

The background of the entire page is a photograph of three glasses filled with lemonade. Each glass contains a slice of lemon and a sprig of fresh mint. The glasses are arranged in a row, with the one in the foreground being the most prominent. The lighting is bright, highlighting the yellow of the lemons and the green of the mint.

The Best Advice So Far

Thoughts
on living like
it matters . . .

because
it *does*.

ERIK TYLER

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR

by

Erik Tyler

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

CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1: CHOICE](#)

[Chapter 2: NEGATIVITY](#)

[Chapter 3: POSITIVITY](#)

[Chapter 4: STARTING AGAIN](#)

[Chapter 5: UNFAIRNESS](#)

[Chapter 6: HAPPINESS](#)

[APPENDIX: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION](#)

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 sniffing.

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 sashes 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.](#)

CHAPTER 4

STARTING AGAIN

I wish you had known my best friend's mom, Carlotta. She passed away more than a decade ago now. It's still hard to believe. When I visit with my friends, in the family home by the marsh where they still live, it feels more like Carlotta has just left the room for a moment than that she is gone. The yard and the garden are still very much hers.

Carlotta's very essence was family and laughter and irrefutable common sense. She observed much and spoke little. And when she spoke, you listened.

She was my friend.

When Carlotta passed away, after a long battle with cancer, she left much behind. She left a legacy. She also left some tangible things. I'm not referring to items of material worth, though we're still finding that some odd thing or other that's been lying around or hanging on a wall forever is worth a fortune. For the purposes at hand, however, I'm talking about her writings.

Carlotta wrote a book. It's nothing short of breathtaking. It alleges to be a cook book, filled with recipes that, for the last fifteen years or more, have defined Thanksgiving, Christmas and summer parties for me. But the recipes are really just a clever excuse to draw the reader into the moments taking place *around* the food, with family and friends. If you haven't lived in New England, Carlotta's book is likely the closest you could come to feeling what it is like. Her personal anecdotes are truly sentimental without being the least bit sappy.

Carlotta wrote more than a book. She wrote on everything, from books to pictures to objects. We have yet to find all of her notes, I'm sure. Among her scratches and scrawls, she left a little piece of paper in her bedside table. As best we can figure, she wrote it while she was at her worst with the cancer. That's important.

I have a copy of this handwritten note, along with a picture of Carlotta in her health. She is turning to look at us from the kitchen sink, smiling in a way that makes you feel like wherever she was in time is where you want to be. I have these two items in a simple, wooden picture frame in my house. The three pieces of advice she left in that note are in the running for my most often quoted and most treasured.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: You have to start from where you are, not from where you wish you were.

My alarm went off at 4:30 this morning. Yes, I actually set it for that downright silly time, despite having gone to bed mere hours before at 1:15. Why? I was headed to the gym.

Please don't get the wrong idea about me. I am not a gym rat, or whatever they're calling it these days. I enjoy being fit and healthy. It does as much for my mind as for my body. But I am by no means obsessed. I know — 4:30 looks like a time that only the obsessive would choose to workout. The fact is, that is the only time my workout partner can manage in his schedule, between family, work and tending his several properties. I'm more of a ten-to-midnight guy myself.

At any rate, this morning was the first time I was to work out in about three weeks. (I told you I wasn't obsessed.) I had thrown my back out some weeks ago, for no reason I can figure, and had been waiting to no longer feel the twinge that threatened to send me to the floor. My workout partner, coincidentally, had also been unable to work out, due to unusual circumstances with his properties and having had family in town for a couple of weeks.

So there we were. It was still wet from last night's rain. If the sun was up, we couldn't tell through the clouds. We got out of our cars in the lot to the gym — alongside only three other vehicles — and headed into the gym together. We made small talk about our love handles and how we might need to be rolled from room to room. In all honesty, we're in decent shape. But just as honestly, starting back after a three-week absence is tough. *Really* tough. We started with thirty minutes on the elliptical. I checked the readout twice, sure that I'd punched in the wrong settings. This couldn't be our usual numbers. I was winded within the first five minutes. The virtual hills felt more like virtual mountains. I sighed and smiled, turned toward my friend, and quoted Carlotta's words again: “You have to start from where you are, not from where you wish you were.”

After our thirty-minute warm up, we headed off to start the first press. The temptation was strong — temptation to load those bars with the same weights we'd been using three weeks ago. Maybe it's a guy thing, but I tend to think not. It feels a little like admitting defeat if I don't perform “where I wish I was” as opposed to “where I am.”

Still, Carlotta's little piece of advice, firmly engrained by now, won out over temptation. We cut our presses each by fifty pounds, followed by dropping our dumbbell weights by five or ten pounds, as well. Even with these concessions, my numbers weren't what they had been at higher weights just three weeks ago. Understand that I *could* have loaded up the bars to be where I left off weeks ago. I might have gotten some reps out of it. But I would have been discouraged. I would be in pain later today. And, even if I did manage not to throw my back out again, 4:30 tomorrow morning would feel a whole lot like torture.

Life is filled with situations where we face discouragement because we are not where we wish we were. Weight. Finances. Relationships. Trying to break old habits. When we find ourselves in these moments, we have a choice. Starting from where we are means more than admitting weakness and begrudgingly adjusting our actions to accommodate. Starting from where we are is an attitude. It is a decision to be happy without being complacent. It is focusing on what I have accomplished today, instead of what I have not. It is celebrating that I am still in the game.

So, you're not a fitness buff. Or you are, but you never miss a day. Let's see how this plays out in some other areas.

You've got a huge term paper due in two weeks. You've known about it for a month, but done nothing on it as of yet. To live “where you wish you were” is to berate yourself for not having started earlier, burdened with the knowledge that you should be through with your research and note cards, and well into your first draft by now. Wishing you were further along uses up mental space that needs to focus on where you *are* — which is at step one. So, you let go of wishful thinking and ask, “What do I need to do right now to get started?” Maybe that is as simple as choosing a topic. Maybe it is finding your sources. Or maybe it is writing out a plan for what you will do each day until the paper is due, as if it were only assigned to the class today. When you accomplish each step, congratulate yourself that you are that much further along than

you were when the day started, rather than continually reminding yourself of how far behind you are. That is starting where you are.

Or let's suppose that one night you are struck with the hard realization, in that quietness just before sleep takes you, that you don't know your son anymore. You've worked too much. You haven't made time for him. And now your relationship with him is reduced to grunts in passing, or barked commands about school work and chores. Trying to start where you wish you were may make you overzealous. You may attempt to immediately instate family meetings, pressuring him to cancel plans that he's already made. Or you may push to have a "real conversation" out of the blue, making things awkward for your son, and perhaps resulting in your feeling rejected when it doesn't turn out as you imagined. Starting where you are may be as simple as saying, "Hey, I know I haven't been around much for you lately, but I'd like to try to change that." Starting where you are is accepting an awkward, "Uh . . . ok" without being offended. Celebrate that you've realized you want to change, that you took a first step, and that your son heard you.

Just today I had lunch with a friend whose marriage was all but over a year ago. Focusing on where he wished they were would have left him in despair, putting undue pressure on them both, and most likely divorced. However, by taking small steps from where he was instead of where he wished to be, he's now able to report that he and his wife are really enjoying one another again.

As my friend and I left the gym this morning, the clouds were just starting to burn off. "Hey, we're here, right? A lot of people aren't," he said. He headed for his truck as I got into my car. Just before I shut the door, he turned back and shouted. "See you tomorrow?"

Workout over, I sat down to write. I'd had a few days of writer's block here where this book is concerned, as well as some eye strain. I'd hoped to be seven or eight chapters along at this point. It's one of life's many intriguing mysteries, that this is the chapter that would break the dry spell and urge to be written today. One more chapter completed. I'm choosing to celebrate.

[Chapter 4: Questions for Reflection and Discussion.](#)

CHAPTER 5

UNFAIRNESS

While this book by no means needs to be read sequentially, I do recommend reading the previous chapter and acquainting yourself with my friend Carlotta. It will make the advice that follows all the more meaningful.

I had a friend in my younger years who was plagued with the notion that life was not fair; hence, he was a chronic complainer. His brother was a vagrant, his mother was ill, and his father was unknown. When he spent time with friends who were happy or around fairly functional families, he rarely left expressing that he had enjoyed himself. Rather, he would say that he was depressed, reminding himself and others of all that he had *not* been handed in life.

Every boss he'd had was a complete moron who continually asked too much of him. He frequently called in sick or quit, in search of the ever elusive job that was going to treat him as he deserved.

When money was tight and bills were due, my friend was like a starved coyote, pacing and growling. Most often, instead of paying what he could, he would go out and spend what he did have on things he did not need, justifying the purchases with the fact that, given how hard everything was for him, he had a right to at least have *some* happiness.

On one such occasion, in addition to having maxed his credit cards, he was now in a situation where he owed me an increasingly large sum of money. Rather than try to squeeze blood from a stone, I tried to help him come up with some better strategies and perhaps some long-term financial solutions.

He had dropped out of college, having failed most of his one semester of classes. When I asked if he'd thought about going back to school and getting a degree that would open more doors for higher paying employment, he sniffed at me in disgust. "That's easy for you to say," he hurled. "School was a breeze for *you*. You barely even had to study. Well, we can't all be born geniuses." I reminded him that I'd earned my degree, through years of hard work. I pressed that, maybe here a few years later, he would find he had more motivation to stick with it this time around. He retorted that the reason he'd flunked out was that his teachers were boring or mean. He even proposed that the reason he'd failed gym that semester was due to the unreasonably early start time — of 8:00 in the morning.

I tried to shift gears, suggesting various part-time jobs he might consider in order to start getting out of debt. He escalated even further, his face contorted with sarcasm and his words a torrent. "You know what? I'm busting my butt at minimum wage already, while you work part time and make — what? — at least five times what I do! It's all so *easy* for you," he spat. "If you weren't doing what you do now, you could make tons of money in computer programming. And if that didn't work out, you could sing or play the piano for a freaking *hour* at a wedding and make my whole paycheck. Everything's just handed to you on a silver platter. I mean, you could literally be a Chippendale dancer if you wanted to, for God's sake!" He was red-faced and heaving.

Though I'm certain the timing couldn't have been worse, I was unable to keep myself from laughing aloud at this last comment.

“I’m serious!” he countered. “You got the perfect mind, perfect looks, perfect body. And what did I get? The shaft, that’s what I got!”

It was no use trying to continue the conversation at that time, so we left it alone for the time being.

The next time we talked, I gently brought up our last conversation. I told him that I was trying to help him and encourage him, not make things worse for him. I reminded him that most things worth having in life don’t happen by lot or luck. They involve making certain choices and investing time and hard work. Somehow, of all the topics on the table, the turn of events led to my inviting him to come along with me to work out at the gym that afternoon, offering that you have to start somewhere.

At the gym, he got on the treadmill beside me. I didn’t want to discourage him, so I told him I’d just go as long as he did. Within five minutes, he was complaining. Before the ten-minute mark, he jabbed the button to stop the machine. “I can’t do this,” he huffed. We tried some dumbbell curls. I helped him pick an appropriate starting weight. After a few reps, he quit and just leaned back on the rack, waiting for me to finish. The next set was a repeat, with him doing five or six reps and then stopping to watch me. I suggested he lower his weight and try to get a few more reps. He muttered something about feeling ridiculous enough as it was, and refused to lower the weights. Moments into the third set, he growled angrily and clanged the weights back into the rack. “I’m done,” he snorted, and stomped off to the locker room.

Back in his bedroom, he took off his shirt and looked in the mirror at himself. Front. Side. Some attempt to flex something or other. Then, hurriedly, he pulled his shirt back over his head. “This doesn’t even work. It’s no use. I just don’t have the kind of body to be able to do that.”

And so, after fifteen minutes of his first attempt at a workout, he’d decided that Fate was against him yet again.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: The sooner you realize that life is not fair, the happier you will be.

Recall that this advice was practiced and passed on by a woman who was experiencing the most difficult time of her life. She was a kind and loving wife, mother and friend. It was not *fair* that she had cancer. But she accepted this. And with that acceptance came a sense of peace, even purpose.

You see, those who expect life to be fair behave as though some cosmic scale is being balanced on behalf of each person. For every difficult thing, they are owed an equally easy thing. For every pain suffered, they have somehow earned the right to expect a comparable pleasure. As the hard knocks stack up, resentment and impatience mount, begrudging the Universe for being so lax in evening the odds in their favor.

And so they sit, unwilling to budge from crumbling docks, demanding that their ship come in.

In short, this belief that life is supposed to be fair immobilizes us. It leads to that victim mentality that I mentioned in the first chapter on Choice. The fact is, life is in large part what we make it. Bad things happen. Happy people have merely learned to accept the bad parts as a given, to shrug them off quickly, and to capitalize on the many good things around them.

So let's say I'm lonely. I've tried being friends with certain people, but they just aren't interested. Or I asked someone out and they turned me down. It seems everyone else has close friends and lovers except me. If I believe that life is supposed to even out, what will I do? I will reheat last Friday's take-out and eat dinner alone, sulking and wondering when my phone will ring. Furthermore, I will feel that, when that phone rings, it had *better* be someone who will be my soul mate immediately, never let me down, and always be available — in order to make up for the years I haven't been granted what everyone else has.

But — if I accept that life isn't fair, I will not wait for things to change. No one owes me anything. If I want friends or a relationship, it's going to be up to me to put in the effort. I'll have to go out there and be friendly, even if I'm rejected at times along the way. If I want to spend time with the friends I do have, I won't be keeping track of who called whom last and waiting for it to even out. I'll just pick up the phone and call.

If I don't like my weight, I won't bemoan those skinny blankety-blanks who can eat a whole pizza and never gain an ounce. I'll accept that, though it may be harder for me than others, getting to where I'd like to be will not come via some cosmic scale suddenly tipping in my favor to even things out in my life, but through a decision to change my eating habits and stick to an exercise regimen.

I have seen people overcome seemingly insurmountable odds, and go on to thrive. And I have seen those with plenty of potential wither away in the briar patch of bitterness. In essence, it all comes back to choice. Life will be perceived as good or bad based on the choices we make at each turn, not on some unseen and unpredictable system of pluses and minuses. In short, if I want my life to be different from what it is, I'm the only one responsible for bringing about that change.

[Chapter 5: Questions for Reflection and Discussion.](#)

CHAPTER 6

HAPPINESS

If you're poking through the book at random and have no idea who Carlotta is yet, consider reading this chapter as a unit with the previous two. You may well understand what follows without taking my suggestion; but as I said in starting the preceding chapter, I believe you'll find that the advice here will take fuller shape within the context of the person who passed it along to me.

I spent eight years of my life committed to one girl. My heart was hers and hers alone. Truth is, I pined after her even longer than that.

Now, I say I was dating her. She would say I was sometimes dating her. Or rather that she was sometimes dating me. Or at least that we were sometimes *something*. I'm not sure I even knew what dating was back then, I was so young when it all started. We attended the same school. We didn't really talk about what we "were" very often, but everyone knew that we were *something*. At least they told me they did. Most of the time, I was OK with being that nebulous *something* as long as I could be with her. Smell her perfume. Write locker notes to one another. Talk to her often. Back when land lines and one service provider were all we had, my parents forced me to get a separate line; after all, she lived a whole forty minutes away, and any calls outside of a twenty-mile radius were considered long distance. The result was regular three-hundred-plus-dollar-a-month phone bills.

Sometimes, in early high school, when I'd falter — doubt *us* — I'd venture bringing up what exactly we *were*. She'd look me in the eyes and tilt her head toward me, a wicked little smile forming. She'd say something like, "Why do we have to put words to it? Why is it so important that everyone else have a label for us, when *we* know what we are? Isn't that all that's really important?" And I'd think, *OK, I think that means we are what I think we are. Phew! I think.*

As high school graduation drew near, these semi-reassurances were no longer enough. While I was away on my senior trip to Disney World, I confided in a friend during one of those senior-trip, late-night talks, that I was going to break up with this girl when I got back. I loved her, but I knew somewhere in my head that I should not go off to college as an unspoken *something*. It tore me apart. But I was steeled to do the deed. When I returned, I called her. "We need to talk."

She cut right in. "Hi! Welcome back! I really need to talk to you, too. Can I go first?" Hearing her voice started to corrode the steel. I didn't want to do this. But I had to. Still, I could do the gallant thing and let her speak first.

"Yes. Sure."

She sighed in a way I'd never heard from her, like for once, she was actually unsure of herself. There was no wicked little smile behind her voice this time. "Listen . . . I've been thinking. I . . . haven't treated you very well. You've . . . been amazing to me for four years, and I've never given you a straight answer about what we are."

My heart felt like it was not going to keep up. Was she finally going to tell me I was . . . *nothing* to her? Why had I let her speak first. I didn't want to end things hearing that it had all meant nothing!

She continued, “You are everything I could ever look for in a guy. And . . . this is hard for me to say, but . . . I really want to be with you. *With* you. Like commit. Boyfriend and girlfriend, and tell everyone.”

My eyes pounded in their sockets. All of the sadness and rejection I'd felt was forced out every which way by a rush of overwhelming elation! It was one of the few times in my life that I was quite literally speechless.

“Erik? Are you there? I . . . know that seems like it's out of the blue, but . . . it isn't. When you were away, I really missed you and I thought, I don't want to be without you in my life. Ever.”

I've since imagined that the voice that finally emitted from me was low and sexy, perfectly calm. In reality, I'm sure I sounded like the frog prince before the royal transformation. “I want that, too.”

“Oh, good!” she whispered, relieved. “I thought for a second there that you'd given up on me. Which I would have understood. I don't know how you didn't give up on me earlier.” Silence. “Oh!” she giggled warmly, “You said you had something you wanted to talk about, too! I almost forgot. I was so nervous about my thing. What's up?”

I was literally crying with joy and relief. I felt dizzy. “Oh, nothing. I just wanted to talk about . . . the same thing, actually. But we said it all.”

We talked a long time that night, keeping the children of the good folks at the phone company fed.

Graduation was the following weekend. I didn't have my own car yet, so graduation day was to be the first time I'd actually see her after that, though we talked by phone every day in between. I wanted that day to be perfect. The graduation itself was obscured by this new development in things.

Brace yourself for what is to follow. Decide *now* that you will not send mocking emails to me. Be mature. Be understanding. Be amazed.

I had never kissed her.

In fact, if I'm being completely honest, other than during games of Truth or Dare, I'd never kissed anyone yet. Not in a romantic, I-mean-it kind of way. Ah, tender seventeen.

In today's world where grade-school kids I know are “going out” or talking about protection, I'm sure I seem like the biggest freak. We were raised a certain way, and I'd been after her since before kissing was a thing for us back then. I'm not sure about all the ingredients that led to this reality. Religious repression, my own perfectionism. But, those are the facts. And now I was horrified. Would I be a good kisser? What if I did it *wrong*? We didn't have the Internet. I couldn't just Google [how to kiss].

I decided to write a song. I'd already written her songs before this. One was called “Special Place in My Heart.” Another was called “Fairy Tale.” Breath-taking, I know. What's more, for the very first time, I am going to reveal to you, my reading audience, some of the lyrics to the latter. This is World Premiere stuff. Hang onto your hats, kids.

*I used to think that unicorns were fairy tales,
That knights in shining armor don't exist;*

*Magic seemed as silly as the rest did,
And dragons were a fable, just a myth.*

*I doubted that there was a well of wishing
Or a fountain that could make an old man new;
But I believe in all of these and more now —
You made my fairy tale come true.*

I'll give you a moment to let the chills subside. There's more, of course, but my talent agent has cautioned me against revealing all the wonder at once.

It's important to note here that, while I had written this girl several songs, I'd always *given* them to her on cassette tape (if you don't know what that is, do a quick Internet search). "Here. I wrote you something." I never sang or played them for her live, and I never listened to them with her. It was write, pass, part, chat later.

This time, I was going full monty. This time, I was going to write the song of all songs. And I was going to sing it to her, at the piano. Live, baby. And then — *then* — as the last notes hung in the air, I was going to seize the moment. And kiss her.

Graduation was a blur. I was Valedictorian. I said some things I presume I worked on before saying. I got some awards. I don't remember what they were for. The whole time, in between marching and the speeches and applause, I just kept running through those lyrics to my song. I air-played the chords on my knees. Over and over. It had to be perfect. It had to be!

The diplomas had been passed. The caps had been thrown. Goodbyes were said. Tears were shed. And the last lingering conversations slipped out the doors. I had told her — my *girlfriend* (oh, the joyous ring it had!) — that I had something for her afterward, but I had to give it to her at the school. I was in high standing with all of the staff, and so I'd borrowed keys to the building. We walked into the empty and silent auditorium together. The humidity from the crowd was dissipating and it was beginning to cool. A lone spotlight was on, directly over the black grand piano. I led her by the hand to a place beside me on the bench. My ears were ringing with nervous anticipation. I said nothing.

I began to play the opening chords of the song. My song. Our song. It was called "Saying Goodbye." It had just the right amount of melancholy parting at my going off to college and hopeful resolve in our newly confirmed and public relationship. And so I played. It sounded good. It was all just as I'd imagined it would be! It was happening! Only — I'd forgotten the words to the first verse. For what seemed an uncomfortably long time, I played those first chords over a few times, trying to act like it wasn't a mistake. And then, my salvation! The words flooded back into my head. I sang it out, getting quiet and loud and raspy at all the right parts.

The last few notes hung in the air. It was *déjà vu*. The time was here! I leaned toward her. I made nice, soft lips like I'd practiced. And . . . contact! Oh the bliss! Oh the rapture! I was engulfed in the heat rising from my collar and in her perfume. Then we drew apart.

And a long, slimy string of drool formed a drooping trapeze between our mouths, finally breaking to swing down and slurp against each of our chins.

I am not lying to you. I wish I were.

We did our best to quickly and discretely tend to things. We didn't laugh. We never spoke of it again.

That summer was magical. I left for college completely confident that, when I was through, we would marry and live happily ever after.

I was later to find out that my confidante from that late-night senior trip chat had tipped her off when we got back, that I was going to call things off for good. That explained the sudden change of heart. Or at least words.

Unfortunately, college was a repeat of high school. She knew I was hooked, and her commitment became less verbal. Less public. Less. She went to a school fifteen hours away, and our talks dwindled. Early on, she reneged on the *boyfriend-girlfriend* thing and said she wanted to go back to just “knowing what we were.” I couldn't let go. That one summer had given me the taste of happiness that being with her could bring. We could have it again that way. She was just nervous. She still loved me. I needed her to love me, or I could not ever really be happy.

I waited. She dated. I didn't know. The spring before she graduated, I visited her during break at her house. I came to tell her that either she committed — like it had been during that summer years ago, once and for all — or it was over. And yet I was still prepared to marry her if she did commit.

She told me she'd been seeing other people, as far back as high school. She said she hadn't told me because she didn't want to hurt me. And she informed me that she was engaged to someone else. They married that summer. It was over.

THE BEST ADVICE SO FAR: If you're expecting someone else to make you happy, you never will be.

Now, before you think this advice is a bitter refrain, hear me out.

I might rephrase Carlotta's advice this way: No one can *make* you happy. You see, happiness is a choice. I chose to allow myself to be happy only if I could have this girl, and have it be in my fairy tale way. I deluded myself, by choice. When I look back, I saw signs. I *chose* to ignore them. I can admit this now.

I repeat: happiness is a choice. It does not happen to you. You choose it. Or you choose to bypass it. As I said in my chapter on choices, this does not mean that we always choose our circumstances. But we choose what we *do* with those circumstances. I chose to fixate on a dream that was not real. And so I chose not to be happy. There were countless reasons to be happy all around me, and I missed them during those years. I see them now, as clear as Christmas. But I missed them then.

The fact is, not only can no one *make you happy*, no one can *make you mad*. Or jealous. No one can make you love them. In each case, the responsibility for these choices lies solely with us.

Let's take anger. How often do we find ourselves saying, "That person just makes me so angry!" And, so, in our minds, our mood is necessarily *their* doing. It is out of our control. They have the control. But consider. When that person criticizes you or argues with you or leaves dirty socks on the floor, would it make someone else angry? Would it make *me* angry? If the power were coming from that person, it should. A critical person in your life might even become critical of me directly, and it will likely not have the same effect on me as it has on you. It may even have no effect whatsoever. But again, if this person held the power to "make you mad," they would logically hold the same power over everyone. And they don't.

Or what if the sock dropper or barker were a senile old man in a nursing home you were visiting. Would his socks *make* you mad? If he growled furiously at you, shaking his gnarled fist, "Mabel! You've burned the stew again, you old cow!" would it *make* you mad? I don't think so.

So, if the power of anger is not emitting somehow from the person, nor from the actions themselves, where does it come from?

It comes from within ourselves. We *choose* to allow ourselves to give in to anger. Or we can choose not to.

Still not convinced? Who hasn't experienced a mother in the throes of screeching bloody murder at her kids when the phone rings. Does she chance missing the call? Or pick up in a rage, shouting, "Whoever you are, *leave me alone!* My rotten kids are driving me crazy!" No. And you know this to be true — she picks up that phone, dire threats still issuing forth, and magically becomes June Cleaver, chiming "Hello. . ." in musical tones. Maybe that was your mother. Maybe you *are* that mother. But herein lies further proof that we *can*, in fact, choose where being angry is concerned. Even mid-swing.

Now, while no one can *make* you happy, there are certainly people in life with whom it is easier to choose happiness! I highly recommend spending most of your time with such people where possible. And there are people with whom it is harder to make that choice. Likewise, there are people with whom it will be easier to resist choosing anger, and people with whom it will be more difficult. But the truth remains: whether easy or difficult, the choice is ours.

And accepting this is far from a bitter refrain! It is freedom. Someone else isn't running — or ruining — your life. Not your lover or spouse. Not your parents or your boss or your kids. They simply don't hold that power. Only you do.

[Chapter 6: Questions for Reflection and Discussion.](#)

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 4:

1. What are some times when you've had to start over in life? How did you handle those times?

2. What are some words or phrases that you associate with starting over?

3. Do you consider yourself a self-motivator when it comes to starting over, or do you fare better with help? If the latter, do you tend to seek out that help when you need it, or to avoid starting over instead?

4. Is there any area where you'd presently like to start over? What holds you back?

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

CHAPTER 5:

1. Can you think of a person in your own life who tends to see life as categorically unfair to them? How do you feel when you spend time in the company of this person?
2. Are there circumstances you feel or have felt to be unfair about your life?
3. When things seem unfair in your own life, how do you tend to respond?
4. When you advise a friend or family member who is feeling that life is unfair, what might you be likely to say? How closely does your advice to others match your personal reactions when your own life seems unfair?
5. Can you think of a specific time when you reacted well to unfair circumstances? How do you think your choices affected the events that followed?

[BACK TO THE BOOK](#)

CHAPTER 6:

1. What do you think are some tell-tale signs that we might be relying on others for our own happiness?
2. Be honest: Are you currently letting your happiness hinge on someone else's actions or responses to you? If not, have you ever?
3. What are the perceived benefits of letting others make you happy? What are the drawbacks?
4. Consider the central piece of advice in this chapter: **“If you're expecting someone else to make you happy, you never will be.”** Is this concept a new one for you to consider? Do you think it is sound advice? If not, what problems do you see with it?
5. What is your personal response to the related claim that “. . . no one can *make* you mad. Or jealous”? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
6. How difficult a change would it be for you at this point in your life to apply the advice from this chapter? What realistic first step would you need to take in order to put it into practice?

[BACK TO THE BEGINNING](#)