular basis. Your list might not include any of them. There is no magic number of obstacles to look for. It's more important for your list of obstacles to be complete than it is for your list to have a certain number of entries. If the length of your list or the size of your obstacles is a bit intimidating, take heart. Now you understand why it was so important to document the rewards and consequences beforehand.

### **How Many Obstacles are Too Many?**

For some of us—and depending on what the obstacle is—“one” may be too many. For others, a list as long as your arm is *not* too many, if the goal is worthy and your commitment is strong.

### **Why Would One Obstacle Be Enough to Stand Between Me and My Dream?**

There could be several reasons an obstacle becomes a showstopper for you. Let's look at a few possibilities.

- ◆ The achievement of your goal may not be within your ability to control or influence. We trap ourselves in this one sometimes when we rely on someone else's actions to achieve our goal for us. If you realize this is happening to you, review (and perhaps rewrite) your goal to make sure it reflects what YOU are willing to take action upon, not what someone else needs to do.
- ◆ Related to the prior point, your goal may not be realistic if there are insurmountable obstacles attached to it. If you are over the age of, let's say 22, and you set a goal to grow five inches taller without the help of platform shoes, all of the good nutrition, exercise, and posture in the world aren't going to do it. Your one big obstacle is that you have already passed your age for growth in height. (Caution and/or the good news: Even the natural physical limitations we accepted for years have become, in some cases, debatable. Imagine 60-year-old+ women bearing children—in these days women and doctors are finding ways to make it happen.)
- ◆ You may not have *really* decided to persist in your pursuit. If this happens, review the rewards and consequences you listed to renew your motivation. Also try to identify what secret messages are interfering with your desire to change your habits. You will need to do some frequent, intentional positive self-talk to diffuse the attitudes that are holding you back.
- ◆ Maybe you only anticipated one possible solution to this obstacle and that "solution" didn't work. Now you're blocked until you come up with another one, and the frustration makes you want to quit.

A colleague of mine is highly goal-driven in his actions, and from time to time he nails somebody on the issue of overcoming obstacles. He has little patience when he sniffs a trace of wobbling commitment. One day I overheard my friend talking to a new independent sales rep. She was complaining about the high cost of the products she had to offer, the lack of market for her products, and overall was blaming other people and outside factors for her lack of success. She was thinking of packing it in because of all the obstacles.

My friend squinted his piercing blue eyes slightly as he assessed and said, with a challenge in his voice, "Are you decision making or problem solving?" The salesperson stammered and frowned slightly, looking puzzled; then walked away.

In effect, my friend was asking her "Have you actually decided and committed yourself to selling this stuff, and are you genuinely looking for solutions to your problems—or are you dwelling on the obstacles until you've accumulated enough excuses and negative energy to justify quitting?" My friend made a valid point.



---

Sometimes we change our decisions too readily when it feels overwhelming to stay steadfast and pursue them. We only take our thinking as far as the roadblocks and don't go beyond them to consider, "What can I do to get past them?" In the process of giving in too early, we may sacrifice our dreams.

### **Now that I'm Looking at My Obstacles, This Goal is Way Over My Head!**

If you believe, deep down, that your goal is out of your reach, what is the likelihood that you will take all of the necessary action to achieve it? In my experience, slim to none. That's why the sales rep in the example above was viewing obstacles as reasons to stop pursuing her goal—she didn't really believe she could achieve it, yet she was subconsciously trying to protect herself by looking for outside reasons things weren't working.

I would be remiss to talk about overcoming obstacles without touching yet again on the power of belief. If you think you are capable of doing something, you will do whatever is needed to overcome whatever obstacles are out there to do it. If you don't think you can achieve your goal, you're more likely to try changing boats midstream or shifting your attention to an activity that is tension relieving, not goal achieving.

Do you remember earlier when we talked about what comes first:

- ◆ Thinking yourself into a new way of acting, or
- ◆ Acting yourself into a new way of thinking?

If you have a goal with a couple of really huge obstacles, you may need to break that goal down even further—into several smaller plans. Break it down into smaller pieces so that each piece is manageable and you can handle them successfully.

### **"Enrico"—Rico's Java Spot**

Enrico's dream was to own a gourmet coffee bar and jazz club before he hit the age of 30. He had three years left to hit his deadline date. Jazz was his first love; he learned to play the tenor saxophone as a kid and stayed with it all through high school and his music major in college. He and several of his college buddies formed a combo with dreams of the big time, but they found it difficult to find venues open to jazz music that wasn't necessarily the 1940's big band variety.

Coffee was Enrico's other passion. His older brother introduced him to it when Enrico was 12 years old, adding enough cream to render Enrico's first drink a pale off-

white color. Now after working himself up to coffee connoisseur status, Enrico insisted on grinding whole beans himself, brewing it in a French press to retain the flavorful oils, and drinking it black.

Although he knew jazz and coffee, Enrico knew nothing about running a business—obstacle number 1, and a biggie at that. At age 27 with only five years of teaching behind him, Enrico didn't have a big reserve of cash to invest in his venture. He didn't know how to write a business plan, had no idea how much coffee people would drink in a week's time, and he didn't know where he would buy high-quality coffee in bulk to sell in the shop. He wasn't sure where to buy the equipment and supplies he needed, and he had never decorated a room in a style more refined than "post-college student hand-me-down." Enrico didn't have a location or a name for his business, he didn't know about how to keep books, and he had never interviewed a prospective employee in his life.

Enrico didn't worry about finding soloists and combos to play in his jazz club, though. He belonged to a large, informal network of players whose standing joke was, "What does a jazzer doll do? You wind it up and it starves!" He simply put the word out among his friends that he planned to build a club, and they offered to play for next to nothing to help him get started.

Although the pile of hurdles in front of him felt like a mountain, Enrico's goal was firmly set in his mind. He decided to treat this project the same way he handled the rehearsal of a new musical chart—take it phrase by phrase, perfecting one at a time, and then put the whole tune together.

His first sub-goal was to develop his concept on paper in detail in the form of a business plan. He researched potential suppliers and equipment on-line, and he visited more than a dozen jazz clubs. None of his future competitors offered the same combination of coffee and jazz that he was planning, but a number of them were quite full of customers. He figured that was a sign of good market potential, and he sampled their menus and checked out their décor for ideas.

Once his business plan goal was complete, Enrico moved on to find financing. He figured he needed to raise enough to pay for his facility, equipment, startup inventory, and a few months worth of cash flow to pay staffers and utilities until his customer base built up sufficiently. Banks turned him down flat, citing the poor risk record associated with restaurant and bar financing. His parents' financial situation prevented them from helping him. Enrico was, however, able to raise the extra cash he needed after his uncle drew on his home equity line of credit to help Enrico get started.

One by one, Enrico dealt with each obstacle. In some instances, he had to try three or four solutions until he found the one that worked. He bought a city property for

---

a song at a tax sale. It needed a major overhaul but was in a highly visible, high-traffic location. He and his buddies did a lot of the major demolition and remodeling work themselves to save money. He enlisted the assistance of his city's codes inspector ahead of time to make sure he was setting up his facility and food handling processes in compliance with health and safety regulations. Enrico located a quality coffee supplier willing to extend attractive payment terms, and his vendor also set him up with on-site roasting equipment so he could generate additional revenue by supplying other coffee bars.

Enrico's business opened 16 months after he first committed to the project. Opening night at Rico's Java Spot was packed with friends and well-wishers. The pungent smell of roasting coffee beans filled the air as Enrico's staff bustled around behind the counter serving up exotic whipped coffee shakes and cappuccino. A piano and jazz guitar softly noodled around with jazz standards under the mild roar of customers' schmoozy chatter. Enrico collapsed into bed that night, exhausted but elated.

Enrico committed to a giant change in lifestyle when he took on the coffee and jazz club goal. He isolated each obstacle and worked on it until it met his satisfaction; then he moved on to another. He was most surprised by how many people jumped in and offered to help in whatever way they could after he shared his dream with them. Opening night was not only Enrico's victory—it was a victory shared by all who watched and aided his progress.

The size of your goal and the scope of the obstacles in your way are as big as they feel. Your goal might seem hard to achieve, even if it's not as complex as Enrico's goal was. If you have a hard time believing, can you at least accept that it's *possible* to improve and change? If you can take your brain that far, the rest is a matter of breaking your goal way down so you can accumulate wins and prove your capabilities to yourself.

### **I've Got a Laundry List of Obstacles!**

Having a long list of obstacles isn't the end of the world. The object is to think through all potential obstacles and develop multiple possible solutions for each of them *before* you start to implement your plan, remember? If you leave a lot of holes in your plan and adopt an, "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it" attitude, you won't feel as confident and, therefore, might not take action. At best you'll start out OK but will have to stop midstream to solve unanticipated problems. Don't cheat on this step or you might place your goal at risk!

This is the point in your thought process where you want to be as creative and freewheeling as possible. When you start developing solutions to obstacles, use an open-

mindful approach—the idea is to document a lot of solutions without stopping to evaluate them. You will evaluate them later.

You might want to start with an exercise to stimulate your thinking. Here are a few examples you can use. As you read through these, document your answers so you don't lose them.

- ◆ Use metaphors. A metaphor is a comparison between your situation and something that might seem completely unrelated. For example: how is this problem or obstacle like a \_\_\_\_\_ (squirrel in the autumn)? Compare the similarities between your obstacle and the metaphor. Think about how the other situation is handled, and then consider how you might apply the same solution to your obstacle.
- ◆ Brainstorm. Write a question at the top of a sheet of paper. For example: What are all of the possible uses for a \_\_\_\_\_ (self-adhesive note pad)? List as many potential answers as you can, as quickly as you can. Don't stop to evaluate your answers. (This one can get extremely silly, but it's OK—laughter unlocks your creativity) If time permits, walk away after your list has been generated, then come back to evaluate the ideas when your mind is fresh.
- ◆ Use the dictionary. Open the dictionary and randomly point to a word. Think about how the word relates to your obstacle or how it might suggest a possible solution to your obstacle.
- ◆ Write creatively. Start a paragraph with a sentence (or the beginning of one) that relates to your obstacle. Allow yourself 5 to 15 minutes to write freely and describe what you would do to overcome the obstacle. "Once upon a time I was driving to an important client appointment when I saw an accident had blocked all lanes of the road ahead as far as I could see. My cell phone wasn't working at this location, so I ...."
- ◆ Sleep on it. Right at bedtime tell yourself, out loud, what you want your brain to work on while you sleep. Your brain is not out of commission while your body rests; it's busy at night processing the day's events and getting you ready for the next. Give it an agenda and you might find that it has an idea or two ready for you in the morning. This method works best if you don't distract your brain by reading or watching TV after you have set your "sleeptime agenda."
- ◆ Take a shower. This shower isn't for hygiene, it's for thinking. Many people find that the relaxation (and also the negative ions) from drops of water pounding on your head helps your mind wander creatively.

- 
- ◆ Take a walk or a run. For most people, one side of the brain is dominant over the other. “Left-brained” people tend to be logical and organized, and “right-brained” people tend to be creative and intuitive. Some theorists believe that walking, running, and other forms of exercise that use both sides of your body help you build the cross-brain connections that help you get the most from both sides of your brain. Even if you do not agree with the theorists, the change of scenery and rhythmic movements can help ideas flow more freely for you.
  - ◆ Solve a puzzle or build something. For instance, try to build a tower as high as you can using only plastic spoons. Do not use any adhesive or hardware to hold the spoons together. What are the principles that help the tower maintain its stability? How do these principles provide possible solutions to your obstacle?
  - ◆ Rephrase your obstacle in eight-year-old terms. Sometimes our adult brains get so caught up in the complexities of things that we miss the point. When we translate our problem into child-appropriate terms, we have to boil it down to its essence, and the simpler version can make it easier to address.

These ideas may sound a bit wacky, but give them a try. They work as long as you avoid instantly editing out things that sound unconventional. If you are more creative in a group setting, gather a few people you trust and give them a try. It is often helpful to build upon other people’s thought processes. You may be one of the many people who think best out loud.

### **I Don’t Have Solutions for This Obstacle!**

There are situations, like Enrico’s above, where the solutions to your obstacles don’t only come from inside your head—some of them come from gathering outside information. The solution to your obstacle might require some technical expertise or the experience of another person who has dealt with a similar obstacle already. Think of yourself as a sponge when you are in the solution generation phase. Keeping your goal in the forefront of your mind will enable your brain to use selective perception to help you find data you can use.

Fortunately today you have access to multitudes of sources for information—why spend your time and energy hacking a new path through the jungle when a perfectly serviceable might one already exist? Your research may unearth solutions or provide a foundation of information you can adapt to the specific needs of your situation. Below are some research sources for you to consider:

- ◆ Knowledgeable friends, family, and colleagues. Tap into your personal network. I emphasize the word knowledgeable, because if you’re only using their uneducated

opinions you might as well use your own—it's faster, and if you are wrong, nobody but you gets hurt.

- ◆ Professionals and businesses. Some professionals, like attorneys and accountants, are in the advice business, so they may charge you an hourly rate for their consultation. Other businesses will provide free information related to the products and services they provide in hopes that you will become a customer or refer a customer to them sometime in the future.
- ◆ Government entities. Departments in local, state, and federal government generate information necessary to provide public service. Depending upon the depth of the information you need, it might be readily available in government publications and by now, even on-line.
- ◆ Associations and special interest groups. Associations often sponsor studies on issues that interest them, and they will often make the results available to you for free or a nominal fee to attract you as a prospective new member. They also often publish newsletters or trade magazines not generally available to the public.
- ◆ Books and magazines. This might seem obvious, but the publishing industry has become more and more specialized. You may find information that is totally geared to your situation. Unless you want to be a book collector, you can minimize your investment by frequenting the library or reading snippets while sipping latte at your local book superstore. Use multiple sources to help make sure you're getting a balanced view.
- ◆ The Internet. This has become one of the most efficient research methods available. Your Internet service provider may have its own keyword search engine to help you find the information you need. If you are not familiar with the various other search engines available, check some magazines geared toward your topic or look in personal computing magazines. Most of them have websites of their own, make reference to favorite websites, or have links from their own site to related sites you can visit.

When exploring websites, it helps to adopt the mindset of a reference librarian or a scientist. Think in terms of a tree: the main topic you are looking for is the trunk; related topics and sub-topics form the branches and leaves.

### **Does it Matter in What Order I Plan My Solutions?**

It's most efficient to list all your obstacles and potential problems before you start to develop solutions. Sometimes you will develop one solution that will address several obstacles at once. This is called a critical path. If you find a critical path, it will often be

the first solution you convert to action for your hands and feet. Otherwise, select the solution(s) you think best to start the ball rolling.

### **I've Made Plans Before, But Didn't Do Them**

One of the scariest stages of the success-growing process for many people is the point at which it's time to take action on our goal. For some, this is the roughest part because this is the "put up or shut up" stage at which the results (or lack of results) of the plan become visible.

Another group of people thinks an idea only erodes and decays from its original perfection once it is put into play. They resist implementing anything other than their original idealized version of the idea, even if the development of an unexpected solution to an obstacle will help make the goal happen.

For yet others, deeply ingrained negative habits of thought kick in and they remember other times when things didn't go as planned. So they give up before they start. For these reasons and more, it's much easier for many of us to think and talk and plan than it is for us to *do*.

Let's review some of the techniques that will help you get off the dime and get on with achieving your goals:

1. Set goals that stretch you, but not too far with the first few. You want to start to accumulate small victories, because they help give you the confidence to work toward larger ones.
2. Write your goals and action plans down so you don't forget them. Keep a notebook with all of them together, and check them off as you make progress toward the actions to complete them. I suggest hard copy because you can keep it in front of you even when your computer is turned off or in another location. Also include a written list of victories—the goals you have already achieved. It will help fuel your confidence when you are starting a new goal or when you are having a rough day.
3. If you have several goals going at once, be sure to prioritize them and list them in priority order. If you only have one hour today to devote to goal achievement, you don't want to waste half of it deciding which of your goals is more important to act upon.
4. Use the combination of your creativity and information gathering to develop multiple solutions in which you can have confidence. You won't always know ahead of time that any one solution is a sure thing. Keep a "test and measure" mindset so you won't derail yourself if the first solution doesn't work.

5. Use your solutions to write detailed, specific action steps. Action steps are observable, measurable tasks you do with your hands and feet. They have a beginning and an end. (Sample action step: Set an appointment for my annual physical with Dr. Johns by 8-23-02.) If you plan in detail and don't leave out small or obvious action steps, you will feel more in control of your goal plan. That will increase the likelihood that you will take action on your goal.
6. Enter your action steps and their due dates in your calendar or daily planner, and include them on your "To Do" list.
7. If you can reasonably predict that your goal-focused work time will be interrupted, incorporate an allowance for the expected interruptions when you set your due dates. This will help minimize feelings of frustration and keep your action timeline on track.
8. Charge up your confidence by choosing your attitude and using daily positive self-talk. The next chapter will tell you how.

How much potential do you have? Exactly how far can you stretch? Not even you may know the depth of the internal resources you possess. You will reveal your real, evolving self through the new actions you take.



**Chapter 7**  
**T – Talk to Yourself to Shape Your Habits**

What if, as of today, you had the opportunity to start over with a blank slate and develop all of your habits of thought from scratch? You wouldn't be burdened with baggage from the past—those nagging doubts that stop you from jumping wholeheartedly into life.

Instead, you would be the composer of your own life symphony, selecting the melodies you wanted to play and the precise combination of instruments that pleased your ears most. You could choose to speed up the tempo or slow things down so the notes could linger. You could decide whether your composition was loud, rhythmic, and raucous, and the very next moment decide to drop it down to the most delicate, subtle mingling of quiet notes.

While you can't become a completely blank slate, you *can* compose the life of your choosing. You *can* mold your secret messages to help you overcome obstacles and achieve your most closely held goals.

### **Let's Get Real Here...This Sounds Too Easy**

Are you familiar with the phrase, "If you want to make God laugh, plan your life." This phrase focuses in on the fact that none of us can plan everything. We can't possibly foresee everything we will encounter down the road, good or bad. There are going to be some surprises along the way that we can't plan for.

I'm not suggesting that if you do what I recommend in this book, you will rule over all. Regardless of how well we plan our lives, the universe has surprises in store for all of us. Some of those surprises will be good for us and others will not. Sometimes someone else's goals and aspirations will fly right in the face of yours. You might want to run for a political office or start a business venture and have to compete to reach your goal. And even if you work hard every day focused on your goal, someone else might work harder, faster, smarter, or have more natural gifts or better timing.

The difference between a person who continually works toward and achieves his or her goals, and the one who doesn't reach them, is what they allow their brain to do with this information. What will you do when you realize your goal isn't a no-brainer? Will you keep that vision firmly in your mind and invest whatever energy and focus are necessary? Or will you give up? Right now you're probably already thinking it would be a whole lot easier to achieve your goal if you were smarter, richer, thinner, more organized, or better connected. But does that reinforce your vision and help you achieve your goals, or does that just make the baggage of your past seem even heavier?

Think for a moment about an upsetting situation or incident from the past that still nags at you regularly. Perhaps it's something you did at one time that you are not proud of. Maybe it's a relationship that went wrong, and you're having a hard time letting it go.

---

Perhaps it's a time when you worked and worked—and didn't get the results you thought you deserved.

When you stop to think about it, that situation is like a balloon—once the balloon has burst you can't un-burst it. The same holds true with your life history—all that went on before today. Everything that happened in the past, it just is. And all of the inner rehashing and replaying you do can't change a thing.

Did you learn anything from the incident—even though the experience was unpleasant or disappointing? Usually there's a lesson in there. If so, take the lesson and leave the rest. Write down what you learned.

When you finish writing, visualize yourself packing that incident into a magic expandable trash bag, the kind that cinches closed. How big is that old situation, and how much does it weigh? Is it heavy, prickly, jagged, cold, lumpy? When you finish filling the bag, tie it closed, really tight, with a double knot if you have to. Now pick that trash bag up and heave it over your shoulder. Don't hang onto it—let that trash bag go flying behind you!

### **Flying Trash Bags?**

Hopefully the last couple of chapters got you really revved up about your goals. It's really great to start out with enthusiasm. Now we've switched to talking about flying trash bags—because right on the heels of your initial enthusiasm about a goal you're going to have to consciously separate your old habits of thought and action from the new.

Although it seems logical to move away from your unproductive habits to the better way you've designed for the future without giving it a second thought, the old ways are ingrained in you. They're familiar, and you're used to them, so they're somewhat comfortable even if they are unpleasant or don't get the results you want.

Separation from those old habits of thought and old actions is a necessary part of change and improvement. Visualize the trash bag exercise, or write your past bad situation down on an index card; then tear it up or burn it. Take some sort of symbolic action to show yourself that the past is done and over with.

It's OK to feel a little blue thinking about leaving your "old" life behind. Even if it wasn't all that great, you were used to it and you knew the routine. And it was easier than all this self-discipline and conscious thinking stuff is going to be. Sometimes it feels easier to just coast than to be so alert and aware.

To help yourself through this phase, talk to yourself about your future and your willingness to believe (or even just accept) that you can improve. Talk out loud or write it down, but either way, repeat the messages regularly over a series of days or weeks.

Here are some examples:

- ◆ I always follow through on things that are important to me.
- ◆ I have faith that the universe will provide.
- ◆ I take action every day toward my goals.
- ◆ I keep my sights on my goals.

The outdated, limiting secret messages you carry in your mind got in there via a process of spaced repetition. When you put new, supportive ones in there using the same method—repetition—you weaken the hold the old limiting messages have on you.

In the early stage of change, you will clearly see what you *don't* want to do, but it won't be as easy to determine what you *do* want to be doing. The next stage of personal change will help you test the solutions you developed—some will work and some won't. Although you've already planned your goal in detail, once you are in action mode, you will learn more along the way. If you keep your mind open to that learning, you can adapt and improve your actions accordingly to accelerate your progress.

Like everything else, you can decide how you feel about your pursuit of these goals. Will you see them as useful stepping stones to the future of your dreams, or will you view them as pressure cookers and whipping posts? Talking to yourself positively about your progress, however small, will keep your enthusiasm level high and your action plan moving forward. Celebrate and focus on your accomplishments rather than worrying about what isn't working as well. Remember that you're in this for the long haul.

### **Why Does Positive Self-Talk Work?**

Positive self-talk is effective because it helps us form new habits of thought in the same way we formed early ones—through the proven method of spaced repetition. While we were too young to choose the messages originally conditioned into your brain as a child, now that we're adults, we can choose our own programming. We can decide to develop supportive, positive habits of thought—regardless of the helpfulness or the harmfulness of our original programming.

Positive self-talk is also effective because it creates a specific path for action. It's like the difference between saying, "I run two miles every day" and "I refuse to do sit-ups." The first statement is positive self-talk in that it says exactly what you *want* to do. It helps you focus on the desired result. The second statement won't help you, because it

only says what you *don't want*—it doesn't specify whether you will run, walk, or sit down and watch television instead. Because it's focusing on what you don't want, rather than what you do, there is no path for action.

The actions generated by your positive self-talk creates results.

### **When Should I Use Positive Self-Talk?**

You can use positive self-talk “all day, every day.” Assuming most of your conditioned attitudes are predominantly negative—like the majority of people—it's a safe bet that those attitudes are holding you back right now in some part of your life. They are probably preventing you from taking action on the very things you say you want.

Are you familiar with the environmental slogan, “Think globally, act locally?” It means, of course, to focus on the big picture and how your small actions will affect it and then to start, however small, with what you can do in your own small way to make a positive difference. If everyone did the same, the world would be a better place.

The same concept applies to self-talk. Think about the long term—what you want to achieve down the road—but stay centered on what you need to be doing right here and now so that you can accomplish that, make a small step forward, and eventually make it to your destination.

Everyone has multiple attitudes and self-images that apply to each of our different roles. We don't think of ourselves the same way when we think about who we are as a worker or employee, an athlete, as a parent or child, as a cook or a handyman, or as a student. We may feel very positive about our skills as an employee but feel totally inept as an athlete.

Like each of us, you are a mish-mash of good and bad self-perceptions, some of which you may have developed with no concrete evidence to support them. When you realize that certain areas of your self-image conflict with your ability to achieve certain goals, you can use self-talk to change and correct those attitudes and self-perceptions. For instance, if you want to build a deck on your house, but you don't see yourself as a professional carpenter, use self-talk to reinforce the current capabilities you do have that contribute to being a successful deck builder. You may be good at math and calculating, extremely precise, and level headed. You enjoy researching and learning new things, pick up new skills quickly, and can visualize how something will look from a two-dimensional plan. All these skills and attributes will contribute to your success at your goal.

By itself, self-talk can increase your confidence. It is even more effective when combined with a goal achievement program, because your goals give you the opportunity to prove your positive self-talk is correct. Try to think of some specific goal-related situations that will enable you to use positive self-talk to achieve a specific purpose.

### **Before you start working on a goal**

Before you start working on a goal, it's important to reaffirm your value as an individual. Regular repetition of your beliefs will also help reinforce your self-confidence and better prepare you to tackle the goal that lies ahead. Reminding yourself of past achievements and successes is also very valuable. Write down some positive phrases to help you reaffirm your value, and repeat them to yourself regularly. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- ◆ I solve problems in a peaceful manner.
- ◆ I always do my best.
- ◆ I am a life-long learner.
- ◆ I am always on time for my commitments.
- ◆ I always exhibit grace when under pressure.
- ◆ I always look for the good in other people.
- ◆ I am a strong, lean swimming machine.
- ◆ I believe that I am capable of change and improvement.
- ◆ I look for ways to demonstrate my faith through my actions.
- ◆ I am a person who tells the truth while showing compassion.

### **While you work on your goal**

Positive self-talk is particularly helpful when it focuses on an action or a mindset very specific to your goal. You can reinforce an action you already do but forget to do when you are under stress, or you can work on developing specific actions that are not yet habits but that you want to incorporate as regular parts of your behavior to achieve your goal.

To create this type of self-talk, take a look at your goal and its action steps. Some of your action steps may be new behaviors you need to instill as a part of your regular routine if you are to achieve your goal. Identify those new behaviors and then reframe them into statements that read as though you are already doing them. Repeat these

---

affirmations daily and see what happens. Before long, your subconscious will develop ways you can make these things happen. Your continual self-talk and repetition will increase your comfort level with the idea of doing these things. And in no time at all, you'll actually be *doing* them. Here are some examples to get you started on your list:

- ◆ I meet with four new prospective clients every week.
- ◆ I ask probing questions, then listen carefully to make sure I understand my prospect's goals, wants, and needs.
- ◆ I make time for one hour of vigorous exercise every day.
- ◆ I invest one-half hour every day to get myself organized and keep my priorities straight.
- ◆ I devote one-half hour every morning and evening to my spiritual growth.
- ◆ I check in on my parents' health and wellbeing at least once every week.
- ◆ I do one-half hour of self-improvement reading every day.

### **After you achieve your goal**

When you're riding high on the wings of success, this is the perfect time to build the foundation for *more* future success. Your self-confidence is at an all-time high, you've seen firsthand what positive self-talk and focused planning can do. You didn't just think about your vision—you actually took the actions to *achieve* one of your goals and bring you closer to your vision. On the roadmap of your life, you can *see* your progress!

Take advantage of your optimism and leapfrog on this success with another. Reinforce your success at achieving this goal and know that this is just the beginning. Use positive self-talk to take you to the next level and build on this success.

Your self-talk can be general or very specific to the victory currently at hand. It can also reinforce your ability to achieve your next goal. Here are some good examples:

- ◆ I am a person who achieves his goals.
- ◆ I am a high-performing salesperson.
- ◆ I plan and host parties where everyone has a great time.
- ◆ I earn \$150,000 per year.
- ◆ I do what is necessary so I can be a full-time mom for my kids.

I discovered one of the best examples of effective self-talk for goal achievement is illustrated in the early childhood education setting. Granted, a lot of the rewards and consequences are externally imposed (by the teacher) rather than internally controlled (by the students), but the thought process is similar to the one you might use. Like my daughter's teacher, Mrs. Dixon, you can decide what you want to see in your performance, and you can use the confidence from early wins to fuel future positive action.

**“Mrs. Dixon”** — choosing to notice what's right

I don't think I've ever witnessed more mastery at influencing children's thoughts and behavior than I've seen in Mrs. Dixon. Although she has a battery of possible consequences at her disposal, Mrs. Dixon chooses to help her students behave well by catching them doing something right.

I was visiting her classroom one day when she asked the 19 children to prepare for a writing assignment. Almost all of the children were wiggling, chattering, and rooting around in their desks for their pencils and paper. Mrs. Dixon walked among the desks, then spoke up, “I notice that Adam and Mei-Jing are all ready and sitting quietly with their paper and pencils.” The rest of the students scrambled to imitate Adam and Mei-Jing's cooperative behavior, and the lesson started.

How did Mrs. Dixon manage to see past all of the bedlam in the room that morning and find the two children who were doing things right? She chose to look for it.

Mrs. Dixon knows that it's much easier to build positive habits when we understand what we *should do*, rather than just what *not to do*. This wasn't an isolated incident. Every day Mrs. Dixon teaches or reinforces a *what to do* lesson when she notices and rewards her students' positive actions. Through repeated recognition of the children's desirable actions, Mrs. Dixon will help the children develop automatic, desirable habits—positive habits they can use and apply in next year's classroom, outside the classroom setting, and for many years to come.

We can apply this same concept as adults. When we acquire a new skill or habit of thought through self-talk and other means, even though that specific skill or thought process was developed to help us achieve a specific goal, it's not limited to helping us in just this one area. The new habits of thought and new behaviors we acquire can also be applied to other situations and can help us achieve other goals, even if they're not directly related to the first. Learning a specific skill that can then be applied to other areas—or become transferable—without having to relearn it for a slightly different but similar application, is called generalizing.



### **I'm Not Sure I Get It...**

Here's an example: When we were kids, it took some practice to figure out how to squeeze toothpaste out of the tube. Once we mastered squeezing our tube of toothpaste, we also knew how to squeeze other toothpaste tubes without stopping to relearn every time. From our toothpaste experience, we also automatically knew how to squeeze tubes of hair gel or oil paint. How's that for an earth-shattering transferable skill!

You aren't usually aware you're learning by generalizing; you just do it. Your brain selects one incident, pro or con, and draws larger conclusions from it. This learning process can work for you or against you, because your conditioned habits of thought lead you to generalize either positively or negatively. Here are some examples:

- ◆ "I know I can handle this project—I've done this sort of thing before."
- ◆ "I tried four times last week. Nobody wants to set an appointment with me."
- ◆ "I don't like fish."
- ◆ "I'm no good with numbers."
- ◆ "I'm a creative thinker."
- ◆ "Everything I touch turns to mud."

Do any of these statements sound familiar?

Throughout this book, we've talked about how most of our fundamental attitudes were established when we were small children based on repeated messages from our parents. Many of the messages inside us are "don'ts." As a result, one of the core habits of thought for many of us is that when we generalize, we tend to do it in a negative way. We often view a situation and notice the down side of it—then we transfer the "see I told you so" or "ain't it awful" mindset from this incident to other situations.

### **"Sammy"** — generalizing in a negative way

Sammy was known for his ability to find the black cloud around every silver lining. His days were one long litany of complaints, suspicions, and accusations. He didn't like the food he ordered for lunch, the server tried to overcharge him, traffic was a mess, etc. At times it seemed there might be a worldwide plot to make life miserable for somebody—and Sammy was obviously the target. Sammy was an absolute pessimist—a negative generalizer.

One day Sammy and his brother Lewis (who didn't share Sammy's view of the world) were driving together when they witnessed an automobile accident.

When the police arrived and asked the brothers to describe what happened, Sammy relished the opportunity to share his version of the incident. He particularly liked sharing dramatic news, especially dramatic bad news. He replied, “I almost saw somebody get killed! That blue car went speeding through the light—didn’t even look. The green one had to swerve way out onto the shoulder and crash to avoid him! There’s that big rock ledge up there along the side of the road—I thought sure he’d smash into a boulder and come flying through the windshield. I’m surprised the driver’s not dead!”

Lewis was asked the same question: “What happened?” He said, “The blue car ran a red light. I was amazed at the green car driver’s presence of mind. I don’t know how he managed to miss hitting the other guy—thank heaven for the wide shoulder. He was lucky to walk away from that, especially considering that solid rock wall.”

Sammy and Lewis witnessed the very same events and interpreted them entirely different.

A negative generalization habit like Sammy’s is sometimes appealing because it can be entertaining for you or others to listen to. That animated, exaggerated negative generalization is one of the key tools popular stand-up comedians use in their routines.

Have you ever overstated the negative elements of a situation or a person when you were talking to somebody else? Did you do it for the story-telling entertainment value? Did you do it because you thought the person might dislike you if you appeared too “good” or too successful?

### **I Don’t Think It’s Negative, Just Realistic**

Your habits of thought influence your willingness to take action, and your actions determine your results. When you generalize in a negative way, you shine a light on shortcomings and mistakes from the past and bring them forward to today. Unless you consciously realize what you learned from the mistake and decide to do things differently in the future so you won’t repeat the mistake, this serves no positive purpose. This habit of thought simply creates fear and sometimes an unwillingness to act. You could easily focus only on the mistakes and assume that since you made mistakes in the past, you will continue to make mistakes in the future, so “why bother?”—virtually guaranteeing that nothing will improve.

On the other hand, when you choose to generalize in a positive way, you create a powerful attitude that helps you *expect* to succeed. You document your victories and look for ways to adapt your gifts and assets to diverse situations. You take action, bring your talents to bear, and...Voila! You see the success you expected to see.

---

In Chapter 3 you listed some of your gifts and assets. Let's see how they transfer to the goals you've established. Answer these questions, keeping each of your goals in mind:

1. What talents or skills do I already possess that will help me achieve this goal?
2. What successes have I already had that help convince me I can do this?
3. In what circumstances have I already done a part of what is required for this goal?
4. What current strengths can I readily build upon to bring me closer to my goal?

The answers to these questions usually reveal a solid foundation to work from. All you need to do is start building.

### **I'm Not Sure Whether I'm Positive or Negative....**

Nobody *is* positive or negative. Optimism and pessimism are developed habits of thinking, and habits can be changed if we decide to change them.

Just for a minute or two, let's practice noticing positive things. Stop and think about the events of the past seven days. Jot down a quick list of the things you did well or the things that went well. Also include the skills and talents you used. There is no victory or asset too small to go on the list.

Was it relatively easy to come up with victories for your list? Or did you find that the things that went wrong kept popping into your head despite your efforts to stay focused on what went right? If you had a hard time not thinking about the bad stuff, you may have a habit of generalizing in a negative way.

What you look at influences what you think about. What you read influences what you think about. What you think about influences how you act. And how you act influences the results you achieve.

It's quite a predictable cycle. Choose to look at and think about positive things. To use a simple school analogy, don't hang your "D" papers on the refrigerator door. Ignore them and concentrate instead on the "A" papers. They'll remind you of the ways you've already been successful and help you keep a positive focus.

### **How Do I Change My Negative Habits of Thought?**

The first step to changing limiting habits of thought is to be aware of them.

The second step is to dilute the impact of negative habits of thought by overpowering them with positive ones. Habits are things we do without thinking. They

are automatic. The key to changing any habit, including a habit of thinking, is to take yourself out of automatic pilot and *choose* the thought or behavior you want.

In Chapter 3, we identified three ways you can choose to focus on positive thoughts:

- ◆ Gratitude journals,
- ◆ Reframing, and
- ◆ Keeping track of positive things you learn.

These are all ways to focus on the upside, even in bleak situations

Affirmation is also a very powerful tool to help difuse old, limiting habits of thought and reprogram the mind with powerful, positive life-expanding ones. Affirmations help you change habits by reforming your thoughts—through repetition—just as you originally learned those habits. You can't overcome years of negatives with a single positive. It takes time and repetition to learn a new habit, just as it took time and repetition to learn the old habits.

### **Isn't An Affirmation That Goofy Thing I Saw on Late Night TV?**

In the 1980's, there was an annoying character on television who spoofed the use of affirmations. He'd gaze at himself in the mirror and recite his list of positive personality traits, mugging and preening all the while. He's not what affirmations are all about.

Affirmations can serve two purposes:

- ◆ They remind you of your strengths, to help you get through times of testing or doubt; or
- ◆ They describe the future you as though you're already there.

Remember earlier when we talked about how we acquire our habits of thinking by repetition? Affirmations work on this premise. Our brains record the information that goes into them without evaluating that information. Later when we react automatically to something, we react on the basis of what was recorded. We need to consciously sort through all the information we take in to determine what's real or true and what's not, what we believe and what we don't, what we want to keep and what we don't.

Through regular repetition of positive messages, affirmations can become ingrained in our minds as new habits of thought just as solidly as the habits of thought from our childhood were ingrained in our minds. Once they're ingrained in our minds,

---

we will react automatically, consistent with those positive thoughts—and become more positive, more self-confident, and more successful.

What’s more, positive affirmations begin to “overlay” some of the negative habits of thought that were already in our minds, and they diffuse the power of those old negative habits to influence your actions. Even as you are developing these new positive habits of thinking, the affirmation process is helping. The brain has the old habits of thinking in there, but now these new ways of thinking are beginning to take hold, too. Your mind no longer jumps automatically to the old habit of thought—it fumbles a bit—providing you the opportunity to make a *conscious choice* about what you will think and what actions you will take.

### **How Do I Write an Affirmation That Doesn’t Sound Ridiculous?**

Writing affirmations isn’t as difficult as it sounds. Affirmations work best and are most effective if they are very specific to a situation. Here are some examples of affirmations to remind you of your current strengths when you start to doubt yourself:

- ◆ I always find a solution to my problems.
- ◆ I am well organized, and I budget my time to match my priorities.
- ◆ I always keep my promises.
- ◆ I am a patient parent.
- ◆ I find creative ways to keep my customers coming back.

### **This Sounds Like I, I, I!**

Yes, affirmations are designed for you to use with yourself. Here is an easy and effective format you can follow to write your own affirmations:

1. State your affirmation in the first person. When creating an affirmation for yourself, always write it in first person singular. Each affirmation should contain the word “I.” If you’re involved in a group and creating an affirmation for the group collectively, substitute “we” for “I,” or insert the name of the group. (For example, “Our family always sticks together.”) Affirmations can help create *esprit de corps* and shared expectations for values and behavior in group situations. Creeds recited in religious ceremonies and ritualistic statements of beliefs are forms of affirmation. They reinforce the common bond of belief among the members of the religious group.

2. Use the present tense. It is very important that you word your affirmation in the present tense as if it has already happened. Using the present tense reaffirms that you are making this vision a reality. It reminds you to do it *now*.
3. Make sure you can believe it. Your affirmation will be ineffective if it's so outrageous that you don't believe it's even possible. I'm 5'3" tall with curly auburn hair, and I'm old enough to be a *very* young grandmother. I could affirm that, "I look just like Britney Spears," all day long, but there's no way I'd ever believe it! If you don't believe your affirmation is possible, you won't take it seriously. If you don't take it seriously, you won't act on it to get the results you desire.
4. Relate it to your goals. Affirmations are an excellent way to remind you to take certain specific actions or maintain the appropriate mindset necessary to achieve your goals.

### **But This Sounds Conceited and Self-Centered!**

Some people think affirmations sound conceited and self-centered. "I, I, I!" But regardless of whether or not you choose to use affirmations, you already talk to yourself every day. The only difference is—you're not managing that self-talk to be sure its supporting your dreams and your future vision.

Several years ago a woman startled me when she took offense at the idea of affirmations. She confronted me after a discussion on affirmations in a class in which she was a participant. She went on a five-minute tirade telling me how affirmations aggrandize man and don't acknowledge God's total power over us. She thought the idea of affirming oneself was sinful and proud.

I must admit that I was taken aback. I had never had anyone react that way before. I asked her if she ever prayed to God for help with her weaknesses or problems. Of course, she responded that she did. We positively resolved her concern about affirmations when we prefaced them with:

- ◆ With God's help, I \_\_\_\_\_.

If you worry about sounding conceited, you don't have to shout your affirmations from the rooftops. For many people, this is a very private thing. For many, this is a prayerful process.

### **I'm Surrounded by Naysayers. What Should I Do?**

The good news (and the bad news) about attitudes is that they are contagious. Because negative conditioning is so pervasive, I'm willing to bet negative attitudes are

---

even more contagious than positive ones. I've been in workplaces where one person's minor complaint snowballed into a department-wide feeding frenzy of discontent. I've seen friendly chats deteriorate into nasty gossip and criticism with everyone recounting their tragedy of the day. In both cases, the air was so heavy with hostility that I could feel the tension when I walked into the room.

If it's at all possible, steer clear of those who would burst your bubble. Instead, find ways to associate with people who think and act the way you want to. Hang out with people who are your role models. Model your behavior after theirs and get productive ideas for your goals and plans from them. You'll feel a lot more confident that you can succeed in achieving your vision when you spend time with people who are already living theirs.

If you can't entirely remove yourself from negative influences, get away from the ones you can or minimize the time you spend with them. Detach from your emotions just a little to prevent yourself from being sucked into old habits. Then reinforce your armor by consciously focusing on your goals and using positive self-talk.

If you're trying to make a life-saving change (like stopping drinking) and your current relationships don't support you, you may have to make a tough decision. Which is more important—sustaining relationships that don't support you or saving your life?

Now that you're in a life-changing mode, you may want to help the naysayers in your life become more positive, too. A few will follow your lead and begin to focus on the positive because you do—and because you refuse to go along with the old negative ways.

But don't be too dismayed if they don't follow you down the road to success just because you're beginning to see the light. Deep down some people love their problems too much to want to solve them. Just as your goals and attitudes are your choice, other people also are choosing. Even though they may be dissatisfied with their lives, they may not be ready to make the changes required to create a better, more satisfying life. For some people, change is a very frightening thing—and they'd rather cling to the familiar even if it is not the life they really want.

### **Okay, You've Convinced Me. How Do I Use Affirmations to Help with My Goals?**

When you're trying to take yourself to the next level, affirmations work to reinforce (or develop) *habits of thought* consistent with your destination. You can also use them to reinforce the *actions* you need to take to hit your target. (If you want to be promoted to vice president you need to think and act like a vice president.) The format is

the same as before. It's worded in present tense, so your affirmation reads as though you're already there. Here are some examples:

- ◆ I submit all of my projects ahead of deadline.
- ◆ I spend at least one hour every day doing whatever my child wants to do.
- ◆ I meet at least one new prospect every day.
- ◆ I make \$100,000 per year.
- ◆ I weigh 175 pounds.
- ◆ I read one self-improvement book every month.

To reap the biggest benefit from your positive self-talk, select one of your goals as the foundation for your affirmation. Determine what key actions and habits of thought are necessary to achieve the goal. (The key actions might already be identified in your game plan.) Use the format shown earlier in this chapter to write several affirmations that relate directly to the actions and habits of thought required to meet your goal.

### **Now That I've Got an Affirmation, What Do I Do With It?**

What do you do after you've written out your affirmations? The idea behind affirmations is to reprogram your habits of thought through repetition. You'll want to create opportunities for seeing, reading, and repeating your affirmations throughout your day if you can. The important thing is to keep these positive statements—your positive self-talk—in your conscious mind. Remember, we want to turn off the autopilot (our old habits of thinking) and consciously *choose* our thoughts and actions.

Go ahead and get a little creative in designing opportunities that enable you to do that. Here are a few suggestions of ways others have used affirmations successfully.

1. Write your affirmation on an index card. Fold it and carry it in your pocket, your wallet, or someplace you will touch it and notice it several times per day.
2. Post your affirmation above your desk or on the mirror in your bathroom.
3. Start a goals and affirmations journal. Start (or end) each day by rewriting your current goals and your positive self-talk statements (affirmations) in the journal.
4. If you spend a lot of time in your car, attach your affirmations to the dashboard.
5. Record yourself reading your affirmations; then play the recording while you're dressing, driving, working, relaxing, etc.



Okay, now let's review where we are:

- ◆ You know all about your secret messages and how they are influencing you;
- ◆ You identified your values and beliefs, your gifts and assets;
- ◆ You created your vision and identified some specific goals to get you there;
- ◆ You assessed the rewards and consequences, the obstacles and solutions;
- ◆ You created an action plan; and
- ◆ You're using positive self-talk to keep yourself charged up and energized.

So what's left to do?

Go do something about it!

**Chapter 8**  
**S – Step-by-step Action is what Makes**  
**Your Dreams Come True**

*“ To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming,  
is the only end of life.” – Robert Louis Stevenson*

A man was stranded alone on a remote, barren tropical island. He couldn't find food or fresh water, but he wasn't worried because he had a deep faith in God. One day after he arrived on the island, the man saw a raft floating among the waves. "That raft looks too rickety to carry me on the ocean, and God will rescue me," he thought. He let the raft pass. The second day a pleasure boat chugged near the island. "God will rescue me," the man said again to himself, so he did nothing to signal the boat. The man was beginning to become weak from heat and dehydration. On the third day, a cruise ship passed by the island. "God will rescue me," the man said yet again, and he sat on the beach and watched the ship sail by.

The next day the man died from lack of water. When he arrived at the pearly gates, he asked St. Peter, "Why did I die? Why didn't God rescue me, as I had faith He would do?"

St. Peter replied, "Three times God tried to rescue you. First He sent a raft, but you did nothing. Then He sent a motorboat and later a ship for you, and still you did nothing to help Him rescue you."

Like the man in the story, even if you can assess, set goals, plan, and talk positively to yourself, your life can only be transformed when you take action to make your goals happen. It's easy to get so caught up in the process of visualizing, setting goals, and planning that you don't take the physical actions necessary to advance your plan. It's also easy to get so busy and preoccupied with what you're doing today that you just don't find the time to act. But remember: if you keep doing what you've always done, you're going to keep getting the same results you've always gotten. The key word here is "*do*"—you can think and plan and dream and visualize all you want, but until you *do* something, nothing will change for you.

### **I'm Not Sure My Plan is Ready**

If you're uncertain whether your plan is ready, it's more likely you're not sure if your plan is "right." To increase the likelihood that your plan will succeed, be sure you've completely and thoroughly worked through the entire planning process outlined in the prior chapters. Maybe you've just missed a step or rushed through one part of the process a little too quickly.

Once you're confident that your plan is "right" for you, test it out to see. As they say, the proof is in the pudding. Take action on your plan and measure your results.

**“George and Fred”**

George and Fred were product development engineers in a company that made private label air conditioners for national appliance chains and home centers. The two had very different approaches to creating new products—George quickly worked up new product prototypes and sent them out for testing, while Fred was painstaking about designing his new products on paper first. George often saw his prototypes fail, and Fred was appalled at the cost of wasted materials George spent producing them.

Guess who had more profitable clients to his credit and, as a result, got promoted? George. Although three out of four of George’s prototypes experienced manufacturing problems or performance failures during testing, he still delivered new custom products to his customers about eight weeks sooner than Fred did. The extra sales he generated by being quick to market more than covered his higher development costs. While Fred worked tirelessly perfecting the units during the theory phase, George was taking hands-on action, making new decisions when the old ones proved faulty, and moving on.

You will experience more success sooner if you think like George. Don’t wait until you think you have the perfect plan to take action. Taking some action is better than waiting for the perfect action. Waiting isn’t action. Waiting achieves nothing.

Down the road, if you realize you made a decision with incomplete information and you now know better, make a new decision. Then take new action.

**That Sounds Like Ready, Fire, Aim!**

Am I suggesting you act *too* quickly? Well, I’m not suggesting you act rashly and without consideration. But I *am* suggesting that you act! You’ll never get any results if you don’t *do* something.

Your individual action steps need to be related to your overall plan to be beneficial.

And some of the actions in your plan have potential big or long-term implications, so you should take the time to consider them carefully. (Remember the burst balloon analogy from the last chapter?) Example: If you want to start a new business venture, one of your action steps might be to quit your current job. But unless you despise your job, are being asked to do things that conflict with your values, or you don’t need the income, think carefully before you give notice. Be certain (to the extent you can) that you’ve thought through the potential fallout or consequences before taking actions like this one.

I’m also suggesting there are some personality types that feel they must know everything before taking action. If this describes you, it’s important to recognize this.

---

Make a point of asking yourself which is more important in this situation—that you have more information or that you take timely action? Sometimes gathering information is just another way of procrastinating.

### **How Big Are Action Steps Supposed To Be?**

Action steps generally involve moving your hands and feet to work toward your goal.

Think of your goal as the picture on the lid of a jigsaw puzzle box. Action steps are like the individual pieces in the box that you put together to create the vision on the cover. Action steps can be big or small, but each one is necessary to complete the vision. Sometimes they are best completed in a particular order—and then things really start to come together.

Action steps are specific, observable, and measurable—and they should also be associated with a calendar deadline to help you stay on track. Write your action steps right into your daily planner so you can keep track of your progress and stay on schedule.

Some of the action steps you need to complete might seem too small or obvious to include. But don't neglect to write them into your plan. Remember that—like the puzzle needs all the pieces, large and small, to be complete—your plan should include all the actions steps, however small or obvious, if it is to lead you to the culmination of your vision. You also need to include all the steps so you can accurately gauge how long it will really take you to complete the steps and achieve your goals. Rather than rely on your memory—which often fails us when we're in a rush or juggling competing priorities—write it all down, even if it seems obvious. The more thorough the plan, the better the chance of a successful outcome.

The degree of detail in your action steps should increase based on a few criteria:

- ◆ The level of stretch your goal demands. If your goal requires you to make big changes in your actions, you need to stay alert and focused—turn your autopilot off—while you are reforming your habits. Detailed action steps help you consciously think about your behavior so you can maintain that focus.
- ◆ High-risk goal or potentially devastating consequences. If your goal is high-risk or a problem with the goal could have potentially devastating consequences, minute detail is required. You just can't afford to miss something. Detailed action plans help you consider each possible scenario and develop a strategy to handle each. Think about a hospital emergency room. If something, even something very small, is amiss with

equipment, availability of medication, cleanliness, or the skills of the caregivers, lives could be at stake. Your detailed action steps should include alternatives to cover your bases just in case you need them.

- ◆ **Your belief factor.** Missing steps (even the so-called obvious ones) can cause you to stop mid-stream and question the validity of the goal. It's better to keep moving than to re-decide. You want to stay in the focused, decision making, active mode—not spend your time problem solving or second-guessing yourself.

Do you remember Maxine from Chapter 1, the woman who has been sober for more than five years now? Her goal included a combination of these factors—it was a stretch for her, it had potentially life-threatening consequences, and it required belief in her ability to change. Although she committed to her sobriety goal, Maxine could hardly imagine never drinking alcohol again. She tapped into the strength of her faith, the support of friends and family, and the structure of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to help her. She created new, regenerating activities to fill her life. But five years after her first day of victory over alcohol, it's still the daily action steps that save her. She says even after all this time, she can only do it because she focuses her energies on doing something other than drinking *just for today*.

### **My Little Goal Doesn't Justify a Whole Bunch of Action Steps.**

Some people think their goals don't require a lot of detailed, supporting action steps. Every goal is different, and some are more complex than others. But before you totally discard the detail, consider another analogy that illustrates the value in those details. When you're driving your car down the road, you don't keep both hands on the steering wheel staring straight ahead without moving. Your arms aren't in a locked position. Rather, you're constantly making minor course corrections to adapt to the curves in the road, the play in the steering wheel, and traffic conditions. If you wait until you're about to run off the road before you start to steer, you risk rolling the car and injuring yourself and others in the process.

Detailed action steps serve a similar purpose as you work toward your goal. They help you steer or maintain your course. They can help you pre-empt any obstacles you see ahead or anticipate. Then if one of them doesn't work out quite the way you intended, you don't have to scrap the entire goal. Instead, you make an adjustment and continue on.

---

### **How Do I Know I've Picked a Realistic Target Date for My Goal?**

There are several ways to structure your target dates. First ask yourself:

- ◆ By what date do I want to see the results of my goal?
- ◆ By when do I want to be experiencing the rewards of achieving my goal?
- ◆ What's the "drop dead date" by which I *have to be done* in order to avoid negative consequences?

You can answer the first two questions simply through creative visualization. That detailed vision in your mind will help you set a timeframe and motivate you to take action. You may think, "I want to see the results of my goal *yesterday!*" It's great that your sense of urgency and motivation to achieve your goal is high, but be sure the target date you establish is realistic.

You might also just "guesstimate" how far out you want your result/reward date to be. Then simply work backwards from that date, creating the due dates for each of your action steps so that all of the steps will be completed. Obviously, if you back into your date this way, you may need to adjust a few times in the planning stages if you discover you can't possibly complete everything necessary in the timeframe you've allotted.

There are some situations where a goal's completion date is imposed by an outside source with negative consequences for failing to meet that goal. For example: the deadline for filing tax returns is April 15th, so you can create your action plan by working backwards from the critical completion date. By what date does your accountant need to complete the paperwork? By what date do you need to get your raw data to the accountant so he can meet his completion date, and so forth? You work backwards in your plan to determine how much time you have available to complete each action step and still meet the goal date.

### **Why Do I Need a Lot of Little Target Dates?**

It's easy for all of us to procrastinate—it's human nature. In addition, there are some things in our lives that you just can't plan for. If you neglect to schedule little target dates throughout your plan, you have no way of knowing whether you're on target or if you will suddenly run into a time crunch as your target date closes in.

When you establish target dates for each action step, you help yourself manage the total project. If your entire plan is mapped out with dates, you can always tell if you're on schedule—and when you're on schedule, you can rest assured you will reach your vision by your target date. Those calendar dates can also help build a sense of

urgency so you will complete those action steps you may be dreading even though you know they're necessary to create your vision. It's *really* easy to procrastinate on steps you're not excited about completing. Target dates will keep you on track.

Although you considered obstacles while developing your plan, you could suddenly face a surprise obstacle that absolutely destroys one of your action steps. If this happens, try to relax and remember your goal isn't engraved in stone. There may be some occasions that require you to reassess your milestone dates and move them back. That's okay if you move them for a valid reason. Stuff happens.

Just be honest with yourself and 'fess up when you're moving dates back simply because you're not really committed to taking the necessary actions to achieve your goal. Your secret messages might be sabotaging your progress and need some work. You may need to re-examine some of those secret messages and focus again on positive self-talk to create more positive secret messages. This is all part of the process of learning and becoming more intentional and results-oriented in your actions.

A huge benefit of scheduling interim or check-up dates is the opportunity for celebration when you hit or beat one! Take advantage of every chance to recognize victory—even when you've achieved something small. These mini celebrations will keep you focused, excited about your goal, and keep it "real" for you. It's also a great way to maintain your energy level—and it definitely builds your self-confidence. Every single little victory is your chance to say, "Yes! I know I can do the rest of it because I did this!" And it goes a long way toward dispelling those old negative secret messages.

I've created an example of how you can plan your action steps:

<b>Goal:</b> Create new 4' deep perennial flowerbed beside deck by 5/30/03.	
<b>Action Step:</b>	<b>Due Date:</b>
Determine maximum budget allocated to project.	3/28/03
Clip at least 5-7 perennial bed design ideas from magazines.	3/28/03
Select plants conducive to sunny site in Zone 6.	4/8/03
Design flowerbed on graph paper.	4/15/03
Dig bed according to design and prepare soil for planting.	4/31/03
Purchase plants according to design, staying within budget.	5/7/03
Install plants.	5/10/03



---

The first two action steps in this example can happen concurrently. For goals where time of completion is a critical factor, be sure to determine if certain steps must be done in a particular sequence or whether several of them can be done at the same time.

An example of concurrent action (two or more actions at the same time) is how you cook dinner. You know the roast takes two hours, the baked potatoes need one hour, the green beans only need about seven minutes, and the salad can be done any time. So you start the roast, prepare the potatoes and pop them into the oven an hour later, and then prepare the shorter items while the longer ones cook. Near the end of the process, all foods are in some stage of preparation simultaneously and all will be ready at the same time.

The first two action steps in the garden goal have the same due date because they are interrelated to some degree—I might clip more elaborate designs for my models if I have a larger budget. Depending on the design I choose, I could also change the “purchase plants” action step. I might also develop a design that includes cuttings and divisions from my friends’ and family’s gardens—at no cost to my budget. Revised action steps could include calling family and friends to ask for cuttings and then later picking them up.

Sometimes you’ll face the age-old “chicken or the egg” debate. Which should come first? The budget or the action plan? Should you develop your actions within a budget, or should your action ideas come first and then *after* the idea is developed, you figure out how to make it happen? Depending upon the complexity of your plan, such an action step might warrant a whole plan of its own. This might be the research part of the process.

Notice that the last due date in the sample I provided falls several weeks before the goal completion date I specified. I included this “cushion time” just in case foul weather or some other unexpected obstacle causes a delay in completing one or more of the individual actions. If I did a thorough job anticipating and developing solutions for obstacles, though, there shouldn’t be too much to throw me off track—unless my own lack of action gets in the way. And if I complete my goal ahead of time, I’ll be ecstatic!

If you don’t have a predetermined target date for your goal, you can simply add up the estimated time needed for each action step and set an overall target at or just beyond the last date. If you anticipate problems like interruptions or other priorities that crop up later, or if you worry your time estimates are overly optimistic, you can build in a little extra time as a buffer. Remember, though, that the whole point of setting target dates is to help you build an internal sense of urgency to complete the action steps and goal. If you put in too much buffer time, you will decrease the sense of urgency and the resulting motivation it gives you to take action.

### **I Like to Be a Little More Flexible – Defining Everything Makes Me Feel Uneasy.**

Some people naturally enjoy structuring things in an organized manner like this. They enjoy planning, studying, analyzing, and predicting. Other people break out in hives at the very thought of planning things out in such detail.

If you like to be spontaneous, build spontaneity into your plan. Create a little flexibility in your plan by including things like time buffers. You can exercise your freewheeling side by really going to town on the brainstorming solutions part of the process. You can also provide yourself with options and alternatives at various points in your action steps. The only difference is, instead of waiting to decide what your alternatives are on the spur of the moment, build the options into the plan. In other words, list the alternatives at that point in the plan so you won't waste valuable time creating the list when you should be taking an action. Then when you get there, you just get the fun of choosing which of the several acceptable options you want to use.

When it gets right down to it, though, if you're still resisting the idea of planning in detail, you need to ask yourself:

- ◆ Am I currently getting the results I want to see in my life? If your answer to this question is “no,” then,
- ◆ What will change in the future if I continue my same course of action?

The answer? “Nothing.” Remember, if you keep doing what you've always done, you're going to keep getting what you've always gotten. Is a little discomfort with details *really* more important than the rewards or consequences you identified with your goal?

### **What If I'm Wrong And I Don't Achieve My Goal?**

Life is a learning process. Just through reading this book and consciously deciding that you want to change some things in your life, you are already progressing. Every new or reinforced concept you internalized from this book is a sign of growth.

Many of our old secret messages would lead us to believe that “if we can't do it right, then we shouldn't bother to do it at all.” I'm challenging you to adapt a *new* secret message: “Life is a great adventure and we can learn so much from just living it!” We all need to challenge ourselves to grow and keep moving forward.

You probably won't accomplish every single goal you set for yourself—at least not on the first try. But if you don't hit a goal, you can still learn from the experience and then go on to apply that knowledge when you try the next time.

1. Start by reviewing the assumptions you operated under when you planned your goal. Did you assume new customers would clamor for your services the moment you

opened your doors? Did you expect ½ hour of daily exercise on its own would drop your weight like a stone? If you now realize your assumptions were incorrect, go back and gather more information. Correct those assumptions. After you do more research, develop new solutions and action steps. Then try again!

2. Then think about whether your goal got derailed because of an unanticipated obstacle. Is it still an obstacle? If so, develop possible solutions and action steps to deal with it. Then try again!
3. Be honest with yourself. Did your goal fail because you didn't *act* on it? Did you *really* examine your reasons for pursuing that goal, and did you *really* commit? Are your secret messages telling you it's not possible or that you aren't worthy of achieving it? Is there a habit of thought or action you're still unwilling to change to achieve your goal?

Don't worry if you don't reach the first, second, or even the third goal you set. Make note of the things that are moving you forward and build upon them. Evaluate your mistakes and avoid making the same ones next time. Remember: the only real failure is when you give up and stop working toward achieving your dreams.

### **Should I Let Others Know Up Front That I'm Working on Myself?**

Some people are more open with others about what's going on in their personal lives. Whether you share your vision, goals, action steps, or even the fact that you are on a course of self-improvement for your life depends a lot on you and your situation.

If you're starting to work toward a goal that has a lot of risk or personal exposure associated with it, you might want to keep it to yourself. Let yourself learn what works for you and what doesn't for a while—without the added pressure of “public” scrutiny. After you've achieved a few private victories, you may want to share your plans with more people. A friend of mine started a lifestyle change plan and didn't tell anyone about it officially until she had lost 30 pounds. She didn't want people to audit her eating habits, make comments, or monitor her progress for her.

If the achievement of your goal means good news for you but bad news for someone else, that's another circumstance where I'd recommend keeping your goals and plans to yourself. There are some situations that, unfortunately, create a win/lose situation for someone. For example, suppose you're a key player in your company and you decide to change jobs. You don't know how long it will take or even whether there are openings available in your goal area. Why worry your boss (or risk losing your current job) by announcing your intended departure before it's a done deal?

There are really good reasons to share your goals with the people you care about personally, though. Your loved ones and friends probably want to be there to provide moral support for you when the going gets tough. They can also help you celebrate your victories. Your trust and openness with them and their willingness to help you can increase the quality and depth of your relationships.

Probably the biggest gift you can give anyone is your willingness to change your behavior to please him or her. If your goal involves changing your actions to improve a relationship, share your goal with the person whose feelings you care about. They will appreciate the gift in your intentions. You might see improvement in the relationship right away just because they appreciate your willingness to do this, and they may notice your positive progress even before you do.

If, however, you have repeatedly made and broken promises to change in the past, I don't recommend sharing that goal with that person now. Telling your loved ones at this point in the process will only further damage the relationship and your credibility if you don't achieve the goal this time around. They might feel additional hurt from having their expectations raised and then dashed—yet again. In this instance, it's better to let your actions demonstrate your commitment. Don't tell them what you're going to do. Instead, *show* them and pleasantly surprise them.

Sometimes you will just feel an unexplainable urge to tell your vision and your goal to someone else for no particular reason. It may not even be someone you know very well. Interestingly, even if you don't know the reason at the time, it usually turns out that this person may somehow be one of the keys to your success.

The accomplishment of one or more of your goals may require assistance from someone else out there to help you succeed. Often you won't know the source of that help when you're setting your goals, or when or if it will come, but put that goal out there just the same and let God and those key individuals out there decide how they can help you.

One of the most amazing things in my own experiences in setting and achieving goals has been how those resources often come to you in some blessed special way. This has happened so many times for me that I now truly view goal setting and planning as a prayerful act.

As an example, when my husband and I set our goal to adopt our daughter, I was so excited about it that I blabbed my goal to clients, friends, and casual acquaintances. (Yes, I was a bit obsessed!) As I look back, I know now that some of my clients moved projects forward a little on their schedules mainly to help us reach the financial portion of our adoption goal. My family also pitched in because they knew how important this was to me. And colleagues in other cities walked documentation into government agencies to save me postage and time. When we needed it, the help just came.

---

### **What if I Can't Do It Alone?**

I don't believe any of us ever can do it truly on our own. I think we all need other people to help us along our paths to success, to help us achieve the goals that will lead to our vision, and to support each other.

Some people also need the structure of a process and other people to keep them on track. Depending on your goal, there may already be an organization or program out there to help you achieve your goal. In fact, many businesses developed franchise opportunities that do exactly that—help people achieve a specific business goal step by step. There's nothing wrong with implementing someone else's plan—as long as you don't do so blindly. Do your own homework to test the validity of their plan the same way you'd do it for your own. Make sure it's had proven success. Check references. If it requires that you join a group or pay an entrance or setup fee, make sure you understand how the organization makes its money. Educate yourself so you can prevent unforeseen costs and expenses or misunderstandings down the road.

Many people benefit from hiring a coach to help them work on their goals. A coach can be indispensable. The coach's job is focused totally on you—and helping you build the life you want. Before you hire one, however, be clear about the role you want your coach to play, because they tend to specialize.

- ◆ Some coaches are primarily listeners—they provide opportunities for you to verbalize your concerns and plans in a non-judgmental, confidential setting.
- ◆ Other coaches are heavily oriented toward the process of developing and implementing goals.
- ◆ Some use diagnostics to help you identify your strengths, preferences, or basic personality types.
- ◆ Still others work you through a learning curriculum so you can gain knowledge and decide how to apply it toward your goals.

You will be spilling your guts to this person, so make sure (to the extent you can) that your personalities will blend well and that you can be candid with her (or him) and value her (or his) input in return. Do your homework on this one.

It takes time and persistence to overcome your old habits of thinking—those secret messages inside you—to create new patterns of action for increased success. Whether you decide to think yourself into a new way of acting or act yourself into a new way of thinking, you will face a challenge in choosing to change your life. It will not always be easy. But if you make an intentional step-by-step effort and keep your vision firmly in your mind and your desired thoughts and goals in front of you every day, you can make a dramatic improvement in the quality of your life and the results you see from your efforts.

**“Marty”**

Marty was, by most people’s definition, a very successful businessman. He led and later sold five high-performing businesses. He was wealthy, well read, well connected in the business community... and very unhappy. After some intensive soul-searching, Marty realized his unhappiness stemmed from his relationships with his wife and daughter, or rather the lack of them. Marty had been so caught up investing time and energy in his businesses that his home life was wasting away.

When his 14-year-old daughter disappeared one Saturday night after attending a party with some friends, Marty was frantic. Not one to wait around, he took action. He called her friends’ homes and asked about her whereabouts. He created flyers with her picture, name, and disappearance date. He drove in a 5-mile radius of his house searching and put posters up at all of the local convenience stores on his way. He called the police.

While he was waiting for an update from the police efforts to find his daughter, he and his wife scoured his daughter’s bedroom and her email for clues. During the search, he discovered cartons of condoms and bookmarks to pornographic websites. Marty cried, and he prayed his daughter would come home safe.

Marty’s daughter returned home late Sunday evening that same weekend saying she was unharmed. She said she had met a 20-something-year-old young man at the party. She claimed she wanted to leave the party because she felt sick, and this guy let her crash at his house. Although Marty knew better than to believe her story, he felt partly responsible for his daughter’s risky actions. His inattention had helped to cause this. She probably didn’t think he cared whether she came home or not. He hugged his daughter, holding her tight. At the same moment he felt the rush of relief at her safe return, Marty decided he needed to change.

Marty took the same focused energy he had applied to his work and now focused on personal change. It took a while for his family to adjust to him coming home from work every day by 6 p.m. in time for dinner! They started family game night on Sundays and began a bloodthirsty competition in Monopoly®. His wife told Marty she noticed an increase in his sense of humor and a decrease in his tension.

Over time at work, Marty trained his staff to make decisions without him so he could put in fewer hours. He wasn’t prepared for their enthusiastic reaction to their increased responsibility and his confidence in them.

A few months later, while on a long-postponed week at the beach with his wife and daughter, Marty realized something. He was happy.

---

### How Do I Stay On Track?

Successful people create rituals and habits that help them stay focused on continuous growth. You can decide to create new paths like these, too, or use these if they work for you:

- ◆ Jonelle maintains a list of her top five personal goals in her daily planner. She uses the power of regular self-assessment, goal setting, and goal-directed action in her job, as well. She says these habits help her maintain a clear set of priorities and minimize unnecessary activities.
- ◆ Marta helped herself quit smoking four years ago by putting her daily cigarette money in a jar on the refrigerator, earmarking it for a future trip to the beach. She funded a trip for her entire family of four that way. She has since applied the “jar money” method to reward her children for good behavior. She also reduced her family’s frivolous spending behavior by routing spare change to the jar and helping her kids save their resources for bigger, more rewarding purchases.
- ◆ Adrian has a standing goal to attend at least one workshop or conference every three months to renew his energy and get new ideas for personal or business use.
- ◆ Louis and his wife have a New Year’s Eve ritual they established about 15 years ago to create a family culture of goal achievement. They invite all of their children (now grown with children of their own) and their families for dinner. Every person, even the smallest grandchild, has an opportunity to share their biggest accomplishment of the past year and their most important goal for the new one.
- ◆ Donna has an affirmation plaque hanging above her desk, “If it is to be, it is up to me.” She reads it before she starts work in the morning.
- ◆ Zobeida is a mother of five and a self-proclaimed reading addict. She always keeps her current motivational book on the side table in her family room so she can grab a few pages of inspiration when she finds a moment to take a breath.
- ◆ Michael sets aside ½ hour of his workweek to sit quietly at his desk and ponder how he can improve his company. He turns off his phone, puts his piles of paperwork away, and doodles on a tablet while he’s thinking. He writes his ideas down and files them in an idea file so he can find them later.
- ◆ Rita’s focus is on bodybuilding. She maintains a consistent workout schedule of two hours each on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Her bodybuilding routine is planned, with specific days to work on her upper body, lower body, and aerobic conditioning.

You will find the ideas in this book work best when you decide to create habits of using them. Set aside a time of day or a specific place where you go to be in your personal growth mindset. Create a welcoming space that draws you into the activities that will benefit you.

You are already one of God's finest creations with many gifts already working for you. In reading this book, you've taken the first step to develop and use even more of those gifts—through positive growth and change in your life. I hope this book will help you choose the secret messages that guide your life and decide to take the actions that will create the tomorrow of your dreams.

- S** – Secret messages are inside you, influencing your actions.
- E** – Each of your gifts and assets is waiting to work for you.
- C** – Create your future by visualizing it in detail.
- R** - Rewards and consequences are what motivate you to act.
- E** – Each obstacle has a solution when you use your creativity.
- T** – Talk to yourself to shape your habits.
- S** – Step-by-step action is what makes your dreams come true.



### **About Julie E. Poland**

*Julie E. Poland owns Summit Human Resources Development based in York, Pennsylvania. Since 1990 she has coached organizations and individuals in the areas of leadership, personal growth, goal achievement, and the processes of change. Her clients encompass more than 30 different industries, local governments, and not-for-profits and also include entrepreneurs and individuals. You can contact her at (717) 767-6595.*

*A fervent arts lover, Julie loves to sing, read, visit museums, see live theatre, and play the piano. She and her husband, Jim, and daughter, Lauren, spend free time going to movies, swimming, biking, and hiking with their Labrador retriever, Cookie, in the mountains of Pennsylvania.*

## Comments and Suggestions

Would you help us improve this book for future readers?  
You can do so at  
<http://www.asamanthinketh.net/contact.htm>.

### **Other valuable resources**

Develop a deeper understanding of many of the principles of this eBook. Begin your week with the wisdom of James Allen, the author of the 100-year-old classic, *As A Man Thinketh*. [Subscribe today](#) to our weekly eMeditation (or visit our website at: <http://asamanthinketh.net/>). It's Free.

You cannot change your thoughts without changing your life in the process -- either for good or for bad. Immerse yourself in the right thoughts and you will become the person you long to be, just as surely as the planting of an acorn yields an oak tree and not a pine tree.

Plant your acorn now -- [subscribe today](#) -- it's Free!

### **More great resources**

[Jim Rohn](#)

[Conquer Fear](#)

[Emmet Fox](#)

### **MP3 Motivators.Com**

[More Great eBooks](#)

[Build A Miracle](#)

[Other Links](#)