

Laid Off and Crazy Happy

Memoirs
of a Houseband



Andy Weisberg

Foreword by Patrick Snow

Praise for this book:

In this powerful book by Andy Weisberg, you will learn how he has perfected the life of living and working from home, being a husband and a great father, and taking care of the duties of running a household. Andy provides you with a hilarious road map to the lifestyle and the freedom you can experience as a result of becoming a “Houseband.” I loved every word of this book and you will, too.

— **Patrick Snow**, international best-selling author of *Creating Your Own Destiny* and *The Affluent Entrepreneur*

Laid Off & Crazy Happy is a supreme example of taking the reins of your life into your hands to control your destiny. Follow Andy Weisberg’s joyful formula and turn your feelings of failure into fun, excitement and freedom.”

— **Susan Friedmann**, CSP, international best-selling author of *Riches in Niches: How to Make it BIG in a small Market*, and many other titles.

Laid Off & Crazy Happy is a delightful, practical, humorous and thoughtful guide to living every day as if it really counts, no matter what the circumstances of your life may be. Andy Weisberg gives us a wonderfully wise primer on how to blur the line between work and play in your everyday life. As long as you have the choice—and Andy shows us that we always do!—then why not choose to play? Bring on the fun!

— **Matt Weinstein**, author of *Managing to Have Fun*

A unique, positive, humorous perspective on the everyday workings of life. Andy Weisberg can magically turn a negative into a positive. Refreshing!

— **Carol Paul**, author of *Team Clean*

Andy exemplifies the joy of living your own life and being your own person. If you want to enjoy your life right now, start by reading *Laid Off & Crazy Happy*.

— **Michael Fulmore**, author of *Releasing Your Ambition: How To Take Control of Your Future and Realizing Your Dreams*

Laid Off
& Crazy Happy
Memoirs of a Houseband

Andy Weisberg



I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Marybeth, who not only inspired me to write this crazy stuff down but also helped shape it, and worked as hard as I did to make it a decent piece of writing. Her editing was brilliant, her support was unflagging, and her tolerance of the behavior described in this book was extraordinary.

Her love and encouragement was (and is) more important to me than she will ever know.

Well, once she reads this, she will. But, you know what I mean.

Laid Off & Crazy Happy

Memoirs of a Houseband

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Foreword

When I began my career in corporate America I was under the belief that as long as you worked your tail off, produced big numbers and supported the organizational goals, then your job was safe. You could put all your time into one company, and eventually enjoy a large pension and secure retirement. Boy, was I wrong!

Then I began to ask, how does one provide for themselves and their family should things not work out at the “J-O-B?” What I learned was that a job was a good thing, but sooner or later all jobs come to an end due to layoffs, downsizing, acquisitions, mergers or companies flat out going under. I realized that having a job is like getting a “fish” at payday, allowing your family to eat. My breakthrough came to me when I realized that to experience true freedom and prosperity, we need to learn to “fish” for ourselves so that we can eat whenever we (or our families) are hungry.

On September 19th of 2001 (only eight days after 9/11), I lost my six-figure, high tech printed circuit board sales job, even though

I was one of the top five percent sales producers. Much of the U.S. manufacturing of circuit boards was being sent offshore to Asia, and hence my employer could not afford to pay a salaried sales force. They decided to evolve the sales team into a single commission-based manufacturer rep, laying us all off and leaving us in the lurch.

Therefore on September 20th 2001, I became a “houseband” and I have never looked back. I have been successfully self-employed ever since. Sure my credit score was dinged as I struggled early on to come up with my “Plan B.” But I have enjoyed every day of my freedom since then, virtually single-handedly raising my two boys and building a hugely successful business working from home as an international best-selling author, professional speaker, and publishing and book marketing coach. Additionally, I had the pleasure of coaching both of my son’s teams in numerous sports (another great benefit of being a “houseband”). In other words, I made the decision to never again place my families’ financial future in the hands of an organization, but rather I decided to become the captain of my own ship, work from home and be there for my family. It was the greatest thing that ever happened, and my home-based business has thrived ever since. Most importantly I was there

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for my children and enjoyed more freedom than any corporate “clock punchers” will ever experience!

In this powerful book by Andy Weisberg, you will learn that being laid off and working from home is not a death sentence, but rather a path to freedom, to happiness, to being there for your family and taking pride in running a household. Andy has perfected the life of living and working from home, being a husband and a great father, and taking care of the domestic duties of running a home, raking leaves, and shoveling the driveway. (You’ll love the names he has given his shovels... too funny!).

In *Laid Off and Crazy Happy*, Andy provides you with a practical road map of the lifestyle and the freedom you can experience as a result of becoming a “Houseband.” He will share (with lots of humor), how his life has changed: the simple joys of babysitting his cat, sitting on the roof of his home with his daughter and having amazing conversations, even how to co-exist with hornets as they try to take over your “kingdom”.

But the heart of this little gem is Andy’s ability to have fun – all the time and with everything he does. His ideas on work and play are worth the price of the book alone, and if you make any effort to do

the exercises and follow his example you will find that everything you experience will be better, more alive and more enjoyable. This is the key to effectively managing the changes and surprises in your life, and living your life as an art.

When you learn to let go, accept the curveballs that life throws at you and embrace your life working from home as a “Houseband,” you’ll be amazed at yourself, how much better things can be than your old lifestyle, and not be distraught or worried. You will learn not to see the negatives, but to live in the moment, embrace the now, and find humor every step along the way, whether it’s painting your home or finding the most efficient way to load the dishwasher. This book is full of great stories and you will find yourself turning the pages with anticipation as you learn why mowing your lawn can be a near-spiritual experience, and how to limit your YouTube viewing to only a few hours per day.

Seriously though, Andy will lead you on a journey proving that you can make it after a layoff, discover yourself, and become a better father (or mother!). Most importantly, he’ll help you take an inventory of your passions, soul search for your most marketable skills, and then discover how you can not only become a content “Houseband” but also start a business working from home. You

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can enjoy your newfound freedom, replace your old paycheck, and at the same time learn how to “fish” for yourself. Andy will help you succeed and thrive as an entrepreneur, working in your pajamas if you want to, from your home. This is a good life, and I believe it is the new “American Dream.”

So take a deep breath, relax, and know that it is not the end of the world. Let Andy show you how you can be at peace, enjoy life, better care for your home, become a better spouse, and most importantly, a better parent! Besides, your boss was an egotistical, power-hungry asshole anyways!

I love every word of this book and you will too. However, I completely disagree with Andy’s conclusion about cats. And that’s okay. But I must admit that I just about fell on the floor with hysterical laughter as I read through several of the chapters. If only commencement speakers could this entertaining!

Remember: when one door closes, a better one always opens. Andy’s story is proof that this statement is true. Your best days are ahead. Don’t be bitter, get better! Breathe, enjoy, be filled with wonder and know that you are an amazing human being. And most importantly, know that your best days are ahead of you!

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Now kick back in your lazy boy, and get ready to laugh, love, and perhaps live more fully in the present than you have for a very long time. This book is one of my all time favorites and it will soon be a favorite for you as well.

Enjoy...

Patrick Snow

International best-selling author of *Creating Your Own Destiny* and *The Affluent Entrepreneur*

www.PatrickSnow.com

Prelude

You've worked your whole life in a career you enjoy and do very well, when suddenly you're laid off for the third time in six years. Now you find yourself struggling to get people to respond to your applications, and you rarely get to an interview. When you do, your best efforts fall short and you find yourself at home a lot more than you ever expected or wanted to be.

I hope that doesn't describe you. But the latest report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (June 2013) said, "Among married-couple families with an unemployed member, the proportion of families with at least one unemployed family member was 80.2 percent in 2012." And even worse, it also said, "Among the 34.6 million families with children, 75.5 percent had at least one unemployed parent in 2012."

Has anything like this happened to you or someone you know? Clearly, the chances are pretty good the answer is yes. It has happened and is happening to more people than you can imagine—millions—and it has happened to me. And like me, I'll bet you're wondering if

you're ever going to get back into the workforce, doing what you're good at and getting paid what you're worth.

I know this place you're in. I've lived it several times over the last 10 years, and I really do understand exactly what you're feeling. I'm writing this for people like you, not just those who may be out of work and facing some real fears about it, but also for those who are working and miserable about it, either because they're in a job they no longer have any passion for or they are working much harder for less pay than they would like. Striking a balance between work and rest of your life is more difficult than ever, and a whole industry has grown up around helping people be happier and healthier with both. There are classes, therapies, programs, "Life Coaches" and dozens of other services that didn't exist a decade ago. And along with telling you my story, I want to offer you some guidance in sorting through some of those challenges to get you to a place where you're not afraid or angry all time, and where you can be happier whatever you're doing. Or not doing.

In this book you will learn the most important thing you can do for yourself and anyone around you: how to enjoy your life more and, as a result, be more successful in any endeavor. Part of this is to help you become "Corporate-Free", and shake off the fear that

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leaving a particular job is as terrible as it might seem. Every job will eventually come to an end, for a variety of reasons, and you can manage that reality badly or you can manage it with all the passion and enthusiasm you had when you first got that job. Helping people understand the mechanics of change and managing that process better is something I've been doing for most of my life. But there's another part to enjoying your life more, and it's the challenge of *being happy no matter what the circumstances*. This is one of the trickiest and most enduring challenges we face, and everyone deals with it. The funny thing is, it's not that hard to do! But it does take practice and a willingness to experiment. This book will show you how.

So how am I “Laid Off and Crazy Happy”? And what the heck is a “Houseband”? Well, first of all, Houseband is not a term that I made up. I don't remember where I heard it, but it was a reference to a married male who has found himself predominantly at home, either by choice or by circumstance, and who is doing most, if not all, of the domestic duties associated with that role. He is a housekeeper and a husband, and that can apply to any kind of marriage or relationship. (I'm going to write that in Wikipedia.)

And as far as “Laid Off and Crazy Happy”, let me be clear that I'm not trying to paint a picture of how being out of work is a bowl of

cherries. Or even prunes. It isn't, and there are definitely times of no fun at all. But, if anything, this book is about having more fun than not, even in the harder times. As I began writing about a year ago, it was my second anniversary of being laid off the last time—exactly two years. I had exhausted my savings, chewed up my 401K, and cashed in all but one of my insurance policies to maintain my family's quality of life (and keep our house), as well as to be able to continue to apply and interview for high-level corporate jobs. My unemployment insurance had run out, and I had no further options. As you can imagine, this caused some serious stress. While my wife's income had increased, so had her workload. I was honestly not at all sure what the future held for us. (Not that anyone ever is.)

But the upside is that by applying the ideas and behaviors I describe in this book I've been able to get some consulting work and, amazingly enough, I've gotten more professional speaking jobs in the last two years than in the last 10 combined. Probably because of shameless self-promotion like this:

Check out my website at www.andyweisberg.com!

But it's also because I have a whole new attitude about my work, and I've come to realize that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

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I've been a professional speaker ever since I started my corporate career, although it has always been a sideline, a way to continue doing some form of performing, my first love. Now, being at home and having the time to write this book and develop my business, I'm doing better than I ever imagined. I have a renewed sense of hope, faith and determination to make this everything I want it to be. But even more important, I get to spend much more time in my home, playing with and caring for my youngest daughter and my wife. And it's the best decision I've made yet. At this moment I'm at the very beginning of what I'd like to achieve, so I promise you this is not one of those "You Can Make Millions from Home!" things. But I'm doing pretty well, and by growing my business while loving what I'm doing I know I'll soon be right where I want to be.

That's why this is important to you. I know what I'm talking about, not just because I've lived it but because I'm the proof in the pudding, if my life could be considered to be some kind of a creamy dessert. My background, in a nutshell (another part of the dessert), is that I graduated college with a degree in Theater and English. For the next eighteen years I waited tables, performed, and taught at several colleges and universities. As my family grew, I found I needed a more stable income. So, when an opportunity came up to teach Presentation Skills at a large computer company, I went for it. Over the next twenty years I rose from Corporate Trainer to Organizational Development Manager to Director of Talent

Development. In the last nine years I have been laid off three times, each instance with increasingly longer intervals of time between jobs. As of this writing I have not had a job in the business world for three years, and apparently I am moving on to my next career phase: writing and speaking about my experience. When you finish reading you can tell me if you think there's a future in it: andy@andyweisberg.com

I totally understand your probable apprehension and skepticism. This was not always a fun process. As described above, there were times of stress and abject fear. I really do know what that knot in your stomach feels like, and the constant worry that you may not be able to provide for your family. But there are two things you can do. One is to understand that regardless of what's happening around you there are still options for your attitude and the way you do things, and these choices can make the difference from barely surviving to being just as happy as that person with no problems at all, if that person exists. (He doesn't.) The other thing you can do is to use that joy to move forward into the life you really want, and be more of the person you really are. It may take some time, and you might not want to make some of the changes in your life you may need to make. But as corny as the saying is, it really is the journey that counts. So why not make it as enjoyable as possible?

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I'd like to help you get there. I know that I can make a difference in the way you do what you do, whatever it is. All my years of teaching were focused on just that – the things that make us better communicators, better at relationships, better teammates, better husbands and wives, better parents, better people. We didn't get any help with this stuff in school, and I rant about that later on in the book. But I'm dedicating the rest of my working life to helping those that are struggling with things that they shouldn't have to be struggling with, and hurting about things that they shouldn't have to be hurting about.

I'm in the process of redefining my whole life, and if you're thinking about anything along those lines, I know that I can help you do that, too. At the end of this book you'll find my contact information. Call me, email me, *contact* me. I have lots of resources, and a lot of experience doing this stuff. And if you're ready, I'll do everything I can to help you get to where you want to be, and have fun doing it.

Andyweisberg

Before you begin. . .

I told my ten-year-old daughter that I was going to write a book about all the weird stuff I do around the house that drives everyone in my family crazy. She shook her head, rolled her eyes and said, *“That’s going to be a looonnnnggg book.”*

So now I feel personally challenged to be somewhat brief. And the description of those activities is not so much about being weird, as it is defining the way I am trying to live my life as an art form. If there’s a difference. I guess part of the reason for doing this is also to prevent me from becoming that crabby old guy who yells at kids to get off his lawn. (The whippersnappers.)

Now, if you’re anything like my wife, your tendency would be to just skim through this and jump to Chapter I. I strongly encourage you not to be like my wife here, but to be more like me: slow. Well, not “slow”, just diligent. Because what I say here will give you some context for all that comes after. Think of this as a road map and imagine you’re completely lost. This will help you.

Whether my background, as described in the “*Prelude*”, qualifies me to write on the subject of housekeeping or not, I’m not sure. But as far as I know, there’s no BA for Domestic Engineering. I checked.

At some point while reading this book you may think, “*This guy has too much time on his hands!*” And you would be right, which is why I wrote this book. It’s all about what some people would call “too much time”, but I see as something else, like just the right amount of time to have fun, do the best job I can, take care of what I can take care of, and love my life.

Or, you might say, “*Okay, he thinks way too much about nothing!*” But this time you would be mistaken. I may think too much, but not about nothing. I have come to believe that this job – housekeeping – is second only to parenting or teaching (which I believe are the two most important jobs a human being can have on this planet). Taking care of the house has the potential to be incredibly fulfilling. And I think it’s those who approach and perform the job as a mere “bagatelle” (great word), or as something less valuable or important than other types of work, that do the crappiest job of it. The house, the household, and the soul of the housekeeper suffer for it.

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This is no different than working a paying job that one has no belief in, no personal investment in, and no commitment to. While I understand that an increasing number of employers don't do much these days to help create environments that promote engaged and committed employees (hence my Housebandry), doing just that was a huge part of my work over the last twenty years in Corporate America. The role I always had was part of Training and Development, and was always directed toward helping people grow personally and professionally. It was a natural extension of the college teaching I did for two decades prior to that. And I ALWAYS ended up in discussions with people about why they were unhappy — because most of them were. And our discussions ALWAYS turned to how work was taking the life out of their lives.

My role was as much therapist as it was “Training Guy”. Maybe more so. And although I was practicing without a license, I think I did some good, if for no other reason than I listened and I cared. But in the end, it was always up to these people themselves to try to see things differently, do things differently, and live life differently. I'm certainly doing that these days, and I'm incredibly happier.

Here's what I'm *not* trying to do with this book: I'm not making any claims of doing things better than others, and certainly not

of any kind of perfection, just that I do things differently. I am, however, proud of what I've developed both in my home life and here in this book. And, as some people have told me, I am "ridiculously" happy, "unreasonably" happy, "unnecessarily" happy, and even "inappropriately" happy, or at least more happy than I should be. With which I disagree.

In the spirit of a true memoir, I wrote the chapters as I finished one of the activities listed on the Contents page. As I worked, I would often be thinking about what I was doing and how I was doing it, and when I was done I would write about it. As such, it didn't necessarily have a "flow" to it, and the majority of the work of putting it together as an actual book was just that: trying to give it an overall narrative so it doesn't come off as, "*Hey, guess what I just thought of?!?*" Although it does some of that, too. So it's not exactly a diary or certainly not a dissertation, but a bit of everything. My oldest son, Zon, says it's like a podcast of one. Some chapters get preachy, and some definitely seem to indicate that I may need psychological help. But they're all very genuine attempts to capture my approach to both the household tasks themselves and what they have come to represent to me.

If anything, I may be attempting to raise the bar for housekeeping. But I'm not making any proclamations. I only ask that you consider

what I'm describing as a different way of looking at things and doing them. You should definitely find your own way, however. That's the tricky part of any kind of a "Self Help" styled book, if that's what this is. (I'm told that's my category.) Even if an author actually has some brilliant and inspiring ideas, (which is *entirely* possible here), the reader's inspiration has to become motivation to find their *own* way to... whatever they're trying to get to. Always.

To that end, I have supplied exercises at the end of every chapter. I hope you'll try them, because by actually doing something to change the way you think and do the things you do around the house (or anywhere), you will make that change. And if you want to be happier, to enjoy your life more, and, as a result, be a pleasure to work with or to just *be* with, try some of the things I suggest. Everyone likes someone who is spontaneously happy, playful and has taken control of their lives to create the best situation they can. This kind of person is naturally attractive, to family, friends, strangers and employers. And their happiness is contagious. For those that are scared about a transition, miserable at being unemployed and not finding work, or just can't seem to get past a general crankiness, these exercises can help change that. And I'd love to hear about how they work for you. They are a big part of my life, and I have made a success of implementing the lessons they can teach. You *can* create

the life you want, if you make the effort to bring out the best you have to offer.

This whole thing, the unfolding of my life, has been completely amazing to me, and I feel blessed and very lucky. But I know the unemployment part has been much harder for others, and in no way do I mean to diminish that. This book is as much about how to get through that kind of stuff as it is how to be happier in general and live your life as a form of art, whatever you're doing.

Probably the most difficult thing of all for me was that there were times when I would be deep in that revelatory “zone” I describe in Chapter 14, and thoughts of these grimmer realities would leak through, spoiling or even preventing the reverie. When I couldn't let go or get past it even for a minute, it was especially hard. And it still is. But that is exactly the work that needs to be done. Not to ignore those thoughts or pretend that those responsibilities aren't real or serious, but to truly understand that dwelling on them to the point of depression serves nothing—no good, no purpose, no salvation. My favorite quote of all time is “*Worry is a misuse of the imagination.*” (Dan Zadra) I invite you to really think about that sentence before you read on, because it's at the heart of everything I do. Once again, it's not to say that you shouldn't be concerned, pay attention, or take

care of what needs taking care of. It's about worry, which is only destructive, and not helpful or virtuous in any way. We can use our creativity in better ways than that.

This is a very hard thing to overcome, especially if you had any religious upbringing, the strong influence of any ethnicity or just strong personalities in your life. I know, that's just about everyone. (Did I mention that I was raised Jewish?)

For example, my sister does this thing where she drags into the present moment any and all of the potential disaster or pain of some imagined, unpleasant future event, such as going back to work on Monday. On a beautiful Sunday afternoon she'll suddenly get all exasperated and with a deep sigh say, "Oh, God.... I have to go to work tomorrow..." The power of that imagined future, which I must point out hasn't happened yet and has no guarantee of misery, destroys her ability to enjoy the beautiful afternoon she's right in the middle of. I'm sure there's a specific mental disorder to describe this, but nevertheless, it's insidious. This is a definite misuse of her imagination, and people do this kind of thing all the time. Oh, and by the way, she is self-employed.

A big piece of this is about how we use our imagination, for better

or for worse, in the application of even the simplest, most mundane tasks. We always have a choice, and some choices are a lot healthier, more fulfilling, and a helluva lot more fun. So for all of you who are recently out of work, and for those who have been so for much longer than you should have been, I hope you'll be inspired to make the happier choice. Or at least be willing to try it. If you let it, it can re-connect you with what it was you were working for in the first place.

Please read this book slowly.

I write the way I talk, and although I often talk fast I hope you will savor it a little. This is a fairly short book and it would take most readers only a few hours to zip through it. But then the book wouldn't work. It wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable as it could be if you just slow down a little and take your time with it. I worked hard to condense a lot of my thoughts and feelings so as not to ramble on too much, and to keep this an easy read. As a result it's packed with a lot of stuff, calling for some thoughtful consideration, encouraging rumination, and humbly appealing for a good mulling. My dream is that this little book will simmer in the back of your mind, and you will think of some of the passages from time to time, and even pull it off the shelf and refer to it to refresh your memory of the wording of

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a particular concept, or the turning of a phrase. That would actually mean a great deal to me.

Throughout my entire life it has been my hope that others would share my delight and joy in the simplest, most every-day things. Even housework can be something other than what most people imagine it to be. There is a magic in it, as I believe there is in all things. And surprisingly, housework—yes, housework—has led me to one of the deepest joys I've ever known.

CHAPTER 1

Home

I have completely rediscovered my home.

The end result of being home so much is that I have fallen in love with the house—managing it, caring for it, and being in it. And since I am stuck here so much I've decided to make an art form out of being here. Everything that I do, whether it is cleaning or working or being with my family, I am going to do with as much grace, skill, attentiveness, spirit and playfulness as I can muster. Really.

It is more than just deciding to make the best of things. And you could argue that I don't have much choice. But I do. I have two choices: be constantly stressed out with the unending search, self-promotion, and all-too frequent rejection that goes with job hunting (and the associated worry that goes with it), or make it a process that is in some way gratifying, fulfilling, and evolving in and of itself. I chose door #2.

Learning about and appreciating my house was a side benefit. It has happened slowly, and it started with painting.

Three years ago it was clear that our house needed a new coat of paint. What made that clear was not so much that the old paint was peeling, although it definitely was in some places. It was more about finding that the wood was rotting as a result of moisture getting behind the siding. The house is 40 years old, and still has the original rough-cut wood siding. It looks great, but hides a nasty secret: once it gets wet behind there, it disintegrates.

We have a little deck outside of what is now an enclosed porch, and it was completely rotten when we bought the house 5 years ago. After another two years of pretending that the deck was fine and hoping to God that no old person would try to use the railing that was hanging on by a single nail, we had it re-built. In the process, the workmen found that the wall on that side of the porch was completely rotten. One guy pulled huge sections off that crumbled in his hand. He thought it was funny. Imagining the entire house was rotting just behind those walls, I did not.

I immediately decided I would paint the house. Well, it was actually after we got two quotes that were in the neighborhood of \$5000. Our house isn't that big, and we would pay less than a fifth of that for the paint and materials needed. So I got all the supplies, did all the primin' and preppin', and started in. It was May, and it's

absolutely beautiful at that time of year here in Minnesota. While the task seemed daunting, once I got started I found that I liked it more and more. This is where I got to know the house a little better each day, and began to appreciate all its nooks and crannies, where it was well-built, where they had cut corners, and just how important this structure is to our family, or any family. I began to fall in love with it, starting at the top...

There was a phase of the painting that required me to go on the roof, either because I had reached a place that was too high for my ladder, or just because it was simpler and quicker to do it from there. The painting that needed to be done from the roof took about two weeks, and I got really good at lying down, hanging over the edge, grabbing on with one arm, and working with the other arm to paint the soffits or a part of the house that extended in such a way that it demanded that I be in this position.

Overlooking the fact that this position was ridiculously dangerous, I started to really enjoy it up there. The view, the breeze that was almost always present, and just working so much higher in the air than I would normally be all created this wonderful sensation that I started to look forward to. Now, some parts were definitely hard to paint, and it's not like I was just sitting comfortably and admiring the

view all the time. But I did do that at several points. And then I got my daughter to join me.

Alex was about 8 years old, and one day she asked if she could come up with me. I'm sure she noticed how much fun I was having and wanted to be as cool as me. (That phase lasted about a week.) And so, much to her mother's chagrin, I brought her carefully up the ladder and showed her how to step around it at the top. I always used the garage to get onto the main part of the roof because it was the lowest part of the house, and it was only about 10 feet from the ground at the gutter. We would then walk across the garage and climb up onto the house's roof, and walk to the very peak. Sitting down in the shade near the chimney we would just talk, and look around, and yell at people, and watch them while they were thinking no one was looking at them. And it was really, really fun.

I still remember it very fondly, because this unique kind of quality time with my daughter was a bonus that I never expected. Plus, it was beautiful up there! It reminded me of being in a tree house as a kid, and I think that was some of the attraction for Alex, too. Seeing what the trees were like much higher up than normal... being close to nests and surprised birds... it was all wonderful. She came up with me at least 5 times. Even now, if I have to clean the gutters or

something, she'll still go up with me. Sometimes.

At this point, I was still working in what would turn out to be my last year of steady employment. So I painted in the evenings and on weekends, and the weather was incredible and it was really quite enjoyable, probably because I had no deadline other than Winter. I thought that I could get the painting done that Summer, but it turned out otherwise... I got all but the backside of the house done. Two coats, and in some places three. You see, the idea was to create as much of a weather-proof barrier as I could, to prevent any further moisture getting in and producing more rot. We didn't have the money to completely re-side our house, which would have entailed replacing all the windows as well (also not in good shape, but that's a whole other story...). So I did what I considered to be a thorough, excellent job, and took my time.

Unfortunately, the next Summer is when I lost my job, and I spent most of the next six months freaking out and working desperately to secure another one as soon as possible. If you read the introduction to this little memoir, you already know how that turned out. So it wasn't until the *next* Summer that I finally got to the back of the house, and it ended up being the most difficult. It was at least 100 feet just to the gutter, (probably more like 30), and I had a 20 foot

ladder. That meant I had to borrow an extension ladder and get my butt up into some very precarious positions. When I think of it now—lying down at the very edge of the roof and leaning over to paint the soffits, or standing on the very top rung of the ladder with a small container of paint in one hand and leaning waaaay out to paint the delicate trim on a window—I'm pretty impressed. My wife's reaction was somewhat different. More like nausea and terror.

But again, I went right back to how much I loved doing it the Summer before, and the days flew by and the painting got done, and done very well. I had already taken on the house cleaning since my wife did all of the cooking, but this was the start of really thinking about and dealing with All Things House as an art. As I was spending so much of my time at home, it evolved in a pretty delightful way as my focus and energy was directed more and more into giving that concept form. The process here was to make the mundane beautiful, like taking a lump of mud and making an excellent piece of pottery out of it. And in that process, finding more meaning and value in everything.

All of what follows is an expression of that experience, in what may appear to be an OCD-like form. At least that's what people are whispering about me. Have I found a new discipline? Yes. Have I discovered something that some people talk about all the time

HOME

(usually in inane and cliché ways), which is that you can find peace and fulfillment in the simplest of things that are right in front of you? Yes.

But rather than just hearing Dorothy say that famous last line in the Wizard of Oz, I have to tell you it's much more. It really can be an incredible way to a deep, profound joy. And it really is like author Eckhart Tolle says, that all of it—all time, all experience, all existence even—is imminent in the present moment. For all the aggravating transparency and obnoxious platitudinousness that statements like that often have, it is a real thing. And that's what this is all about.

EXERCISE

To give you an actual experience of what I've been talking about in this chapter, and in several of the subsequent chapters, I'd like to suggest an exercise at the end here that might provide that. You'll find these insightful and helpful as far as getting to a personal appreciation of the concepts I'm presenting, rather than just reading and imagining what they're all about.

So for this first chapter, try this: on a nice warm day, get up on the roof of your house. Be safe, and use proper equipment (like a ladder instead of a catapult), but go up there, and see what you can see. Spend a decent amount of time there, and if you can, bring a friend. See what happens. You might go there again sometime. And if you do, consider what got you up there. What does it do for you?

Another approach to this is just walking around your house or apartment and considering what it means to you and your family. Even if you're alone, what does your "place" mean to you? What does it provide for you and your family? Your friends? It may not be everything you want and it may not be perfect, but what I'm talking about here is thinking about what having a place to live really means. It's a pretty big deal.

CHAPTER 2

The Daily Regimen

For the last two years or so the structure of my day has been something like this:

MORNING

- Get my 10-year-old daughter, Alex, up and out of bed, which usually means straight into our bed. Then another 10 – 15 minutes of prying her out of there.
- Get ready for school or Summer activity programs, which includes the breakfast/vitamin regimen, and packing a lunch occasionally, if she hates what school is offering, or every day, if she's in a Summer program.
- Provide humor (which Alex refers to as “torture”).
- Provide transport and free entertainment. (More torture.)
- Do prep for any cleaning, or go grocery shopping. (We shop at three different stores, so it's fairly regular.)
- Work on the computer doing my daily job search, networking, avoiding FaceBook, emailing friends and family, making calls. I'm pretty disciplined about it, and I usually spend as much as 4 hours there. (Unless I'm antsy.) This

is also when I do the occasional research for that brilliant article I'm going to publish someday in that scholarly magazine before I die. (You know, that scholarly one.) I've actually written several. Some of the subjects would surprise you. Or maybe not.

LUNCH

- Usually the leftovers in the fridge. Sometimes they are *really* leftover. I have developed a reputation for eating things that no one else would. Ever. I occasionally pay the gastrointestinal price for maintaining the celebrity of that singular renown.

AFTERNOON

- Finish up any loose ends with the computer and successfully avoid YouTube. Most days.
- Work on the house, either inside or out. This includes the daily Pick-Up, that week's pattern for cleaning, waking up the cat (she would sleep all day if I let her!), mowing the lawn or shoveling snow, as the weather warrants it, and anything else that needs doing in terms of a project or long overdue cleaning/sorting/throwing away.
- "The Lay Down", usually around 4 or 5 pm, depending

THE DAILY REGIMEN

on when I have to pick up my daughter and provide more “humor”. Never more than 20 minutes, it is a wonderful little oasis in the day that I always make room for if I can. Sometimes I fall asleep, sometimes just daydream. But I think of it like vitamins: you need this kind of thing to be healthy, truly over-all healthy. Over time it has become much more than just a nap opportunity.

EVENING

- My wife, Marybeth, comes home anywhere from 5:30 to 6:30. Until then, Alex does some of her homework, or if it's Summer we do various combinations of playing, reading, banging on musical instruments, and annoying the cat.
- Marybeth—who is a most excellent cook—makes dinner or we order out/go out.
- I do all the clean up, or enjoy not having to, while Marybeth helps Alex finish homework.
- Some TV or other family activity that could include shopping, a movie, a walk, a bike ride, taking Alex somewhere where my Marybeth and I can embarrass her in public, etc.
- Reading for, and then reading before, bed. We read every night. Well, they do. Either Marybeth or Alex will read out

loud if they are going through a book together, and I love it. I miss some parts of some really great books, though, because I am loving it so much. (Our bed is really comfortable.)

- Get Alex to bed at a reasonable time, preferably before 10, usually later.
- If Marybeth is up for it, we watch TV together, and then if my older kids are around we make fun of her snoring, which usually starts about 10 minutes into the show. If they're not around, I do it myself. (I think snoring is fascinating, for all it's potential danger when it's a serious problem. It's amazing how a perfectly lovely woman can turn into a Mountain Troll with that sound.)

At the end of the day, it's already the next day for me. I seem to only need about 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night, (maybe because of "The Lay Down"), which means one last check of the email and the news, and then getting to bed around 1. Unless I start in with YouTube.

Now all this routine does not preclude the possibility of just ditching it altogether and reading a great book all day long, especially if it's terrible weather and I have just completed a particularly demanding cleaning cycle. There are definitely days that require a "Mental Break" (my children would say that describes every day for me), and I have no

problem enforcing that requirement. And I'm good at not abusing it. In fact, one of the things I thought would be a real problem was the constant temptation to just goof off, but it's surprising how little that has been an issue. Either because there is always so much stuff that needs to be done or because I'm a professional at self-guilt (did I mention that I was raised Jewish?), I very rarely just hang out and do nothing. I can't even remember when I did it last, which is a clear demonstration that there's so much that can be done to take care of a house and its family that this job should never be underestimated. Especially by those that don't do it.

EXERCISE

Now this may or may not appeal to you, but consider mapping out your typical day. Not so much to track it and see how efficient it is (that would be WAY too practical), but more to look at how much of it is just a series of steps through the day—activities that may need to be done on a regular basis, but could be done in any of several ways. Try doing something different with these things you usually do, a different order or pattern of doing them or just in the way that you do them.

You can also try and look at these daily tasks as an opportunity for something more. I encourage you to see them in a new light, and preferably a humorous one, with which you can think about them and perform them with greater joy. Try describing your typical day as a stand up comedian would. With a little effort you can probably find a lot to laugh about.

CHAPTER 3
Picking Up

I am not a cook. I never have been, and the art holds no fascination or attraction for me. I can make toast, an egg, or an egg in a hole that I put in the toast. My daughter taught me how to make French Toast. And I can put jelly on toast. But apparently, I can't get past toast.

So my wonderful wife does all the cooking. I can be a good prep-cook, but usually I'm conspicuously absent from any room in the part of the house near the kitchen. When she is done and we have enjoyed the fruits, vegetables and meats of her endeavors, I spring into action. Well, maybe not spring. I like to eat slowly, gratefully enjoying the meal, and then spend a little time just restfully digesting afterward. Which means I'm the last one at the table.

And then it's my time.

I do all the cleaning. Most of the time. And I'm very happy to split the family duties that way. I would be (and I am), a terrible cook, so I appreciate deeply the talent my wife has for it. My talent, and my art, is cleaning. Marybeth will do laundry on occasion, but that is

generally my domain as well. I really do feel that since she is working hard all day I want to do the same, and make my contribution to a balanced household. And there is definitely enough to do to keep me busy all day, every day.

It starts with picking up. On a continual basis, there are things to pick up all around the house. It's not that we're slob, but things regularly get left on a table or the kitchen counter or the bed or any of a hundred other surfaces. It's normal, and I do it too. So I have taken it upon myself to pick those things up. A lot. This also extends to the realm of dishes and glassware.

Some would say that I am enabling my family to just leave whatever, wherever, whenever. Others would say that I have a disorder. They are probably both right to some degree. But as I said, I consider it my job, and I do try to encourage others to be proactive in their own item and dish management. You can probably guess how well that's going.

We do let some things gather moss. We have what I would call Designated Piles (not a medical condition). There are these particular areas in the house where we all tacitly agree to allow things to accumulate, and it's usually pretty normal stuff: letters, notes, kid

art, things momentarily pulled out of drawers, keys, etc. With at least four people around most of the time, the piles can gather momentum and turn into stacks, which is a precursor to a mound, which leads to a heap, which is one step away from a hoard. It's a snowball that gets way too big way too fast, but in its early stages it's benign. Once a week Marybeth will kindly go through several stacks that have accumulated, usually at the end of the kitchen counter and on the dining room table, (the ultimate catch-all), and completely clear and purge them, as though they were a type of mold that had grown over the last week. It's very refreshing when it's done, as if a great smelling cleanser had been used on that "mold" (at least, it is for me). And then I begin picking up again.

I also consider making the bed to be in the "Picking Up" category. I do it every day, mostly because 1) I'm the last one out of it, and 2) one day Marybeth came home and said, "Oh, I see you didn't make the bed today," as though it was the ultimate gauge of how much I had done that day as my contribution. A litmus test, if you will. Ever since, I make sure it's made (although sometimes not until I see her pull into the driveway). And it's one of the only things that's kind of obnoxious, in that I rarely really want to do it. Making the bed has become one of the only "obligations" I feel, although any task can get that way at some point. I think it's because it was once used

as a measurement of my diligence and commitment. So sometimes I won't do anything else all day, and then at the last minute, I'll make the bed. So there.

Anyway, whenever I'm walking through the house I almost always pick something up. Sometimes I just relocate it randomly, which isn't particularly helpful, but most of the time I try to put it in its proper place. (As I wrote that I heard Mary Poppins' voice.) But I honestly don't try to be completely obsessive about it and it's really very subtle, at least with everything but the dishes. I don't make any kind of a show or a big deal about it, and it isn't constant. (Probably because I do it so often the house is usually pretty well picked up.) My sister will often comment on how "neat" our house always looks, and while I'm tempted to start listing the things that are out of place or, by my standards, "messy", I generally keep my mouth shut and take the compliment.

When someone comes to our house unexpectedly, I do this Sherlock Holmes thing. (Why is everything here suddenly so British?) I look about the house and quickly ascertain what needs picking up or dusting off the most and how it can be done in the fastest, most efficient way without alarming my family. I've always loved Holmes' ability to summarize someone's life in an instant, and I pride myself

in this quite similar ability. (Shut up... it IS similar.) Then I *smoothly* take care of what is most urgently needed, and hide away whatever underwear or cat vomit I spotted thereby keeping up the impression that we're "neat".

So where's the fun, you ask? "In every job that must be done there is an element of fun..." Sorry, but it's true, and I've always loved that line. Maybe it's because I grew up with musical movies (although they don't seem to have affected any of my friends the same way), and I've always been a complete sap for the "Disney Magic", but I do believe that the logic and perfectly acceptable premise of breaking into song and dance absolutely anywhere is just goofy enough to have a lot of appeal. Now that I think about it, I honestly believe that musicals were invented by housekeepers. It's only logical.

So that's what happens: instead of just picking things up and putting them away I make a kind of a dance out of it. Not flitting around the room and pretending I'm in the Bolshoi or something. It's much more subtle and internal, unless Alex is in the room and I want to "entertain" her. If you were to watch me for an hour you might see that I move with a little more grace than one might need to pick up stinky socks, but the thing of it is: IT'S MORE FUN! That something like this would be fun at all is unimaginable to most

people I know, and unimaginable is the perfect word. I consider this internal game-playing with household tasks to be a kind of exercise... exercise for my mind - especially my imagination - my body, my emotions, and my soul.

I'm not kidding. It makes everything I do, chores or otherwise, not be work. It's play. Play and work are not separate concepts to me. They are both sides of the same coin, part of a single continuum, and I continually blur the line most people would put between them. I believe that the best work is the work we play, or have fun doing, and the best play is the play we work at. I choose to play my work, and I play as often and as well as I can, just as a professional musician or athlete or actor plays their work. When they do what they do, we call it play. Everyone else has to work, but only because we think of it that way. It *is* possible to play your work, and not in some immature way. Quite the opposite. What I'm talking about is playing with focus, intensity (but not necessarily the competitive kind), spirit, and joy, just like those professionals listed above. I wouldn't pay a couple of hundred dollars for a ticket on Broadway to see a "work". I want to see a play, and one that is performed by people who have worked hard to be a recognized talent in their field, whether I like the play or not. And professional athletes get paid more than anyone else on the planet just for "playing". But we all know how serious a

business it is (aside from some possible attitude problems), and how often some of the players can pay a high price (in injuries, not fines).

This is a huge topic for me, and I'll talk about it again later. With regard to working, most people will agree that if you can't have some kind of fun at some point, it's not worth it. Not that they made that happen very often, but almost everyone I talked with when I was working at any business would say something like that at one point or another. So how does that play out? (Didn't mean to make a pun there. But I'm leaving it.) Generally people will try to make a given task a little more fun by being slightly goofier, smiling more or just being friendlier. That's about as far as anyone dare go for fear of being perceived as flip or irreverent or just silly, and no one wants that kind of damage to their credibility. Do you see how weird that is? The library-like seriousness that is expected and accepted in most work places is incredibly odd to me. All my experience has shown me that people do better work when they are enjoying it, but that logic is lost in the cubes of the typical work environment.

People are better and smarter than that, but they are afraid. You should know that any effort you make to create a more fun and enjoyable workplace is not only appreciated by your co-workers, (who, for whatever reason, feel they can't do it themselves), but it directly impacts the quality of the business as well.

In terms of Customer Service alone, which place would you rather bring your business to: the one where people are genuinely friendly, honestly enjoying doing what they do and, therefore, doing it well, and making you feel good to be there; or the one where the people are dour, cold, unfriendly or just plain tired, and it's clear that they not only don't like their jobs but they don't like helping you? Now seriously think about how many times you end up in a business like the latter one. It's the norm, and that norm has set the bar for Customer Service about two inches from the floor.

This is a gigantic issue with most businesses in every country right now. In a world where many businesses have become service industries, those that “get it” are thriving while those that don't aren't. Service is the number one issue in the classic arenas—retail, hospitality, travel, cable TV, cell phones companies, etc. — but it has also become the hottest topic for Training and Development departments in every company on the planet. I never worked for a company that didn't have a training class devoted to Customer Service, offered at least once a year, and sometimes mandatory for all employees. There was such a demand, I eventually taught it myself. It is the single most distinguishing element between businesses, defining success or disappointing growth.

So again, why are so many places of work so un-fun?

The notion that play is immature, or that it is by nature only for children, is total crap, and any artist or athlete will tell you so. It's time we really examine what we want and what's holding us back, both personally and in our places of work.

I play my work as often as I possibly can, and it's a whole different experience than what "work" is for most people.

"A lark, a spree, it's very clear to see..."

EXERCISE

Actually, two exercises. First, ask yourself what you think about the word “play”. What baggage does it bring with it? What are your feelings about play as an adult? Does it carry implications of immaturity or irresponsibility? How did you experience play as a child? In what ways do you feel held back from spontaneously playing? (Here’s an exercise I’ve actually done many times in a professional setting as part of a class on Creativity: If I were to ask you to act like a monkey, would you do it? Immediately, without hesitation and with total abandon? Most would not. I then spend about a half hour answering the question, “Why is that?”) When you’ve gone through any or all of this, do the same thing for the word, “work”.

Second, if no one was looking or even in the same room as you, would you play a little more with any kind of a task or job that you had to do? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 4

Cat

Don't get one.

EXERCISE

Seriously, think twice about owning a cat.

CHAPTER 5

Mr. Clean

I am a “Method” Cleaner. . . You know, Strasberg, Meisner, Kazan. . . (Sorry, Theater humor.)

Anyway, I have developed a clear technique and pattern for the process, either in an effort to maintain my sanity or to make something more meaningful and useful out of a series of potentially mind-numbing tasks. I prefer the second reason. And my family would say that the first one has not been successful.

Honestly, there really can be an “art” to housework. As I’ve described, the whole purpose of writing this is to outline a thesis of play, as well as to exorcise my demons. But without focusing too much on the latter, you can really make much more of a game out of routine chores than you might suspect. I’ve always been fascinated by the connection of play and discipline, and there is one, though most wouldn’t think so. Like picking up around the house, all cleaning can be done with a little panache and it can make the whole thing a lot more enjoyable and healthy. I guess you could call it Houseplay. It’s not silly, but you could say it’s childlike. It’s not irresponsible, but

you could say it's unusual. It's not immature, but you could say it's mischievous. It has to do with using the tasks that have to be done as a medium to do something more, and *that* is a lot like art.

So I clean to music when I can, and I do mean “to” the music. Sweeping and mopping are obviously rhythmic. Cleaning and/or polishing counters can have more of a flow as well. And I have been known to sing. Not really loud or like an opera star, but more like humming. Sometimes I will incorporate my breathing. Sometimes I will try to use only the muscles necessary to do the job and see how much of my body I can keep relaxed. And other times I will purposely try to increase the difficulty of a job either by working faster or doing as much stretching as I possibly can to make it a real workout. Having studied several martial arts, I especially like to see how some of those principles can be applied. Yes, like “wax on, wax off”. Repetition, routine, ritual—all just a matter of degree. Vacuuming really lends itself to rhythmic movement, as does mopping. It can be more dancelike or it can be like a Kata.... doesn't matter. As long as it's not just vacuuming.

If you're interested, write to me and I'll give you the list of my preferred cleaning products and equipment as well as my specific methodologies for particular rooms. (E.g. Toilets: always by hand. I don't trust a crappy brush or, even worse, that flushable wipey thing... a nascent

catastrophe for folks on septic systems.) I have a feeling that you won't be too surprised by how much detail I can provide.

My preferred process is to do the whole house at once. There is method to my madness: work from the top down, and end with the dusting. I usually start either in the kitchen or the bathrooms and work from the cabinets/mirrors to the sinks to the counter tops to the appliances/toilet/shower to the floor. Once I hit the floor I go all over the house and dry mop, sweep and then wet mop any bare floors. Then I vacuum the carpets and stairs. And that's why I leave the dusting for last. If you dust too soon, you'll just kick up a bunch more when you vacuum, no matter how many Hepa filters the vacuum may have.

The other approach I use is to do one "realm" per day (kitchen, bathrooms, floors, vacuuming, dusting). Breaking the job into smaller, much more digestible pieces can be very appealing some weeks, but I usually prefer to do it all at once. It's a focus thing, and a much better challenge.

When I do whole-house cleaning I usually work for anywhere from 3 to 4 hours, and I can get one heck of a workout. Once every week to ten days. In the process I purposely try to exercise all the muscles

in my body - including my lungs and heart - and strengthen my balance, stamina, control, flexibility and concentration. And it's fun. Way more fun than going to a gym or something. (I've never been interested in working out in public. It's just too... public. And there's something just plain weird about running on a treadmill right in front of a window that looks out onto a busy street. Especially as you walk by with a big Cinnabon in your hand or something.)

As a result my body is still in pretty damn good shape for a 59-year-old guy. And that's not the only thing that's still in good shape. You can ask my wife about that. Her name is Marybeth. Seriously, please email her at the following address and ask her about it: iamsogointokillyouforthis@gmail.com

I mean it. I would love it if she got a ton of email, from both men and women, asking her about my "prowess". I'm laughing as I write this. Please do it, if for no other reason than the fact that such an easy gesture would bring both delight and constant annoyance to our marriage.

I should mention here that Marybeth does do some cleaning, (she's watching me type now), but her methodology is completely different than mine. Her tendency is to start with something simple, like

putting away Alex's shoes, and an hour later I will walk into the room and see everything that was in the closet spread out all over the floor which, for me, is the equivalent of someone sucking all the oxygen out of the room. She will do an incredible job of thoroughly cleaning and reorganizing that closet, but the intent was to put away a pair of shoes. I'm sure you can see how I experience a confused mix of admiration and hysteria. I do let it happen, of course, but I have to give her a time limit or she'd be in there all day.

I want to be clear that none of these cleaning procedures are set in stone. There is an evolving process at work, not unlike the evolution of a species, (actually it's nothing like the evolution of a species, but saying that lends a seemingly impressive scientific gravitas to it). Just in the months that have passed since I first began this Memoire I have slowly changed my approach to several things, including my cleaning. Along with the "All At Once" method and the "Realm Per Day" method, I have developed a new one: "Constant Cleaning". This entails the continual cleaning of any room I happen to be in, but it's not as obsessive as it may sound. At least I don't think so.

The "Constant Cleaning" method emerged as I began to realize that cleaning is an ongoing process and not a one-time weekly event, approached like a sport or a support group meeting, not that I need a

support group or need to attend weekly meetings of any kind. Right? It's a process that plays out naturally, as I move from one room to another in the unfolding of my daily activities. So, for instance, I go into one of the bathrooms to wash my hands and I see that the sink has some water stains, dust and grime that have accumulated over the last several days, and I decide it's just unsightly enough to do something about it. I grab one of the towels (that I make sure are always clean), and quickly wash and dry the sink, creating the impression that it has been thoroughly cleaned with cleansers and sponges and such.

While it might appear that this would be a half-done job, this is no short cut. Although I have not used the cleansers and sponges in the typical "full clean", it is nonetheless a thorough job, just a shortened version, and when done regularly it is very effective. The thing about this is that it's done almost daily, from room to room, and in each case it's a spontaneous response to the needs of each room based on the use and abuse of that room. As such it has this improvisational and "in the moment" feel that is a great substitute or alternative to the weekly, structured whole-house clean. I'm sure you can appreciate the virtues of this option, and I hope you take advantage of its revolutionary possibilities. Or that you at least consider its serviceability.

The real issue here is that there is a flow—a real, living evolution of process that is based in the practice of being a little more deeply involved in the simple activity of taking care of your house. As time goes on, you should be able to bring your continuing creativity and playfulness to whatever you're doing, and ceaselessly improve that process that you thought was pretty good to begin with. You might find that your experiment was not as successful as you thought it might be, but that doesn't matter. The experiment itself is what it was all about. And whether it brings with it a breakthrough revelation or just a confirmation that this was not the direction you really wanted to go in, either way it's a good thing, and just what was necessary to move you to the next level.

This is Art, with a capital “A”.

With regard to the flow of one task to another and the execution of the tasks themselves, I offer one final analogy: You know that part in Kung Fu Panda 2 where Shifu is talking about inner peace, and as he does he rolls in his hands a single drop of dew that fell off of a leaf, and ends by letting it fall gently into a little pond at his feet? It's like that. (If you haven't seen the Kung Fu Panda movies what the heck is wrong with you?) Yes, even cleaning a house can be as beautiful as that.

EXERCISE

How do you go about the tasks of housework? First, consider how you *feel* about doing housework. Then, how do you actually perform those tasks, given how you feel about them? Would you consider changing your actions if it's less than desirable or enjoyable? And if so, *how* would you change your approach to cleaning and taking care of your house?

Probably most important of all, can you see and accept the concept of housework as an art? Why or why not?

And finally, if you could see your way to seeing the potential for housework as being an art form, and you could imagine the possible applications, what's holding you back from doing just that? And then applying it to your whole life?

(Do I need to provide writing space for you to do this kind of thing or can I trust that you'll try some of these exercises to make the ideas of this book more concrete and visceral? Don't make me come over there and draw lines in your book...)

CHAPTER 6

Dishgineering

You should know that I have become so accustomed to picking up after people that I have made a career out of it—a serious, professional approach that is specific, time-tested and well practiced. I am a seasoned Pro, to the extent that I have a reputation. With dishware, if you leave a glass or plate sitting around it will vanish and magically reappear in the dishwasher. In its proper place. Even if you didn't finish drinking whatever was in that glass, if you turn your back for a moment it may not be there when you turn around again. It's what I do. And the defense for such swift justice rests on the argument that it can take as long as a week (and that's no exaggeration... I've tested it), for "some people" to take care of it themselves. I consider this just another part of doing my part. With a vengeance.

One of the things I especially like about the dishwasher is that it's one of the few places in the house that is completely free of cat hair. (See Chapter 4.) The other is that if you do a really efficient job of getting as much dishware into the dishwasher as possible, you save a great deal of water, soap, and time over washing it all manually. As

long as you don't defeat the purpose of the machine and spend more time rinsing and organizing than it would take you to just wash the damn dishes by hand in the first place.

There are two ways to fill a dishwasher: the obnoxious way and the efficient way. Guess which one I prefer? The thing is, if I'm going to be the one to empty the dishwasher just about all the time, and I am, then I don't think it's asking too much that it be filled with a little rhyme or reason so that it can be emptied with the least amount of difficulty or confusion. It's really a simple thing, but it can be made to be a very difficult and time-consuming thing if "some people" don't get it. We won't mention their names. Or maybe we will: Jake and Kait. (Two of my three older children) They never really got with the program. I'm in the process of training Alex. Marybeth came pre-trained by her mother.

(Update: A few months after I wrote the segment above, Jake moved into his own place. He now has his own dishwasher and has come to appreciate and follow my excellent example. I knew he would come over to the Dark Side.)

As for the pattern with which I fill the dishwasher, Marybeth suggested I provide a diagram, and I could. But I think a description

will do just fine, and it would take too long to design the CAD program that could handle the details and specific shapes and sizes of all the different types of dishes and silverware and their proper placement. So I'll just spend the next 10 pages or so telling you exactly how it should be done. I'm kidding. It's only 9 pages.

It just so happens that the dishwasher you have, if you have one, has a manual. In it, there is usually a clear description of how the dishes should be placed in said dishwasher for the most efficient cleaning. Look at it and follow it. It will take all of about 10 minutes and then no one can argue with your demands for forks to be placed with forks, and spoons to be placed with spoons, with both sets of utensils facing upward. (They won't argue, but they'll still put them in wrong.)

In general, here are a few tips from the delightful manuals provided by such prestigious manufacturers as Maytag, Whirlpool and Bosch:

- Place dishes in descending size, from the sides to the center.
(This is so the most water and soap can get to the most surfaces, not just because I think it looks nice. But I do.)
- Put plastic containers on the upper rack, not in the lower one (near the heating element in older washers), where they

will melt and contort into interesting but non-containing art forms.

- Larger glasses on the outside of the upper shelf, smaller ones in the center. (I love it when someone puts a huge glass in the center of the top rack and then runs the dishwasher, only to have the spinning washer arm at the top get stuck and held in place for the entire wash cycle. Actually, no, I do not love that.)
- Smaller bowls can be stacked neatly on the upper shelf in the center, larger bowls on the lower rack. (Logic, people.)
- SPOONS, FORKS, AND MANY NON-SHARPENED UTENSILS SHOULD BE PLACED FACING UPWARD AND GROUPED TOGETHER FOR EASY REMOVAL. (Why would you squeeze dirty spoons and forks so tightly together in a single compartment that they can only get marginally clean??)
- Knives are placed down, for obvious reasons. (If you don't do this, it's clear you're not the one emptying it.)

I really have to say that all of this just seems to be common sense to me, and it amazes me how often “some people” will just toss dishes, often un-rinsed, Willy Nilly, into the machine. I do not like Mr. Nilly, and he has no business in my kitchen. Over the past few

months he seems to have less and less influence on my family, much to my relief and greater enjoyment.

As for emptying the incredibly well organized dishwasher, the term “rhyme or reason” is perfect, because I believe in trying to make tasks like this as graceful, fun—and, for lack of a better term—musical as possible. The easiest way to accomplish that is to have some music playing. But given the schedules that most people have and the amount of time they usually want to spend on emptying a dishwasher, it’s just as effective to provide your own music, or at least to perform the task like a kind of dance. Yes, again with the dancing. Bear with me.

It is entirely possible to remove all of the dishes from the dishwasher and put them all away in their respective places throughout the kitchen in an incredibly short period of time, and that is the challenge. Think of it this way: if you could win a million dollars by emptying your dishwasher as quickly, smoothly, quietly, (now we’ve upped the ante), and with as much economy of movement as possible, how would you do it? That’s the approach I take. Almost every time. Naturally, there are some times when I just don’t feel like playing, but it’s always less fun when I don’t. I might be absorbed with something else and not in the mood for The Dishwashing Olympics, and later that day someone might find a bowl in with the glasses. All I’m saying is that

the Dishwasher Dismount can be cool, and I've even had people time me just for an added bit of adrenalin.

It's not the job. It's the jobee. And, of course, it helps to have a really tolerant family.

As you know, not all dishes get washed in the dishwasher. Sometimes I wash a few of them by hand, as well as all the pots and pans. And, as you might expect, I have a "thing" that I do here as well.

When I wash dishes by hand, I rhythmically tap silverware, Tupperware or other small, non-breakable items on the side of the sink when I'm done washing them – to shake off some of the excess water. It's just a quick little thing, but I do it every time, and I usually tap out a Latin beat. It's a short rhythm pattern that everyone recognizes when I do it. And they usually smile, or just shake their heads.

However, as I finished this chapter my oldest daughter, Kait, started tapping a Latin spoon-beat on the sink.

You *can* live your life as an art, and you can pass it on.

I can die happy now.

EXERCISE

O.K. I'm struggling for an exercise here, other than just suggesting that you try to unload your dishwasher as quickly and quietly as you can. Once you do that you might go, "Big deal." But if you're the competitive type, you'll appreciate the continual effort to beat your "personal best" and seek to perfect the art of dishwasher arranging and emptying.

And that's really the heart of it: to make a typically mindless job more skillful, more artful, and more fun.

And finally, if you could accept the potential for housework to be an art form, try just singing or playing music as you do these kinds of tasks. Always a good idea. But consciously try to have more fun, or make it more interesting. Because then *you* will be, too.

CHAPTER 7

To Mow or Not to Mow

The grass: it's an ongoing management challenge, and it is yet another source of bliss.

The weather is the problem. If it's been raining a lot then the grass gets out of control and mowing becomes twice the work. If it hasn't been raining, then I can go for several more days of not having to do a thing. But I can never accurately predict weather (and weathermen are no help at all), nor can I ever be fully on top of it. There are always a couple of days that the lawn either looks like the Munsters live here or we're turning our yard into a sandbox. But the cool part is, that's because it's alive. And while most people think of it as just another demanding task to be completed at inconvenient times (if they want to maintain a lawn at all), lawn care can also be something much more.

It's kind of the same with parenting my kids: the unpredictable weather (which would be the hot and cold running drama of their lives), makes for a more thoughtful approach that demands presence of mind and a watchful eye (paying attention), to provide effective

mowing (good parenting). I'd like to go on record, however, to say I am not in favor of mowing your kids. Though, I did mow over my sister's foot once. I was being so hilarious, chasing her around the yard with a push mower, that I actually clipped the back of her heel. Sometimes comedy is dangerous.

ANYWAY, being at home allows for more flexibility in the timing of the mow, and it also provides for more enjoyment of it. The "something else" it has become is a time of reflection, introspection, and contemplation. A time of reverie.

A little sidetrack into the philosophical: I considered calling this book, "Seeking Opportunities for Reverie", because I think that's what I've been doing more and more. And I've been finding it. Everywhere. Even in housework. But what I mean by that is I try to thoroughly enjoy whatever I'm doing—really, deeply enjoy it—and as a result, play with it. Or it might be that I've learned to play with more stuff and as a result I enjoy it more deeply. Either way.

There's a lot to be said about play. I can say lot, anyway. I have a whole presentation that I've delivered to over a hundred organizations and conferences (I've been doing it for 20 years), about the nature of play. For 12 years I worked for a company called Playfair, run by one

of my all-time favorite people, Matt Weinstein. (Of all the books I ever read or seminars I ever took on Leadership, he had the very best methodology. He once said, *"How can we do what we have to do today in the best way possible and have the most fun doing it?"* Changed everything in the way I thought about work. Forever.) Having also taught Theater for 20 years, I think I know a lot about "Play".

If I haven't made it apparent yet, let me do so here: my whole premise is that we can play our work. In this case the mower is the medium and becomes the instrument, capable of just as much expression as a cello. Or perhaps more like a tuba, since they're both large, loud and made of metal. One slight difference is that the mower could kill you. (Although I suppose it's entirely possible to be killed by a wayward tuba.) Come what may, the point is this: I honestly am trying, and succeeding more and more, at being far more eclectic about the medium I choose when I'm in a mood to express myself. I'm almost to the point where, when inspiration strikes, I could just as easily grab the vacuum cleaner as go and play my electric keyboard. Almost.

Play sets a pattern in your consciousness and your level of engagement in whatever you're doing, and it's cumulative. It becomes effortless or at least enjoyable to do even the most difficult tasks, and you do

them better. The only way we learn to be a human being as an infant is by imitation and play. Ask anyone who has received even a basic education in Child Development. We learn to move, to speak, to express ourselves, and to socialize all by the time we're three, and it's *all* through play. It's not until we are about seven that we begin to have a truly "intellectual" understanding of things, although there are those that would like to push that to an increasingly earlier age, to our children's detriment. Play is how we become fundamentally who we are, setting patterns of behavior and belief for the rest of our lives. Play is serious business. But at the same time it's fun. That's why it's so cool.

Back to the lawn. So here are some of the "tunes" I play on my incredibly dangerous "instrument":

TAI CHI-ING THE LAWN

My lawn is ridiculously uneven. So I noticed, especially when I first took charge of this lawn, that mowing would create a lot of tension in my arms, shoulders, neck, and even my face, as I was trying to compensate for all the bumps and dips when the mower rattled over them. Consequently, the game became, "How can I be as relaxed as possible while doing this?" I have a simple Yard Man mower, but it's self-propelled. Eventually, I learned to completely let go of my neck

and shoulder tension, and totally loosen my arms so that my hands alone were doing most of the work of holding on and steering. It became pretty fun to see how soon I could get into the zone of using just the muscles necessary to do the job and no more, and do it with a little finesse. In the bumpiest places my arms would bounce around and it would be surprisingly relaxing. I was also much less fatigued when I finished.

Back in the days when I was teaching, I studied and eventually taught Tai Chi Chuan, and spent a lot of time working with several other martial arts—Chi Kung, Ba Gua, Wu Shu, and Aikido. The simple, everyday act of mowing, and several other things I do around the house, have become wonderful vehicles for actually living some of the fundamental principles of the martial arts, in a way that I had only read about in the stories of the masters and the schools they were brought up in. Performing household tasks has become more than just doing forms and practicing patterns. It is a way of using the repetition of those acts to “sharpen the saw”, and continuing to grow and develop and deepen my appreciation for it all. This is the stuff, the “chop wood and carry water”, that is just as viable a way to enlightenment as any austere spiritual regimen or countless hours of meditation. I’ll let you know when the enlightenment part happens. I do know, though, that it’s closer than it has ever been.

BEING IN THE SEASON

This one isn't hard to figure out, but it's one of my favorites. Not so much a game in itself as just a part of the larger package, I do this to some degree every time I mow. It's just about being there, paying attention, and really feeling a part of what's going on at that moment in time. But the focus is not just on the present; rather, it's a deeper perception of the weather, the grass, the trees, and the sky. I can sometimes taste Autumn coming, as early as the first week of August. The first mow of Spring brings the delight of the smell of fresh cut grass and moist soil. And even the most intense heat and humidity of high Summer is a thing unto itself, like a great, cleansing sauna. You can see things changing every time you mow, if you look for it. I try to find one thing that's different each time, and I always can.

MOW ART

This is simply mowing in different patterns. It's very entertaining for both the person mowing and the neighborhood. Looking at it logically, you can generally mow the lawn five different ways: back and forth across the width or the length, two ways diagonally, or in ever-decreasing concentric circles enclosing the lawn. And I suppose you could start at the "true center" and mow in ever increasing circles outward. So that makes six. You can also draw shapes and even pictures (okay, seven), but I suggest you start simple and work

up to something like that. Crop circle patterns are harder than they look. And people will think you're high.

Changing it up is the key, and it's actually healthier for lawns, too. Back when we had the money for it, we used a lawn fertilizing and weed control service, and they left a little pamphlet that said "Mowing in different directions each time you mow prevents ruts and marks in the grass that can become permanent." Or something like that. I think this concept can be applied to a lot of things in life.

I want to be clear that this isn't just a whim of mine that verges on being silly. Who hasn't marveled at the artwork of professional baseball field groundskeepers before a game on a sunny afternoon? Sometimes it's outright amazing. So now you have something you can aspire to. You're welcome.

BEATING THE BOUNDS

There is an old tradition that is still practiced in parts of rural Britain, and most certainly in other pastoral settings across Europe. It is called the "Beating of the Bounds", and consists of walking the perimeter of one's property or the community's boundaries at certain times of the year. It enables confirmation and updating of those boundaries. In olden times, property was conveyed by reference

to distances and notable landmarks. Some bounds—like “the large white oak”—might be lost, e.g., in a storm or a fire. By walking the bounds annually, a new landmark could be substituted/created for a lost one. Even today, particularly in old farming communities where properties have been “in the family” for centuries, changing ownership if the landmarks haven’t been kept current can give ulcers to the poor lawyer trying to figure out who’s buying/selling what.

But even more, it is a re-establishing, reconfirming, and cleansing of the physical and emotional envelope that contains the family or the inhabitants... the collective unconscious of the locale. And it is a validation of the spirit of the place.

When mowing, I will sometimes do this, especially when I do the concentric circles thing, which starts with the perimeter of the whole yard. It can be very interesting, and if you’re at all curious about such obscure and ancient practices you can, of course, Google it or read more about it here: *Earth Rites*, by Janet and Colin Bord, Granada Publishing, 1982. (Sorry, it’s the teacher in me.) And if you’re not curious about such obscure and ancient practices, fine. No problem. Doesn’t bother me. Curiosity won’t kill you, you know. It doesn’t kill the cat, either. I’ve been watching.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Every lawn has sections—definable parts that demand a particular way of mowing or have limited ways of being mowed effectively. This can either be because of objects, (a clump of trees or bushes, a clothesline, a deck or patio, gravestones, etc.), or landmarks, (a drainage area or a place where a famous battle took place, a “ceement pond”, etc). So it usually requires that you mow in certain ways every time, regardless of how much you might want to play a game with it. You can divide up these areas and do them in various sequences, moving from one to the other as you finish them, or you can just skip around. Whether I’m intentionally trying to or not, this aspect of lawn mowing is somehow slightly different every single time, and that in itself is pretty interesting. At least to me.

These are just a few of the games than can make mowing on even the hottest days of the Summer a more deeply enriching experience. And while you might be thinking, “I’d just as soon zone out and daydream”—which is just fine—I’d like to suggest that you just try one of the games sometime, or make up your own. Or even just consider the possibility of being a “musician” with the mower. The important thing is to experiment, or you’ll never know what can happen. It’s like never tasting new food because it’s easier to just to eat the same stuff you always do. You don’t have to be a foodie to get how limiting that

is. Another favorite quote: “*The difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.*” (Gerald Burrill)

Since I’m talking about doing things in the yard, this is a good place to say something about trees. Over the five years we’ve lived in this house I’ve begun to talk to them more and more, not unlike my talking to Hornets, but with a much better result. (See Chapter 10.) While that may seem like further confirmation that I have more of a problematic mental situation going on than previously suspected, it’s really not that far fetched or odd. Or at least, it shouldn’t be. If you don’t know about the whole talking to plants thing (the decades long research on the remarkable responsiveness of plants to various forms of stimuli, including people’s actions or mere intentions), or some of Stevie Wonder’s music (*The Secret Life of Plants*, an entire album devoted to the subject), you should check it out. It’s old news. Even older, the Lakota Sioux (and several other indigenous peoples), used to sing to plants and animals before harvesting them, in thanks for their sacrifice. I always thought that was cool.

We have two ash trees, a giant silver maple, a little cluster of fragile birch trees and several cottonwoods in our yard. They are big, beautiful and old. Because I have been home more, I have had—make that, *taken*—the time to pay more attention to what’s going on with them,

and there is definitely a response. I love them deeply now, for what they are and how they do it, and I thank them regularly. Just standing next to them is humbling and thrilling at the same time. They are these gigantic, mute beings that endure all weather, all the time, year after year. But they absolutely are part of our home and family, and we can feel it. And while I can't prove it, I believe they respond to my one-sided conversations and appreciate the attention, as well as the love. I also spent the money to have them "cleaned up" when we first moved in, both to protect us from falling branches (during a storm, the cottonwoods actually dropped a branch that punched through the roof over our bedroom, thereby filling our closet with water), and to care for them in a way that had clearly never been done. Now they are very healthy, and neighbors have even commented on how beautiful they are. I'm sure they also comment when they see me talking to them. But I don't care; I hope to set an example. Just another part of my approach to housekeeping. It's not just the house.

People write books all the time about taking care of our cars, taking care of our own health and emotions, or taking care of our kids, but not about the things we see every day and take for granted, like trees. And I'm not talking about the obvious stuff like watering them, but they like that, too.

The only downside of all this arboreal wonderfulness is the leaves they drop in Autumn. As beautiful as they are—and Fall is my very favorite season—the leaves are a total pain in the arse to pick up. There are SO MANY of them! I have yet to create a truly enjoyable game for picking up every single leaf that these huge trees dump on my lawn. But I'm working on it. If you have any ideas, please send them to me. (My email address is in the Introduction.) I'll put them in the follow-up book that all my fans will be demanding. And I promise to give you credit.

This year I did manage to use a variation of the Divide and Conquer method to make the leaf clean up a little more fun. Once the ash trees had dropped their leaves, I used a blower to move them into three piles, each the size of a loaf of bread for a giant. (Roughly nine or ten feet by four feet wide, and about three feet high. That's a Giant's Loaf, right?) After letting them get very dry and crumpled, made easier by the fact that we had a very dry Autumn, I took the lawn mower (with bag) and chopped up the mounds bit by bit until I filled about four large lawn bags for each pile. The mulching was a great way to whittle down the volume of leaf debris and reduce the bagging as opposed to just stuffing leaves into bags by hand. And it was kind of fun. Not as much as mowing in creative ways, but efficient. It was even more fun when my older daughter, Kait, helped

out (although I don't think she would have used the word, "fun"). After the Maple and Cottonwoods dropped all their leaves a few weeks later, I then ran the mower over the rest of the lawn while Marybeth stood by with bags ready to fill and finished with a very clean yard. Of course, I still had about 32 bags in my driveway by the end of the season. We get a lot of leaves.

But even that eternally tedious and seemingly endless job turned out to be not so bad at all, and took less time than I thought. With a little planning and intentional play, it was quite tolerable. And being outdoors so much during my favorite season of the year helped, too. I do recommend that you pick a day when there's a bit of a breeze, though. It will help keep the leaf dust off of you, and prevent you from looking like you just rode a motorcycle down a dirt road. Behind a truck.

EXERCISE

I can think of a dozen exercises here, including those described in this chapter. But the gist of it is just asking yourself once again how you do this task. How do you feel about mowing? Is it something you approach with disdain or do you actually look forward to it? If it's not a very enjoyable task, how can you make it more so? Consider the ideas suggested in the chapter and come up with some of your own.

If you don't mow your lawn because you don't have one, what other large-scale tasks do you do that take a lot of time and are repetitive? You can apply many of the same principles.

If you don't mow your lawn because you can't be bothered, just give it a try once. The first time it's pretty cool. It's the hundredth time you'll have to work on.

And while you're doing that, look at any trees you may have on your property or that may be nearby. Look carefully, and take the time to understand them more deeply. They are an incredibly important part of this planet, and well worth a few minutes of your consideration. As well as your appreciation.

If you do have trees, take good care of them.

Interlude

I marvel.

I just realized that's what I do, all the time.

I am absolutely amazed and filled with wonder at just about everything. It's both a blessing and a curse, but mostly a blessing. And while it's not naïveté (I've been around too long for that), I am still astounded when people are complete jerks. It just stuns me, because I always expect better and I keep thinking that there can only be a few people out there who are so unhappy that they have to crap on others. I mean, we're talking about everyday people here, not tyrants or despots or unbelievably cruel oppressors. I know about them, but I believe there are only a few real monsters alive at any given point in history. Or at least I hope so. I know that there is plenty of ignorance, and I see the terrible harm that can be caused by it. But other than what we might read in history books and occasionally hear about in the news, the vast majority do not go out of their way to seriously mess up other people's lives.

This kind of optimism does, however, tend to give me a perspective that my wife says transcends the "rose-colored glasses" thing. She

says I have rose-colored corneal implants. But here's the thing: that perspective tends to manifest what it observes. (I won't go into a lecture about Quantum Physics here. I do that in Chapter 13, so you've got THAT for look forward to.) More often than not, I expect a better and more astonishing universe and it tends to be so, more often than not. And I know enough to temper it with just the right amount of sober realism, but not enough to completely destroy it. So it doesn't crush me when people are crabby or mean, but it does surprise me. Every time.

What's important here is that this is something more than just "you see what you want to see". It actually shapes my day, my work, my world and my entire life. I'm not talking about the idea of a well-intentioned universe, but the influence we all have on it. This reminds me of a great quote by Joseph Campbell, a hero of mine: "We can't cure the world of sorrows, but we can choose to live in joy." With regard to my careers and lifestyle, as I look back I see that I have created the work and the life that I wanted most, no matter what was going on around me. In some cases, against all odds, I made a less than pleasant job much more enjoyable and unique because I wanted it to be so. Not all of this was part of a conscious, direct intent, and it sometimes manifested slowly. But I see it now as a consistent influence, and I can track its impact throughout my life.

INTERLUDE

Before I take you on a journey to examine what in my past has shaped me into such a fascinating person, put down the book for a moment. Wait... read the rest of this paragraph and *then* put down the book. (This will serve as the exercise for this section, making me very consistent if nothing else.) Take a moment to think about your general level of optimism vs pessimism. Which are you more of more often? Do people tell you that you are a bright, hopeful, upbeat person, or do they not tell you much of anything because you're so crabby they stay away from you? Seriously, this choice and how often you make it can be the difference between the suggestions and exercises in this book really having a lasting impact or just glancing off your armor. This is like the difference between sarcasm and humor. Sarcasm, as a branch of the larger general field of humor, is really veiled complaining, thinly disguised whining or just another form of backbiting. You can make someone laugh with it, but it's the laughter of shared pain. Yes, it might be good to know that at least someone is sharing it, and it can be somewhat cathartic. But very little. It usually offers no solution, no help, and not a lot of hope. Humor in general is much broader has much greater depth. It demands that one be fully present, and that one make the choice to be uplifting for its own sake, to make a difference in people's lives (and your own), that is positive. To choose to be positive more often is a form of taking responsibility for all your choices, especially your

attitude. This is important for all those other choices you make, as well as the resulting actions. So when you put the book down, spend a little time thinking about what you choose and why you might choose it. And then pick it back up and we can get back to me.

Now, here's the quick rundown of how this principle has threaded its way through my life: It started with my mother frequently leaving me to my own devices with very little structure, to which I responded with what would be best described by the first sentence of this Interlude. I remember being about eight years old and seeing something on TV, I think it was Fireball XL5, and wanting to have a spaceship just like that. (I know, I'm dating myself but I'm a cheap date.) So I pulled a chair up to a blank wall in our dining room, which had wainscoting on the bottom. The dividing line that the chair-board made along the wall was perfect for the outline of a windshield, and after sticking a slingshot and a couple of other console looking objects into the sides of a dining room chair, I spent the next three hours touring the solar system. I did stuff like that a lot, which I'm sure looked completely hilarious because I was essentially staring at a blank wall for three hours. (Years later, you can imagine my total admiration for Captain Kirk's command chair.) As a perk, my parents also found it was useless to punish me by putting me in the corner. I would be too entertained.

INTERLUDE

I could also spend an hour or two as the hero of another favorite show of mine, *Sea Hunt*, scuba diving around the living room looking for danger and adventure. The carpet was blue, so, “ocean”, of course. I imagine my Mom looking around the corner and seeing me struggle in the middle of the floor as my air hose was cut by a bad guy. I’m sure my performance was so good she could see the bubbles, as she picked up the phone to call a professional for help.

In 4th grade I learned to play the guitar, and that was the source of a lot of my later performing. I played every time my parents asked me to, mainly because I was pretty proud of the rousing rendition of *Old MacDonald* I had come up with, and later because I learned the theme song to my favorite TV show: *Fireball XL5*. I sang it at camp one Summer, and the older girls all pretended to swoon when I sang the chorus. Right then and there I became aware of the potential of rock and roll, as it related to the opposite sex. Part of me wanted to think that they actually did like my singing, and my emerging style: nerdy Jewish kid with a decent voice who was always happy. It had its appeal. So, being too dumb and excited to realize that they were making fun of me instead of being embarrassed and slinking back to my grubby cabin in shame, I took it on what I thought was its face value: they loved me. And by the end of camp, they actually did.

After my innocent years of elementary school (I always loved school because it seemed to me that it was all about being curious, which is a close relative of marvel), I had what was an apparently unique experience of high school. I somehow avoided the “cliques” and had friends everywhere. It was both wonderful and challenging, especially when a friend from one social group would be calling me to come join him, and another friend from an “incompatible” group would be calling me at the same time. Sometimes it was difficult to choose where to sit in the lunchroom. But it wasn’t that I consciously tried to make friends everywhere. It was just that I didn’t really get the clique thing at first, so I didn’t comprehend the social divisions right away. When I decided to try out for the swim team (I had bad knees so I couldn’t do Track and Field, my first choice), I didn’t make the “A” Squad. So I hung out with my buddies on the “B” Squad where there was a lot less pressure. It was a lot more fun, too, and because our team was first in State for two years in a row, even being on the “B” squad meant I was a damn good swimmer.

But here’s what I did most: I entertained the team. On the bus rides to swim meets, I would do impressions and act like a preacher doing a fire-and-brimstone sermon. They loved it, and they made me do it almost every time we had to travel. The coach even made me promise to do it before the State meet, just to help everyone relax. This turned

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out to be a kind of a “hinge-point” for the rest of my life – to always be the entertaining inspiration, putting people at ease and gently guiding them to do their best – and it was excellent preparation for becoming a teacher.

In the last years of high school I was in a lot of plays, and played in a rock band, (The State of Mind... yeah, baby!). We were pretty good for a bunch of kids. But the point is, other than the usual dumb stuff any kid at that age will get into, (getting caught smoking behind the school, getting caught taking out a 1925 MG TD that a neighbor was storing in our garage, getting caught trying to sneak into a friend's house late at night in my bathrobe... you know, a lot of getting caught), I generally had a great time, and had managed to make school everything I had hoped it would be.

When choosing a major for college, I knew it had to be teaching – mainly because a couple of my own teachers had literally changed my life. So I started out as an English major. Within two weeks I had tried out for a play, gotten a part, and switched to Theater. Needless to say it was, well, dramatic. My parents weren't exactly thrilled, and I hadn't really thought about exactly where that would take me, but I was determined and very devoted to the craft. And as a result of throwing myself with unflagging enthusiasm into any and everything

that was offered to me - studying with some of the top Mime and Pantomime performers in the world at the Valley Studio in Spring Green, Wisconsin; working and studying ritual and ceremony on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Window Rock, Arizona; travelling to Yugoslavia to study and perform across the country; working with one of the last travelling Marionette performers in the Midwest, Robin Reed; and teaching the first year Acting class when my professor got on his motorcycle and said, "I'm tired of this. You do it." - I had an incredible time. *And it was mostly because I expected to.*

After several more years of performing, teaching, starting my own theater company, moving to Florida, teaching at an Art School, and eventually ending up in Austin, Texas teaching and doing improvisation at a Comedy Club as warm-up for the stand-up comedians, I found I had a growing family and a very unstable income. Fun as it was, it was too scattered, and I was gone too much at night to be with my kids. So when my Dad told me about an opening for someone to teach Presentation Skills at a computer company back home in Minneapolis, I went for it. I spent the next 20 years developing my career in Corporate Training, eventually directing the function for several companies. And guess what? I always ended up entertaining them. One way or another my Theater background always came up and I would be asked to MC at a company event,

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play a character at a Trade Show, create a fake news show for all the employees, (long before another one of my heroes, Jon Stewart, was doing it far more brilliantly on national TV), or something like that.

Here's one example: when I was just out of college and performing with Friends Mime Theater in Milwaukee, I got a job being a Leprechaun at Irish Fest. (Milwaukee did a lot of "Fests", covering all the most popular ethnic groups in town, and they were usually pretty fun.) I wore this huge foam rubber outfit and was kicked in the shins and beat up all day by kids that thought I was just a cartoon character and not a real human. When I was invited back, I agreed only if they would let me play a Spriggin, a character from Irish folklore that guards the Fairy Treasure, and who was a real crank. It was the greatest gig I ever had because I spent the day chasing and yelling at all the kids that beat me up the year before.

So, fast-forward about 10 years or so. I was asked to go to a trade show for the computer company I was then working for, but not as a sales person or an informed representative of the company, but as *Albert Einstein*. Yes, there I was, in full crazy hair and make-up, wandering around the showroom floor, improvising schtick with the all the people there, and gathering more attention than any other booth had ever done at one of these events. In fact, they kicked me

off the floor because I was pulling too much business away from all the other booths. Seriously. And this was in my new life as a Corporate Trainer. It was unreal, and a total blast. But you see the irony, right?

Once again, my innate desire to have fun wherever and whatever I was doing manifested in ways to actually have fun, even in places that were hardly conducive to such playing around. I was fortunate enough, and sometimes driven enough, to create the best possible work conditions a corporate environment could have. And it happened everywhere I worked, through what seemed like no direct action of my own, just my constant mental state of marvel. I regularly marvel at the whole thing as well, which sometimes gives me double the marvel.

I told you the rest of the story in the introduction. And I'm not just trying to list all the cool things I've been fortunate enough to do. What I'm trying to say here is that this was not my doing. At least, not entirely. It was beyond my capacity and vision at the time to directly control or influence the creation of all these wonderful events and experiences, as much as I'd like to take credit. But there was and continues to be this amazing principle at work throughout, and it's just that: amazing. *The more I would have the disposition to find*

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everything that happened to me to be amazing, the more amazing it was. (There's more on this "inverse paranoia" I seem to have developed later in the book.)

I know. . . I was incredibly lucky, too. But it wasn't just a pure, constant luck or I would never have had any disappointments or heartbreaks, and I had plenty. If I was uncommonly lucky I'd probably be rich and famous as well, which I'm not. It was this beautiful gift, which took me years to recognize but that I always had a suspicion of, that is the "flow" of my life. I could trot out all the New Age platitudes and pseudo-science that describes the power of intention and visualization and focused positivism and on and on, but it's a real thing in my life and not something I picked up in a seminar on "The Secret". The honest truth is, a part of me believes that the only reason we haven't lost our house by now is because if this principle at work in my life, continually producing just the resources we need (sometimes at the very last minute), to continue to survive. It's that real to me.

It's what drives all the chapters of this book. It's what drives all of my work. And I believe it's what drives everyone forward, one way or another, either in the face of terrible circumstances or wonderful ones. It is uniquely human, and perhaps an aspect of what we might

call the Divine. I don't think I'm the only one who has noticed this in their lives. Although, I sometimes feel alone in the sheer depth of my feeling about it.

CHAPTER 8

Laundry

All right, back to housework. Laundry is an area that I think is pretty easy, or at least not as hard as some other household jobs. So I will do everything I can to make it as complicated and demanding as possible.

First, to get our laundry downstairs to the washer and dryer, we have one of those cool old laundry chutes. I like to think of it as a Dumb Waiter, except that I can't fit in it. And yes, I tried. The sorting isn't too big of a deal, unless there are some delicate clothes. Then I have to make sure they get into a pile of their own, and try to make a lot of other clothes suddenly fit in to the "delicate" category, even if they're just a little thinner or older. Because if you ever want to get the laundry done, you don't want loads of only three items.

While "darks" are pretty easy to pick out, my wife and I seem to have different ideas about what constitutes "lights". I generally go with whites, light colors and pastels, but she seems to think that anything that's been washed several times can go in with them, even if it's black. Or red. The jury is still out on this one, but I usually do the wash, so I win.

Washing is also not a big deal if you have a decent washer/dryer that doesn't mangle your clothes or leave them still smelling funky. It usually takes me a full day to do the family's wash, going through all the cycles and folding, and I do it every Monday. Some other time I'll tell you about why I do some of the stuff I do on specific days. Let's just say the process I use to determine this is very intellectual and profound.

Just a quick thing about the dryer filter: it took a couple of times before I got the hang of cleaning the filter and throwing away the lint without getting a lung full of the stuff. Like a lot of the other tasks I've talked about here, I've made it a game: I hold my breath. The idea is to take a deep breath, remove the lint from the filter, get to the garbage can, (which for some reason is not near the dryer), dump the lint, and then get the filter back into the dryer before I run out of air. Sometimes you can hear this huge exhale coming from the laundry room, and I guess that could be disconcerting to anyone in earshot. I do the same thing with emptying the vacuum cleaner, only then I'm at the garbage can in our garage and the neighbors or the unsuspecting dog walker will wonder what the hell that loud outpouring of breath is all about. I think it's pretty funny, and sometimes I'll over-exaggerate it just to imagine the reaction of possible passers-by.

LAUNDRY

As for the folding, using the couch in the living room can be extremely efficient, except when I have to clean off the cat hair first because she decided to sleep on that particular couch the night before. Regardless, the living room couch offers plenty of space for each person's categorical stacks—pants, shorts, lounge pants, shirts, sweaters and sweatshirts, sleep shirts, underwear—as well as sheets, pillow cases and towels, both bath and kitchen. It helps to designate a loveseat or chair for the non-clothing items.

Now here's the thing you need to know: I have absolutely no discipline like this anywhere else in my life. When I tell people about this stuff, especially my Brother or Sister, they flat out don't believe me. I don't demonstrate this kind of "intense organization" in any other aspect of my behavior (although I have always enjoyed arranging the bric-a-brac). Housework has opened up a whole new side of my personality, although it's not necessarily one that is endearing. But I hope that by the end of this you'll get why it's more than just being over-organized. Or over-caffeinated.

As far as the actual folding of garments I could write a chapter on each one of the various "fold-types", but I'll settle for a few paragraphs:

THE PANT-CREASE FOLD — Most casual pants arrive to us from Pant Heaven folded with the crease on the outside and inside seams of the legs. This gives the visual impression that you're either a clown or all your pants are Cavalry Pants. In an attempt to get them to look normal, (i.e. the crease in the center of each leg), I fold them that way. Especially for the casual clothes, if you fold them well and put lots of other clothes on top of them while doing the rest of the laundry, you don't have to iron. And it actually works pretty well. At least this is what I tell myself to get out of ironing.

THE TRI-FOLD — This is the fold that you do with shirts where you put the arms back, fold it in half, and make it look the way a department store does. Very neat and presentable. And very adult. Most kid's clothes only need a single, mid-line fold, either forward or back. Hey, they're kids. They don't care. I did experience a recent surprise, however, with the impact of the transition from the one-fold approach to the Tri-Fold. My daughter's clothes are about as big as my wife's now, and just last week I started doing the Tri-Fold with her shirts. It made me verklempt.

THE TOWEL THROW — I do this thing where I fold a towel in half from the top and then throw it in the air and catch it midway for the second fold, and then finish with a third fold if it's big enough.

It looks a bit like a magic trick, which is why I like it. My magician name would be “Andy, the Unnecessarily Fancy”.

THE DREADED CAMISOLE — I hate these things. They’re small, (both my wife’s and my daughter’s), and they have this shelf at the top that I guess veils the boobs, and these thin little straps that always get tangled and twisted. A total pain to fold well, and as such, demanding of extreme precision. I’m not always in the mood.

THE SOCK SORT — I just throw them in a pile and do them all later. It’s kind of like putting a puzzle together, and I’ll even pile them on the dining room table and invite the whole family to solve it yelling, “Hey, everybody... It’s sock matching time!!” It’s usually just me.

You get the idea.

I do have one other little trick that I’m very proud of, and it’s something that no one really knows about or notices, but it’s still cool. I try to do the last things that people put in the laundry first, and then when they are washed and folded they are on the bottom of the stacks and the stuff they wore earlier in the week is on top. That way they don’t have the clothes they just wore yesterday on top and they don’t have to dig for the other clothes that they would probably want to wear

next. It's not a big deal, but it's one of those little touches that make the whole thing a little more than just washing and folding. Having written about it now, I expect it to be appreciated.

As for putting all the beautifully folded garments away, I don't do that. The one thing I ask with regard to this topic is that everyone put their own clothes away. I don't even know where some things go. But I will sometimes put clothes in the appropriate person's bedroom, just to move things along. And get them off the couch. So the cat can sleep there again. (Sigh.)

And, of course, there's another thing to this whole process: Just by folding clothes an opportunity can occur for something very different. (As if what I've described already isn't different enough.) On several occasions I've been going through the pile of clothes, folding and placing the various items in their stacks, and I get to this very quiet state of mind. It's surprisingly calm and centered, and is very still even though I'm moving quite a bit. Somewhere between being kind of spaced out and being very meditative, I am neither numb nor am I overly absorbed in what I'm doing. It's hard to describe, but it's similar to the experience you may have had when doing something you've done many times and don't have to think about much, and you perform the task with a lightness and a simplicity that is very freeing. And as I'm

released from the usual vigilance and concern that goes with doing most jobs well, but still doing an excellent job of it, I get this quiet flow of movement and an unusual sense of emptiness. But it's not at all robotic or zombie like, just peaceful and very fluid. It's a kind of Tai Chi, if you know about that meditative Martial Art, and it can be a genuine relaxing break from the typical experience of doing laundry.

As I mentioned you would in "Before You Begin..." (you read that, right?), just about now you're probably thinking, "This guy thinks way too much about nothing!" While I believe I effectively argued against that notion, the point here is that this experience, which I've had quite often, is noteworthy for the very reason that it's not about thinking at all. It is the opposite, almost completely sans-thought. We don't often get very many moments when we're not thinking about something, usually to the extent that we either get worried or start to stress out in other ways about whatever we're imagining.

Consider this: There are many forms of meditation and focused attention that train people to do just that, stop thinking, at least the way we usually do. Many people will regularly take medications or recreational chemicals in an effort to numb or inebriate their thinking and/or worrying thoughts. And our own biology demands that we sleep each night and shut down our thinking minds for

several hours. Why? Is thinking wrong or harmful in some way? Yes, so stop it.

Actually, there's some interesting research on that. And even though it doesn't have anything to do with laundry, I'm going to tell you about it because I led myself here and I'm going to get myself out, damn it!

Many psychologists have written about the ceaseless chatter or "self talk" that fills most people's heads, and how harmful it can become if it is overly directed toward self-evaluation, self-comparison, self-criticism, commenting on everything we see and do. As Peter Russel says in *Waking Up in Time*, "It is the voice that speculates on the future... It wonders what other people are thinking and how they might react... It wonders what might happen to the economy, to our partner, to our lifestyle... It is the voice of fear."

This is the ego-mind, which really isn't an entity unto itself but just a collection of repetitive thought patterns and beliefs that we take to be "us". This part of us believes that what happens to us from the outside, in the world around us, is what determines our own happiness. And that is a mistaken notion. As long as we rely on the outside world to create our happiness or misery, we'll often get what we don't want.

We will almost always be lacking in happiness, time, peace and all the things we want most because they cannot be delivered consistently by the things and people around us. But it's a strong belief system held by many, driven by our culture. We all know the old saying, "money can't buy happiness", but we act as if it can, more often than not.

This is why I'm actually not a proponent of "Positive Thinking" any more than "Negative Thinking", even though many of you might think that's what this book is all about. I am a champion of making choices, and making informed, discriminating and healthy ones as often as we can.

It's not about a forced positivity or a repressed negativity, but paying attention to what you do, what you choose to display to others and what you choose to tell yourself. The question here is, how often is your internal chatter worrisome or automatically negative?

EXERCISE

This is a task that everyone should have some feelings about, whether good or bad. It has to be done, and it's usually done weekly or thereabouts. So how do you feel about it? I think most people just regard it as a necessary evil, something that must be done and doesn't deserve much more attention than that to take care of it. But that's just what the chapter is about: how can you make this particularly mundane task more fun and more interesting?

That's the question you should ask yourself, and it's more important here than most other chapters, just because usually doing the laundry is completely the opposite of "fun" or "interesting". Can you use music or anything else to make it rhythmic or artistic in some other way? What are your techniques or "Personal Folds"?

And if you find yourself asking, "Why should I do that?!?", it's the perfect opportunity to examine your attitude and approach to a lot of things you may do around the house that may be far less enjoyable, skillful, playful and just plain fun than they could be. Why not choose to have more fun?

LAUNDRY

One thing you should consider: you're *much* more attractive if you're having fun. Really.

Finally, consider the possibility that these kinds of tasks offer the opportunity to turn off the “self-talk”, the ceaseless chatter that comments on everything but offers nothing as far as wisdom, solace or joy. If you would consider it, then do it. The next time you're engaged in a task like folding laundry, let the repetition free your mind from the wandering inner blabber, and seek a quieter, more flowing state in which you can be fully present, perform the task at hand, and enjoy the peace. It's a pretty great feeling.

CHAPTER 9
Manhood

I fully realize that for some the idea of Housebandry carries with it a threat of emasculation. (I'm willing to bet some of you are picturing me swinging my vacuum while dressed in neatly creased slacks, a crisp button down shirt and a bowtie, all topped by a lacey apron.) For me, however, the emasculation threat is an empty one, for two reasons: 1) I am very comfortable with my masculinity; and 2) my Bar Mitzvah presents made me so mad I decided never to be a man.

Number 1 is self-explanatory, but number 2 may require some elaboration. I'll break it down into categories, starting with the Bar Mitzvah experience itself.

NOT BECOMING A MAN

I was Mitzvahed in 1967. I had the typical 13-year-old Bar Mitzvah of the time, at least one that you would get from a Conservative synagogue in Minneapolis. Basically, I was required to recite some prayers and read a portion of the Torah (the Jewish bible) in Hebrew. And that was it – completing those steps made me a man in the eyes of God and the congregation. (Of

course, I was a 13-year-old man, so I still needed a ride home at the end of it.)

Unfortunately, this whole process held very little meaning and value for me, because of the way we learned the required Hebrew. I was taught phonetically, so I never really got the translation part of it. That meant that I could read any Hebrew you put in front of me, but I never understood what I was saying. And as weird as that sounds, it was common. I was then trained to go through the motions of the Bar Mitzvah process in much the same way I had learned Hebrew: without much real understanding of why I was doing what I was doing. This didn't matter to the Rabbi, my parents, or any other attendees—as long as I looked like I knew what I was doing, that was good enough for them.

So I recited the prayers, read from the Torah, and did as I had been instructed. In fact, I had been taught how to say and sing the whole thing by way of a hi-fi record. Yes, a vinyl LP recording of exactly how the songs were to be sung. So, with sheer rote memorization, I got it down and the ceremony went like the well-oiled machine it was designed to be. I had a lovely voice and sang it all beautifully. When I got to the end, everyone was smiling. I had no clue what I'd done, but I made my Mom and Dad proud and that was all that mattered.

Later that night, when there were what seemed to be about 3000 people crammed into my house, I started receiving gifts. They were all traditional, in that they were just what people like my relatives and friends should have given to a “Bar Mitzvah”, i.e., a 13-year-old man (who can’t drive). And that’s why it was so aggravating. I want to note that my reaction to said gifts was, by no means, a result of people being intentionally malicious, nor was it about me being ungrateful. Well, not entirely ungrateful, anyway. I have always appreciated the gesture and the thoughtfulness, and really did feel that many people were very generous. It was the gifts themselves that got to me.

- A leather-bound dictionary with my name engraved on the cover.
- A pen and mechanical pencil set with real wood on the sides.
- A desk set with a blotter, pencil holder, in-box and paper clip tray, all covered in leather.
- A crystal paperweight, with leather on the bottom.
- A set of leather coasters. For real. Apparently, leather was the symbol of manhood. I was surprised I didn’t get a loincloth.

It was stunning. I mean, some of the stuff was very nice, but it was all Man Crap. And what was with the desk set? I was barely

old enough to have a paper-route, let alone a desk job. But here I was with all this office paraphernalia, which came across as a not-so-subtle signal that I would no longer be playing with “silly kid stuff”. Or ever have fun again. Even the gifts of cash - which held some promise because I thought I could actually buy what I wanted – were devalued by my mother. She suggested I use the money to buy some slacks. SLACKS!

And so, I threw a Mantrum.

When the gift-giving was done and over, I remember sitting in my room all by myself, (none of my friends had been invited to the party, as was also tradition of the time), and thinking, “From this day forward I refuse to be a man!!” And I made good on that. For the next, oh, 50 years I became quite accomplished at dodging what most people would call manhood.

On the surface, I did all the things that men of my generation were expected to do: finished school, got a degree, got a job, married a woman, had some kids, paid the bills, presented myself well, and cleaned up real nice. But the reality was that it was all an act, a performance to present myself as fulfilling the expectations of society, which is what I thought it was all about, especially early on.

The fact is, I was always just a little skewed from the stereotype and what was then defined as the “norm”. Yes, I went to school, but I got a degree in Theater, which damn near gave my father, (a lawyer), a heart attack. And yes, I married a woman, but we got divorced years later. And yes, I had some kids, but I did not raise them with what would be called conventional parenting. With my children I’ve always been a lot goofier than most other adults. That’s because I had promised to never be one, and I was true to my word.

NOT BEING MECHANICAL

What this has meant to my life has been interesting. One of the side effects of my refusal to become a man was an attraction to the arts – a place where I could be an adult, but still play. In junior high, I befriended a bunch of guys who eventually became my band-mates. We called ourselves “The State of Mind”. We played at all the school dances and other venues around town, from about 7th grade through high school graduation. We had long hair, listened to a very eclectic selection of music, and generally were the coolest kids around. As far as we were concerned. Actually, we were pretty level headed. But the arts were always a part of my life, even though my parents weren’t particularly artsy at all.

Between the band and my emerging interest and involvement in theater, I had a lot of fun in high school. But I never thought of

myself as being in any way macho. Not effeminate either, but not a “Man’s Man”. And there were others that clearly thought I was in the “questionable camp”, to the extent that once, while I was standing on a street corner, a guy driving by in his pickup truck yelled, “Get a haircut, Faggot!!” I had heard of that kind of thing happening back in the 60’s, but this was 1978. It seemed so retro. Of course, wearing Mime makeup, tight pants and a leotard didn’t help. (By the way, after seeing an old picture of me in my Mime outfit, Marybeth said I looked a helluva lot like Paul Stanley from KISS. Unfortunately, she’s right.)

NOT BEING INTO SPORTS

I’ve never been a huge fan of any particular sport. I love to see a football or a baseball game as much as any other guy. But for me, once or twice a year will do it. It just doesn’t move me, at least not to the degree that it does other men I’ve met. The time some spend on memorizing names, numbers, stats and salaries is astonishing to me. And it’s another source of odd looks when I clearly don’t have a clue what they’re talking about. The irony is that I was actually a pretty good athlete when I was on the high school swim team, and for many years afterward I studied several types of physical training and the physiology behind them. I typically know more about the human body than the average guy. But this is no exaggeration: on the

few occasions when I've told guys that I just don't follow sports at all, I've gotten a look that my friend, Rusty, calls "The Full Martian Treatment". It's a weird feeling, knowing that we might have had some other things in common but we'll never know, because the conversation ended when I couldn't 'man up' and talk sports. I guess I'm just a Man Club reject.

NOT BEING GAY

Throughout my adult life I've often experienced what I think a lot of gay men go through, though to a much lesser degree: being hassled, looked at sideways, getting the eye-roll and the confused stares when I would not really be amused after being told a sophomoric dirty joke in the men's room. The fact that I laughed at these jokes at all reveals my own insecurity and self-doubt, which compelled me to act like I thought the jokes *were* funny. I didn't have the courage to say otherwise. I regret that, especially when it was just plain offensive. But when it came from someone that had a position of authority—which had this element of "testing" me to see if I "fit in"—I just didn't know how to handle it. I do now.

I've also had the experience of guys telling me how messed up being gay is, and watching their faces change when they saw that I didn't feel the same way. A bigot is a bigot, and being smart, artistic or a

little more observant are not guarantees of gayness. I would consider them admirable qualities. It has always troubled me, that kind of isolation and abuse, and I have a lot of compassion for those that endure it. I feel the same way about women who are treated badly by sexist and abusive men.

My wife and I were good friends for two years before we actually started dating. Unbeknownst to me, she thought I was gay. She was recovering from her second divorce and she loved hanging out with me, just talking and telling me stories of the men she had dated/married over the years. She felt very safe with me. I'm a good listener, I'm funny, and I'm sensitive. And it's kind of sad that those qualities made her think I was gay—that they're not a part of male behavior in general. When she said she just wanted to find a nice guy who wasn't interested only in sex, I said, "What am I, chopped liver?" She freaked out. She said, "Really? **I thought you were gay! REALLY?!?**" It was a little disconcerting that it took so much to convince her otherwise. I also had to clarify that I *was* interested in sex.

So the whole manhood thing has partially eluded me and partially been a source of fascination and struggle over the years. One of the questions I've always been working out one way or another is "What does it mean to be a man?" Is it any less "manly" to care deeply

about what my mate might really need at any point in time? I learned from my first marriage that it was a lot harder than I thought, and it took more consistent, thoughtful work to maintain the health of that kind of relationship. Is it any less manly to easily express strong emotions without some kind of shame or embarrassment? My kids would be the first to say that I have no trouble with this. In fact, they think it's pretty entertaining when I openly cry at commercials. I'm a sap. But I don't care, and in fact, I love it. The stoic, non-feeling uber-male is an old stereotype, but I still don't see a lot of men showing emotion freely, other than anger. No problem with that one.

As it happens, I actually know someone who is angry all the time. Seriously, ALL THE TIME. He's like a Louis Black that never stops performing. But it's not a show, it's who he is, and it's not far from what I see in a lot of guys. The "Aggravated Man" is an icon of my generation and the one before it, and it's pretty rampant today as well. Now, I can be as cranky as the next guy, and I can get a good whine going, too. But I like to think that it's not my general modus operandi, and that I get past it quickly.

NOT BEING THE PROVIDER

Not being gainfully employed is another source of "Questionable Manhood". Being out of work sometimes creates the same kind of

awkwardness in conversations as does my sports ineptitude. I think people are just not sure what to say when I tell them that I haven't worked in my field for two years, even though I usually follow that with the fact that I love being at home. There's almost a sympathetic response, as if my masculinity is in hospice and will soon be gone. I can most certainly work, and I've done several odd jobs recently, some of which I even got paid for. But there is sometimes a real and palpable tension when talking with other guys about it. I should say here that there are also some really great guys I've met who are genuinely caring, sympathetic, compassionate, and supportive. But not a lot. And those four adjectives are not typically associated with what most people would describe as "maleness".

Here's what this all means to me: I define manhood differently, and much less narrowly. I marvel at how men and women can have both male and female qualities, having sensibilities that are on both sides of what seem to be polar opposites. In fact, it's my belief that true mental and emotional health is based on a balance of the two in everyone. (Unfortunately, I think women are often rewarded for incorporating masculine qualities into their behavior, but not vice versa.) This is not original thinking, and any psychologist worth his psalt will say the same with regard to the integration of the psyche. The most fascinating thing of all is how we blend these

two aspects of ourselves in so many different ways. But the key is the blending, much like my ideas about work and play. They are not opposites, but two sides of a coin, in this case the coin being humanity itself. Yes, biologically we have two sexes. But to express one or the other exclusively is to not truly understand either. Other than basic procreation, it's the only reason we mate with anyone: to deeply and profoundly acknowledge, apprehend and appreciate the other person. If you care enough, anyway.

I don't have a lot of close friends, and almost all are either my wife's friends or my buddies that I've known since high school. I think women are generally more fun to hang out with. I'm like Paul Rudd in "I Love You, Man", serving Mimosas at his fiancé's dinner party. And then going back into the kitchen to clean up.

I'll take it. I really like who I am, and I like the solitude as much as any socialization. We need both, and if being the way I am is different than the standard male or somehow off-putting at Men Only watering holes, so be it. It has it's own Badge of Honor.

EXERCISE(S)

This is heavier stuff. So I guess the first question would be, “How do you feel about your sexuality?” And as much as that may be a loaded question, that would be where you need to start with the ideas presented in this chapter. While this is a very sensitive and powerful topic today, that only makes it all the more important to sort out your feelings and thoughts. Especially if you have children, because you’re going to have to explain those thoughts and feelings to them if you care at all about what you pass on.

To continue along this line then, other important questions with regard to the overall context of the book would be:

- How do your ideas and feelings about masculinity or femininity impact your behavior around the house?
- What are your thoughts about rites of passage, such as the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation, and the like? Do you know the history of such rites, what they are for and that they are a part of every religion and culture?

MANHOOD

- What is the connection for you between sexuality and responsibility to the family? Are the roles clearly defined and set in stone in your mind or are they flexible? Why?
- What exactly are your feelings and thoughts (and they are usually differentiated), about homosexuality? What informs your thinking and generates your feelings? This is a complex and deep subject, and usually carries a lot of baggage. Sorting it out and really clarifying your position allows you to know that it is just that – informed and well thought out without being automatic or self-justifying. We all want to know what we're talking about, right?

CHAPTER 10

*Critter Control and Contracting
with Hornets*

Hornets are welchers. They can't be relied on to keep their end of a bargain. Maybe it's because they don't really understand much of anything outside of their Hornet Universe. But I thought I could make a deal with them and that they would get it. I still do. This is another one of those things that I haven't been able to demonstrate or prove yet, but I will. I'm pretty sure.

Last Summer, some hornets decided to set up shop just above the upper left corner of our back door. It seemed a little too close for comfort to me, so I had a long discussion with them. I outlined a contract in which they had to promise not to bother or sting anyone in our family, in return for which I would not destroy the nest. And they held up their end of the bargain. For real. Two other nests appeared on either side of the garage under the soffits, and I made the same agreement with them. I was confident that they heard about the arrangement with the other hornets and decided it was a decent deal. So I left all three nests alone, and there were no incidents at all. None. I thought this was pretty remarkable, since the ones by

the garage got fairly large... at least a foot across. The nest by the back door stayed small since it was in a corner and there wasn't much space to expand, with the door constantly opening. But that's just it: there were people going in and out of that door all Summer, and each time it opened it came up against the nest. To my amazement and satisfaction, there were no incidents.

Then it all changed. When the next Summer came around the hornets were back, but this time they seemed, well, different. I didn't get the same cooperative vibe from them as the crew from the previous year, and the other nests by the garage didn't appear at all. It was like there was a new element that moved into the neighborhood, a bad element, and everyone knew it. They built the nest above the door again, and I offered to renew the contract. I thought we had an understanding. But they were aggressive, and decided to build this nest bigger and better than the last year, and whenever the door opened it squeezed the nest.

Then, one day, when Alex's friend, Sarah, went through the door, they broke their end of the bargain and stung her on the hand. When I went out to check on Sarah, several of the "Thug Hornets" got agitated and came after me, too. I ran a distance away, and hollered to them that our contract was now null and void. They didn't seem

to care. That evening I sprayed the nest, and I said out loud so all the other insects could hear, “This is what happens when you break contracts!” I felt sad, but I knew I had done the right thing, for my family and for all human/insect interactions. It was only justice, after all, and I was the one who had to dish it out. I don’t think they’ll ever forget...

Well, actually, they’re all dead.

There’s another critter in our home that cannot be trusted: the Cat. I’ve caught her many times on the kitchen counter (forbidden), on our dining room table (also forbidden), and sharpening her claws on our furniture (outright prohibited). And even with my most powerful (or just loud) attempts at discipline, she continues to claw our family room couch and chair. They look like crap now. And yes, we could have had her de-clawed, but Marybeth thinks that would be cruel. I can think of a lot worse things, and when I catch the cat doing any of the above-mentioned verboten activities, I think of several.

I really don’t hate the cat, she’s just annoying. She sleeps all day (I don’t believe the “myth” that cats are nocturnal... this one is just lazy), occasionally eats until she pukes (almost always on the one small Persian rug instead of the vast expanse of bare wood floor), and

deposits her little “Kill Gifts” on the front doorstep, usually right before we have guests coming over. Delightful. But most annoying of all is the hair. Seriously. This cat sheds 24/7/365. No matter what the season, she drops fur just like Sylvester from the Looney Tunes cartoon, when he sees the “giant mouse” (that’s actually a baby kangaroo), and turns white and all his hair falls out at once. It’s everywhere, and sometimes it’s the sole deposit on the broom when I’m sweeping up. We don’t have Dust Bunnies, we have Hair Bunnies, and they’re a far more sinister kind of bunny. There’s always one lurking somewhere, and I can spot them from across the room, usually because I think it has just moved of its own volition.

She will also sleep on the couch in the living room, just to leave a puddle of hair in the shape of a curled-up-cat for me to kvetch about as I reach for the Dust Buster. We had to put a special blanket on the back of the couch on the porch because in a matter of days the couch would be completely covered with hair, looking like it was made out of the stuff. This is why the cat is the nemesis of the housekeeper. Arch Nemesis.

And there’s more: waking us at 5:00 am by biting Marybeth’s head because she thinks we should be up; jumping on the bathroom sink and meowing until someone finally comes and turns the water on,

very slowly, so she can have a drink (Marybeth's fault); walking around the house just yowling for no apparent reason; etc. And don't get me started on the litter box.

Other animals that require management:

BUNNIES - They're dumb as little fuzzy bricks, and the Cat loves to catch them if she can. Typically, she can only get the babies, which is really horrifying, especially when friends with children come by for a visit and upon arriving at our door they are greeted by a baby bunny without a head. This Summer a Mom bunny decided to dig a hole in the middle of the yard and have her baby bunnies in it. Right in the middle of the yard, with complete disregard for the fact that there's a Cat out there every day, staring at her with "Lunch" in its eyes. The Mom was as big as the Cat, so our not-so-fierce yard-guarding Cat wasn't about to go after that big of an animal. But the babies...

I noticed the Mom digging, and a couple of days later I found these three tiny little babies tucked into a hole that was only about four inches deep. I spent a few days debating about moving them to prevent the inevitable carnage, but she finally wised up and moved them herself. I had talked to her about it several times from a distance, and I know she could hear me, so I guess she listened. Of course, the Cat still got one of the babies as soon as they were out and about. Dumb.

BIRDS – Along with our bird feeder, we also have a little cage thing that we put suet and nuts into for the woodpeckers. Not because we're trying to attract woodpeckers, but rather we're trying to keep them from putting holes in our wood siding. We have several, holes I mean, and one just big enough that some Blackbirds recently decided to finish the job and make a nest in the wall above our bedroom window. At first we thought it was pretty cool, but then we thought about what was probably going on in there, and realized it was not so cool. Plus, it became another obnoxious, early morning wake up call from an animal that was completely oblivious to how wrong it was to be awake at 5 am on a Sunday morning. Moral: keep an eye on birds.

SQUIRRELS – While on the one hand I'm really very grateful to have any animals at all so close by, on the other hand they can be just enough of a pest to make you consider selling pelts at the local trading post. (Kidding. Mostly.) With squirrels, you can only have an uneasy agreement at best. I talked with several in our yard about not eating all the birdseed, since it's not all that cheap and they can be total gluttons. Then I had to demonstrate how intolerant I was of being ignored, which was, of course, their first response. Every time I saw them on the bird feeder I would run outside and make my angry squirrel noise, you know, the one that sounds like Donald Duck with asthma. Every once in a while, I'd actually yell at them in Human just to show them

I meant business. And for a while they would avoid the feeder and be content to eat the spillage that was all over the ground just below it. But not for long.

Breaking our contract, AGAIN, they came in the early morning and emptied the entire feeder. I put a squirrel-proof barrier on the top of the feeder, and they just jumped onto the lower part of it from the side of the tree. Little Evil Knievels. As I write this I'm trying to figure out where I can place the feeder so it's too far out for them to jump to and has too long of a wire to climb down. Seems like an awful lot of work to manage a Tree Rat.

CHIPMUNKS — Now these guys are pretty entertaining, mostly because they annoy and tease the Cat. We call it Chippertainment, and our local celebrity is Chipford J. Chipperton, aka “Chippy”. He will sit at the corner of the house, just outside one of our drainpipes, and yell at her. He does this “chip” sound over and over and will sometimes carry on for an hour. The Cat gets completely perturbed, and it's great. She knows that if she goes after him, he'll scoot into the drainpipe and she'll never get him out. And he's patient enough that if she just sits outside the pipe and waits, he'll wait, too. And she'll give up. And then he'll sneak out, stand on his haunches, and chip at her again. It's very much like this video, (starting at 0:35), which we think is hilarious:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB7n6IbGivA&feature=related>

Chippy would also get into the garage, find the bag of birdseed, crawl inside it and proceed to chow down. When someone would walk in he would get so panicked he'd get trapped in there. It was pretty funny to see his little head banging into the sides of the bag trying to get out. He'd eventually make it out just fine, but with a flourish of chirping and squeaking noises. I talk to him, too, but mostly just to thank him for all the Chippertainment.

So other than a couple of bothersome creatures (and I won't get into any insects), it really isn't so bad. But it does take further management, and adds to the list of jobs in and around the house. If I had patches for all these jobs, like a Boy Scout, this one would be "Yard Wrangler".

EXERCISE

The real question here is, “Do you interact at all with the wildlife in your yard or around your house or apartment?”

If you don’t, then never mind.

If you do, there are some things you can work on. Start by answering some of these questions for yourself:

What are your general thoughts about these animals? Do you think much about them at all or do you do things to encourage their presence? (Bird baths, bird feeders, salt licks for deer, etc.) Either way, it can be helpful to be clear as to why you feel and think the way you do. So go deeper and see if you can figure out why you have so little interest or go out of your way for the creatures around you.

How do you feel about “pests” that may challenge your efforts to maintain flowers or a garden or a nice lawn? Do you feel that you must get rid of them? And if so, why? How do you handle that? The issue here is whether your actions are just convenient, done out of habit or they have been well thought out and do less damage than is necessary. This can also help clarify some of your thoughts on life in general.

How do you handle insects both in and outside your house? What bugs creep you out the most and which ones don't bother you at all? Have you ever figured out why? If you use pesticides, are they potentially harmful to other animals, or even your family? What are some alternatives?

CHAPTER II

The Other Days

At the risk of turning this memoir into a confessional, it's important to share a bit about the darker side of being out of work. So far I've only written about how happy I am. But I'm sure you don't believe that my life is a big bed of roses. I don't even think that would be a very comfortable bed. I do think, however, that a lot of people can relate to things like the continual rejection of being turned down for work, even when you get to the rare, actual interview. So, I will offer some balance. For those of you who are struggling to stay joyful in this kind of a tough situation, I hope you will find some solace, or at the very least, a sense that someone else gets what you might be going through. (As for the rest of you — the perfectly happy people - you can leave the room for the duration.)

The challenges of dealing with some of the harsher realities are very real, and I want to acknowledge them. Toward that end I will offer some ideas about a possible Action Plan at the end of this chapter. Since it has been suggested that I write a blog, this is my trial run. (That word really bugs me, though. When someone says, "I have a blog", it sounds like they have an obstruction in their intestines

or something.) I just want this to be more than a self-indulgent diatribe, and by the end of this book you'll see how following my sage advice and admittedly quirky example can literally change your life. It did mine.

But as far as the Dark Stuff itself goes, I'll start with a couple of the biggest difficulties that I have had to deal with, and how I got past them.

UNCERTAINTY

As you can imagine, applying for work and being rejected for two years straight has been a bit unnerving. Actually, it's been more along the lines of soul crushing. Especially so since I taught Interviewing Skills for 15 years and I *know* that I am a good interviewee. I can totally understand why so many people have just dropped out of the job market altogether. The continual blows to one's self confidence get harder and harder to bounce back from, and for some people I know it becomes intolerable. Either you end up getting angry and just throwing in the towel, (which often makes you feel even more humiliated and conscience-stricken), or you can get genuinely, clinically depressed. I've skirted both, and sometimes lingered too long in each. There were mornings when I really struggled to get out of bed, and when I did I spent the better part of the day obsessing

about not working and all the possible horrific outcomes. I've been very fortunate to have a wonderful wife and family who have played a big part in helping me get through it. It makes all the difference in the world, at the end of a rough day, to be able to say to Marybeth that I didn't handle it well, and then work through my negative thoughts and feelings, sorting out my fears and identifying what I could do to be productive and not paralyzed. I can't imagine how much harder it would be if I was alone, and I can't recommend enough that you lean on your family or friends if you need to. You'd do it for them, right?

How I've managed to climb out of those holes also has a lot to do with what I've written in this book and why I wrote it. Uncertainty and its effects are related to the concepts in the Managing Change segment of my chapter on "Time". Part of the difficulty in dealing with such unpredictability is that we think we should be able to control it better, or that if we were somehow "better", we could make things happen more smoothly. While this logic is clearly flawed, we stubbornly maintain a sense that we have or should have more control over things than we really do.

Where does that come from? I suspect it's mostly our upbringing and education in a culture of "can do" and misguided individualism that seems to imply we should be able to do anything. In fact, we

often hear that phrase with regard to kids and their futures: “You can do anything”. It may be true to some degree, and I’m a firm believer in potential only being limited by the imagination. But that’s just it—our imagination *is* limited, by the guidance we are given about our options, being told what’s “realistic” or not, the punishments and rewards we receive and our resulting beliefs. There are limitations outside of us, too, and real life has a way of providing lots of roadblocks for our aspirations to greatness.

The key is in how we respond to all that. There is no doubt that continual repudiation and dismissal of our skills would eventually get to anyone. But there is something here that we have difficulty applying in these situations, even though it’s what we want and need the most: *humor*.

Humor is an incredibly powerful tool for dealing with change, working through stress, building relationships, leading others and a dozen other critically important abilities most adults need on a regular basis. And I’m not talking about just laughing off the pain or telling jokes to “lighten up”. I’m getting at the mechanism of humor itself—what makes a joke work in the first place and why we laugh.

The way that a joke works is by surprise. If you are told a joke that makes too much sense, that's too logical and linear, it won't be funny. "Two guys are walking down the street, and they see a street sign." (Rim shot.) It's not funny, and the reason it's not funny is because it's too obvious, it's just what you'd expect, and there's no surprise. A great joke is one in which you don't see the punch line coming. People will sit for twenty minutes while a great comedian will go through a story joke, because they know the punch line will be worth it. And "punch line" is the perfect phrase. What gets punched is your expectation, the probable ending that logic dictates would make sense. But that's just what would make it unfunny, get it? It's all about the surprise, and the bigger the surprise the more we love it. Even the way people describe the experience of hearing a great joke is revealing, saying it was like having the rug pulled out from under them, or things like, "I did NOT expect that!" or "THAT came out of left field!"

So here's the million-dollar question: Why don't we laugh at the daily surprises in our lives?

We have a scale of response to events that surprise us. On one end is laughter and on the other end are tears. Most surprises fall somewhere in between, and we are either mildly amused or just aggravated. All responses on the scale are reactions to things not

going the way we planned, or the way we thought they should go. What's the connection? *We actually want and need some things in our lives to be unpredictable.* Who would want to go on a roller coaster that's flat? Who would want every day to be exactly the same? And you know it's not a good thing in the hospital when the line on the EKG monitor is flat. And yet, a lot of our behaviors and reactions to the universe doing its thing are the opposite. We rail at unexpected changes and freak out over the events that "inconvenience" us.

So here's what you need to do: the next time something happens that is not on your agenda, see if you can discover how it's funny. If you get a flat tire on your way home, would you get the joke? Probably not, but that's exactly what needs to be done to make the healthier choice and become more flexible in your life. Think of it as a kind of training. The more you can do this, the less infuriated you'll get when things don't go your way. This doesn't mean that you can't ever get angry or upset, but it does mean that you don't react automatically on the "tears" end of the scale when the unexpected occurs. The more you practice this, the greater the likelihood that you will see the funny faster, and move toward the "laughter" end of the scale sooner.

This is really powerful stuff, combining a greater understanding of the role that surprise plays in your life and a healthy dose of

self-examination in your reaction to it. Both will pay off big time if you really try this. I'd love nothing better than to pull over to help someone who is changing a tire, only to find him laughing hysterically. Though, I would probably approach him slowly.

BOREDOM

One of the other challenges of being home all the time, and not having something to do every second, is boredom. Now, you can get bored anywhere, anytime. But I've always believed it's a choice. We decide not to be fascinated. We decide what is boring and when to be bored, and it changes almost every day. So given that this is a choice we make, the question is: why would we choose it?

What's interesting is that under normal circumstances we usually won't. Most people are compelled to be "doing" something all the time. We learned in school that being busy is good, and not being busy is bad. "Idle hands" and all that. We also learned that not being busy might very well mean that you are doing something unproductive like playing, and we all know that's not good either (NOT!). Perhaps it's the combination of escalating insecurity, a sense of "uselessness", and the feeling that being out of work means there's nothing worth doing at all which prompts us to more often choose a crippling boredom. Without the momentum of a daily structure we start to feel like the

gravity in our specific vicinity is increasing and it gets harder to move or be moved. It's also a variant of feeling just plain lazy, which really isn't a bad choice in the short-term, but it's not the greatest lifestyle.

I've already written in other chapters about play, so I'm not going to repeat it. But there is an element of play - or at least an exercise of our imagination - that is the quintessential cure for boredom: curiosity.

The people I've considered to be the best teachers in my lifetime are those that encouraged and nurtured an environment of curiosity. When we are curious, there is no room for boredom. Even if we get bored with what we were first curious about, we move quickly to the next thing to be curious about. I've found that if I make even the slightest effort to maintain a state of curiosity I can fend off boredom every time. Honestly, I very rarely get bored. And, like everything I'm challenging you to try in this book (other than understanding the true nature of Time, Space and all Reality), it's easier than you might think.

Being curious is to be easily fascinated. For some reason, either by virtue of genetics or because I think about this stuff a lot, I'm good at it. I think others could do it *almost* as well if they would just try to look around them more often with "fresh eyes"—that innocent, child-like

quality of being amazed with just about everything. This is similar to the “marveling” that I described in the Interlude, but it’s more than just awe. Curiosity urges us to take the next step to exploration and investigation, which often leads to experimentation, which suddenly bears no resemblance to boredom whatsoever. It is one of the best ways to learn anything, since it brings along its own motivation and it’s usually the reason we are inspired to learn something in the first place.

But how to trigger curiosity when you’re in the midst of a serious, full-on bore? People will often say, “I’m bored!” with such exasperation that they seem helpless, completely at the mercy of some kind of trap from which they cannot free themselves. While very dramatic (and as such not boring at all), it also has this “I’m not responsible for my own emotions or state of being, so entertain me” thing to it. I hear them really saying, “Do something!!” And the funny thing is that’s just what I would say to them.

One ‘something’ they could do is to look around with the eyes of a child. Have you ever observed kid in a grocery store who is being ignored by their shopping-absorbed parent? It’s really great entertainment. Any little thing that pops into their head, any music that might be playing, any colorful display can set them off. I’ve watched kids dance fiercely to music that is playing only in their

heads, and it's hilarious. I once heard the phrase, "music in your heart can be heard by the universe." I believe it. I believe other people can hear it, too.

This is actually a very interesting and compelling principle, and one that we see demonstrated every day. Again, Matt Weinstein comes to mind. He once told me of a friend of his, Jack Canfield (Chicken Soup for the Soul, etc.), who said babies are "inverse paranoids"—they believe the world is ultimately out to do them *good*, and this is what attracts us to them. Whenever a baby is brought into a room, all eyes go to that baby. I believe this is a very real force, a form of gravity itself, which pulls us toward them and anyone else who is manifesting this kind of joy. (Richard Buckminster Fuller once said, "Love is metaphysical gravity.") When we are near someone like this, we describe them as being "warm", or that they have a "warm personality", and it creates a kind of attraction. I think kids generate this kind of gravity a lot. Of course, they can be obnoxious too, but so can I.

There is very little in this world that is not a source of fascination for a child. And, while most adults will smile and shake their heads with seeming admiration, they would never consider that state of mind to be something useful—an incredibly powerful tool for inquiry and continued growth, let alone a happy escape route from boredom. It's

just too easy to be bored, sometimes even oddly cozy in its laziness.

So with very little effort, you can always pull yourself out of boredom. You are not a victim of some kind of a suffocating, lead-lined Boredom Blanket. You choose, and you can just as quickly go with “What’s that?!” as you can with “What should I dooooo?” (whiney voice) It’s usually a matter of thinking about something other than only ourselves. And once again, it’s a kind of play.

THE ACTION PLAN

Since I’ve given tips on ways to clean the house, do the laundry, use the dishwasher, deal with backyard critters and many other things, I’d like to offer a loose plan for dealing with those times when you don’t feel like doing these things with joy and playfulness, and when you’re headed toward serious worry and anxiety. This is the stuff I do, with variations and combinations, but it works. I’m living proof. I’m not on medication and I’m not drunk. At the moment. They do require that you *try* them, though. Experiment with them and do so with no particular expectation, as good experimenters do. Just give them a go, and see what happens. I’d love to hear about it, too.

The next time you find yourself heading into a downward spiral, use these tools:

HUMOR – The most powerful and easiest one of all. Try to get the joke of what's going on around you. It may feel like it's a practical joke that's meant to be hurtful, but it's not. There's no one laughing at you, unless they're watching you be crabby way longer than you should be. It's just a surprise. Be surprised, and laugh.

CONTROL – Let go. I know you may have heard this before but one of the best things you can do is really sort out what you have control over and what you don't. I have to continually remind myself of this stuff, and it does make a difference. It can move you from sitting around worrying about the things you can't do anything about, to getting up and taking care of the things you can. The best use of this tool is to completely let go and free yourself of any tension, regret or guilt associated with whatever it is you want to control but can't. It takes practice, but it's well worth the effort.

CHILD EYES – Use them. Just close your eyes and then open them up again as if you just woke up. And you will. You'll wake up from the dream that you were bored or trapped or can't get out of your funk. Find something to look at and think about, or pick up something and examine it like you've never seen it before. Find the quirk in things that don't seem to have any. Be quirky yourself. Everyone loves a good quirk as long as you don't get too weird. Wait... on second

thought, go ahead and get weird. Even if you don't find something amazing, you'll feel just goofy enough to laugh and snap out of it. The bottom line is, if you look for the wonderful, you will find it.

GET UP – Sometimes the momentum of no momentum is cumulative. Just sitting, and especially sitting and worrying, can build to a crushing weight. Get up, move somewhere, take a walk, swing your arms, play some music... anything physical and different can help break the cycle. Even housework.

REMEMBER: You Choose. Like stress it's not coming from outside you. You decide what's boring, what's cool, what's stressful and what's relaxing. Anything can be anything. Really.

CHAPTER 12

Snow

I live in Minnesota. That's probably all I have to say. A lot of people that don't live in this part of the country think we get a ridiculous amount of snow every year, and it starts in September and doesn't thaw out until June. This is just not true. It starts in October and ends in May.

It's funny what people imagine Minnesota to be like, never having been here. I remember once meeting someone in Florida and they said, "Where are you from?" and I said, "Minnesota" and they said, "Oh, so you live on a farm." I'm sure I would fall prey to such speculation if I hadn't gotten around to most of the country. But I have, either through work or just travelling. I love to travel, and I wish I could do it more. Having been to every state except Alaska, and having lived in Minnesota, Wisconsin, New York, Florida and Texas, I think I've had a good sampling of what our beautiful country has to offer.

I moved back to Minneapolis about 20 years ago, partially because I grew up here and much of my family is here, and partially because

I got my first corporate job here. But the reason I'm still here now is because I love the seasons.

Spring and Fall are spectacular here, and Summer is especially beautiful because of all the lakes. Our license plates say "Land of 10,000 Lakes", but there are actually more than 15,000. It's a very unique area, and I love all of the Midwest. Even on the hottest days of Summer most nights are cool, an experience I did not have in Florida or Texas. And the colors of Fall are not unlike the incredible leaf fireworks the Northeastern states are renowned for. Spring has this great urgency to it, as if to say, "QUICK!! We've only got a couple of months to grow before it's cold again!!" And it's true.

And then there is Winter. I have an on-again off-again love affair with it. The first snow is amazingly beautiful to me, every time. And each winter varies from the last. Some Winters we get several feet of snow and it comes early, in others we actually get very little snow and it's not as cold. There's just enough variety to make it interesting and unique each year. But by March I'm really ready to be done with it. If we still have snow by the end of March I've pretty much lost my "WTF" – Winter Tolerance Factor, not the other WTF – but it becomes more like the other one if we still have snow at the end of April.

The cold is another thing. It can be harsh, but it's usually not what some people think: that it's 50 degrees below zero the whole season. That only lasts for a week or two. Ok, maybe a month. In mid-January or early February we often get slammed by some really cold weather, and with wind chills it can get as low as 60 below. Flesh freezes instantly and we get warnings to not go outside for anything. People ask me why I don't want to be in a warmer climate, and I tell them I've lived there. And while I like the South very much, it can get as extremely hot there as it gets extremely cold here. The cold you can dress for. When it's hot you can only take off so many clothes without getting arrested. The really frigid temperatures here are short lived, anyway, and there's something cool about getting such incredibly cold weather. (No pun intended.) I actually like to go out when it's at its coldest, just to feel it.

When my daughter Alex was little, just before bed on what seemed likely to be the coldest night of the year, I would carry her outside in her underwear. I'd tell her to really feel the intense coldness for just a few seconds, and try to remember it on the hottest Summer day. And then I'd lock her out there until she understood what I meant. No, not really—we'd only be out there for about 5 seconds, but it was really fun. For me. Now that she's 10 she won't do it anymore, but I thought it was a neat idea. And in the middle of Summer I would

remind her of it, usually when we'd be sitting in the sun and it would be 100 degrees. Yes, it gets that hot here.

But all of this romantic, pastoral imagery and groundbreaking parenting is just my lead-in to the housekeeping part: shoveling. If you don't have a snow blower, and we don't, it's an art form all its own. We have a two-car garage and our driveway is about 15 feet wide by 45 feet long, with a sidewalk that runs in front of our house for about 30 feet. If we get any kind of a substantial snowfall, it's a lot of snow to move. And I usually do it all. I'll get the occasional help from Marybeth and Alex, but not often. That's because I have to do it before they're ready to go in the morning (and if I don't we won't be going anywhere), in the middle of the day when no one is home, or in the evening when no one wants to go out there. Sometimes it has to be done multiple times because it's going to snow for two days straight and it's dumping 2 to 4 inches every few hours.

So the procedure is usually based on the amount of snow we're getting and how cold it is. If it's falling fast and furious and it's going to be doing that for a long time, I usually go out there at least twice so that it's a lighter job. Even though I'm doing it two times, it's not as bad as it would be to do it once with 8 inches or more of the stuff. And if it's warmer, the snow is wetter and heavier. That

can make a serious difference. It's like trying to shovel a bucket of water. When it's colder the snow is much lighter. Except for the cold, (which can really get to you), it's an amazingly easy job no matter how much snow there is, because it's a lot fluffier. But don't get the idea that it's cute.

We have five shovels: "Larry", a standard size with a metal strip at the bottom for scraping ice (18 inches across); "Moe", a larger and actually lighter one (26 inches across); and "Curly", a large metal one that is really just a giant plow-shovel with little wheels (30 inches across). We also have "Bob", a general utility shovel (13 inches across) and "Gary", a spade (pointy). If you count our garden trowels, "Fred" and "George", we have 7. You name your shovels, too, right? Everyone in Minnesota does. The Winters here are long.

Anyway, we're fairly well prepared for any kind of shoveling. For the snow I generally prefer Moe, and Marybeth or Alex will use Larry when they're helping. The methods of shoveling can vary greatly, and with so many Minnesotans engaged in this ritual over the entire Winter there's a lot of opinions as to what's the best methodology. Mine is the best. I know this for one very good reason: I'm the only guy in the Midwest that actually has fun doing it. Most of the time, anyway.

Now, to have fun with an activity that for many is about as fun as breaking rocks, you have to do two things. One is to develop a pattern that works best for you and your driveway, and the other is to figure out a way to make it as enjoyable as possible. Both can be a little demanding, but worth the effort.

Because our driveway is flat, and longer than it is wide, the pattern that works for me is fairly simple. Facing the street, I go down the left side (because our picket fence runs along it), and shovel a straight line to the street. That allows me to stand on clean cement while I shovel from left to right, starting at the back of the driveway and working all the way down to the street. It takes about 20 swipes across. It's a little slow, but it works beautifully because I end up with a just-full shovel at the right side of the driveway, and I can gently lift it up and dump in onto our yard. If you're wondering why I don't just shovel in long lines from the garage to the street, it's something only a seasoned snow-shoveler would know. It isn't faster or more efficient, because you will either have snow spilling over the top and sides of the shovel all along the way, or you'll have to scoop and throw it to the side of the driveway about 30 times as you make your way to the street. When I shovel from side to side it's only 15 feet, and I can get to the end with minimal spillage. Even if you weren't wondering about this, now you know.

So after figuring out what was the most efficient and least exhausting pattern, it was then just a matter of what I could do to make it more fun. This ended up being very similar to mopping, sweeping, or vacuuming. I just do it with as much grace and flow as I can possibly muster, and without looking too much like Fred Astaire dancing with the coat rack. And it actually is fun. As a bonus, it also helps fend off the cold.

I know that for a lot of people, having to shovel snow every Winter is just vexing. I love that word. And what I'm trying to describe here is another way to become unvexed, or vex-free. This is my job as I see it, my goal in life, and shoveling is just another vehicle for becoming completely vexless. The only thing that might keep me from achieving this is when I just finish up with my little Shovel Show and the city plow comes along and leaves a huge pile of snow at the end of the driveway. Usually with some boulders of ice included. (sigh) This is the equivalent of shoveling the entire sidewalk when the avalanche-that's-been-waiting-to-happen on my roof decides to cut loose and bury all my work. And me. That happens, too. I'm still working on the vexlessness.

One thing that's actually a big risk with regard to shoveling (other than the genuine potential for heart attack), is the possibility of back

injury, which can occur when you overdo it or when you're just too stubborn to slow down and do it carefully. Almost everyone I see shoveling after a storm is pretty stressed out, both with the amount of work that has to be done and the time it will take to do it. So they often go with the Fast and Furious method, which ends up saving neither time nor their backs. I know a lot of people, including family and friends, who report a wide variety of injuries, aches, and pains sustained from shoveling like whirling dervishes. Another reason for slowing down, lifting properly, (bend the knees), and having fun: I never get hurt, and rarely get sore. And that's actually a big thing if you consider how much weight I move over the months of Winter each year. Stretching out beforehand is a good idea, too. I've thought of offering Snow Yoga classes, but I don't think Minnesotans are quite ready for that yet. We've just got to naming our shovels.

As Winter fades, we get these really interesting shapes made by the bigger piles of snow that are the last to melt. They often get this covering of dirt from car exhaust and dust, as well as the dirt that makes up much of the snow itself, and it has a very unusual sort of a shadow effect. Once the ground is showing again, some of these remaining mounds, especially if there are several together, look like the Standing Stones of Europe. Whenever I see them I think, "Cool... Snowhenge!" I don't think anyone else thinks that, and in

SNOW

fact every year people comment on how ugly the dirty snow piles look before they're all gone. I think it's a lot more fun to see them as mysterious ancient structures than dirt balls. But that's just me.

UPDATE:

I just got back from taking my daughter and her friend, Lindsay, to school. We have 4 inches of snow on the ground, and we're supposed to get as much as 14 by tomorrow. There was a big van that slid off the road into a ditch, and the highway that I cross on the way to the school was a parking lot. The snow is very wet and very heavy. And it's April 21st. WTF?!?

I still love it here.

EXERCISE

You're probably thinking that if you shovel snow that *is* the "exercise". The trouble here is that if you don't live in a climate where you ever get any snow, there isn't much I can suggest to work on in this field of endeavor.

There are, however, some principles mentioned in this chapter that have applications to other areas of activity. Like the chapter on mowing, I'm encouraging you to make those tasks that are particularly time consuming, repetitive and labor intensive more fun than they usually are. How? If you read these chapters you have some suggestions already. Here are some more:

The next time you have to do one of these bigger tasks, change the way you prepare. Make it more like someone preparing for a performance, or for a sporting event, or for an activity that requires special equipment (scuba diving, astronaut, etc.) You can even give the equipment names. Put a little pep in the prep and you can improve the chances that you'll have more fun with the task.

Play. Make some kind of a game out of the task, any way you can. The main thing is to take the time, which should only be a minute or so, to exercise your creativity and invent *something different* in the way

SNOW

you do this task. It doesn't have to be a big deal and it doesn't have to be a transformation of the whole process. Start with just a piece of it and you'll find it can make a big difference in the way you feel about and perform that task. Remember: boredom is a choice. Why would you choose it?

CHAPTER 13

Time

In chapters 1 and 7 I mentioned some things about time. And now I'm going to elaborate. (This is where I get to show off how deep I really am. And I should warn you: this chapter and the next wax some serious philosophical.)

I believe that much, if not all, of what many people consider to be “stress” in their lives has to do with a mistaken understanding of time. There are a few fundamental issues that I want to address here as far as what we have forced time to become in our lives, and in our culture.

STRESS

Stress is not evil and it is not “out there”. Those are easy mythologies that sell pills, exercise and diet programs and fuel much of the advertising industry. They are marketing ploys to sell us stuff, and they are lies. Most of the true stress of our lives is necessary to live: the stress of your heart pumping, your lungs breathing, your intestines... intestining. And there are other forms of stress that we experience as part of life that we couldn't grow without, such as the

stress of reaching for a goal or meeting a challenge. What most of us think of when we say the word “stress” is really emotion-based, resulting in the physiological tension that causes our bodies to react and, in the long run, breakdown.

Now I’m not going to get too far into this whole thing because it could be a book in itself (and there are way too many out there already). But to really understand time you have to get some clarity in the way you think about it, and how you react to those thoughts. Here’s the most important thing you can ever know about stress: *you make it*. No external event of any kind is in itself “stressful”. We decide what’s what, and that’s the crucial part. Think of going on a really big roller coaster ride. Does that sound like fun to you? For some people it doesn’t. The very same experience can elicit excitement and joy in one person and abject terror in another. But it’s not the roller coaster, it’s the rider. For the purpose of sounding like this book is extremely well written I’ll repeat the observation from Chapter 6: it’s not the job, it’s the “jobee”.

QUALITY TIME

In the same way, it’s not time that we have too little of, that is too fleeting, or that never has enough quality to it... it’s the “timee”. (O.K., I’ll stop with the made-up labels.) It’s you, and how you

understand and decide to respond to these events that occur every moment. **This is really important so I hope you're not skipping ahead**, at least not if you want to have more fun doing the most mundane things in your life, experience more joy in general, and live a happier and healthier life. (I hereby claim that all of those benefits will accrue to anyone employing the tactics outlined in this book. Anyone who genuinely attempts to do so will not find mundane tasks to be drudgery, will not have more misery in general, and will not live a crappier life. I'm working with my Lawyer on this.)

"Quality Time" occurs when you pay attention and you are fully present, it's not something you have to try to create by some kind of special activity, going to some special place or blocking out some time in your Day Planner. It can happen any time, anywhere, and for as long as you want it to. But you have to make the conscious effort to do it. That's where it gets tricky, because most people want to make it about all those "things" outside of us that distract us and pull us away from what we really want most... to really be here, now.

We've made time out to be an enemy that changes everything and takes everything from us, preventing us from deeply enjoying the separate moments of our lives. For the most part, the influence of time that we perceive is the unstoppable disintegration of our bodies. Time

is not something to fight or control. It is part of the very fabric of our existence, and being stressed about it is unbelievably counterproductive. It's like hating the fact that we have to breathe to be alive.

TIME MANAGEMENT

The very notion of managing time is hilarious to me. HILARIOUS! When I was in charge of Training and Development departments, I once fell prey to the idea that a class on traditional Time Management techniques would be a good thing. But I quickly wised up, and ended up teaching the kind of stuff I'm writing about here. Yes, it's important to have and use tools to manage complex projects large and small, but I'm not talking about the obvious need for good planning in appropriate circumstances. What I'm getting at is the fact that most planning doesn't work out anyway, at least not exactly as planned. There's too much "real life" that nudges even the best-laid plans into slightly (or completely) different outcomes. A battle plan is valid only until the first shot is fired. Any Project Manager understands that. Remember the old joke about how to make God laugh? Tell God your plans.

MULTI-TASKING

We have this notion today that multi-tasking is a really great skill that should be applied as often and as universally as possible.

But multi-tasking is deemed to be admirable far more often than it should be. While it may be useful in some situations, it's quite harmful in others.

For instance, I see people exercising all the time—walking, jogging, running, biking, etc.—and they are often listening to music or talking on the phone or talking very intensely to someone with whom they're exercising. It's not that they're doing something terrible or wrong... there's certainly nothing wrong with listening to music you love while doing some tasks. But listening to music while trying to study for an exam is impossible for some people. And when exercising, they are curtailing the effectiveness of the very intention of what they got dressed up and came outside to do: to exercise and to be outside. A divided focus is a diminished focus.

This is an example of the down side of multi-tasking. It has been demonstrated that exercising while distracted weakens the effectiveness and the benefit of the exercise, because you're not paying attention. Anytime your attention is divided, either because your focus is spread over two or three different things or you're just completely distracted altogether, your efforts suffer for it. The whole reason for the popularity of Yoga is that it is *mindful* exercise, timed with breathing and one's full attention on the muscles being

stretched. There is even a whole branch of meditation that has come to be called, “Mindfulness”, although it is now an often-misused term.

Have you ever talked to someone on the phone who is at work and continues typing the email or document they were working on just before you called? They’re not listening very attentively, and if what you have to say is important you’ll have to say, “Stop typing”, or they won’t. Hear you, I mean. And I can’t imagine that the email is going to come out all that great, either. (One exception: my wife. She’s *fabulous* at this.)

We call this doing things half-assed, and everyone knows what that means, as well as why it’s not a good thing. But it amazes me how often people do it and in how many different circumstances. Don’t, or at least try not to do it so often. This is the very reason that some people struggle with quality time, because they’re too used to dividing their attention. Many things deserve your attention, your full attention, and only a very few deserve half of it.

Now this isn’t just me ranting (although I am). I’m supported by famous people who share this notion. So there. A while back, Time magazine ran a story about Suze Orman, in which she condemned

multitasking: *“I think it’s the absolute ruination of the perfection of a project,”* she says. *“The people who multitask do everything to mediocrity at best. While they are getting a lot done, they are getting it done in such an inefficient way that they usually have to do it again.”*

~ Claudia Wallis and Sonja Steptoe, Sunday, Jan. 08, 2006. The full article is here:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1147162,00.html#ixzz2Bl6NBDnY>

MANAGING CHANGE

More accurately stated as “Controlling Change”, managing change is another hilarious concept. The only thing we can depend on, with a 100% guarantee, is that things will change. But for a wide variety of reasons—most taught to us by our culture and education system—we do our utmost to hold fast to things as they are. Understandably, we like the things we’re familiar with. It’s the source of most of our comfort. But since the only truly predictable and dependable event in the universe is unpredictable change, shouldn’t we be developing a better ability to handle it well?

Ironically, the only way I know how to deal more comfortably with change is to take an Improvisation class from a good, knowledgeable

teacher who knows how to create a safe environment for beginners. The study and practice of improvisation is not necessarily about performing, unless you consider your life a type of Performance Art. (Which I do.) Improvisation is the primary change-adaptive skill demonstrated by professionals and lay people alike on a daily basis. *We improvise our lives.* For all of our calendars and timepieces and scheduled activities, we are really at the mercy of whatever is going to unfold on any given day. But that's not a bad thing, and we are not helpless.

In *The Silent Pulse*, George Leonard writes: "*In terms of game theory, we might say the universe is so constituted as to maximize the play. The best games are not those in which all goes smoothly and steadily toward a certain conclusion, but those in which the outcome is always in doubt. . . the geometry of life is designed to keep us at the point of maximum tension, between certainty and uncertainty, order and chaos. . . We really wouldn't want it any other way.*"

While some consider tension and the forces of change in general to be a frightening proposal, carrying with it the implication that everything that happens to us is wildly out of our control (which it is), I'm suggesting that we can choose to work *with* it. . . surf the waves of change as they occur, if you will, rather than try to swim against the current. It's more than just a *laissez-faire* "going with the

flow” kind of a thing. It requires a focus that is as much intuitive as it is informed by all of our experience and knowledge. We can live our lives to expect and even welcome change, which we know will come, rather than regard it with fear or aversion. It’s planning for the unplanned, managing the unmanageable, playing an unknown game. This is Tai Chi-ing our lives, it’s Shifu finding inner peace by flowing with the movement of that dew drop, the drop itself dictating the perfect response.

A very good friend of mine, Ron Lybeck, put it this way:

“It occurs to me that play is challenging, literally and figuratively, the normally perceived “order” of the day. Re-ordering and re-valuing through a sensibility not grounded in logic or reason. Not devoid of them entirely, but not the locus of inquiry. Which presents ambiguity as part of the medium of play.”

Isn’t he a smart-ass? Still, it’s beautifully said. And that’s the magic of play: it’s ability to work with and give shape to the unpredictable, it’s very medium ambiguity, and, interestingly enough, that what generates the fun at the same time.

Let me push even deeper into what we’re really talking about here. (As if you could stop me at this point...)

From The Time Management Workshop, by Patricia Haddock:

“Traditional techniques usually offer a left-brain, logical, linear approach to getting things done. They emphasize creating and maintaining order and controlling time. Time, however, cannot be controlled. Time flows, and in order to become more productive, you have to learn how to flow with it.”

I would even go so far as to say that time doesn't even flow. We perceive time as a flow or a progression, but some of the best minds in theoretical physics, medicine and philosophy agree that time is a principally subjective psychological phenomena, not the objectively “real”, directional progression we believe we experience. This has been a struggle for me to really grasp and understand, but it is at the heart of being fully, deeply present and the central concept behind all the things I've been talking about in this book. It's like the difference between *knowing* that the sun doesn't go around the earth, and really *believing* it. Our eyes tell us otherwise, and every day, as we experience the sunrise and the sunset, we mark the progress of our lives with another day completed.

Eckhart Tolle probably does the best job of describing the power of being fully immersed in the present moment, but the gist of it is that this focus of our attention is critically important to the very thing we want most in our lives: happiness. Our efforts to manage and control

time will never be successful, and will always be an illusion. Clocks are like thermometers, in that they measure without valuation: where does “warm” begin? “Cold”? As Einstein would say, it’s relative. The artificial, arbitrary calibration of our timepieces is the same thing, measuring time’s effects as we perceive them but telling us nothing about time itself.

Again, I know this is hard to get. We see the passage of the seasons and the relentless progress of the years, watch ourselves and our loved ones age and die, and it’s very difficult to leave this seemingly solid and confirmed reality behind. But the truth, as described by both students of modern Theoretical Physics and by age-old philosophers alike, is that it belies our perception of temporal reality. What we perceive as time is the interaction of quantum mechanics and conscious observation. *“We, the conscious entities, are like time’s zippers: our minds pulling together the future’s infinite possibilities into yesterday’s secured past.”* (Evan Harris Walker).

I told you this was going to get heavy.

But this is neither wool-gathering nor future-dread. I’m not talking about what my sister often does, suffering for an imagined future that hasn’t and won’t necessarily materialize. Rather, I advocate that

we convert fear of future uncertainty to anticipation of novelty and new opportunity; become active participants in the process of change. Play. We make choices, every second, but most are unconscious, influenced by countless experiences, environments, beliefs. We can consciously choose to be more awake, and deeply connect with the flow of everything.

Is that possible? Yes.

Is it hard to do? It takes practice, but it's not hard.

Will there be a test? No. Only the judgement of how much joy there is in your life.

Part of this is the principle I describe in the Interlude, of holding a vision or an emotional structure so passionately that it tends to manifest itself in your "reality". There's a lot being said about the subject of reality these days, and some of the most interesting stuff is coming from a traditionally non-spiritual/philosophical source: Science. To make a long story short, consciousness itself is now considered the fundamental basis of reality. No sub-atomic particles, no little marbles flying around in an atom, only consciousness. The implications should be clear. And while I certainly did not have any control or focused intent to shape the reality of my life, we all do it. But to a much greater degree than most people think. Quantum physicists are literally saying

that what we call matter doesn't manifest until we observe or measure it. It's pure potential, a "probability function" as they would describe it. And only when we attach our consciousness to it does it collapse into what we call reality. Cool, huh?

So what?

This is what: it means that we have far more power and responsibility than we thought, and we can make the conscious choice to participate at a level limited only by our imagination. This demands, however, that we be fully present, more often, and purposefully choosing to participate in the creation of the endless moment, leveraging your imagination to create more joy, not less.

Some would even say that you don't have to "do" anything, just get to the place where this all happens. Some would call it Zen. Some would call it God. The point is to get there.

Remember the seminal 1971 book on spirituality, Yoga and meditation, *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass, a.k.a. Dr. Richard Alpert? Maybe not, and maybe I'm just dating myself again, but for a few years it was everywhere, and it had a very subtle but deep effect on me. The book was sidelined as just a part of the late Hippie movement

and marginalized in its importance by much of the general public. In many ways it was ahead of its time (no pun intended), and ever since there has been a steady stream of similar books such as *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle; *Quantum Medicine*, by Deepok Chopra; *Seeing Through Your Illusions*, by Paul Chivington, *The Physics of Consciousness*, by Evan Harris Walker, and many others. While some of these authors are often grouped into the “New Age” category, there is real science here. Written, in some cases, brilliantly (and especially for the newbie), they discuss how the universe works and the limitations of the ways we perceive it.

There is also renewed discussion in the scientific community about the very nature of time and space and how they, as separate entities, fit (or don't) into the overall structure of the Universe. It's really great stuff. (*Unified Reality Theory*, by Steven Kaufman, *The Elegant Universe*, by Brian Greene, and just about any book by Dr. Amrit Goswami are good places to start.) I can't encourage you enough to check some of this out, although I'm trying. Do it. It's worth the time. (HA!)

TIME

EXERCISE

Other than reading some of the books mentioned in the last chapter, the real work to be done is on the way you think about time.

Using the chapter segments as focus points, you can do some of the following things:

STRESS

Do you agree that most forms of stress , if not all, come from inside you and the choices you make about your response to your environment? If you do, work on catching yourself in a response you really don't want. There are tons of resources for relieving stress, but it's usually stuff like, "shake your arms", or "take deep breaths". Not a lot will focus on how you got those tight muscles or shortness of breath in the first place. Practice not responding automatically with tension to those things that don't require it, or at least letting go of that tension more quickly. Pay attention to the tendency to hold tension in your jaw, neck, shoulders, and stomach. And the biggest reliever of stress is also the secret to quality time: *remaining fully present*. Practice that.

QUALITY TIME

Do you feel like you never have enough quality time with your

husband, wife, partner, children, or friends? What can you do to focus more on the present moment when you are with them? Your undivided attention is the key, and not allowing any distractions to pull you away would also be helpful. Make arrangements not to be interrupted for as much as your time with them as possible.

MULTI-TASKING

Don't do it, or at least don't make it a habit. It should only be done rarely, when it would be most beneficial to do multiple things at once, which is just about never. Don't let circumstances lead you to believe you can get more done if you multi-task. It will be done poorly, and consider the time it will take to correct or redo half-focused work.

TIME MANAGEMENT

No such thing. Calendars and Day Planners can be helpful, but be prepared to change things a lot.

MANAGING CHANGE

This is a big one, and there are lots of things you can do as well as lots of time you could spend on it. It all depends on how you manage the changes in your life in the first place. Short of getting therapy, you will need to do things like pay close attention to your reactions to sudden changes and surprises. Are they novel or aggravating? How often are

they the latter? Can you see the joke in the surprise endings? Work on seeing the humor instead of the disaster. And don't hold on to your plans too tightly. Easier said than done, so make the effort to practice if you want to get better at this..

For large-scale changes (moving, new job, loss of job, getting married, having a baby, etc.), the effects are slower and run deeper. Invite others to tell you when you don't seem to be handling things so well or are displaying more anger than usual. You can monitor these things yourself, but long-term changes are more subtle as they progress and for some the end result is a sudden breakdown, even though it's been building for a long time. Talk with people you trust and explore any fears or struggles.

The more you work through your ability to deal with change, the more you'll see that you already handle many things pretty well. So another approach to this is to examine why you deal with some things well and others not so well.

CHAPTER 14

The Fountain

So we end up here, at my fountain.

This is the place where everything I've written about came together and crystallized in a way I never expected. And I didn't even try to make it happen. Here, the map illustrating the terrain of all the varied aspects of my efforts to make my life an art form point to an "X" that marks the spot. And on that spot the topography simplifies into one thing: a fountain.

I have always dreamed of living in a wooded area with a creek or a stream running through the property, the water tumbling over some rocks right outside my bedroom window. The sound of gently falling water has always been very beautiful to me, and very centering. (As long as it doesn't sound like someone going pee.)

Since that doesn't naturally occur on my property, I decided I would build a fountain in my yard. This is actually part of my Neo-Pagan/ Universalist/ Wiccan sensibility. For those of you who might care at all about that sort of thing, it was a way of embodying one of the four

elements that I wanted to give expression to in my yard. I had Earth - our flower and vegetable gardens; Air - expressed, well, everywhere, but especially by big, open areas; Fire - a pit that I built myself in our first year here; and now it was time for the Water element. I had a fountain liner and a pump because I had wanted to do something like this for years but never got the gumption. This year, inspiration struck in the form of a sinkhole, and I got the gumption.

We've had the sinkhole in our backyard for a few years. It was a an ever-widening hole that seemed to be slowly sucking up the entire yard, and even after two years of filling it with rock, gravel, grade 5 soil, and sod, it still kept sinking. Where all that stuff disappeared to is completely mystifying. It had a creepy, "This house was built over an ancient graveyard!" feel to it. And my wife was thoroughly convinced that it was going to swallow our cat. One can only wish.

So I decided to turn it into a fountain. I filled the hole one last time, dug out the overall shape I had envisioned, and put the liner over it. Then I filled the liner with decorative gravel and river rock, and adorned the edges with larger rocks that I found around the house. (We had a line of large rocks edging three sides of the house, and now we have a line of large rocks edging two sides of the house.) And finally, I got some even bigger rocks from "some places" (that's as much

THE FOUNTAIN

as you need to know...), and used them to build a three-foot mound. Then I ran a tube from the pump to the top of the rock mound. The water cascades over some beautiful Purple Creek River Rock I found at a landscape place, fills a little pool and then trickles into a larger pool (the now cleverly disguised sink hole). It ended up being about 12 feet long and has a figure eight shape. It was all done in about three days, and it turned out pretty damn good. I'll put a picture of it on the back inside book cover flap. You know, where they usually say stuff like, "Andy Weisberg lives with his family in beautiful Cumberbun Meadow, overlooking the rolling hills of Shavorford, Vermont, with his ever-loyal Shetland Labrador Terrier Spaniel, Gary."

One of the coolest things about the fountain is that it's an ongoing project, or more like a perpetual sculpture. Almost every day I futz with it, arranging the rocks on the bottom, adjusting a rock on the mound, altering the way the water comes out of the tube and over the rocks at the top. It's really a lot of fun, and I could continue to play with it for a very long time. I have yet to experience the coming of Winter and what will have to be done to protect it for next year, but I look forward to it. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do without it, though. Marybeth will probably find me sitting wistfully in front of the bathtub with the water running, although that would probably sound a lot like someone going pee.

But beyond having something to fiddle with, the fountain has taken on another, far more interesting role in my daily routine: it has become the linchpin, the center, the very heart of my life at the moment. A Fountain of Happiness, if you will. I know that may sound like a bit much, but it has become this safe, peaceful, sort of holy place, and summarizes all that taking care of my house has become for me. While everything I've written so far has to do with my experiences over the years and the resulting thoughts and feelings, this fountain thing is something new. It's a kind of a culmination of all my other efforts, and an arrival at a new way of being. I have had experiences at the fountain that perfectly capture both the overall spirit of this book and the ideas described in the chapter on time. I have gone from simply being "out of work guy who is extraordinarily happy more often than he should be" to something much deeper, much more transforming and, I hope, permanent.

Now, this is hard for me. I've never been challenged to clearly identify and describe my feelings in such detail before, but it's essential at this point. This piece of the story has become the most important one, with the housework itself and the way I do it ushering it in. And it's difficult to tell it without either getting overly gushy or sounding like a brochure for some kind of a religious cult. I'm not pushing anything, just making an attempt to explain and share my experience.

And this has happened gently, without warning, quietly. It's nothing less than a true revelation, but even that word brings with it a kind of baggage for some. It was an awakening to a more full awareness, and has provided a bridge to a way of being, the foundation of which can only be described as pure bliss. There's no getting around talking like this because this is how it felt, and I'm still trying to fully understand it. So forgive me for sounding like a guru or a New Age motivational speaker. This is real, and I know it happened as a natural evolution of the way I do and think about things.

It was a gradual transition—probably taking my entire life to be honest—but accelerated by the writing of this book and by a more concerted effort to live the way I have always felt was more “in the groove”. I have also been trying harder to understand exactly what that means, and to get to a place where all the talk of reverie, joy, and bliss actually exists, and stay there more consistently. I believe now that it's everywhere, and even perhaps the true nature of existence itself. I mean it. And the fountain brought me there.

So here's what happened: As the Summer went on, I would sit next to the fountain more and more, on the edge of our old hammock, and just listen. I would close my eyes and just be there, and if I opened them I would often find a finch or a robin sitting right at the end of

the hammock, or taking a bath in the fountain, completely unafraid of me sitting less than a foot away. (St. Francis of Assisi would be so proud...)

Simply sitting there, I would soon feel deeply centered and quiet, but at the same time more expansive, in a way I had always hoped I could experience when I investigated meditation. If you have also struggled with the meditation thing, you should know that it's much simpler than the details of any philosophy that you might be ascribing to or any technique you may be trying to perfect. It's just being *completely present*, and staying there. When you can hold onto that fully mindful presence, which does take practice, it can create an opening to an experience that is challenging to describe but has a very real depth and power. The easiest way to say it is "uplifting", but it's more than that. More like rapture, without all the requirements of an Apocalypse. I would say ecstasy, but that brings images of looking like I'm having an orgasm, and the neighbors would have been dragging their kids inside their houses if that were case. It's actually much quieter, much simpler. All the glory and wonder of it is in complete stillness. The closest thing I've seen that captures the experience in a tangible way is "The Overview Effect", a cognitive shift described by Edgar Mitchell and several other astronauts upon seeing the earth from space for the first time. (Check out <http://vimeo.com/55073825>)

It may sound like I'm exaggerating, but on some occasions I have truly had an incredibly powerful experience there. The impression I often get, and use as a guide to get back to this state of awareness, is a feeling something like the entire world imploding to the center of my heart, and then exploding again with an outpouring of what I can only describe as the purest love. (For a visual, remember the Death Star exploding apart with that cool shockwave ring in Star Wars? That's close.)

As part of this experience I would often feel a direct connection with all things, everything, in as much as my imagination could grasp that concept. I know, that language is annoying. But it really happens, almost every time now, if I can just hang out there for a little while. It is the epitome of what I had always hoped to achieve with Yoga, Martial Arts, philosophy, and various spiritual teachings. And while I have a small library full of unusual books with lofty subjects, this is the real, direct experience of what they all strive to communicate.

Sometimes it's so profound I can't help but weep, and I get the feeling that if I were to sustain this state of awareness, completely immersed in the incredible blessing of my life in this universe and the bottomless gratitude that goes with it, I would cry continuously. Hysterically, uncontrollably, joyfully. And as utterly happy as I

would be, I'd probably be difficult to be around, so I'm just shooting for having a constant grin on my face. I hope I don't get punched.

For me, this experience is like the ultimate act of prayer, or perhaps the true meaning of grace. It is the center of sacredness and the Holy of Holies. And it usually lasts for no more than a few moments because I start to think of these kinds of descriptions instead of remaining there. But it's enough.

It's enough to hold me until the next time. And I hope I'll get better and better at just being there, staying there, and becoming that. Because I know that's what I am.

As cryptic as that might be I can't say it any other way. Like I said, this is hard for me. The feeling is so powerful and fleeting that it defies capture, resists the net of definition. But I know it now. And I can feel this state of awareness as it approaches and sense its impending envelopment. And I cherish it.

Sometimes I would be in the middle of this full-on bliss and I would catch a whiff of melancholy. Opening my eyes I would think of people in general, all of us, and our inherent sadness. We are made of memory, inexorably caught up in our past – either nostalgically

or painfully — and constantly worried about our future. But we're rarely where we really are: in the present. And it's all because we think too much. When I was able to close my eyes again and stop the rumination, I found I could get back to it again, that infinite and personal center of time. I know someday I'll hold it constantly.

The fountain, then, represents a literal dream come true. Something I made myself, and continue to make and refine, it is somehow the centerpiece of all that I have worked for. This is art, as I know it. And my life seems like one big sculpture in the making, filled with the deepest gratitude I can possibly feel.

I once studied an obscure healing technique in Japan, and the primary teaching was simply "to be absolutely grateful, for all things, morning 'till night." Try really doing that, with intention and discipline. When you stray from being totally immersed in gratefulness, do what you can to come right back to it. The more you do it, the closer you'll get to the experience described above. It's not New Age (the concept is ancient), and it's not over-simplification (really try it—you'll see how hard it is to sustain it for more than a minute). It is the most direct and simple way to the greatest joy I've had since the first time I fell in love, and I sincerely hope you can experience it, too.

Everyone is interested in happiness, either as the obvious choice for the preferred state of being or as the ultimate goal of their entire lives. We all certainly want more of it, and in a time of economic challenge with lives turned upside down and many roles reversing, especially so. But I don't think happiness is as elusive or mysterious as it's often made out to be. It's closer than most people believe, and maybe even so close that it's our true natural state. And, as I've said, it begins with a choice. I remember hearing someone once say that as long as your *looking* for God, you'll never find Him/Her/It. God is always here, immanent and ever-present in everything, not somewhere hidden. Living your life as an art is one way to discover that.

It doesn't matter what medium or vehicle you use in performing this craft (including housework), because they all drive this: the most wholehearted, genuine gratitude you can muster and sustain can lead to the direct experience of the most profound love there is, and to the very foundation of your being.

If you think too much, this is hard. So don't. I found it at my fountain, but it wouldn't have mattered where I was. I was able to get myself out of the way enough to connect. Make the time, quiet down, still your chattering mind, and just feel. Allow the joy of "just being" to push its way in and replace anything else that isn't. When

THE FOUNTAIN

you do this, all things, everything, will speak to you at once because it all says the same thing, all comes from the same place. You are more connected to this stuff than you can possibly imagine, which is why it's something you must experience, not just think or dream about. All time, all existence can be held in your hand, and when you try without "working" at it, and just let it in, you'll know the real gift of being here. It's the endgame of all religion, science, and art. The craziest part of all is that you're there already.

Just start, gently and playfully, with a heart full of gratitude and the belief that you can feel the flow of creation effortlessly. And be patient.

But start...

And speaking of gratitude, thank you for reading this book.

THE FOUNTAIN

Now go take out the garbage.

EXERCISE

No, I'm not going to suggest you build a fountain. Unless that really appeals to you. What I'm getting at in this last chapter is just exploring elements of your own being. Have you ever taken a class on any form of meditation? There are many, and it doesn't have to be about religion or spirituality. It is a process of the mind, and learning about it is only a good thing as far as getting a better understanding yourself and how your mind works. I believe it's an extremely powerful way to understand what happiness really is, and to achieve a level that lasts a lifetime.

I won't list the various methods and techniques here, but if you are at all interested in experimenting with basic forms of meditation or mindfulness, start by simply finding a book or taking a class that appeals to you.

The main thing here is to find value in exploring deeper levels of consciousness that can provide an entirely new experience for you, one that could literally change your life. Whether it's for relaxation or awakening, you can benefit from this kind of work. (The health benefits alone are myriad and well documented.) Once again it does take practice and patience. Here's an excellent resource for free stuff online:
<http://list.ly/list/24h-best-free-meditation-resources-online>

Finale

So now the question is, what are you going to do with all this? What, if anything, will you actually *do*?

You can certainly put the book down, walk away from it, and tell everyone you know how incredible it is. You could also contemplate its profound messages and let it slowly sink in, subtly transforming every fiber of your being. Or you could just do nothing.

But I'd recommend this: do something. There are actually a lot of things you can do, ranging from the light and easy to the deeply involving. If you really did the exercises suggested in some of the chapters, wonderful. You've already done something. If you want to take it a little further, here's a list of just a few of the key ideas that you learned about in this book:

- You *always* have a choice you can make
- You *decide* whether to be bored, happy, miserable, etc.
- You can *play your work*, just as you work at your play
- Your *imagination* can help you or harm you

- Almost all stress comes from *inside* you
- There is a 100% guarantee that things *will* change
- In *everything* you do, you can have fun

Using that as a guide, make a Top 10 List of the possible actions you can take to make changes in your life that incorporate these ideas. They could be things like “I will make the conscious choice to find the fun in my activities”, or “I will track the number of times I imagine a terrible future”, or “I will find specific ways to play in my daily routine”. You can easily put together ten things that would be simple to do and could be monitored to help you stay on track.

And then, of course, start to do them. Make a schedule or a deadline or a journal as you work on each one. And make a commitment to just experiment with them at the beginning, and once you get the hang of it, really apply them and incorporate them into your day.

This is the kind of practice that it will take, and it will need to become a conscious choice to practice as often as possible. Not in a way that will be a burden or cause added stress, and not in such a way that you will torture yourself with guilt if you don't play with putting the dishes away or mowing the lawn. But the more you choose to have fun and look for ways to make it happen, the more you'll find it. And then being happier

FINALE

will become a habit. The real pay off, however, will be how it impacts your work, your business, your family, your life. You will find that the world will change as it responds to you, and more good things will come to you more often than not.

Here's another thing you can do: get support. I'd like to invite you to contact me and let me know what you liked and what you didn't about this book and the ideas in it. *Call me anytime and you can have a complimentary 30-minute conversation about anything in this book, and I will be happy to give you all the tips I can.* For real. And if you want to continue to work together, we can talk about that, too. Here's my personal phone number: **763-370-9874**

You may have to leave a message if I'm travelling or in a presentation, but I promise to call you back as soon as I possibly can. If you prefer email, here's my email address:

andy@andyweisberg.com

Write me a note about your response to these ideas, your experiments, your play, your successes and disappointments. Write about some of the things you already do in your life to get to that place where you are "unnecessarily happy", and the ways that you stay there as long as possible. And I will reply within one day.

And I'll even go another step further. If you really want to make a change in your life—the way you live and *make* a living—I can provide you with the resources to grow professionally in a dozen directions. I have been a teacher and a coach for 40 years, my specialties being communications, relationships and presentations. And I can connect you with top notch professionals who can help you build and market your own business, write a book, manage your finances, or just about any type of help you might need. Check out my website for more details:

www.andyweisberg.com

You can do this more easily than you might think, and I would be honored to help you get past the initial hurdles and all the barriers that keep you from being one of the happiest people on the planet. All the best to you, whatever you do.

A handwritten signature in black ink. The word "Andy" is written in a cursive, flowing script, while "weisberg" is written in a more straightforward, slightly slanted sans-serif style. The two parts are connected.

About the Author

Andy began his life as a child. Like most kids his imagination ran roughshod over anything that resembled “reality”, and he soon found solace in music, acting and a constant state of wonder. Girls confused him, however. In an effort to impress them he joined a rock band in high school. He’s pretty sure the band was very cool but there wasn’t a lot of confirmation of that. In college he turned to acting and became a Mime. Another excellent choice. After 20 years of performing, teaching and doing consulting work for professionals, he landed his first corporate job, in which he thought “rush hour” meant that you were supposed to be excited. Few people appreciated his enthusiasm and creativity, or his tendency to Mime a fake door to his cube.

As part of his “incorporation” he received several certifications in Training and Development, and worked in a wide variety of companies and industries. From manufacturing and high-tech companies to State Government, he developed a novel approach to teaching over 25 classes in Communication, Relationship Building, Managing Change, Innovation, Teambuilding, Leadership and several other business-related topics. What made his approach novel was that he never really understood why intelligent, mature

adults needed to learn how to play nice. As a result he was a rebel, a maverick, and no corporate office could hold him for long. And that is the REAL reason he worked for a wide variety of companies and industries. He also learned a lot of cool words over the last 20 years, like Performance Management, Assessment and Competency, Curriculum Development and Learning Management Systems. (Cool is relative.)



While evolving his career into his most recent role as a Director of Talent Development, he also continued to ‘perform’ as a professional speaker, presenting to hundreds of businesses across the country. Now in his third career incarnation, he is writing, speaking and enjoying life more than ever before.

About Andy's Training and Coaching

If you have recently been laid off, or if you are working but find you have no passion for what you're doing anymore, or even if you just want a better, happier direction in your life, you have options.

And the choices you make now can make the difference from barely surviving to being just as happy as that imaginary person with no problems at all. You can use the joy that can be found in any situation to move forward into the life you really want, and be more of the person you really are. It may take some time, and you might not want to make some of the changes in your life you may need to. But as corny as the saying is, it really is the journey that counts. So why not make it as enjoyable as possible?

Andy can help you get there. He can be your coach, your friend, your mentor or even just that crazy little guy that always makes you feel better and gets you back on the track you want most. He can make a difference in the way you do what you do, whatever it is. 40 years of successful teaching and coaching were focused on just that – the things that make us better communicators, better at relationships, better teammates, better husbands and wives, better parents, better

people. These are the most critical skills for adults, and we didn't learn them in school. Andy is dedicated to helping those that are struggling with things that they shouldn't be, and miserable about things that they needn't be.

Over the last two years he has redefined his entire life (for the third time), and if you're thinking about anything along those lines, Andy can help you do that, too. Call or email Andy, for a complimentary 30-minute conversation. With tons of resources and a lifetime of experience he'll do everything he can to help you get to where you want to be.

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Book Andy as Your Next Speaker

Andy Weisberg is unusual.

Few presenters can claim to have been both a professional performer and a professional businessman. Andy spent 20 years as a successful actor, director, theater teacher and performance consultant at multiple universities, and then spent another 20 years as a successful corporate trainer, an Organizational Development Specialist and ultimately a Director of Talent Development. He's older (and wiser) than he looks.

He has presented to literally tens of thousands of people over his lifetime. His deep understanding of the importance of personal and professional development has allowed him to make a powerful impact on both the Business of Doing Art and the Art of Doing Business.

Andy's experiences as a performer, teacher and senior executive have enabled him to combine all three into a very unique approach to speaking, and everyone thinks so. They always say, "It was... unique." His favorite topics are Humor, Creativity, Teambuilding

and Managing Change, but he'll talk about anything. And he will always customize his presentations to the particular needs of every audience.

His newest presentation is based on his book, *"Laid Off and Crazy Happy – Memoirs of a Houseband"*, taking everything he has learned and combining it all into a masterpiece on creating the life you want most.

One thing is for certain: the way you think about work and play will never be the same.

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