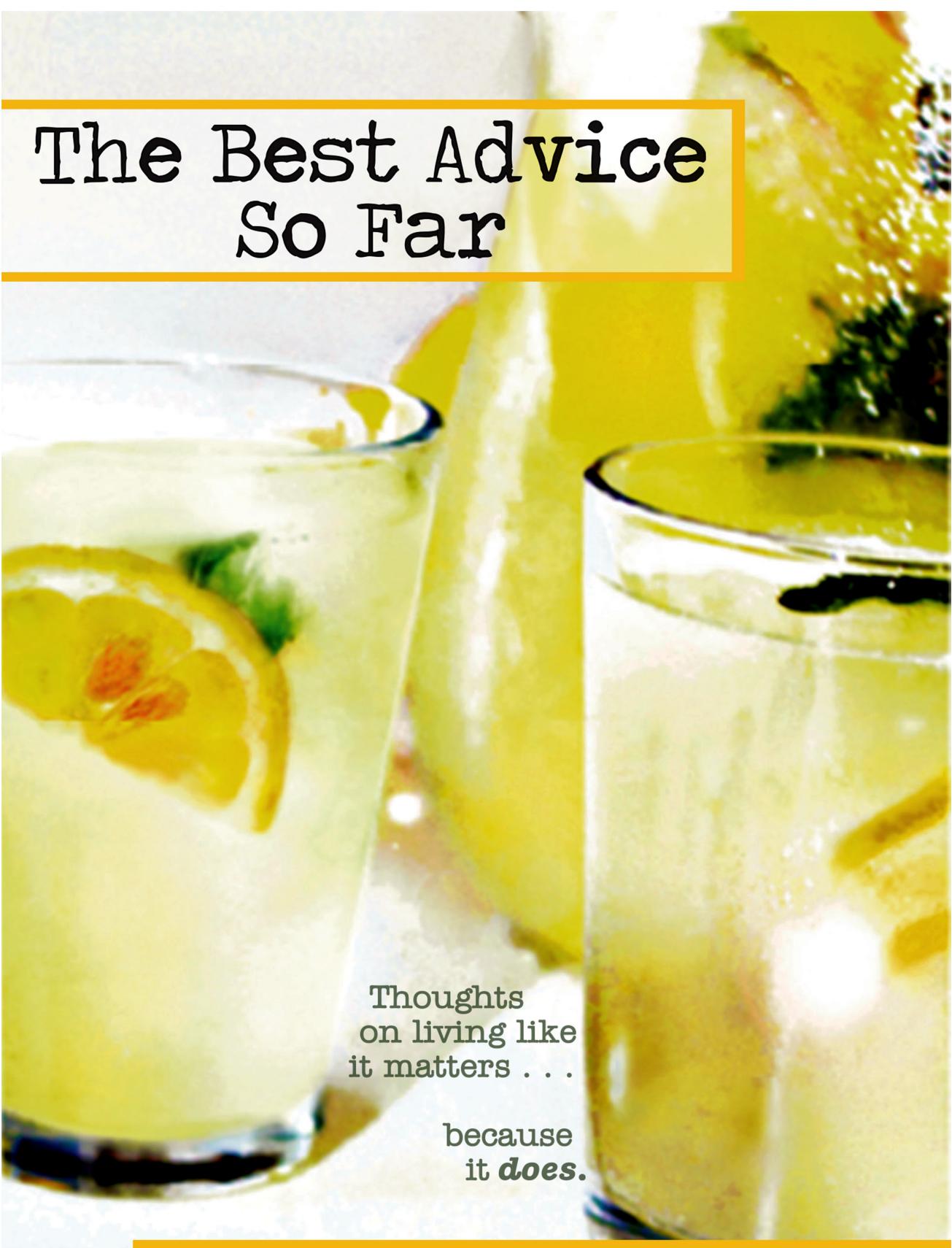


The Best Advice So Far



Thoughts
on living like
it matters . . .

because
it *does*.

ERIK TYLER

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR

by
Erik Michael Tyler

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT The Best Advice So Far

“Congratulations on a very practical, thoughtful and useful book. Great advice ... and compelling. I opened it to skim, but I kept on reading. Nice work. Thank you for what you are doing to change people's lives.”

— **Karen May**
Vice President, People Development
Google

“*Terrific.* Just the right amount of humor, not at all ‘preachy,’ and shows a real understanding of how others might be able to apply the advice.”

— **Bob Halloran**
New York Times Best-Selling Author
Irish Thunder and Breakdown

Reviews from other readers across the country:

“You saved my life. Those four words ‘You have a choice’ ... I will never be able to truly express how thankful I am.”

— **Dezi M., State College, PA**

“The Best Advice So Far pulls you in with its relatability. It’s not one author telling you how to live; it’s a journey of shared experiences and insights delivered in a funny, real way that forces you to reflect on your own life in a positive and uplifting manner.”

— **Sullivan C., Denver, CO**

“Filled with insightful and engaging anecdotes, this book certainly lives up to its title. This is an incredible book that you will return to time and time again.”

— **Ryan G., Boston, MA**

“Reading a chapter from The Best Advice So Far is a similar experience to having lunch with a wise and kind best friend. I finish each section simultaneously encouraged and enlightened, but never with the feeling that I’m being lectured to.”

— **Paul H., Dallas, TX**

For my grandmother, Beatrice Kwiatkowski,
and for my dear friend, Carlotta Cooney,
whose lives have spoken volumes.

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THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mom, for believing that I could, for reading along the way and for telling me that every chapter was the “best so far”;

Holly and Richard, for embodying the heart of unpretentious wisdom, sharing and storytelling;

Maddie, for lending a critical eye and encouraging spirit at just the right time;

Michael, for stepping into the picture – the big one and the small;

Dylan, for sparking the idea in the first place;

Chad, for inspiration, for helping me stay focused, for invaluable feedback, for friendship, and for living a book-worthy life;

Bud, for being a rock and for illustrating with grace what it means to express the heart of a truth with few words;

and Dib, for reminding me constantly who I am and why it all matters.

My sincere thanks, as well, to every person so far who has read or listened or pondered or asked a question or checked in on things along the way. You are as much a part of this book as I hope it might become of you.

FOREWORD

If you are lucky, you will at some point in your life experience a “friend at first sight.” You meet someone for the first time, and there is a particular twinkle in their eye, or you laugh so hard at the same moment, or they say something that drills deep into your soul. And you know — you will love them forever.

It's rare and it's beautiful.

This very thing happened to me just about 20 years ago. I was at church, of all places. It was at the end of the service during the last hymn, and as usual, there were the many mismatched voices around me — some OK and many not OK — when remarkably, I heard one that stood out. I mean really stood out! I stopped singing and just listened. This voice was talented, but it was more than that; whoever this was, was just enjoying singing and creating new harmonies with a very old song. It was lovely. When it was over, I turned around to see who this might be. And there it was: the twinkle . . . the laugh . . . and then the soul drill.

I was smitten for life.

Since then, I have continued to experience love from this wonderful and rare individual. But more than that, I have been privy to his unusual wisdom, his incredible compassion and his unrivaled understanding of the human.

What you are about to read is a wonderful snippet of practical life wisdom from the most interesting and talented brain of my best friend.

Enjoy . . .

Dibby Bartlett

**Courage is doing
what you're afraid to do.
There can be no courage
unless you're scared.**

Eddie Rickenbacker, WWI flying ace
and Medal of Honor recipient

PREFACE

About 500 years ago, a guy named Nicolaus cleared his throat and announced to the world that the universe does not, in fact, revolve around us. However, eons before Nicolaus dared to speak up, the facts were the facts. It did not matter what important people thought or knew or wanted to believe. The earth has simply never been at the center of the cosmos.

As dinosaurs tromped around the planet, the principles of flight that now allow several tons of metal to take off and get airborne — were just as true. It just took us a while to figure them out.

Truth is true, whether we know it yet or not. Truth is true, whether or not we choose to believe it or acknowledge it. Kick and scream all you like. Truth just is. The best any of us can do is to discover it, to better understand it, and to explain it in such a way that others can make some sense of it with us.

A few months back, some kids I mentor set up an online discussion page in my honor. The name is something like “I Wish I Had a Pocket-Sized Erik.” Crazy kids. On this page, they recount with one another meaningful advice I've shared with them. It's one of the hazards of mentoring, that some kids inevitably get starry eyed and think you are magical and tell their friends that you started “The Wave.”

I want to make it clear at the outset here that I take no credit for inventing the advice in this book, any more than Copernicus can take credit for changing the orbits of bodies in space. If there is truth to be found in the pages that follow, it has always existed. Truth is. I've just collected it. Repackaged it. Added some new bells and whistles along the way.

With some of the advice in this book, I can recall the moment when it was passed along to me. Some of it I gleaned from books. Still other trinkets of the advice found here I'd swear I got from a certain close friend — who will swear she got it from me. I'm known to have a knack for analogies, and I guess I've wrapped advice in those mental images so often over the years, that for many, it seems to have originated with me. Honestly, in most cases, I don't remember exactly how I came into the advice. I think I just pay attention in life and take note when I see patterns of truth.

Some may argue that individual bits of advice in this book do not as stated constitute advice at all, but rather something closer to a principle or proverb. It's true that, where clarity or impact would be improved by so doing, I chose to favor brevity over strict adherence to grammatical structures.

The relaying of truth is a collective effort. It's not terribly important where we hear it, only that we respond and change accordingly. I trust you will find your own gems of wisdom here. My hope would be that some of it

becomes so much a part of your everyday life and philosophy, that you too will wind up passing it along to others, even if you are unable to remember quite where you heard it first.

Preface: Questions for
Reflection and Discussion.

CHAPTER 1

CHOICE

What I am about to say is foundational to all that will follow in this book. Don't race through it. Spend some time with it. Read it several times if you must. If you can really internalize it and live it, it could quite literally change your life.

First, as is my way, I'd like to start with a story.

I mentor teens. I've done so for more than two decades. By mentor, I do not mean that I've joined an organization and agreed to spend a block of time each week with a teen. While I certainly encourage and see the value in this type of commitment, my mentoring takes a broader scope. At any given time, I'm investing in twelve to twenty young people on a personal, day-to-day basis.

A couple of years back, I had about a dozen seniors I was mentoring. We'd sort of formed a band of brothers back when they were freshmen. It was now April, and many of the guys were suddenly and simultaneously falling apart. Frantic calls at all hours. Lengthy, erratic emails. One of them had even asked to come over near midnight. When he arrived, he sat on my couch shaking and in tears, trying to explain that he had been having repetitive nightmares and was generally panicked at all times. I listened as he gushed for a while. Then I looked at

him sagaciously. “I see. I think I know exactly what's going on.” His eyes widened, as if he were sure I would tell him the term for some rare form of psychosis, which he would readily have believed he had.

“*What is it?*” he pleaded, tears still falling.

“You're graduating,” I replied, smiling.

In addition to hanging out one-on-one or in smaller clusters during the week, this entire group of guys met together on Mondays at my place for dinner and open dialog. That particular week's discussion point was a given. I've always thought it negligent somehow that society doesn't better prepare seniors for this phenomenon: the emotional upheaval that accompanies stumbling headlong from childhood into adulthood. It seems as obvious and necessary a topic as the birds and the bees. The simple fact, I told them, is that sometime during the three months before or after graduation, when faced with the end of life as they know it and the beginning of life as they *do not* know it — high school seniors have a period of what feels a lot like mental breakdown. They wander through an unpredictable maze of fear, lethargy, mania and other erratic moods. I told them that, as odd and scary as it may feel, this was completely normal. And that set their minds at ease that they weren't, in fact, going crazy like Great Aunt Bertha.

As we went around the circle, pressed in close along the olive sectional in my living room, each of them shared

how they had been feeling, relieved to hear that they weren't the only one. Until we got to Chad.

Chad was different. He was charisma incarnate. And while he listened attentively to the others, offering encouragement and good advice, when it came to his turn, he just couldn't relate. "Gee," he said, all smiles, "I just don't feel *any* of that. And I can't imagine why I ever *would!* I'm excited about college. I'm comfortable with new people and situations. I can't wait to graduate and get started!"

I didn't want to dull his shine. And, if anyone were of the constitution to escape senior panic, it was Chad. But I *did* want him to be prepared, should it creep up on him later. "That's terrific!" I said. "Just keep it tucked away, in case it hits later on." He shrugged and let it go with a noncommittal "OK."

Graduation came and went. Chad was bubbling over with enthusiasm. He even staged an ostentatious stumble and trip across the lawn as he went to receive his diploma, eliciting a few colorful but good natured words from the principal, who apparently forgot his microphone was on. Chad's graduation party was the hit of the summer. True to his prediction, he remained deliriously optimistic and excited about heading off to college, where he would follow in his father's footsteps, having enrolled as a pre-med student.

I helped him pack the day he headed off. I actually think it was a far tougher day for me than it was for him. I

stood in the driveway as the family drove away, Chad waving from the window like a lunatic and shouting back, “I love you, Papa!” (one of his many nicknames for me).

A few days later, I was out having lunch with a friend when a text came through. It was Chad:

**Really not doing so hot.
Need to talk.
Call if you can.**

I excused myself and called immediately. The voice that answered was barely recognizable. Chad was hoarse and sobbing. Hard.

“Tell me what's going on,” I invited.

Chad stumbled over his words, choking through the torrent of tears. Everyone he'd encountered at college was “fake,” he told me. No one thought he was funny there. He was on a campus of thousands and felt completely alone. His professor for Calculus was Bulgarian. He couldn't understand her, other than that she had made it clear that she really didn't want to be teaching this class, but had been made to by the higher-ups. He was presently curled up in fetal position on his bed in a dark dorm room, finding it unimaginable that he could get up and go to the next class, let alone continue for the long haul at this desolate campus. His world was crumbling. His dreams were over.

It was the first week of classes.

I welled up as he let it all drain out of him. It would have been pitiful had it been anyone, but being Chad — perpetually cheerful Chad — it was all the more heart wrenching.

“OK, Chad,” I said when his words had run out, “remember that conversation we had about the panic that hits everyone? It's hitting you. It's normal. You just hit yours a few days late. It will pass. I promise.”

Whimpers on the other end of the line.

“Second, you need to go and drop this Calculus class *today*. It's your first semester. Four classes is fine. You'll feel so much better.”

Chad sniffed. “Really?” Something like hope was breaking through. “I can just *do* that?”

“Yes, Chad, you can do that,” I said with gentle authority. ”You can drop or change every class if you want, and it's still early enough that you won't be charged a cent to do it.”

“Yeah, then I'm going to do that. I just didn't know I could. That will be great.”

As we talked about Chad's other classes, it seemed he wasn't thrilled with many, even those not being taught by less-than-willing Bulgarians.

Finally, I asked the pivotal question. “Chad . . . *why* did you choose pre-med?”

He paused. “I don’t know,” he finally replied. “I guess — my dad and I just always talked about me being a doctor like him, and I guess that seemed fine to me. I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted to do, so I just went with that.”

“I see. How would you feel about changing that major to something you will actually *enjoy*? ”

Chad didn’t say anything, but the sun may as well have been shining through the cell phone. “You know what?” he chirped. “*I hate pre-med! I hate science!*” We both laughed openly, even through our sniffling.

We decided that each of us would separately look through the handbook at all of the majors offered by the university. We’d circle anything that we thought was a better possibility, given Chad’s personality and interests. The next day, we compared notes. Chad was ecstatic. Every ounce of despair had been replaced with joy. Among a handful of others, we had both wound up double circling this long shot of an option, but one that just seemed so . . . *Chad*: Human Services/Rehabilitation.

It was settled. He was changing his major.

“I don’t know what my dad will say,” Chad chimed, “and I know that it won’t pay anything close to a doctor’s salary. But I’m *so excited* about it!” He clamored on about the great class lists and the cool professors and the opportunities available to students in this major.

As it turned out, Chad had a great talk with his father. His parents wound up being the biggest supporters of his new major. And, not only did Chad change his major, he began to change the entire campus. He founded a unique club of which he was the president, a club that continues to this day and whose mission is to take positive social risks. And both he and the club have garnered lots of notice. He was featured on the radio and in the newspapers. He met with high administrators who were eager to back his efforts, and even wound up catching the personal attention of the president of the university.

Nice story. But what does this have to do with you? Well, you see, even an ultra-optimist like Chad fell apart and was completely overwhelmed and despondent, because he'd forgotten a very important truth. He was immobilized, because he believed in that space of time that life was *happening to him*, and that he had no say in the matter. Yet, once he was reminded of this key truth, he not only rebounded but began to take the world by storm.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: You *always* have a choice.

Chad did not need to be a doctor. There was no rule that said he must struggle through a schedule of classes he hated, or even that he needed to remain at that university. Chad had choices.

If you don't accept this truth — that you always have a choice — if you don't remember it and *live it*, then you are left to play the part of the victim in life. You begin (or continue) to live as if life is happening to you, that you are powerless, oppressed by your circumstances. But, if you truly change your mind set to believe and live out in practical ways that, in every circumstance, you have a choice — now, you open a door for *change*. Instead of living as if life is happening to you, *you* will begin to happen to *life*. You will begin to realize the difference that one person — *you* — can make, that you are an agent of change in your own life and in the lives of others.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we get to choose everything that happens to us in life. We do not choose abuse, for instance, and we can at no time choose to *undo* those things which have happened to us in life.

We do not choose illness. We do not choose when or how the people we love will leave us. Or die.

We *do*, however, have the choice of how we will *respond* in every situation, even the hurtful ones. Instead, so often, we pour our frustration and anger into those things we can not change, rather than investing that energy into the many choices that we *can* make from that point forward.

I saw this painted on a classroom wall recently:

HARDSHIP IS GUARANTEED. MISERY IS OPTIONAL.

I devote a whole chapter to this concept later on in the book. But for now, let that sink in. In the worst of circumstances that life may bring, you always have the next move. You have a choice.

In grieving, will you choose to close yourself off from others? Or will you live with more passion and intention, realizing the precious nature of life?

Will you let the abuser rob you of continually more hours and days and years of your life, through bitterness and anger? Or will you take the steps to thrive and live in the now, using your experience to help others do the same?

So it is with any advice. It is always your choice to try it out. Or to discard it. You can skim the pages of this book, mentally assenting or theoretically debating with me about why such-and-such wouldn't actually work in real life. Or you can come along for the adventure, try some new things, and see what happens.

The choice is yours.

[Chapter 1: Questions for
Reflection and Discussion.](#)

CHAPTER 2

NEGATIVITY

I know some people — too many of them, really — who seem to be in a perpetually bad mood. These people drift along, frequent sighs having replaced anything akin to wind in their sails. They have somehow managed to find the worst jobs with the meanest bosses and most backstabbing co-workers. Asking “How are you?” is met with a tragic roll of eyes and sucking of teeth. The quaver in the opening word of the reply — “Well . . .” — indicates that you will not escape any time soon, but will be subjected to a lengthy and painstaking tale of woe. It seems that whenever I run into one of these people, they have coincidentally just that morning had some streak of catastrophic bad luck or other. Despite their obviously tragic circumstances, they report that their unfeeling family and so-called friends continue to criticize, hurt and reject them. Traffic jams, illness and botched orders at the drive-through are attracted to these people like dirty cosmic magnets.

I feel badly for these people. But it is not because of some plight with which they've been cursed. I feel badly for them, because they have unnecessarily spent so many unhappy years with a continual knot in their stomach.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: Being miserable is a choice.

Some of you just got mad. My short piece of advice feels like judgment to you. You're telling yourself that I don't understand, that this is a generalization, that your circumstances are far more complex or a special case.

At least hear me out. Then you will have all of the information, even if it is only to better fuel your anger toward me in the end. Might as well make your fire a doozy.

Or maybe, it will be the unimaginable — happiness. Freedom. Peace. If you will at least entertain the possibility, then you've already chosen to put your foot in the door to a better place.

I recently saw a short video about a man named Nick. As the video begins, the camera is zoomed in on Nick's face. He is a young, handsome man with a cool Australian accent. (Then again, to Americans, an Australian accent is always cool.) His voice is warm and friendly. You instantly like Nick. You know somehow without a doubt that, whatever he may be about to say, he is not acting. Nick announces that he likes to swim, boat, play golf. It almost seems like a dating advertisement. After the short list, which manages to exclude "long walks on the beach," Nick finishes his greeting: "I love life. I — am happy."

The camera zooms out. Nick is on a couch. Nick has no arms. Or legs. Well, he has something there where a leg should be — one small misshapen appendage, which he later refers to as his “chicken wing.”

Nick's list of things he loves to do quickly takes on new meaning from this angle. In a montage sequence, we see Nick on the grass in front of a soccer goal. A ball goes flying over his head into the net. “I wasn't ready!” he exclaims, with a feigned look of childlike excuse. Next, we watch as Nick runs — yes, runs without legs — down the field. He balances a soccer ball on his head far longer than I can. He sloshes down a waterslide. Surfs. Steers a motor boat with his chin. Dives into a swimming pool. Plays golf (again, far better than I can).

But the purpose of Nick's video is not to illustrate some one-in-a-billion scientific anomaly. There are no doctors' testimonials, saying, “We don't know why this man can do these things. It should be impossible given his condition.” The purpose of Nick's video is to tell others that being miserable is a choice. And that, conversely, happiness is also a choice. Nick is an international motivational speaker who tells his story so that the very same advice I've given you here has a voice that's difficult to argue with.

But it's still the same advice. True is true.

Nick doesn't paint some Pollyanna picture of his life. We see aides having to pick him up and move him onto a stage or an interview chair. He talks openly about having

tried to drown himself in a bathtub at the age of eight, because he saw his life having no possibility for happiness. He would never be married. No one would love him that way. He was a drain on his parents and society. Nick had every circumstantial reason to be miserable. And for a while, he was.

Understand that his circumstances didn't change. He did not get prosthetic limbs. He still needs help in the bathroom, I'm guessing. But something changed, that much is certain. He took the exact same circumstances he'd been handed and *decided*, "If I am going to live, I am not going to live like this." He did not get happier after learning to run or swim. He learned to run and swim, because he decided to start being happier. And happiness breeds hope. He has found a purpose for his life — successfully encouraging hundreds of thousands of people to believe that life is what you make it. That you can always get back up and try again.

Nick is not an isolated case. I know many such people. A friend of mine, Anindaya, has been deaf and blind since childhood. He was not born deaf and blind. He lost his hearing gradually, due to a degenerative condition. He lost the sight in each eye in separate, random accidents in his native country of India. Talk about grounds for bitterness! But he is one of the happiest people I have ever met. He travels the world, unaided except by his dog. He completed an advanced degree and holds a high-ranking teaching position. He is an inventor. He is

probably the smartest person I know. And he is married and very much in love.

Maybe this is a good time to bring it back to you. If you've got the miserable bug bad, you probably read those stories and felt some negative emotion. How did *they* figure out how to be happy when I can't? I'm a terrible person. I'm selfish. So I guess I deserve the miserable life I have. And, man, am I miserable. Just this morning, I blew a tire . . .

And off it goes down that path again.

I was just talking with my niece about a woman we both know. I commented to this mother about how impressed I was with her toddler's memory. "He's a bright one! He's sitting in there quoting the movie we watched last night, line for line!" In an Eeyore-like voice, she replied, "Yeah. Great. That's because he's seen it a million times. He drives me crazy."

Now, is her two-year-old intelligent, exhibiting solid memory and language skills at an early age? Or is he obsessive and annoying?

My best friend Dib is famous for putting it this way: "The only prize for being the most miserable is . . .
[deliver next lines with zealous enthusiasm and a gasp of delight] 'CONGRATULATIONS! You're the Most Miserable!' [applaud here, then extend invisible interview mic] "Tell us — how does it feel? You must be so proud!"

The nub of it is that there is no gain to being miserable. You're just miserable.

I remember a story I heard once, about a young mother baking a ham. She cut substantial-sized portions off the end of the ham and set them aside. Then she basted the remaining center portion, dressed it, and placed it in the oven.

“Why do you cut the ends off?” her inquisitive six-year-old daughter asked.

The mother paused, then replied, “That's just the way we always did it!”

“But why?” pressed the little girl, expectantly.

“Run along and play,” the mother replied. But she was bothered at her own lack of any real answer. Her family *had* always done it that way. She called her own mother.

“Mom, I'm baking a ham and I cut the ends off, as usual. But . . . why *did* we always cut the ends off?”

There was a silence on the line, followed by, “I . . . don't really know. We just always did it that way in my family.”

The call ended there, but the burning question lingered. The young woman now called her grandmother.

“Hi, Grandma. I have an odd question. Why do we cut the ends off the ham before we put it in the oven?”

“Goodness me,” replied her grandmother, “I can't imagine why *you* do it. I only did it because my oven was too small to fit a whole ham.”

Consider this carefully. We do virtually nothing in life without some sort of perceived gain. A man trapped by a fallen boulder while climbing endures the horror of cutting his own arm off with a small knife, because he believes there is a gain. Survival. Likewise, we complain, focus on the negative, or respond with sarcasm because there is a perceived gain.

Understand that I said *perceived* gain. Like the young mother in the anecdote, we often get ourselves into situations where we have long since stopped asking what the gain is. However, if we were to spend some thoughtful time answering this question, we may be forced to realize that the end result we were after isn't being achieved. Maybe it has *never* been achieved. And that means we've simply been wasting a whole lot of precious energy that could have been expended in more productive ways.

Maybe for you, this answer to the question of gains will rise to the surface: “I want people to pay attention to me. I never got attention as a kid except for when I was very sick.” And so somewhere along the way, sickness — and the collecting of other dire circumstances — became your only hope for being taken seriously and getting the attention a child craves. A helpful realization. But ask yourself, “Am I, in fact, getting more affirming attention from people with my complaining and negative outlook?”

The answer is likely no. The answer is more likely that people actually avoid your company or don't often call looking to spend time with you. The intended goal is not being reached.

My aim in this particular book is not to give a case-by-case rundown of all psychological possibilities for what unachieved goals are driving each person's negative emotions and perceptions. It is only to say that there is ample support and research, not to mention countless testimonials, to say that circumstances are not the problem. Choices regarding focus and behavior are. And those can be changed, with diligence. And perhaps a little help from others. I add my own life to the testimonials, and I hope that some of the principles in this book will provide solid suggestions for change.

So where do you start? How do you change what may perhaps be a lifetime of feeling like a victim?

Old habits die hard. They won't change overnight. That much is sure. But they *can* change.

The first step would be to accept that you have become a negative person, and that life or other people are not to blame. This is also the start of embracing that you are part of the solution. Not quite convinced that your problem is all that serious? Ask the three people closest to you. Don't lead the witness, using phrasing like "You don't see me as a negative person, do you?" Ask neutrally. Border on begging for an honest response: "I need to ask you something. It's serious and I need you to tell me the truth.

I will not argue with whatever your answer is, I just need to know what you think. Do you see me as a negative person?" Then just listen. Be aware that, from people who love you, the answers you get may be tempered: "What do you mean by negative?" or "I might say you're more serious than negative exactly." Take anything but "No, of course not!" as a "Yes, you tend to be negative."

Breathe. Here comes the hard part, that will bring you face to face with finding out what those perceived gains of yours are. *Tell the people in your life that you are committing to stop being negative. Miserable. Sarcastic. A complainer.* Tell the people to whom you complain most. Tell them that you are resolved not to dwell on negative things any longer, but to focus on the positive. Give them permission to call you out on it when you slip. If you really consider doing this, you may find yourself thinking things like, *I can't do that! If I tell them, I won't be able to _____ anymore.* What you fill into that blank is likely your perceived gain. *I won't be able to get my kids to do what I want them to do anymore. I won't be able to pass the blame for my own failures anymore. I won't have a reason for people to feel bad for me anymore, and that's the closest I feel to loved.*

But again, ask yourself, is your perceived goal being met by the negativity anyway? Likely not. The kids ignore you when you gripe and nag. Others aren't keeping you from the consequences of your shortcomings. Complaining doesn't leave you feeling loved.

So, commit to your new course of action, tell people, and then set a new goal. An achievable goal. Spend time with your kids. Make it your goal to listen to them and understand what's important to them. Make it your goal to gain new job-related or interpersonal skills. Make it your goal to spread cheer and hope to others. As soon as you realize you are getting negative — even if it is only in your mind — stop yourself and admit it. If you are in conversation, admit it out loud: “You know what? I just realized I'm complaining and focusing on the bad here. I'm really trying to be more positive. So, I'm not even going to finish that story.”

Don't give in just because the other person offers that “you have to vent sometime” or “it's OK with a good friend like me.” It isn't OK. Even if they are content to listen to it, complaining isn't helping *you* to achieve your goal of peaceful and happy living. It is just keeping the old cycle going — the cycle that you are now committed to breaking.

Understand here that being negative isn't an all-or-nothing state. I consider myself a very positive person, but I still have my things that pull me toward moping or complaining. Just the other day, I was running this chapter by my friend Chad, who is probably the most positive person I know. And still, we both were able to notice in one another areas or times when we give in to being negative. There is always room for growth, for redirecting wasted energies into more positive pursuits.

I'd also like to say that, like Nick, you may have legitimately difficult circumstances. But Nick realized at some point early on that what he wanted was arms and legs. A normal life. And it became clear to him that being sad and angry wasn't going to give him those things. So he changed his goal. He decided that, rather than pining for the "normal life" of those who have all their limbs, he would pursue a different goal. A life of *purpose*. *That* goal was achievable, with specific action. And having positive, achievable goals, paired with a specific plan of action to reach them, will change our outlook on life.

[Chapter 2: Questions for
Reflection and Discussion.](#)

CHAPTER 3

POSITIVITY

So, you've looked in the proverbial mirror and decided that you complain or become negative more than you'd like. You're committed to change. Great! But now what? When you feel that black bubble rising inside, do you stuff it back down by sheer will power? Do you just grin and bear it when things go awry? Is the goal simply not saying negative things and hoping it changes how you feel?

It is certainly true that misery loves company, in the sense that negativity only breeds more negativity. The more we speak negative words, the more we perceive the world and other people through a negative lens. It stands to reason (as well as research) that speaking fewer negative things causes our outlook on life to be less negative.

But that is not the end goal, to simply be “less negative.” While living at dead center may trump living in a funk, the real goal is to learn to live more positively — to actually see the beauty and wonder that already exists in the people and circumstances around us.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: Practice positivity.

This does *not* mean “Buck up, camper!” or “You just need to pull yourself up by the bootstraps!” The goal is not to behave in a more positive or palatable manner outwardly. The goal is to actually *become* more positive on the inside.

No one who is great at anything became so by simply deciding to be great. Likewise, you cannot just decide to be more positive. It takes *practice*. And practice is work.

Every cloud has a silver lining. This may at first sound like some platitude that your great grandmother might have doled out, back in the days when people borrowed cups of sugar from neighbors and thought clean humor was funny and didn't seem to know very much at all about how complicated the world really is. I'd like to challenge you to dust off this saying and to practice it. Practice it like an athlete practices in preparation for the Olympics. Write it on a sticky note and put it on your dashboard. Set your phone to send you a reminder midway through your day. Heck . . . frame it and hang it on your wall.

Sounds nice in theory. But how does it work in a real-world setting?

First, consider it a challenge. A contest. You win if you can find the positive side in each seemingly negative situation. (If it helps, you can keep track of your score on that sticky note that's on your dash.)

I'm going to tell you a story. I like stories. This story is true.

I woke up one morning this week and went to take a shower. When I turned on the water, it hissed and sputtered, glugging out a pathetic amount of water. Then it just dripped, emitting a high-pitched whine. I turned the lever off, fuming. *I pay for hot water, and now I'm going to be late for my ten o'clock appointment!* I picked up the phone and stabbed in the numbers for the property management office. When the office attendant answered, I tore into him.

“*Why do I have no hot water?*” I said ominously. “I have someplace to be in a half hour.”

“I just got a notice on that, sir. Let me see . . .” He fumbled through some papers. “Yes, they're replacing your furnace today, sir. It shouldn't be more than two hours.”

“*Two hours?* You have to be kidding me!” I exploded. “You can't just shut off people's water without notice! Replacing a furnace isn't something that just springs on you. How hard of a job would it have been to put a notice up yesterday to let us know?”

The man stumbled over himself apologetically, “I'm very sorry, sir. I don't know why there was no notice. I'll speak to maintenance and find out why that happened.”

“Well, speaking to maintenance about why it happened isn't going to get me a shower right now, *is it?* So now, I'm going to have to call and cancel my appointment, because you people can't manage a simple thing like

notifying your community when you're going to turn off our water.”

“I'm very sorry,” he repeated. This was followed by an awkward silence.

“I have to go and — figure out how to fix this mess. So, goodbye.”

I sat on the couch, seething. Should I drive up to the office in my rumpled clothes and bed head, to really make my point? I texted my next appointment: “Idiots shut off my water without notice. Have to cancel. Sorry.” Then I began to plan a letter to the CEO of the management company, expressing my outrage at the injustice.

OK. Stop.

Isn't this how we get? It doesn't seem any silver lining was found here. Yes, the circumstances were inconvenient. Yes, the management should have had more foresight. But my reaction is still my choice.

I'm pleased to inform you that, while the initiating circumstances were true, my reaction in the above account was completely fabricated. This is how it really went down.

I woke up one morning this week and went to take a shower. When I turned on the water, it hissed and sputtered, glugging out a pathetic amount of water. Then it just dripped, emitting a high-pitched whine.

I turned the lever off. *Hmmm.* I had an appointment at ten o'clock. I picked up the phone and dialed the management office.

“Hello. My hot water seems to be off. Do you know what's up?”

“I just got a notice on that, sir. Let me see . . .” He fumbled through some papers. “Yes, they're replacing your furnace today, sir. It shouldn't be more than two hours.”

“Two hours. Yikes! I have an appointment in a half hour. I didn't see a notice about it,” I replied.

“I'm sorry about that, sir. I don't know why a notice wasn't put up.”

“Well, at least they're fixing the broken heater,” I said. “It's been on bypass for a week or so since the last one went, and it'll be good to have full heat and pressure back. Thanks.”

“Again, I'm sorry for the inconvenience,” the man repeated.

“No problem. Not your doing. Thanks for the information. I've been around the world and seen some things. I should be able to handle a cold shower.”

We laughed and then said our goodbyes.

I sniffed under my arm. Decent. Didn't need a full shower, I decided.

I grabbed my face wash, shampoo, a washcloth and a towel, and headed for the kitchen sink, which is deeper than in the bathroom. I turned on the cold water, running the washcloth under it. Really cold. It would certainly wake me up. Plus, cold water tightens the skin. Bonus.

I washed my face quickly, then bent down to put my head under the faucet. I was suddenly reminded of summers when I was a counselor at a camp at the northernmost part of Maine.

The bathrooms were rustic and kids used to get up at four and five in the morning to vie for the limited hot water. Anyone who got up after six took an ice cold shower. I was certainly wily and tenacious enough to get up before anyone else and take a long, hot shower. But I enjoyed thinking that, by taking a cold shower, I was sort of “giving” the hot water to one or two of the other kids. I loved that camp and my campers.

By now, I had rinsed the shampoo out and was toweling off my hair, smiling at the memory of individual kids I'd had over the years at that camp. I wondered where they were now.

Having skipped a full shower saved me time. I made my ten o'clock appointment in plenty of time.

You see, the circumstances didn't change. I just found the silver lining. And that changed the events that *followed*. Where I could have begun the day stewing and clenching my jaw, my day was off to a great start.

On the Fourth of July this year, I got caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic in town. I had just gotten off the phone with my friend Chad who lives about a half hour away, and we'd decided I'd come down to watch an impromptu late-night movie. I had somehow forgotten that our town had fireworks this year. Once I was swept into the stream of cars around the rotary, I was stuck. It quickly became a virtual parking lot, and there was no escaping in either direction. I called Chad: "I'm going to be *very* late!"

Here again, I had a choice. Many people around me were already laying on horns and throwing arms in exasperation. *Silver lining*, I thought.

I looked over at the car going the opposite direction, stopped beside me. A boy of maybe six was in the back seat, twirling his pink glow necklace, smiling, oblivious to the traffic.

I put on the radio. I took out my cell and began to text encouraging notes to some of the kids I mentor. Many texted back with equally affirming thoughts. Some of the texted conversations really got ridiculous. I laughed more than once. I would say I managed to send positive notes to a dozen or more kids. They felt like they mattered. I had used the time wisely. Forty minutes had passed and I finally approached my escape route on the right — a street that would have been a three-minute trip under normal circumstances. After taking a few back roads, I got to Chad's almost an hour late. He couldn't have cared

less. We watched our movie and stayed up talking after that. It was a terrific night.

It could have been a miserable one. I could have boiled with irritation in my car, being mad at the world. I could have decided that I was sick of it all by the time I reached the turnoff, and just canceled plans with my friend and drove home mad.

Traffic and plumbing issues aren't the worst things, you may argue. What about the *really* hard stuff that life throws at us. Where's the silver lining then?

I read a story once of a woman who was placed in a Nazi concentration camp for helping to hide Jews. She tells of how, in addition to the daily horrors she and her family endured there, her bunker of women had an outbreak of fleas. For many of them, this additional trial threatened to be the proverbial last straw. But this woman pointed out that, since the outbreak, the cruel guards had not come into their area and hassled or abused them, fearing that they would themselves be exposed to the fleas. It turns out that she and the other women had relative peace and freedom in their bunker, because of the infestation. She was adept at finding the silver lining.

My grandfather passed away in the spring. Twenty of us were around his bedside when he passed, one hand on him and another on my grandmother, his wife of nearly seventy years. It was surreal and somehow beautiful. I sang at the funeral. It was the hardest thing I think I've done. What good can come of death?

Through the planning and wake and services, our extended family bonded in ways we never had before. My grandparents had six children, who all have children. Our living line extends to great-great-grandchildren. There is a twenty-year age gap between my mother and her youngest sister. So, while I've seen many of my younger cousins at a family event here or there and we've been cordial, I've never really known them. My grandfather's death opened doors for us to know each other. In fact, if you read the acknowledgments, you'll have noted that the whole idea for writing this book came out of a graduation card I wrote to my much younger cousin, Dylan, with whom I connected in a new way during the circumstances around our grandfather's passing.

Silver linings are everywhere. Make it your personal challenge to find them. They will surprise you. And the world will begin to look different.

Practice positivity. Practice makes perfect.

[Chapter 3: Questions for Reflection and Discussion](#)

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CHAPTER 24

PEOPLE VS. PROBLEMS

Let me tell you about Jerry.

I met Jerry when I was working in an inner-city high school program. The program met in the basement of the school and was funded on a grant as an experiment. The kids in the program were teens on parole or probation, or who were in gangs, or who were students otherwise at high risk for truancy. The aim of the program was to find ways to keep them in school.

My first day on site, I pored over files, choosing out my first students. My goal was to identify and connect with those I felt were at critical risk level from among the already high risk population. Jerry was a clear frontrunner.

Jerry was 17. They'd told him he was a junior; but as far as actual credits, he was only in high school because of his age and the special nature of the program. Jerry was on a strict, court-ordered probation for a number of crimes. He had already done time. One of the stipulations of his probation — the only thing preventing him from going immediately back to lock-up — was that he attend school daily. He was to obey the rules. He was to attend all classes assigned to him.

The problem was, Jerry could not read.

Jerry's file showed that he had received years of state-funded special services in reading and math. Yet, his last available test scores from only a few years earlier showed that he was still on a first-grade reading level. My priority with Jerry would not be counseling. It would not even be academic support, *per se*. My goal had to be to try to teach this near-man to read past "Do you like my little dog?"

I knew I could succeed — that *he* could succeed — if I could get him in the chair. My roster was complete. I went to meet the kids. Jerry was my first visit. I entered a classroom, where the teacher lounged with his feet up on his desk, and students looked at the pictures and stats of sports teams in daily papers strewn across tables. Heat began to rise in my chest. I hoped this was some sort of break time and not the norm. "I'm here to see Jerry," I announced.

Heads turned toward a lanky African-American boy, with half-closed eyes that said at once that he trusted no one. Jerry's eyebrows raised self-consciously but his face remained a stone. He did not look toward the doorway where I stood. I felt for him immediately. "Hi, everyone. Hi, Jerry. Why don't you at least come out in the hall for a second so I can tell you *why* I'm here to see you." He pushed himself up roughly, the waist of his pants hanging just above his knees and the rest pooling about his sneakers in seeming bolts of denim. He sauntered to the door with a look of defiance, almost threatening. He still

would not look at me, his eyes seeming to trace an invisible, zigzag line on the floor. Once he was outside the classroom, I quietly closed the door. Even leaning against the wall in a slouch, staring straight ahead, he towered over me.

I felt confident. Excited. I was *going* to teach this kid to read. More importantly, I was determined to help him see his own worth as a person. I had my work cut out for me.

“Hey, Jerry. I’m Erik. It’s my first day. Listen — I read your file. So I know a little *about* you. But I don’t know *you*. I hope I will. But right now, I want to ask you to take a risk with me. Look at it as a sort of dare.”

He glanced *toward* me, though not quite at me. At least it was something. I kept going. “I want you to give me two weeks, an hour each day, to work with you on reading.”

That was it. He was already shaking his head and gesturing vehemently, an acrid look on his face. “Naw, naw, naw. I’m not [expletive] going to your [expletive] retard classes, man!”

The window was closing. I had to act fast. I pushed forward. “Jerry, it won’t be the same as before. I promise. Give me two weeks. Just ten days. And if you don’t feel like you are reading much better by then, you can quit.”

“I can *already* quit,” he countered. “You can’t *make* me do *nothin’*.¹”

He started walking away down the hall. I drew in a breath, gearing for the big guns. I hated to have to use them, but I knew it was for his best. I followed him.

“Jerry, your file says you are on probation and that you have to go to classes and follow the rules. If you don't come to my class, I will have to call your probation officer and tell him that you aren't following the program.”

He stopped.

You could feel the air change, almost crackle. He spun on his heels to face me and looked me dead in the eyes for the first time. “A'ight.” It sounded like a question. A menacing challenge more than assent.

“Good decision,” I said. “You won't be sorry. I promise.” I turned and started down the L-hallway to the end, where my room was. Jerry followed. I tried to make small talk about what he liked to do outside of school or if he played basketball. He didn't reply. At least I would get him in the door.

I walked in and set my things down on a table. The room was stark, the walls made of large, yellowed cinder blocks that appeared to have been trying to pass for white at one time. The floors were badly chipped linoleum, with many tiles cracked or missing altogether. I thought to myself, *This isn't a far cry from what he had in lock-up!*

I turned around to invite Jerry to a seat. Jerry was squatting with his hands placed fingers inward on his

thighs for support. His head was down, as if he were going to vomit. Then I realized what was happening. He wore his jeans low to begin with, but his boxers were now pulled down, as well. His bare thighs were visible between them and the hem of his XXL jersey. Something dropped to the floor.

Jerry was taking a dump.

Right there on my classroom floor and in front of me, Jerry was relieving himself. After leaving his last deposit, he unceremoniously hoisted his boxers back up and straightened his shirt. His face was all smug self-satisfaction. “That's what I thinka your [expletive] readin' class, *boy!*”

Now, this story could be used to illustrate a number of things I feel passionately about, and which are topics discussed elsewhere in this book. The fact that, regardless of our circumstances, we always have a choice. The benefits — and challenges — of choosing positivity over negativity. The idea that no one can *make* you mad. But here, I want to use it to talk about something else.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: Focus on the person not the problem.

In those few seconds, I had some decisions to make. I was certainly well within my rights to be furious with this kid! I could have called his probation officer on the spot

and had him sent back to lock-up, or had him on the run until they found him. I could have called school security and had him removed. Heck, I could have called the police to come and arrest him, adding another charge to his record for exposing himself in public, and leaving him branded as a sex offender for the rest of his life. No one would have seen it as retaliation. Everyone would have understood and seen any of these choices as perfectly reasonable.

But I chose not to see the problem in front of me. I chose to see the person. The young man. The boy.

It was not important to me *what* he had done in that moment. It was more important to consider *why* he had done it. And that seemed obvious. This kid didn't hate me. He hated himself. He hated his failure. And he wasn't about to allow himself to be humiliated. Not anymore. And so he was willing to go to this extreme — seeing defecating in public as less shameful than how he had felt up until now in his life, than being branded as "stupid."

I spoke in an even tone, even kindly. "Well, Jerry, unfortunately, I'll have to give you a detention. You can leave for now. See you at 3:15."

He seemed defeated that I hadn't given him more of a reaction for all his effort. But he was still defiant. He began to shuffle toward the door. "I ain't coming to your [expletive] detention."

As he exited, I made sure he heard me: “Then you'll leave me with no choice but to call your probation officer. I'd hate to see that happen. You decide, though.”

I did not report the incident. Other students who came down to see me all noticed the “present” Jerry had left. But I didn't give him away. I simply said, “Oh, yeah, one of the kids had an accident. I'm going to clean it up later.” One kid, strangely, didn't even notice!

After school, I wondered whether I'd see Jerry. But I was prepared, in the event that he did show. 3:15 — no Jerry. I waited.

At 3:25, Jerry slunk around the corner with his hands stuffed into his pockets and immediately noticed that his — statement — remained right where he had left it all those hours earlier. Beside it were gloves, a bucket with soap and water, disinfectant spray, bleach, paper towels and a red biohazard bag. I noticed the slightest hint of shame come across his face. Then it was gone. He straightened up. Hardened up. “I'm not cleaning that up,” he informed me.

“I'm not asking you to,” I said, moving toward the supplies and donning the gloves. I cleaned up the mess as quickly as I could, while being thorough. It took less than five minutes. Jerry didn't say anything. But he didn't walk away either.

“Your detention is over, Jerry. See you tomorrow morning to give that reading stuff a shot. Have a good night.”

The next morning, Jerry showed up to my classroom on time for his lesson. He said nothing. I didn't mention the episode the day before. “Hey, Jerry! Good morning. Glad to see you. Let the two weeks begin! Trust me on this — you're going to be reading before you know it.”

Jerry sat down. But for the entire hour, he remained silent, staring off. This was a challenge, since teaching reading usually requires that the student read aloud. And we were working at the phonetic level. I had no idea if this was going to work. But I talked for the hour, giving myself the proper responses that Jerry should have been giving me. When the time was up, I thanked him for coming and told him I hoped to see him the next morning.

He came back. For two weeks he came back. And each day, he said nothing. Not a word. He slouched in his chair, with those half-closed eyes, looking sullen. Never looking at me. But he came. On the last day of the two-week period I'd challenged him with, I told him, “Well, Jerry, I told you that if you couldn't read better after two weeks, you could quit. The problem is . . . I don't *know* whether you can read better or not yet. But I'm going to leave the choice up to you. There are other students who need the help, and if you don't want to come tomorrow, I'll try to find someone else. But I *hope* you will come back. I like you. And I know you can do this.”

To my surprise, Jerry came back the next day. And the next. At the end of the third week, I told him how proud I was of him for coming. He literally had not spoken to me in three weeks! But I cared a lot about this kid all the same.

Week four, Jerry showed up. Keep in mind that not *only* had Jerry come to my class all this time — it meant he had also *showed up to school every day for weeks*. By now, I was used to giving the instruction and the response for the hour. But today, mid-way through the lesson, Jerry spoke up. His voice sounded strange to me, not having heard it in all that time. He spoke loudly, almost belligerently. “*Why'd you clean up my sh*t?!*”

I remember how my eyes stung. All this time he'd been coming, thinking about this every day in silence. “I cleaned it up because I care about you. And because I've messed up many times in life, too, and been forgiven. And I wanted to do that for you.”

He nodded, as if in acceptance. That was it.

I continued with my instruction. Only this time, he answered me. He still slouched, leaning on one fist with half-closed eyes. But he *answered*. What's more, he was *right*.

Four months later, Jerry was reading on a high school level. He was a different person. He had an insatiable desire to learn. He wanted to know everything. He began reading magazines. Then books. He wanted to know how

to spell and write. And he was like a bodyguard to me, walking beside me proudly down halls, as if daring anyone else to mess with me.

Go back to Jerry's first day in my classroom. Consider what would have surely happened if I'd focused on the *what* instead of the *why* — on the problem instead of the person. Better yet, think of it in reverse. Look at what *did* happen because someone chose to see Jerry in terms of *why* and not *what* — as a *person* and not as a problem.

Now think about your own life. Do you tend to react to *what* the people around you do, without considering *why*? I'm convinced that, if we will choose to take the time to understand the *why*, the *what* will no longer bother us so much.

[Chapter 24: Questions for
Reflection and Discussion.](#)

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APPENDIX

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

PREFACE:

1. What lead to your reading this book? What are your expectations, based on what you know about the book so far?
2. How do you react or respond when someone offers you advice?
3. Do you tend to be someone who seeks advice?
4. What's some of the best advice you've gotten so far? Why do you consider it the best?
5. Are you famous for giving any certain advice often? Do you remember where you first came across this advice?

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

CHAPTER 1:

1. You always have a choice. What do you think of this idea? Is this hard for you to accept or believe?
2. In what areas is it most difficult for you to feel that you have a choice?
3. Think about an area where you feel stuck right now. Try to name at least three choices you could make in this situation. What might the results or consequences of each of these choices be? Are those results or consequences certain, likely, possible or imagined?
4. What are some of the benefits of remembering that you always have a choice?
5. Are there any downsides you see to accepting that you always have a choice?

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

CHAPTER 2:

1. What is your reaction to the idea that “being miserable is a choice”?
2. Do you consider yourself a negative person?
3. Take a risk: ask 3 to 5 people who know you very, “Please be honest with me — do you think of me as a positive or negative person?” Don’t debate, argue or cajole. Just listen. Regardless of the answers you receive, ask each person, “What about me makes you say that?” If you are using these questions for group discussion, regardless of whether you know everyone well or not, consider asking the other group members to answer this about you.
4. This chapter suggests that there is always a perceived gain for what we do in life. If you’ve become negative in a certain area — or in general — what do you think your own perceived gain might be?
5. What do you fear you might lose by committing with others to change patterns of negativity?
6. How might your life change if you were to truly let go of negativity? Imagine a specific area or relationship that would be affected, and then describe the change you imagine might be possible in as much detail as you can within your group, to a friend or in writing.

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

CHAPTER 3:

1. What do you think of the idea that simply being less negative doesn't necessarily mean that you are a *positive* person?
2. Who is the most genuinely positive person you know? How do you feel when you are around them? Do you find this person inspiring or daunting?
3. Think of one challenging or difficult situation you currently face. Try to name at least one “silver lining” that exists in this situation.
4. How do you feel when challenged to consider the silver lining in difficult situations? Rueful? Sarcastic? Thankful? Cheerful? Neutral? Something else?
5. How drastic a shift would it be for you to *practice* The Silver Lining Game on a regular basis? Does this seem realistic to you?

[**BACK TO THE BOOK**](#)

CHAPTER 24:

1. How would you have reacted if Jerry had “done his deed” in *your* classroom (assuming you were the teacher)?
2. How does the central piece of advice from this chapter parallel the advice from CHAPTER 18: **MOTIVES (“The Best Advice So Far: Motive is more important than behavior or outcome”)**? How do the two pieces of advice differ?
3. Is there anyone in your life right now whom you've been treating as a problem rather than as a person? What are some positive characteristics about this person, or hopes you have for them outside of “the problem” as it relates to you?
4. What is one way you can be intentional in your interactions with the person you chose above, so that they will feel like you see them as a person and not as a problem?

[BACK TO THE BEGINNING](#)

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