

DATING DOESN'T HAVE TO SUCK



THE **NO**
BULLSHIT
FIELD
GUIDE
TO
DATING
READINESS

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DATING DOESN'T HAVE TO SUCK

The NO Bullshit Field Guide to Dating Readiness

Dating Doesn't Have to Suck: The No Bullshit Field Guide to Dating Readiness

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Published by Spire-Light Press

ISBN: 978-1-0696913-0-9

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Dedication:

I honestly wish we lived in a world where this book would be completely unnecessary, but this book is dedicated to all the guys who need to know what's in here.

To Andréa, whose insight, patience, and support made this book actually happen. And who's inadvertently proven that 5 years later, everything in this book actually works.

Deb M., without whom my whole Widower's Wingman journey would never have started.

And to my amazing family and friends who didn't disappear when I got weird and quiet for the better part of a year while I wrote this... you know who you are. Thanks for being such an important part of my journey even if it doesn't seem like it at the time.

Special Thanks to:

Louis C., Josh K., Daniel G., Greg W., Dan & Kelly D., Tim E., Drew C., Brandon V., Roland L., Donny C., Pistol Pete, Greg P., Lynn M., Rick M., Jim S., Yas A., Ayya, Nora, Stephen A, Michael D., Boyse A., Mike W., Clayton C., Aubrey M., Mel H., Justine P., John K.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This is a practical, actionable workbook. There's a few hundred "read it and feel better about your situation until the next thing grabs your attention" books out there. This one runs on a simple principle: do the exercises and use the theory as a tool that extracts clarity. Don't use the exercises and it's an informative and hopefully entertaining addition to your nightstand collection.

If you want to read through any given section first then go back and do the work, do so with my blessing. Many of the exercises will take more than one sitting: this is not a sprint, take the time. A few weeks of doing these exercises properly now typically saves two to ten years of dating to figure out the exact same thing. It also eliminates the most expensive part of the process, which is getting into a bad relationship and then needing to start over.

What you'll need: something to write with and something to write on. A legal pad is ideal. Writing by hand makes a difference and I could fill an entire book on the neurology and psychology of why that is, but in the interest of keeping this book thinner than a medieval bible, trust me on this point. That being said if you really prefer electronic then be my guest... just one exception, NO A.I. if you want results that matter.

The theory sections are there for anyone who wants to understand why this works. Read them or don't: the exercises stand on their own.

What you're building here needs to be yours before anyone else gets a say on it, and again, that includes any A.I. model. An accountability partner who holds you to your commitment without weighing in on the content, however, is a genuinely good idea.

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INTRODUCTION

I'm all about simplicity, so let's cut to the chase. There are plenty of dating guides/books out there and mountains of content online. A few are rare islands of sage advice amidst a veritable ocean of drivel. This book is written for men who've been widowed or blindsided by divorce to find clarity about who they are, what a "good relationship" means now, and specifically what they need to look for in a partner. That said, the clarity it brings works for anyone who is dating with the intent to find a stable long-term relationship.

If you're reading this, chances are you've been through a special form of hell, the kind of rollercoaster that leaves you so shaken and empty that for no explicable reason you've sat, alone, in the dark just to get away from the rampant turmoil that is the world (Don't worry, we **all** do it at some point).

You've also probably pondered and searched for answers to all of these questions (or some variation of them:

- Does it ever get any better?
- How long does it take to get over/past this?
- Why am I fine one day and a flaming train wreck the next?
- Is it wrong that I feel inclined to want a relationship?
- Is it normal to be this horny?
- How long do I need to wait?
- Will I be "forgiven" if I start a new life/find someone?
- How will I deal with my kids/family/church/etc... ?

If you're reading this, it's because you've got a yearning or drive to find that special someone who makes life fun and vibrant again. Maybe you've gone out a bit and tried looking around, or signed up to an app or two and thought something along the lines of..



The thing you need to remember about the dating industry is... **it's an industry!** And it's an industry that is out to make money. In fact, the dating industry is remarkably similar to casinos and street hustlers, because they get paid by making you play their game, by dangling the elusive prize over you, just out of reach. If you play their game by the numbers "the house always wins" or at least **far** more often than not.

It looks pretty bleak when you compare:

- ❑ The overwhelming options in apps/sites and their algorithms, the "numbers game," the bad press around bots and scammers and no guarantees to be found anywhere.
- ❑ The matchmakers with the same mystique as fortune-tellers who will gladly match you up with five people for a mere few thousand dollars.
- ❑ Preening, posing peacocks flashing gold chains, fancy cars and a vision of masculinity borne from venom and malice... you can join his woman hating cult (for a nominal fee and most likely your immortal soul).

I totally get it. Looking at this train-wreck varies from frustrating to terrifying. Honestly, a lot of the dating advice you'll find isn't really made for people like us. It doesn't address what **you** need to **know** before stepping back into the scene.

It's **not** just about finding someone **right now**, it's about making sure you're **ready** to find **the right relationship** without settling for anything less.

I've been there. I had twenty years with a beautiful wife who was a force of nature unto herself. We had a good relationship and faced life's challenges together, which included 9 years of her struggle with a rare cancer, the last 9 months of which were a medical nightmare scenario. After she died, I decided to learn what life without her could be. I started again.

I've seen the craziness and I still do, every day, as I help others navigate it. I've seen firsthand how much easier and more rewarding it can be when you take a step back, do the personal work, and really figure out what you want before you dive in, because I stumbled through doing it for myself.

I learned... I refined... I tested.

Now, I use everything I've learned to help others through a much smoother process than my own. I know those first attempts can feel too big, too messy, too challenging. Hell, where does one even begin?

This book is for **you**, to help guide **you** through the first steps and get you to a place where you feel **confident and clear** about **who you are** and **what you want**.

So, what makes this book different from all the other dating books out there? This isn't about seduction or the "ten ways to get her eating out of your hand," or getting her to like you, or any other techniques and tips. It's definitely not about rushing you into anything.

It is about helping you get a **solid foundation** under your feet. To know exactly who you are, what you want, and **what's important** so you can **go after what you really want**.

A spectacular quote from Seneca (philosopher and O.G. stoic) is particularly apropos here... “Ignoranti quem portum petat, nullus suus ventus est.” (If one does not know to which port they sail, no wind is favorable.)

So, before you run blindly into “dating pool damnation” with the gas pedal to the floor so hard you’re giving yourself blisters from the pressure alone, it’s critical to understand where you want to end up. This particular parade of pixels or printed pages promises a practical pathway and perspective to:

- ❑ **Know** if you’re ready
- ❑ **Reconcile** the past to be able to move forward
- ❑ **Rediscover** who you are now
- ❑ **Articulate** what a healthy relationship means now
- ❑ **Pinpoint** what you’re looking for in your ideal partner



Right now, you're at a crossroads. **One path** keeps you exactly where you are... **stuck playing defense**, replaying memories like it's a golden oldies station and hoping that maybe someday you'll figure out how to change it. That path? It's about as fun as watching paint dry.

Then there's **the other path** where you actually do something about your life. The one where you stop playing defense and **start calling the damn shots**. It might get a little uncomfortable at times but "there's gold in them there hills."

Here's the reality: No one's coming to rescue you. There's no Hollywood moment where some mysterious woman sees through your tortured soul and magically makes you whole again. If you sit on your ass waiting for that, you might as well adopt twelve cats and start collecting decorative plates.

These are the choices:

Do nothing and hope that the almighty sends you divine inspiration, a million dollars, and the perfect woman.

or...

Reconcile your past, rediscover yourself, establish a baseline and choose a path to start building a life you're eager to wake up for every morning and that she finds irresistible.

This book is **about you**: the new version of you who is empowered by the past, who **knows** exactly **what he wants**, and who has the confidence to **go get it**.

So, here's the million-dollar question:

Are you ready to step up and start **authoring your next chapter**?

Turn the page and find out.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Why it's not as simple as "Go out and get you some."

If, like me, your relationship ended with the loss of your spouse, I'm sorry for the circumstances, but pleased that you found this resource.

If you're on the receiving end of a divorce, much of this will also apply to you and I encourage you to see how much of what's in this book rings true.

The death of a spouse hits harder than anything in the movie *Full Metal Jacket* ever threw at Private Pyle, and that's saying something. Dealing with the logistics and emotional aspects of that loss, while still needing to keep up with the day to day tasks of our own life, is more complicated than open heart surgery in Grand Central Station... at rush hour.

My fellow widowed will certainly recognize what I have coined "the carnival." This is the inevitable period after the loss where your life is suddenly flooded with too many well-intentioned people, none of whom know what to say because they're unable to understand the endless barrage of too much stimulation, too many options, too much to think about and no bandwidth to try. You, dear reader, are neither the first or last to just sit or lay down in a dark room, too tired to sleep and unable to shut down your mind from the raging tempest of unformed thoughts to just linger in darkness. It's a brief reprieve from the implicit obligation to comfort the friends and family who come to

grieve, give their condolences and ask you what you need (not that you'd have the first clue what that is through the haze of overwhelm).

We carry on, we grin and bear it, while we comfort and console them because we're expected to be strong, dependable, unflinching even in the face of our loss, which is especially true for men. Yes, it was their loss too, but rarely are we personally afforded the opportunity to pause, process and grieve until after "the carnival" is over. When all those well-wishers have gone back to their respective lives, we are left alone to figure out how to adjust to a life where it feels like three quarters of the floor is missing while simultaneously being haunted by the unavoidable and conspicuous absence.

Some of you had your life suddenly shattered by a choice that you didn't make, handed as a decree, used like a weapon so vicious that it could only be forged by the minds of humans. I refer of course to the mighty hammer of **divorce**, which makes even the pantheon of gods look away in distaste. In this case the pangs of betrayal, resentment, doubt, and shame are, I've been told, positively scrotum-clenching. It also doesn't help that in western society divorce is, traditionally, regarded as a kind of failure. The proverbial salt in the wound is that they're alive and moving on, while leaving you to figure out by sheer trial and error how to build a life from what's left.

Both of these events invariably lead to a moment of clarity where a particular truth sets in: we have more life to live and the freedom to choose how we want that life to be. Some will come to this epiphany within weeks while others may take a year or two, while still others can take a decade or more. But ultimately, at some point, we look forward and see potential and possibility.

As you look to the path ahead, everyone's view will be different. You may find it obscured by the patterns, traditions, and rituals of your past, but if you see hope and opportunity, that's where we begin this process.

I'll also assume since you've read this far into a book on dating readiness that you've decided to take on the quest to find someone, and

I rather doubt it's for the scientifically proven benefits to mental and physical health, social stability, and more, but because **you feel lonely**. This is an entirely natural and worthy pursuit. It's also a good time to address the most common emotional challenges.

What About All These Emotions?

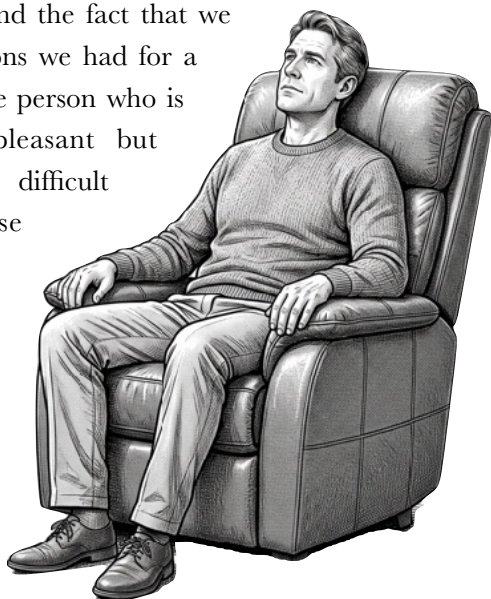
Grieving the Expectations That Cannot Be

When we're young we say things that are often well intentioned but unrealistic. We lack the life experience and perspective that come with it, so we make bold proclamations like "we'll be together forever," "I would die for you," and set expectations for ourselves based on a narrative that assumes a fair and static world, or that we can somehow stave off injury, illness, or good old "acts of god."

The limited experience of youth blinds us to the tremendous value of our fickle and finite time on this earth. This is part of the human condition, but now we find ourselves forcibly faced with the realization that the life we expected cannot persist, no matter how strong our desire, or our attachment to the notion of forever.

There's no easy way around the fact that we need to identify the expectations we had for a life we planned to live with the person who is no longer there. It is unpleasant but necessary to sit with those difficult feelings, to surrender those dreams to the great unknown so we have the space to create new ideas, and expectations to find a new path.

It absolutely sucks while it's happening. Just know that you're not alone.



Looking Back Without Rose Colored Glasses

Unless a couple is the type to air their “dirty laundry” in public or on social media, the common assumption is that marriage is an effortless, happy, blissful affair a notion our society glorifies without irony.

The reality is that all relationships have some degree of friction. Few are perfect, many are strained, and some are outright terrible.

Most of us in North America are raised with a pervasive fear of being judged and the resulting obligation to “keep up appearances.” Think of the extraordinary lengths some families go through to protect an arbitrary ideal like purity of lineage, race or group affiliation, let alone hide mental illness, cycles of abuse, social scandal, potential financial ruin or other “family secrets.” Social media does the exact same thing through a more exaggerated lens. Those who use social media regularly tend to actively curate their profiles to show a specific persona, or an idealized version of themselves.

This trend goes into overdrive after death. The social convention of “we do not speak ill of the dead” means that unpleasant truths like debt, affairs, addictions, or worse often surface only when the person protecting them is gone. For those left behind, ‘keeping up appearances’ very often becomes a difficult challenge about protecting the secrets and reputations not only of the spouse that’s gone, but also their own — which sometimes means taking on the burden of those secrets, or worse, the blame. That’s a reliable path to deep resentment and an unwillingness to trust... both of which will quietly derail any new relationship before it begins.

The good news is that emotional intelligence is becoming more recognized and appreciated. The “suffer in silence” model is losing its grip, and most people have had enough of inherited shame to last a lifetime.

Facing Survivor's Guilt

I say the following from a place of first-hand experience: about half of the men I've spoken with in-depth after losing their spouse feel guilt for not being able to save their spouse or take their place in death. In the case of those who've been on the receiving end of divorce, the blame for the "death of the relationship" is foisted firmly on the ex-wife with the man in question trying to distance himself from any fault, while other men take the blame completely on to themselves, along with the associated guilt.

Far too often I hear "they were a better person than me" or "it should have been me instead." If that's the territory your inner dialogue has actually been hanging around in, talking to a therapist is the bravest and smartest thing you can do. This book can get you ready to date again; it has tools to help you face what you're feeling, but it won't carry real grief or trauma for you, which should never be carried alone.

If you're facing the kind of challenge above, these three thoughts are unpleasant, but I want you to really think about them before rushing ahead...

1. You may **not be ready** to be looking for a relationship. This book will offer tools to help you gain insights into yourself. **Resolve this part before you even think about dating.**
2. In long-term relationships we tend to lose track of aspects of our individuality in the day to day of the roles we take on. Again, the tools here will help you rediscover those parts for yourself.
3. The greatest gift you could ever give someone you truly love is **sparing them the suffering of losing you.**

The most significant way to **honor their commitment to you** and your time together is **by learning to live as a better version of yourself**, upholding your shared values and incorporating everything you learned from them.

Dealing With Guilt Around Loyalty

You might feel like choosing to develop a rich and vibrant life or dating again is tantamount to **cheating**, or **dishonoring** your loved one and the **commitment you made** to them. Maybe you feel like you have unfinished business because you believe, in retrospect, that you should have been more “in the moment” during your time together or feel like something important has been left unsaid.

After loss, most people find themselves facing shame around having their needs or wants met. Beyond the basics, this includes sexual needs, basic connection, and physical touch. It is particularly notable in those with complex trauma or who were long-term caregivers. I say all this without delving into the nearly ubiquitous issue of sexual shame in the developed world, mostly because we’ll get into that later on in the book.

Whether it’s about being heard, touched, cuddled, other forms of intimacy, or even just companionship so one doesn’t feel alone, it is both completely normal and acceptable to not only have those desires and needs, but to get them met in safe and responsible ways.

There might be guilt around not having been there enough (work or family obligations) or simply the current desire for carnal fulfillment (horny as fuck). Even the desire to step forward into a brighter future can carry shame or guilt, especially when friends, family, religion, or “society” have other ideas about what is moral, objectively correct, or best for you.

While the overly simplistic advice of “They’re not in your shoes and they don’t feel your loss and loneliness so they can sit on it and rotate!” is amusing, it does little to banish those limiting emotions. It is necessary to slow down, acknowledge, understand, and be capable of communicating what your needs, and desires are. Keep reading! We’ll do that later in this book.

Why Would Anybody Want Me?

Perhaps you fear that you are somehow broken, unworthy or that you'll never be lucky enough to find someone to love you again. Let's get stunningly honest about a few things:

- ❑ **You are the product of imperfect circumstances.** Listen to the lyrics of the song *Someday Never Comes*, by Creedence Clearwater Revival. If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, or have experienced toxic, abusive, unhealthy, or absent relationships, and any of this led to a less than ideal view of yourself: **you are not alone.** Every generation either follows or overcompensates for the patterns of the generation before them. The “adults” in our life **never** had all the answers; they just did the best they could with what they knew at the time.
- ❑ **None of us suffer from the tragic flaw of perfection.** Without exception, every human being on earth has baggage and insecurities. Start getting comfortable with the idea that you are “perfectly imperfect” and worthy of love (including your own).
- ❑ **Life is a game, and like all games you have to participate to progress.** Sitting in your corner hoping that people will bring the game to you doesn't work. **You** have to step up to the board to roll the dice to move forward. Life is about living in the same way that games are about the process of play, and both are infinitely more about the connections we make, the bonds we forge, and how we choose to play than the outcome.
- ❑ **People fall in love everyday.** It's easy to forget that fact in a world where we are constantly bombarded with fear, shame, division, and manufactured outrage. Every single day, throughout the world, tens of thousands of people find love. You won't see it in the news because it's not sensationalized, but it happens every day. It can and will happen for you if you put in the work to be seen.

How Long Do I Need to Wait?

This question is, without a doubt, the most asked question by both men and women when they consider dating again. For clarity, this applies to both widowed and divorced people. The advice I was given when my late wife passed and that you've likely heard at least once is:

Wait one year before making any major life changes.

This advice, though well meaning, is very broad and doesn't account for changes that are necessary or unavoidable. Here's why it does make a certain amount of sense, from a neurological perspective. Your brain runs on a strict energy budget by automating as much of daily life as it can into "autopilot" routines (heuristics, if you want the fancy ten dollar technical term). We'll get more into how that works, and why it matters so much, in Chapter 4.

Why it matters here is that the longer we live with someone, the more we divide and conquer the workload. Each partner specializes on the aspects they take on. Our day-to-day patterns become normalized, and whole roles, (like who keeps the social calendar, the kitchen inventory, or specific chores) get outsourced to one partner rather than shared between both of you (yes, there are some exceptions). Also, remember that skills we rarely or never use get "rusty."

When we lose a partner (even through a surprise divorce) the mental autopilot no longer works because everything we used to 'outsource' or share is ours again. We need to rekindle those unused skills, and it takes an extraordinary amount of cognitive energy to navigate the basic day-to-day stuff. We have more to think about and skills to relearn because "normal" doesn't apply anymore. Our identity is often anchored in what we recognize, so the more we change the things and places around us, the less of an anchor our identity has. With no anchors we quickly lose the sense of who we are.

It takes time to accept, adapt, and establish new routines to create a new sense of "normal." This takes, on average, a year but "your

mileage may vary,” especially for those who hate change or have difficulty adapting.

This new enhanced cognitive load also explains the “brain fog,” memory lapses, lethargy, listlessness, chronic mental fatigue (and even the sitting alone in the dark which is stunningly common among widowed men). Granted this is a simplified explanation and there are many other factors such as nutrition, exercise, proper sleep habits, socialization, and more, many of which are neglected in grief.

For our sanity, our efforts are best directed away from the notion of reclaiming what was. Nature shows us, on an ongoing basis, that we either progress and grow or stagnate and die: harsh, but true. Our priority needs to be establish our new life, new routines, and new habits. We need to cultivate our own sense of stability.

During the first year, any changes should be intentional, minimal, consistent, easy to maintain, and progressive to accumulate small healthy advancements that compound and add up to improve life as a whole.

The most important point that I can add here is that regardless of what others say, no matter how well meaning, any changes need to be made by you, for you, and for the life that you’re choosing to build when (and only when) you have the mental bandwidth to do so with clarity and intention.

Am I Ready For a Relationship?

Being ready to get out there and find someone has absolutely **nothing to do with a specific measure of time**. It comes down to one simple question:

Are you looking to fill a void or share a life?

If **your desire** is primarily about **avoiding anything** (loneliness, new normal, dealing with your emotions or self image, feeling unprepared to face this new life) then, quite simply, **you are not ready**.

Can you find a relationship to fill a void? Yes. It happens often and even when it isn't gold-digging, an outright scam, or trauma-bonding, I guarantee it will be unhealthy... more likely destructive.

A healthy partnership is about the convergence of two lives, each person complete, capable, and driven to bring the best of themselves to a shared journey. You don't need to have everything "figured out," or your life well-established and in perfect order. A solid plan and a little effort to make that plan happen is sufficient. As I am fond of saying: women want to go on the adventure together, not to **be** the adventure.

Dealing With External Opinions

There will undoubtedly be family, friends, or others with strong opinions about how quickly you should or shouldn't move on. The key to dealing with this is open and honest conversation to manage their expectations and ensure they feel heard. This centers around active listening, giving them the opportunity to express their perspective completely without getting triggered and demanding the opportunity to express yourself uninterrupted. If those who claim to love you are unwilling to even listen to your experience and perspective, it's a lack of respect and a major red flag. You'll need to be particularly cautious about how much power/agency you give them in your life and decisions..

What Do I Need to Watch Out For?

We have a tendency to believe that the only people who would want us or understand our perspective are others who've lost as we have. Bonding over trauma is fine for support, accountability, or friendship, but this is not a good source for core compatibility. It can blind us to what's most important for a long-term relationship by making us overlook emotional maturity, conflict-resolution styles, common interests or shared values. Imagine, just for a moment, what a relationship based in common trauma would look like if one partner found themselves ready to move forward and the other could not.

What is Wrong With The Dating Scene?

Perhaps you know all of this! Maybe you're one of the ones who reasoned it out or discovered all of the above through trial and error. You may even have looked around online to see what possibilities exist. In doing so, you've likely come face to face with the mountains of content around the current state of dating. Women bashing men, men blaming women, terrible advice put forward as well-intentioned guidance, and the myriad stories of online scammers and swindlers — it's all out there.

Then there is the dating industry which is every bit just that: **an industry**. Whether online or offline, it's become big business and to many of these companies you're little more than an "income stream."

Some apps will promise you the simple ease of swiping your way to sexy girls, while other apps and sites say that they'll use scientifically backed methodology to shower you with ideal partners. They may even cater to specific preferences like higher education, socio-economic status, a particular faith (christianity, judaism, islam), gamers, love of pop-culture and all things "geeky," to name a few.

Many programs, coaches, and "bros" will try to sell you their patented, cure-all, magical techniques that will "get you any woman" or "have her begging for more."

Whatever their marketing says, these are businesses here to make money. It is also interesting to note that **all** online dating companies **closely guard all** their **numbers and statistics** to provide the **illusion of abundant options**, even the few publicly traded companies. Just like taxis, they only make money while you're along for the ride, which results in a natural conflict of interest. If they were honest, you would pay once for a clear and defined result.

Why Does It Have To Be So Damn Hard?!?

The simple answer to this question is: It doesn't.
But then why is it so hard?
Here's the simple answer:

- ❑ **The real issue has been confused, conflated, and complicated into a quest for the “holy grail.”**

We've been raised on romantic notions of the soulmate, the twin flame, the one true love. The fairytales of our youth tell us that love is a prize that must be earned by all manner of trial, sacrifice, and chivalrous deed. The idea of a “true love” has been made into something bigger than us, beyond us, something that is reserved for a precious fortunate few, like winning the lottery. I say this because I hear so many of those I work with say, “but I've already had my great love,” as though there is some karmic limit, or they're somehow restricted from finding a loving relationship again.

- ❑ **“In a society that profits from your self doubt, liking yourself is a rebellious act.” - Caroline Caldwell**

The vast majority of us learn from a very young age to “be quiet, sit down, do as you're told, blend in, follow the crowd.” We are socially conditioned to shun those who stand out. Is it any wonder that when we join a dating site/app or activity we follow the same pattern of blending in, “play it safe” by doing what others do?

If ever there was a place to break that pattern, stand out, and show your true colors, your dating profile is absolutely it!

❑ **The most insidious story that we are told is some variant of: You are not enough/found wanting/somehow unworthy.**

Every one of us (from royalty, to academics, to single mothers, to beggars) is just a human trying to figure out their way in this big, crazy world. We've been repeatedly told "you can't change the world." We crave connection; we search for another person who "gets us," someone with whom we are comfortable enough to enjoy figuring out this crazy thing called life.

I'd like to note here that human history has only ever been changed by individuals who decided to boldly share an idea, dream, or ideology that resonated with others. From religious movements, to civil rights, to great art, to monumental buildings; it all starts with an individual who shared their idea.

❑ **The only person who truly understands what you need or want, and will consistently advocate for what is in your best interests, is you.**

Throughout history, there have been peddlers of potions, elixirs, and cure-alls. The modern age equivalent is the apps, influencers, gurus, guides, companies, and coaches seeking to sell you their "magic bullet" system, solution, or special technique. Here's the truth... **there is no magic bullet.** Anyone offering you a quick fix just wants your money regardless of your results.

You'll know the good ones by the common single truth: It's about **you** and empowering yourself to get your own results... period.

When we factor in these points, the path becomes simple; however, for it to be easy, you need to be perfectly clear on what your version of success looks like. You also need to **know** you're ready to handle it. The next section is where we start building a level of clarity that you'll question how you ever lived without.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE WE BEGIN

Laying the mental foundation for actual change.

I'm a huge fan of Esther Perel and how she redefines relationships into something simple, elegant, and universal. The name of her podcast and card game is *Where Should We Begin*. Well, in homage, let's use her no-nonsense approach and answer that question for ourselves by redefining our relationship to ourselves with a little bit of wisdom that I'd encourage you to remember as we move forward.

- ❑ The dating industry runs on a business model that is, more often than not, at odds with your desired outcome
- ❑ Finding a relationship is not about luck, lottery, labor, or a quest for some pure, unique treasure. It is about sharing this journey of life with someone whose crazy is compatible with your crazy.
- ❑ This is not some kind of easter egg hunt or about manipulating a woman to accept you. The way you “win” is by being outwardly yourself, so the right people will find you and recognize that when you meet them.
- ❑ We're conditioned to conform, fit in, dream small: to stand out we must actually **STAND OUT!**
- ❑ The way you find someone these days is by learning to stand up and be found. Anyone who tells you different is selling snake oil.
- ❑ Everyone is trying to figure out life, regardless of how rich, famous, pretty, strong, charismatic, and/or successful they seem to be. We're all just people who have been told we're not enough, trying to connect with each other. We're all worthy of that connection, so just start with “Hello.”

What Moving Forward Actually Looks Like

The trope in North American culture is that rebuilding your life after a major loss is like joining the French Foreign Legion. One must abandon one's old life, as much as possible, and figuratively (sometimes literally) move away to establish a new identity.

Rather than putting anything “behind” us, you move forward by acknowledging the past that has brought you to this point and how that has forged the person you are today. On the next couple of pages there's a definitive exercise to do exactly that. This work is incredibly important for a few reasons:

- ❑ Based on the Zeigarnik effect, we can store a lot in our noggins, but have a limited amount of bandwidth (or working memory) at any given time. If we keep running the same thought loops, we run out of bandwidth for new thoughts and deeper reflection. By getting it out of active thought and onto paper, we have room to bring up the deeper layers, and to make new connections and associations.
- ❑ A long relationship is a multilayered and complex thing with a **lot** of emotions associated with it. Putting it on paper takes a great deal of the raw emotional charge off of those memories.
- ❑ It gives you a chance to see new patterns over a less compressed timeline, which creates a more coherent story, and it helps you understand the events in context.

We need to remember the good times that lifted us up, the rough times that showed us the depth of our strength and proved we know how to persevere, and the times we could have done better — not to punish ourselves but to understand the type of man we choose to be.

What if we choose to drop the lens of the loss we've suffered as the will of some outside force or karmic punishment? Try with me for just a moment to imagine that the universe is indifferent and without malice. Rather than looking for an outside motivation or meaning for our loss, we can decide, instead, that we get to choose what it means to us.

I realize, of course, that last paragraph may fly in the face of some faiths or systems of belief, but I highly encourage trying it anyway, even if just as a valuable thought experiment.

The Power of Choosing Tributes

This is a practical exercise and completely optional depending on your circumstances, though I have found it a wonderfully effective tool for gaining closure (including for those who have been divorced). There is nothing like intentional action to cement new patterns!

Choose three single tasks that are intentional and meaningful, ideally where your talents or interests overlap with something your lost love was passionate about.

I, for example, chose three of my late wife's favorite songs and sang one of them (out loud and in public) on her birthday for the three years after she passed. Another gentleman that I worked with chose a small plant and tended it carefully as a tribute to their shared love of gardening; he called it his "new beginnings" plant.

Alternatively, if you find yourself divorced, I suggest you choose three tasks to affirm your new life outside the relationship. One socially outgoing divorced man whose ex-wife hated having company started a monthly board game night as a tribute to his newfound freedom and opened his home to colleagues and friends both old and new.

I recommend choosing three tributes for the simple reason that it creates an unquestionably intentional effort that has a clear beginning, a process, a timeline, and a psychologically satisfying end. Schedule them appropriately, put them on your calendar, and treat them with reverence as a pact you make with yourself. Steady, intentional, actionable, and finite steps help with closure while giving yourself deliberate permission for freedom in this new chapter of life.

The Roadmap: Where We're Going Next

This is not about techniques for “picking up women” or “game.” This is how you get ready to **do dating the right way**. Being **ready** comes down to being really **clear on** these **three things**:

- ▶ Who you are today and the version of you that you aspire to be.
- ▶ What a good relationship looks like for the person you are now.
- ▶ The most important traits you need to look for in your ideal partner (and what your dealbreakers or non-negotiables are).

To get to this clarity, we **first** need to do a little **mental housekeeping** and get things in order so you've got more mental bandwidth and a real understanding of where things are at internally. Flip to the next page and let's **begin the practical part of your journey**.



Exercise: Clearing the Slate... The Letter

A philosophy professor presented his class a perfectly mundane glass of water. “How much does the glass of water weigh?” he asked. He listened to and acknowledged several guesses. He graciously thanked the students and said, “If I hold the glass for a few minutes it weighs almost nothing. If I hold it for an hour it will feel quite heavy. If I hold the same glass of water for a few hours my arm will tremble and my shoulder will get stiff and ache. If I continue to hold the same glass of water all day I will feel intense pain in my arm, shoulder, and back... I will also likely resent holding it.”

While your arms may not ache, what pain do you suffer for the burden you carry? What if you didn’t have to carry that burden and could put it down once and for all? Sounds good, doesn’t it? But how? How do you get rid of this? I want you to write a letter, and not just any letter: **The Letter**.

This letter chronicles the entirety of a relationship with the person who’s now gone. It needs to cover everything... the amazing and triumphant, the quiet moments, the good, the bad, the sad, the ugly, the things that were said that hurt and hopefully healed, the things left unsaid that lay in stagnant puddles of regret. This is where you say it all, everything you can think of.

As you write, you’re going to find that new thoughts, old memories, repressed feelings, and other unexpected things will bubble up from the recesses of your mind. Write them down and get them out! Keep writing, and under no circumstances let those deeper fleeting thoughts or feelings sink back down... it’s those under-the-surface thoughts and deeper hidden memories that hold heat like smoldering embers that need to be brought to the surface to cool enough to be handled. Get those out and on to the page where they can’t hide, fester, and slowly burn you from within .

This is rarely done in one sitting. For our purposes, this is more of a marathon than a sprint. The letter is for you, not them; it doesn’t need to be well crafted, articulate, polite, or polished.

This level of emotional release can, and will be, tiring, raw, and painful. You will need to take breaks.

Take the breaks!

Some things will come up that will surprise you. Write them down.

Some things will seem unkind or uncomfortable. Write them down.

Some emotions will be raw and visceral and make you want to lash out. Write them down.

I don't care if you have fourteen pages of pure unfiltered profanity in blunt red crayon that makes the movie Full Metal Jacket look like some kind of lame corporate instructional video. Write it down!

When it's all out... when there is nothing left to say... you end the letter with a clean and simple "goodbye."

Once it's done, go and rest. Take a day or two, and then read the letter through once. Understand it, explore the things that surprised you, and then put the letter away. Everything in the letter is there and doesn't need to burden you anymore.

You may feel empty or as though a weight may have been lifted. Watch how your world will change in the days and weeks that follow.

If there's another part of your life that troubles you in the same way, then write another letter for that. This exercise is meant to help set you free and clean the slate for what comes next, whatever that may be for you.

What Ready To Date Actually Looks Like

Ready comes down to one single question, and it's not the easiest question because it requires a level of honesty that many people are not comfortable with. The question is: are you looking to fill a void or share a life?

Put another way... Is this relationship meant to fix/change, jump-start or give purpose and meaning to your life, **or** are you living a full, rich, and vibrant life and looking to expand your world by joining up with someone who's looking for the same?

Either way, I highly recommend you keep reading and going through the exercises because, ready or not, the level of clarity you achieve here will not only help you understand yourself better, but it will also help you learn what you need to move forward.

What a Great Relationship Looks Like

I'd like to take a moment to give two very important foundations around **every** good relationship, including the ones with our parents, siblings, family, friends, coworkers, bosses, and even our own children.

The First Foundation

When it comes to relationships there's a lot of talk about communication, honesty, trust, chemistry, connection and more. I'm going to boil it down to something very simple.

Heard • Respected • Valued

Here's why:

- ❑ **Heard:** our position in **any** given social group comes down to who listens to us. When we are **seen and heard**, we feel like we have a place in that group. The larger the group the more true this is. When the head of the family, mayor of the town, manager of the bank, or the CEO of a company listens to you, then you feel a part of the group (even if they're good leaders and listen to everyone). Our loyalty to a group wanes quickly when we feel our voice has no weight. This is especially critical in our one-on-one relationships with others.
- ❑ **Respected:** the weight or belief we **give** another is something we measure subjectively and internally. The interesting thing about respect is that it can only ever be given. It might be **afforded** due to position, reputation, or achievement; **earned** through benevolent action. Sometimes it is **freely given** because of sheer charm, in good faith, or just dumb luck. Notably, respect can be demanded but **never forcibly taken**... compliance and respect are **very** different things.
- ❑ **Valued:** we only invest our resources in the things we value. When I say resources, most people think **money** and **effort** and often forget about the more valuable ones like **time, attention, affection, and consideration**. Value can never be conveyed through words... only by the language of actions as people see, sometimes more clearly than we do, where our attention, consideration, and time are focused.

Hey, What About Communication?!?

I would assume it's obvious that communication is essential when being heard is core to a good relationship. There are some who ask how much is too much or too little... let me simplify this. We all want two things from communication: to **avoid unpleasant surprises** and to **know where we stand**. It really is as simple as that... everything else is a nice bonus.

The Second Foundation

Every relationship is an unspoken contract. What most don't realize is that each and every contract **can** be utterly unique. We tend to take a shortcut here because drafting a complete new contract from scratch takes a lot of mental effort, so people tend to use other relationships they've had in past or seen with others as a kind of de facto template. This is a reasonable idea until we assume too much, or fail to review what is aligned or not with the other person. With that in mind, let's try a little something...

Grab a paper and pen (or pencil) fold it in half to make two columns and look at your past relationships: In the left column, write a list (in no particular order) of the things you really liked from past relationships. What would you want to carry over into your new relationship? In the right column, list the things (again in no particular order) that you didn't like and want to avoid in a future relationship.

Be specific about these points... you may have to dig into some of them a little bit to get to the deeper point of what really bothered you rather than simply the symptoms, but it's a great exercise for being aware of what did and didn't work in the past, and what is likely important to you now. If you look at a few of Esther Perel's talks, she rightly points out that even in the past 40 years, relationships and our roles within them have changed drastically. The notion of husband and wife and the general expectation of what that meant were, by and large, defined for us... a template contract that people altered sparingly based on immediate needs and sometimes desires.

Now we want our partners to be our trusted confidant, intimate lover, objective therapist, accountability coach, best friend, enthusiastic cheerleader, partner in crime, loyal companion, fellow enthusiast, spiritual equal, additional household income earner, dedicated co-parent, family organizer, and, in some cases even business partner — and that's just the most common ones.

What a great relationship looks like comes down to roles. What roles do you **need** your partner to fill? What roles do you **want** them to fill? And, just as important, is understanding what roles **you are ready to fill**?

To illustrate the point, let's look at the roles of the average active dad:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Financial Advisor | ☐ Builder |
| ☐ Driving Instructor | ☐ Protector |
| ☐ Sports Coach | ☐ Provider |
| ☐ Chauffeur | ☐ Role Model |
| ☐ Tutor | ☐ Trusted Advisor |
| ☐ Co-conspirator | ☐ Disciplinarian |
| ☐ Home Savings and Loan | ☐ Mover |
| ☐ Project Manager | ☐ Shopping co-pilot |
| ☐ Short order cook | ☐ Pest Control |
| ☐ Clean up crew | ☐ Complaint Department |

One worthy question to ask yourself about what you're looking for is: "Is this specific need or role something I could hire somebody for?" I bring this up because a very pleasant fellow reached out for help finding a partner. When I asked what he was looking for in a relationship he replied, "Someone who keeps the house nice and cooks well." I suggested that for a small fraction of what I charge for the kind of coaching he wanted, accumulated costs of dating, a wedding, and all the associated fees, and... (you get the idea) he could easily find and hire a housekeeper who cooks. It would cost him infinitely less in the long run, and he could be as selective as he likes. He was clearly not in the right mindset to date.

Who You Are and What You Bring to the Relationship

“From the moment they are born, boys are expected to be men without being taught what a man is or does. Boys are given more clear instruction on what a man isn’t than what a man is through aggression from their peers and other social influences. They are told to not cry, to not be a pussy, to man up.” – Elise Micheals.

Let’s be honest... we live in a world where, on a broader scale, few of us feel personally heard, respected, or valued. It’s no wonder there’s so much distrust in companies, media, institutions, and especially the government. The apparent lack of any form of integrity, accountability, flexibility, or authenticity makes us feel disconnected and often apathetic. Add the fact that almost all of us have been conditioned since our youth to sit down, sit still, be quiet, behave, speak only when spoken to, “don’t embarrass me/yourself,” follow along, don’t skip ahead, stay in line, and **never stand out**.

If you’ve ever found yourself constantly trying to be the “good guy” and avoiding conflict, always putting others first, hoping your kindness will earn you love or approval, then you need to stop and read this next part carefully. If you’ve **hidden your needs, felt resentful** when others didn’t reciprocate, or quietly believed that being **nice should make life go smoothly**... this isn’t just bad luck. It’s a pattern. One that didn’t start with your loss, but may have gotten worse because of it. If any part of this hits, you need to read *No More Mr. Nice Guy* by Dr. Robert Glover. It will not replace what’s in this book, help with patterns that are deeply established and unhelpful across all aspects of life — and most certainly in the dating world.

Here’s the thing nobody seems to want to say out loud: a person’s worth was never supposed to be something you earn. Babies are cared for and protected because they need it, and that’s enough. Everyone says that children are our future and they need a proper and healthy

childhood, nutritious food, a good education, and preparation for the future. If we really believed it, adoption would be much easier, food programs would be flourishing, and the primary focus of schools would be functional real-world skills rather than: sit down, be quiet, behave, do what you're told, learn what you're told, memorize this, parrot back that... or get punished. That's the conditioning that primes you to spend your teens chasing approval, giving up bits of yourself to fit in with one or more groups (*we go into this a lot more in depth in Chapter 4*). Your worth was never utilitarian, or something you needed to earn: they started grading you on it because they've forgotten that too.

There's also those of us that lost ourselves in survival mode by caring for siblings, a sick parent or spouse missing out on affection because of their absence, ... even if their body was right there. Maybe every moment of your early life was meticulously over-scheduled, with Herculean expectations, or you struggled to find your own light in the shadows of much larger personalities. There are a thousand different possibilities that prevented you from discovering who you were and how to dream of bigger possibilities.

Growing up, you were handed two options for masculinity: be strong enough that violence, or at least the threat of it, keeps people from testing you, or get enough status that looks like power to give the impression that crossing you has consequences, or at least the threat of them.

Two sides of the same coin... dominance. Be threatening enough, on the street or in the boardroom, and no one gets to manipulate you. The problem with dominance is that it needs you to constantly convince the world of it, which means your focus is always on maintaining the illusion and not being in the moment. The truth is much simpler: self-sufficiency is a choice you make. It's a choice to stop chasing what others' think, and trusting yourself and your capabilities.

On the next few pages are a series of worksheets that have helped many others to:

- ☐ Review your life
- ☐ Highlight the patterns that define why your life is as it is
- ☐ Review these patterns
- ☐ Define a new vision for a future version of yourself, and get guidance on how to get there



MEDIA REVIEW COPY

MEDIA REVIEW COPY

CHAPTER 3

BACK TO BASICS

Practical questions to help you rediscover yourself.

This chapter is a practical section. Here, I'll encourage you to grab a notebook, pad, or even some scrap paper and plan about thirty to sixty minutes to work with these questions. They may seem trivial at first glance, but the better the quality of your answers, the easier it will be to use the framework presented in the next chapter to interpret them.

The more curious among you may be tempted to skip ahead to figure out how this works. I say, go ahead! These questions are unique to you and provide the raw info you'll need to extract the patterns that have shaped your development. When you understand these core patterns you can track how they shape your behavior now, especially as it pertains to all the relationships in your life.

YOUR ORIGIN STORY...

1. Describe your childhood bedroom:

- ☐ Was it a big or small room?
- ☐ Did you share it?
- ☐ What did it look like?
- ☐ Were the walls plain? Wallpapered? Posters? Decorations?
- ☐ Was there a lot in the room?
- ☐ What kind of furniture did it have?
- ☐ Were there a lot of Toys? Books?
- ☐ Was it generally clean or messy?
- ☐ If a new friend came to visit, what are three things that you would show them first?
- ☐ What is something that you'd hide away that you didn't want anyone to find?

2. The common room you spent the most time in:

- ☐ Is this a den, TV room, living room, basement, garage, kitchen, treehouse/clubhouse?
- ☐ Describe the room.
- ☐ What were the three most common activities you'd do there?
- ☐ Who would you most often be with?

3. The place where you felt the safest:

- ☐ Whether it's grandma's kitchen, a solid treehouse, or a hiding spot in the back of the closet, what is the one place you felt like you were safe to be completely and wholly yourself?

4. What were three stories from your youth that you still remember? Did they come from TV shows, cartoons, comics, books, family or somewhere else?

- 5. Who was your favorite hero/superhero?**
- ☐ What in particular made them “cool”?
 - ☐ Do you see them the same way today?
- 6. What did you want to be when you “grew up”?**
- ☐ What appealed to you about it?
 - ☐ What did you believe life would be like then?
- 7. Who did you feel safest with... who had your back?**
- 8. Who listened to you and supported your ambitions?**
- 9. Who did you seek attention from?**
- 10. What did you need to do to get attention?**
- 11. Who did you want affection from?**
- 12. What did you need to do to get affection?**
- 13. What happened when you didn't get the attention or affection you were looking for? Did you stop trying, push harder, or look for another way to get it?**
- 14. Name one adult who taught you something that still influences you to this day. Can you name another?**
- 15. What happened when you were caught indulging your curiosity? (Took something apart, climbed somewhere off-limits, asked the uncomfortable question, poked at something just to find out.)**
- ☐ Were you punished, threatened, warned off, encouraged, or just left alone?
 - ☐ Was the above answer different depending on who was around?

16. What did you learn to do when something you did went wrong? (Say sorry fast, disappear, fix it before anyone noticed, make a joke out of it.)

- ☐ What did that teach you about being allowed to try new things?
- ☐ Did you decide to try things in secret or avoid the discomfort of making mistakes?

17. When the adults around you disagreed about something, what usually happened?

- ☐ Did voices raise? Did everyone go quiet? Did someone leave the room?
- ☐ How did it get resolved, or did it just get swept under the rug?
- ☐ What evidence did you collect about how conflict is "supposed" to go?

18. Which of the following topics were openly talked about in your house, and which were avoided?

- ☐ Money
- ☐ Status and comparisons to others
- ☐ Social rules, expectations, and manners
- ☐ Feelings: yours or anyone else's
- ☐ Body image and realistic standards
- ☐ Choice with purpose versus letting life happen
- ☐ General health, illness, or death

19. What traits or qualities did you believe defined you?

FROM THEN TO NOW...

20. What ritual, tradition, or social event, if any, marked your “coming of age?”
21. At what age was it decided that you were an adult?
22. How does your life today differ from the life your younger self envisioned, particularly in the following areas?
- ☐ What did you expect to achieve by your current age, as a child?
 - ☐ How do your current achievements and lifestyle compare to those expectations?
 - ☐ What aspects of your childhood dreams have you realized, and which have changed or been abandoned?
 - ☐ How have your interests, values, and goals evolved over time?
23. From puberty until today, what are the five big milestone events that have defined your life as it is?
24. What are some of the expectations, beliefs, or ideas in your life that have limited you?
25. What values, relationships, and traits still persist from your childhood?
26. Knowing what you know now, what three pieces of advice or info would you give your younger self?
-

Exercise #1:

Write a short letter to your present self from your younger self about what’s important, and what vision your younger self had for your life.

Exercise #2:

- **Write three things you're really good at.**
 - **Now, write three things that you love doing.**
 - **Finally, write three things that you've always wanted to learn**
-

The patterns of your childhood become the blueprints for how your entire social structure gets built, in both helpful and unhelpful ways. It's the time when you had the most energy, the most natural openness, and were the most impressionable. The next chapter gets into exactly how that works. These questions do the first part, which is to get it out of your head and onto paper, so when you read through the next chapter, these answers make much more sense.

Because seeing it outside yourself is the point. That's the data. That's what lets you identify the patterns, see where they came from, and start cleaning out your mental closet. Familiar patterns and healthy patterns are very different animals, and knowing the difference is what moves you from "this is just how I am" to choosing the man you are becoming. When you know that man, trust him, and feel safe with who he is, when you can honestly say "I'd hang out with that guy any day," then so will she.

In this next part we're going to use Jungian archetypes as defined in Carol S. Pearson and Margaret Mark's book *The Hero and the Outlaw* to help you both identify how you see yourself now and choose a template as a way to focus the direction for who you want to become.

THE ARCHETYPES

THE OUTLAW

"Live Free or die."

Keywords

Disruptive

Rebellious

Free-Spirited

Idealizes:

Freedom, Change, Righteousness,

Agency, Independence.

Rejects:

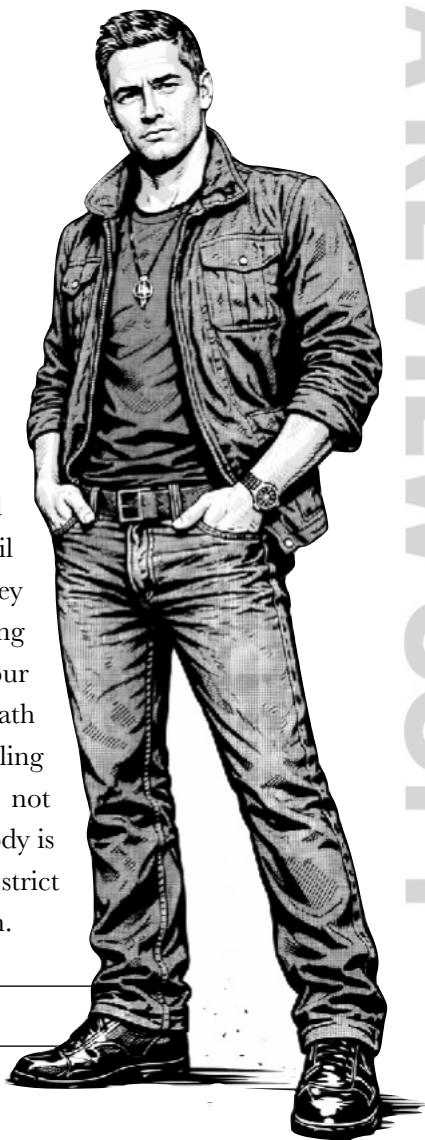
Servitude, Conformity, Complacency,

Acceptance, Dependence.

The Outlaw is often misunderstood as just being angry and out for chaos until you understand that, at their core, they live to defend freedom of choice (including yours). They don't need to like your choices, but will defend to their last breath your right to make them, even if willing conformity makes them itch. They're not against civility or law provided that nobody is oppressed, but when the rules are too strict they'll be all too ready to burn it all down.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)



THE MAGICIAN

"You only say it's impossible because you haven't seen it done yet."

Keywords

Mystical
Informed
Unfettered

Idealizes:

Transformation,
Knowledge, Vision,
Discovery, Potential.

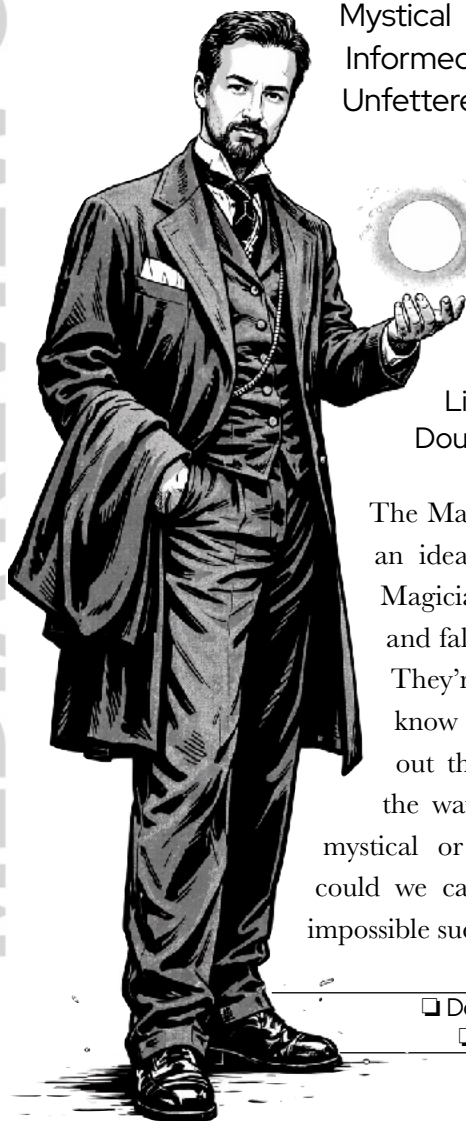
Rejects:

Limitation, Stagnation, Ignorance,
Doubt, Uncertainty.

The Magician appears, at first glance, to be an idealist or visionary; the truth is that Magicians see past the illusions, fallacies, and false limitations that stop most people. They're the ones who always need to know how everything works, not to point out the mechanisms, but to show others the way forward in ways that often seem mystical or wondrous... after all, what else could we call it when something that seemed impossible suddenly isn't.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)



THE HERO

"We're men of action. Lies do not become us."

Keywords

Honest
Candid
Brave

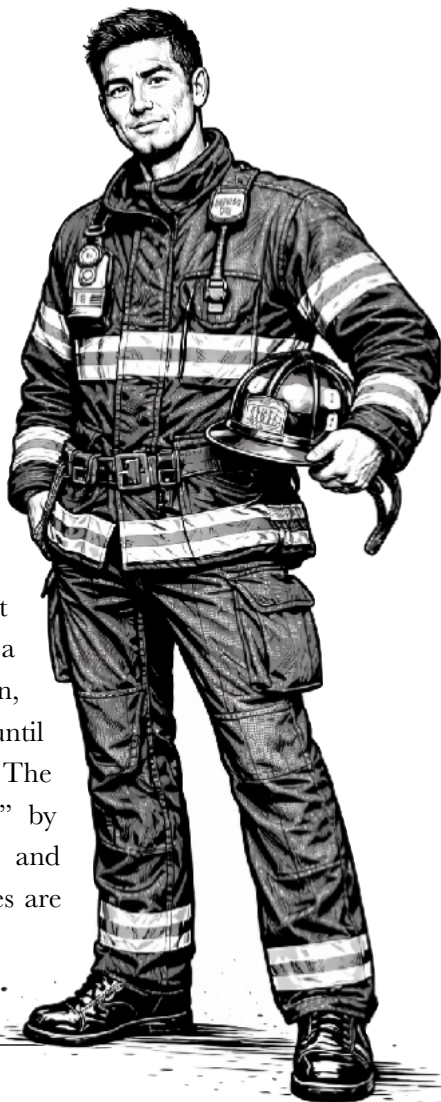
Idealizes:

Mastery, Courage, Growth,
Development, Action.

Rejects:

Incompetence, Cowardice,
Deterioration, Downfall,
Incapability.

The defining characteristic of The Hero is action. The Hero has no time for foolishness, drama, or bullshit, but they are not reckless. The moment they see a clear and direct course of action, they move and usually don't stop until whatever situation is resolved. The Hero is driven to "save the day" by their own sense of competence and conviction, and when the outcomes are less than ideal, it hits really hard.



- ☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)
- ☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE LOVER

"Tell me, what do you truly desire?"

Keywords:

Sensual

Empathic

Soothing

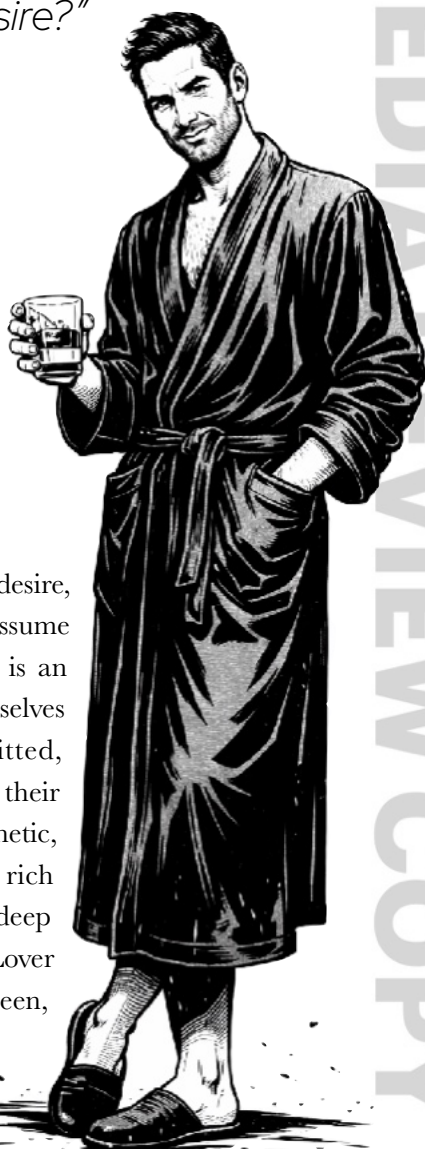
Idealizes:

Sensuality, Closeness, Indulgence,
Affection, Love.

Rejects:

Rejection, Loneliness, Isolation, Invisibility,
Contempt.

The core of The Lover is about desire, intimacy, and pleasure. While some might assume this means strictly in a sexual context, that is an overly narrow view. The Lover devotes themselves to being attractive, passionate, committed, sensual, and connected with the subject of their desire (even if that's a cause, company, aesthetic, or person). There's no mistaking the rich experience, comforting connection, and deep intimacy of being around The Lover. The Lover has a non-negotiable price; they need to be seen, wanted, and valued in return.



☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE JESTER

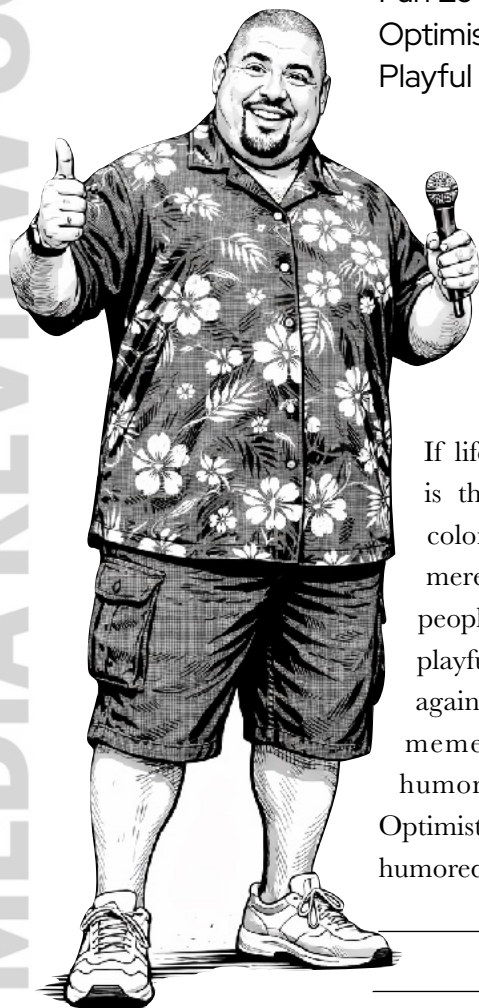
"If we can't laugh about it, what's the point?"

Keywords:

Fun Loving

Optimistic

Playful



Idealizes:

Fun, Happiness, Laughter,
Camaraderie, Positivity.

Rejects:

Apathy, Bleakness, Solemnness,
Loneliness, Negativity.

If life seems like a dull grey sea, The Jester is the lighthouse that beckons others to color and laughter again. More than merely the "class clown," these are the people who call out others' inner child and playful nature and get everyone laughing again. The Jester is best illustrated by the meme, "Memes exist to disturb the humorless, and humor the disturbed." Optimistic and fun-loving, even the darkest-humored Jesters are driven by playfulness.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE EVERYMAN

"You've got a friend in me."

Keywords:

Friendly
Inclusive
Unassuming

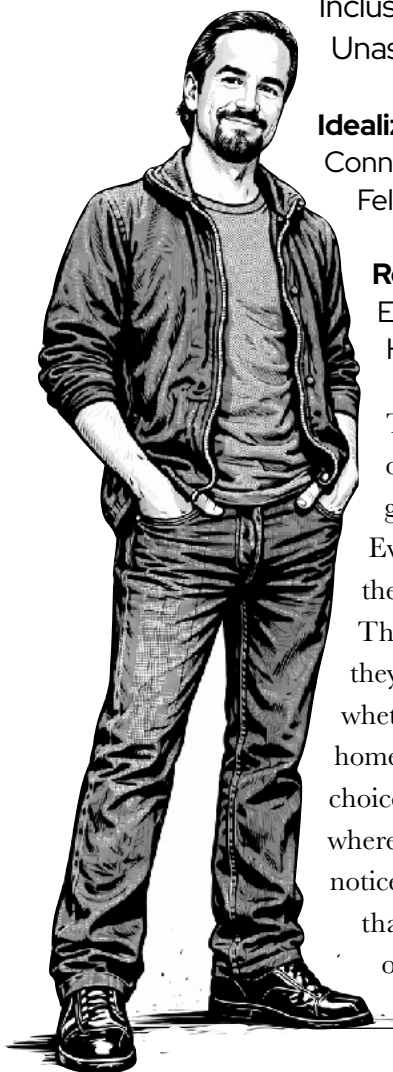
Idealizes:

Connection, Togetherness, Equality,
Fellowship, Community.

Rejects:

Exclusion, Standing out, Isolation,
Hostility, Alienation.

The Everyman wholly embraces the art of fitting in; they're unobtrusive, generally friendly, and low drama. The Everyman operates as close as possible to the local social baseline on every level. They know what they like, and like what they know, and don't "make it a thing," whether that's hobbies, clothes, cars, or homes. The goal of their behavior and choices is to stay within a happy medium, where they don't stand out enough to be noticed, for better or worse. The challenge is that just being likable is also easily overlooked or forgotten.



☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE CAREGIVER

"I've got you covered."

Keywords:

Caring
Protective
Reassuring

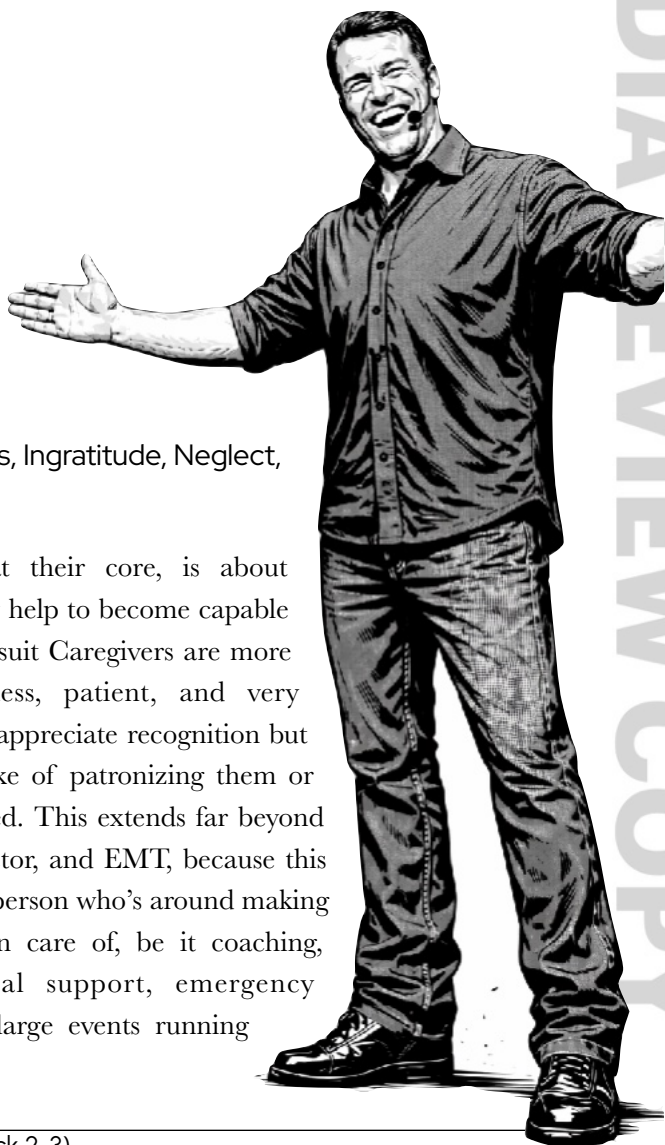
Idealizes:

Support,
Help, Service,
Recognition,
Gratitude.

Rejects:

Anguish, Helplessness, Ingratitude, Neglect,
Blame.

The Caregiver, at their core, is about getting the people they help to become capable and whole. In this pursuit Caregivers are more often than not selfless, patient, and very protective. Caregivers appreciate recognition but never make the mistake of patronizing them or taking them for granted. This extends far beyond the obvious nurse, doctor, and EMT, because this is a particular type of person who's around making sure everyone is taken care of, be it coaching, payroll, psychological support, emergency dispatch, or keeping large events running smoothly.



-
- ☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)
☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)
-

THE RULER

"Long live the King."

Keywords:

Decisive
Unflappable
Articulate

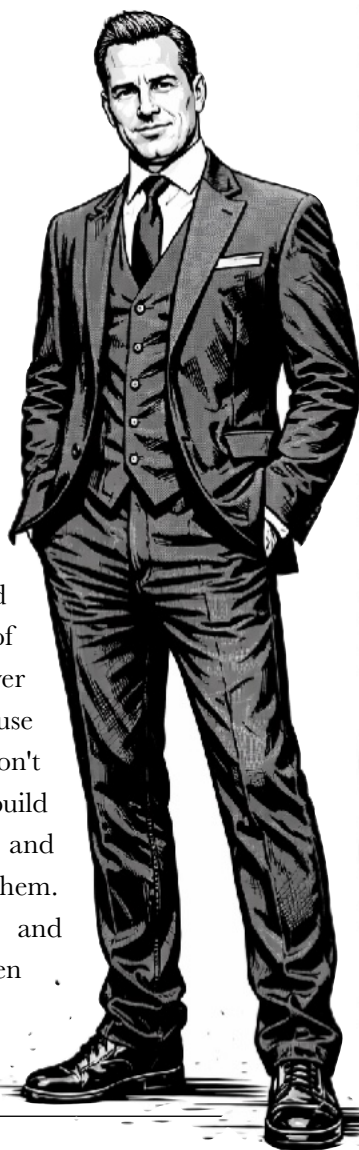
Idealizes:

Authority, Competence, Status, Success,
Control.

Rejects:

Weakness, Insignificance, Failure, Poverty,
Discredit.

The Ruler is about unquestionable authority and control. The Ruler always demonstrates control by being capable and decisive, while projecting an unflinching air of authority. Rulers are at the top of whatever "food chain" they choose to be a part of, because anything less is unacceptable to them. They don't wait for the top to be handed to them; they build it, thus creating the means for success and prosperity to be shared with those loyal to them. When The Ruler speaks it's clear, direct, and influential, because their word has already been backed by results, not just demanded by position.



- ☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)
- ☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE CREATOR

"Think Different."

Keywords:

Idealistic
Undeterred
Individualistic

Idealizes:

Creation, Originality, Self-expression, Vision, Imagination.

Rejects:

Stagnation, Duplication, Disillusion, Indifference, Mediocrity.

The Creator seeks to add enduring value to the world through a vision that's genuinely their own. They foster their talents and hone their skills to ensure that their vision is truly new, innovative, and exceptional — not just in their own mind, but in the world. The natural enemy of The Creator is mediocrity. But perfectionism disguised as devotion to standards can stall a vision in endless tinkering, or ambition can swell it into something too overwhelming to ever finish. Those who master themselves, in addition to their talents, skills, and tools, are the ones who leave something behind that outlasts them.



☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

THE INNOCENT

"Honesty is the best policy."

Keywords:

Honest

Agreeable

Traditional

Idealizes:

Happiness, Morality, Simplicity,

Safety, Harmony.

Rejects:

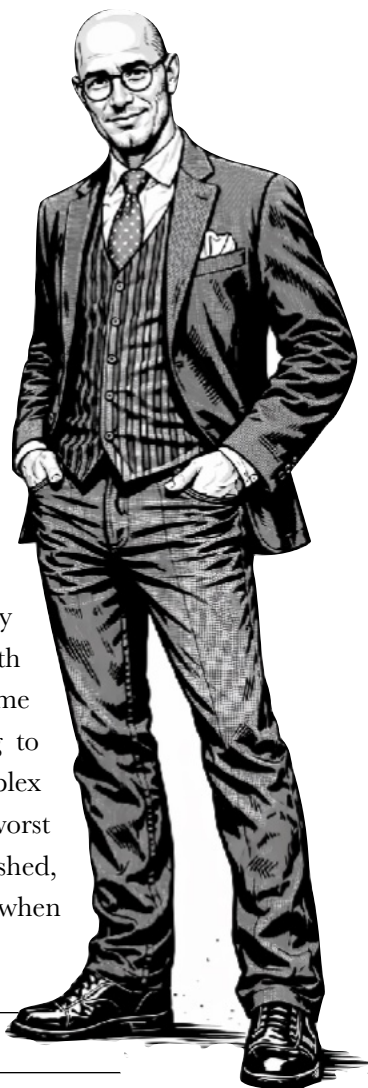
Betrayal, Depravity, Exclusion,

Deceit, Punishment.

At the core of The Innocent is safety through simplicity. The Innocent believes in a better world where "follow the rules and everything will be alright" is the general strategy that lets everyone get along. Their faith and optimism run deep, but that same optimism can push them into refusing to see the world when it proves more complex and problematic than they'd like. The worst experience for an Innocent is to be punished, persecuted, or ostracized, especially when they've been playing by the rules.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)



THE SAGE

"Now you know, and knowing is half the battle."

Keywords:

Knowledgeable
Deliberate
Prudent

Idealizes:

Wisdom, Intelligence, Expertise,
Reason, Clarity.

Rejects:

Ignorance, Misinformation,
Inaccuracy, Irrationality, Ambiguity.

The Sage is all about truth. Endless seeking, learning, and reflecting make Sages slow to judge, because they prefer to understand the whole picture. Sages are intelligent, and build their expertise so they're never deceived or caught not knowing. The wisdom that all Sages need to be mindful of is that learning and analysis are good, but acting on that knowledge is essential.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)



THE EXPLORER

"Hat - \$93, Whip - \$85, Exploring the world on your own terms... priceless."

Keywords:

Intrepid
Fearless
Daring

Idealizes:

Adventure, Exploration, Self-reliance,
Liberation, Novelty.

Rejects:

Confinement, Monotony,
Inauthenticity, Stagnancy, Routine.

The Explorer is all about discovering who they really are through real-world experience. It isn't just about how many miles an Explorer travels, but the relentless need to push themselves outside their comfort zone. No nine-to-five here! Explorers need new experiences as much to feed their ambition and exercise their autonomy as to avoid falling into conformity or routine. The Explorer's biggest danger is if they become aimless and seek novelty for its own sake, because that's when they wither away inside.

☐ Describes me now (pick 2-3)

☐ Describes who I want to be (pick 1)

Take a moment here before you flip ahead. There's no prize for speed, and rushing through any of this work defeats the point. The quality of what you get out of this book tracks directly with the quality and honesty that you put into the answers to the exercises.

Look at what you marked: the archetypes you resonated with describes the role you've been playing... whether that was chosen on purpose or just grown into is largely irrelevant. The one you picked for who you want to be is not an absolute but a north star that will help guide what comes next. In Chapter 5 we'll use that archetype and do some very similar practical work to create an actual path forward.

Chapter 4 goes through the neurological, psychological, and social development of every human, across all cultures, specifically around how we understand relationships.

This was a bit of a balancing act, to present something that is quite complex and spread across disciplines, in a way that is simplified, accurate, and approachable without oversimplifying or losing the nuance that makes it work. By looking at your answers from the previous exercises through that particular lens it should give you a remarkable new understanding of your own life and how you got to where you are.

MEDIA REVIEW COPY

MEDIA REVIEW COPY

CHAPTER 4

THE UNDERLYING MECHANICS

The theory behind how this works

You've done good work. If you're eager to keep the practical work going, feel free to skip ahead to the next chapter.

I was always the kid who had to know how the magic trick worked. If that describes you, too, then this chapter is exactly that... the how and why behind it. It's not required reading, but if you choose to dive in, it's crazy how much of your life will start to make a lot more sense.

I threw a lot of questions at you in that last chapter; most of them are there strictly to prime your memory and get your head in the right space to answer a few really important ones. It was never just about memories or preferences; it's about **your track**. Think of it as a set of patterns that work as a kind of auto-pilot for how you balance your own emotions within social interactions, where these patterns were laid out subtly over time through the first twenty-five years of your life. Most people run their whole lives without knowing it's there. The work you're doing is designed to help you see it and change it in the way that works for you.

To understand how your track got established we need to go back... way back, though not quite to Mr. Peabody's wayback machine,

further than most people think to look. The best analogy I've found is something almost all of us have lived: moving into a new house. Bear with me here, because by the time we get to the end of this you're going to see your own life in a completely different way.

Stage 0: Womb to Birth

Long before you drew your first breath, the work had already started. The nervous system begins forming in the first weeks of pregnancy, and by the third trimester, it's actively processing sound, rhythm, basic light, temperature, and the chemical signals carried through your mother's bloodstream. Stress, calm, anxiety, contentment: these arrive as physiological states, absorbed and registered by the body as baseline before we can even interpret them. You're already being shaped by an environment unique to your circumstances.

If we compare this to moving houses, it's the time in the car before the moving truck arrives. Nothing to do but be who and where you are. You know change is coming, but right now, you're just taking in the scene from the comfortable safety of the car that got you here.



Stage 1: Birth to 9 Months

From birth to around nine months, our entire focus is orientation. We suddenly find ourselves in a world for which we have no prior reference. Air, that's sometimes cold and harsh, and other times soft and easy, fills lungs for the first time. Everything is foreign. No longer suspended in protective fluid, gravity's pull means we feel pressure on our body.

Without narrative, language, or context, every experience registers as pure sensation sorted by a single primitive standard: too much, too little, or just right. Interestingly, that "just right" is not universal. We develop our own sense of "just right" based on our environment; for example, a house with five kids is loud and chaotic, compared to a home with an only child born to older parents. Light, sound, temperature, physical sensation, all effort goes toward managing this new reality. We begin to bond with the people and conditions that align with our "just right," or make the extremes more tolerable. Through touch, soothing voices, and presence, our most fundamental and basic understanding of safety is created.

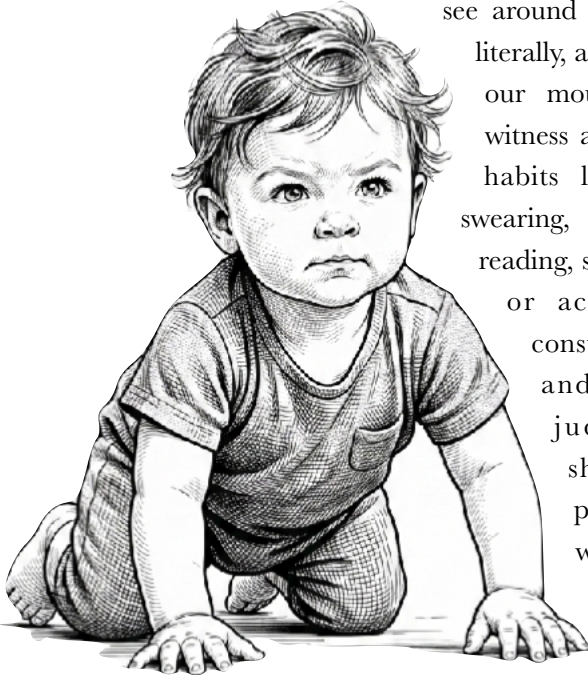
Back to the move! The truck has arrived, it's "go time." Even with the best-laid plans, carefully packed and labeled boxes are shuffled up in the chaos of many ideas of how to get everything into the house, and the many hands that carry out those many ideas. When all the contents have been moved inside and the truck leaves, you're sore and exhausted from the productive catastrophe you just endured. That night, comfort is spartan. It's all about fast food, hastily acquired drinks, and finding only what you need to get through those first couple of days. Those first few days are strictly about orienting to this new place in which you find yourself. The the sounds of a furnace coming on in the middle of the night, the creaks and squeaks as the house settles during the night... these become something we get used to over time. What began as jarring, unsettling, creepy, and unnerving, becomes "normal," which frees our mind to consider new things.

9 Months to Walking:

By the beginning of this stage, your body and the world you know (which admittedly is tightly managed) feel familiar and ideally predictable enough to shift your attention outward. You begin interacting with the environment rather than just reacting to it. Object permanence, spatial reasoning, and tactile experience all become “real” as we figure out how to sit up, roll over, and start crawling around to explore. We discover cause and effect:

- ❑ If we make the right sequence of sounds, at the right time, we get a very favorable response. This becomes words and then language.
- ❑ Touching something hot or sharp is a lesson you, hopefully, only need once, while soft and warm are always welcome.
- ❑ Showing the right response to a situation makes the adults give you the good kind of attention. For example, I'm sure we all had that moment as a kid when our face showed that we did not like a gift we were given, and the “grown-ups” made sure to let us know that's not okay.

At the same time, we pick up everything we see around us, both figuratively and literally, and much of that goes into our mouths at least once. We witness and file away actions and habits like smoking, shouting, swearing, always being in a rush, reading, slowing down, playfulness, or acts of generosity; we constantly absorb reactions and emotions like fear, judgment, frustration, shame, guilt, curiosity, pride, and love... even when adults try to shield us from it.



During this time, even before we have language for it, we start collecting evidence to answer three questions:

- ❑ Am I worthy of care?
- ❑ Are the people around me reliable and available?
- ❑ What does it feel like when I need something?

We don't ask or answer these questions as they're written here, but we start to build an impression of how safe the people we depend on are. Can we explore and have a safe person to return to? If we run into an experience that is "too much," do they comfort us? If we experience "too little," do they stimulate us or encourage us to be curious?

The evidence we see over and over during this stage lays the foundations of our track, or what developmental psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth called attachment styles.¹ Before 9 months, we needed to find our personal "just right"; now, we do it again, but this time it's more elaborate as we feel out spaces, textures, sensations, emotions, rudimentary cause and effect, all to create our personal sense of what "normal" means for us... regardless of what is "normal" for others.

Just like when the chaos of moving day settles, and we now know the layout and the sounds of the house, the actual work begins. Boxes get found and moved to their decided rooms: kitchen, here, bedroom, there. Essentials are unpacked first: a bed, a table, the television, and somewhere to sit at the end of the day... the rest will have to wait. This is about getting the place functional enough to weather the day-to-day. The house is still new, and still revealing itself in a hundred small ways, but you're learning its charm and its quirks. The decisions you make at this stage (who gets what room, what gets set up first) are the foundations you'll build everything else around.

¹ John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* [1969] and Mary Ainsworth's *Patterns of Attachment* [1978] are the foundational texts on attachment theory, if you want to go deeper

Walking to Puberty:

From the time we start walking with intention, to when puberty arrives, the world gets bigger... fast. We understand our environment much better, and we have a sense of “normal.” Now, most of our learning comes from imagining how things should work, establishing our own theory, and experimenting to test if our experience matches our expectations. This is the process we know as play. It is commonly believed that play is about having fun, but the truth is that fun is just a side effect. Play is how we test our values, beliefs, and limits, because for children all things are possible until proven otherwise. The accomplishment of discovering a new skill, beating a record or a high score, breaking a rule we find totally arbitrary (like staying up past our bedtime or skipping school for a big event), improvements at a sport or video game, picking up a cool bit of trivia or learning the reason why a rule or barrier exists — this is what we lazily call “fun.”

Meanwhile, the tightly curated world of our early childhood opens up. Suddenly there's a yard, then a playground, then a neighborhood, then kindergarten, and finally, elementary school.

School is a whole new self-contained world with a largely consistent cast of new characters (most of them our own age) to figure things out with, along with a handful of authority figures. Friendships form, cliques take shape, rivalries are created. This is how we learn to socialize, cooperate, collaborate, solve problems, make decisions, manage disappointment, develop resilience, and distinguish healthy from unhealthy competition. Probably one of the most important things we develop, thought, is our learned relationship to failure.

I'm going to really stress this last point, because it is one of the most important, direct, and influential patterns that carries forward directly into adulthood. Whether failure lands as useful feedback, or as judgment to be feared, is impressed on us by a myriad of subtle cues and expectations. Some are blatant, many are never spoken but quietly enforced: a mother's disappointment, a father's tirade, a teacher's tone when handing back a test, and the coach who pulls you from the game.

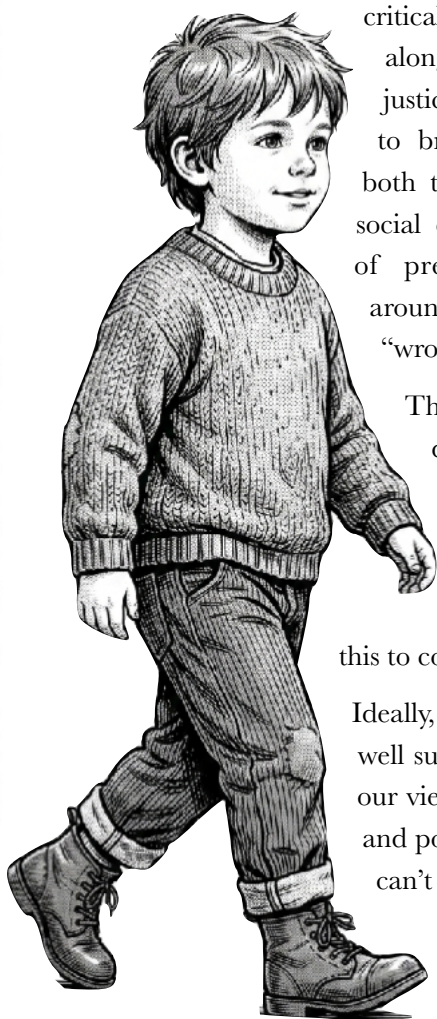
These are the behaviors that tell us if it's safe to try the unconventional idea, to know we're allowed to innovate, to see ourselves as capable even when it all goes wrong. It's why most people like *Calvin and Hobbes* so much... what he gets "wrong" is what makes him the kid we all still want to be.

Also new to us are social structures and rules, whether they're from a board game or an institution. So too come the notions of fairness and justice, because we're taught that rules are non-negotiable and that the people who created these rules are beyond our reach. Rules that seem

arbitrary or hypocritical cause us to develop the critical thought to question and challenge, along with compassion, empathy, charity, justice, and ingenuity, especially about how to break the "stupid" rules. This applies both to rules that "get in our way" and to social conventions, including bullying, forms of prejudice or discrimination, whether around age, race, wealth, or just living in the "wrong part of town."

This is where we begin to discover the divide with what the society around us considers "normal" and acceptable, and what we personally stand for and believe. It becomes important later because we relinquish a lot of this to conformity during our teenage years.

Ideally, in this stage of development we are well supported and given enough freedom for our view of the world to be rife with potential and possibility. Our adult selves know why we can't have cake for breakfast every day, while our child selves revel in the appeal of it.



Given everything above, it should come as no surprise that having this stage of our development stifled means that what comes next is harder, because what we create here doesn't change much: it just gets pressurized and refined.



The moving house equivalent of this stage is the longest stretch of the move, after survival mode ends and the real work of making it yours begins. The essentials have been handled, and we can manage the most basic day-to-day stuff. Now it's about painting and decorating rooms, unpacking the non-essential boxes, and arranging our things where we want them, rather than where they landed on moving day. Furniture gets moved around, sometimes more than once until we find just the right layout. You start having a few of your closest people over, a friend here, a couple of family members there, and get to see the place through other eyes for the first time. This is where the house stops being the place you moved into and starts becoming the place you actually live. How the house comes together by the end of this stage is pretty much how the house will stay for a long time to come, barring any catastrophes.

Puberty to Around 25 Years Old:

Let's begin with the remarkably recent notion of "teenager," which most of us assume has always been "a thing" but in truth it only became part of our culture in the mid-twentieth century. For most of human history, there was no in-between or transition period. Most cultures don't understand or care about puberty, or developmental stages... for them it comes down to a number, a legal age, a specific birthday. As far as your culture is concerned, you became an adult whether you were ready or not.

Some of us had a coming-of-age ceremony: an apprenticeship, a bar mitzvah, rumspringa, even a graduation ceremony from elementary or middle school. A ritual that your family, your community, maybe your religion, decided for you... including when you crossed that line, and what they want you to look like on the other side of it. You're "of age" now, so act like it... carry yourself like this... talk like that... want these things and not those. Suck it up and fall in line.

Maybe you're one of the ones who didn't get a clear marker, or ritual. No ceremony, no clean line, no verdict, just a slow, confusing drift into a body and a set of expectations nobody bothered to explain. We're told we need to start "acting like a man," whatever that means, because nobody actually sits you down and explains it... not that they could, because they learned it the same way you had to. We had to pick it up in bits and pieces from a stoic father figure, a coach who tells you to "walk it off," a hundred small looks and comments that teach you what's allowed and what isn't.

Puberty hits when it does; for some of us it showed up in fifth grade, for others, high school. Every voice that cracked at the worst possible moment, every growth spurt that suddenly made your favorite pair of pants end somewhere around the shin, all of it was cannon fodder for teasing and abuse. You were probably made to feel like you were some kind of "weirdo" for being early, or like you were "behind" if it happened later for you.

The adults around us, every one of whom had been through this, would only talk about it as a series of facts in an awkwardly presented biology class, or maybe a pamphlet left on a pillow. Eventually, someone had “the talk” with you. They used vague terms, like “urges” and “changes.” They talked about testosterone and the body, hair growth in new places, muscle growth, and the deepening of the voice, but that’s just the start. The vastly more complex and interesting part that follows is probably news to them too.

This is the second of two times in your life (the first around three years old) that the brain goes on what can realistically be called a savage decluttering spree. This is where all the play that didn’t lead anywhere, the stuff you tried and lost interest in, and the shit you did to get attention that didn’t work well... all of it gets stripped out. What makes it through is:

- ❑ The social strategies that get you what you want (whining, tantrums, people-pleasing, quietness, confrontation, bluntness, playing the victim, etc.)
- ❑ Whatever you believe about yourself and your family that’s repeated regularly (poor/rich, weird, broken, lucky, etc.)
- ❑ Really intense and emotionally rich memories (from the triumphant, to the miserable, and the embarrassing).

This whole process also causes a major shift from thinking about ourselves as a collection of concrete facts, like:

- I like football.
- I’m good at math.
- I’m bad at spelling.

... to creating an abstract identity:

- I am an athlete.
- I am a good and honest person.
- I can be more/better.

And we’ve never stopped collecting evidence to build a verdict:

- I matter, or I don't.
- I'm capable, or I'm not.

So, we work hard to become a more capable and robust individual, right?



Instead, our brains tap into the primal Neolithic wiring that tells us that getting cut off from the group means certain death... **literally**. While that was once entirely accurate in a historical sense, thankfully it no longer holds true, but the reality is that our brains haven't caught up to that. You just need to think back to the first time you got separated from your family at a mall or store. I'm willing to bet dollars to donuts it's not a favorite memory.

- ❑ Remember the kid who learned to go quiet when tension filled the room? He's still in there, but now he's the anxious teenager who's wired to see it coming, and shuts down the second there's friction in the group.
- ❑ Remember the kid who figured out early that being funny was the fastest way to be liked? Watch him deflect every hard, raw, or real moment with a joke for the next decade.
- ❑ Remember the kid who came at the world like he was bulletproof? Some people say he's cocky, but a lot of them are jealous because the world seems to come easy to the teen who doesn't let anything get in his way... until something does, like an injury or the law, and then he's got to figure out a whole new way to be.

What "the talk" called "urges," is actually your testosterone rising to around 15-20 times what you started with, and your dopamine receptors getting completely recalibrated. What the biological mumbo-jumbo really means to you is a whole lot of wild emotion and caveman-level "want that," with ample drive, energy and an almost complete lack of restraint (we'll talk about that later) to make whatever desire happen.

A side effect of this hormonal street riot is that the brain becomes so sensitive to social validation that what your peers think of you lights up the same brain circuits as a drug hit or a starving man being offered

Error 404 - Prefrontal Cortex Not Found:

Imagine your brain has a top-notch legal team, full of people who want to help you manage your emotions, make good decisions, stop and reflect before taking something personally, and figure out what a proportionate response to a situation is. That's the prefrontal cortex.

The big problem at this stage of development is that your legal team has tons of capability, but terrible communication. Axons are the brain's telecommunication system, and everything is in the process of getting wired and upgraded from back to front. Until the myelination process (the wiring and upgrading) of the prefrontal cortex is finished, at around twenty-five years old, our motor centers, visual cortex, audio processing, and emotional centers are running on high speed fiber-optic connections at full bandwidth, while the prefrontal cortex has the equivalent of a few shitty landlines with poor sound quality and lots of static.

Effectively, that legal team in your brain is fully staffed but totally bored, because little gets in and even less gets back out. Even when you get good intel back, it's like trying to hear it on an old payphone in the middle of the emotional system's fraternity house party.

What that means for everything we've been talking about is that all of that identity building, status chasing, belonging at any cost... that's the emotional system at the wheel, music blasting, windows down, no muffler, making every verdict you reached about yourself **feel** vivid, vibrant, solid, justified, and permanent. The part of your brain that says "hang on, let's put this in perspective" is trying desperately to do its job by shouting at you from an office window as you careen by. Until about age twenty-five that part is just hopelessly, and hilariously outclassed.

food. Basic approval is survival, social validation is the brain's drug of choice, and rejection feels like physical pain... because to a brain in this state, it basically is. This is why most teenagers do stupid things for **status**.

In order to get social validation, we need to be part of a group... and start thinking about a reason for people in the group to notice us, respect us, remember us... that's all status is, nothing to do with vanity. It's your brain saying being invisible means the group will leave you behind... if the group forgets you, then you're as good as dead (even if, in reality, that's only true socially).

Most highly visible mainstream groups tend to demand unflinching conformity or very specific traits or talents, which makes status hard to come by. So, you go looking for "strangers like me," people who see what you see, want what you want, laugh at the things you laugh at, and with whom you feel like you belong. That could come in the form of: the goths, the geeks, the kids who eat lunch in the band room, a church youth group, a sports team, clubs around a niche interest, local stoners, or even street gangs... they may seem different, but it's the same engine underneath. What begins as the hunt for status eventually becomes a quest for the same three things almost every human spends a lifetime seeking: to be heard, respected, and valued.

The paradox of belonging comes with a price our hyped-up emotions don't let us hear. To belong, you need to start dressing like the group, talking like the group, wanting what the group wants, believing what the group believes. Bit by bit, you trade away your own curiosity, quirks, interests, culture, and the parts of you that made you unique. Giving up your authenticity is the price you pay for feeling like you're not standing alone. Every nod of the group's approval lights your brain up because it means you're one of them, and fitting in is the only way you feel safe.

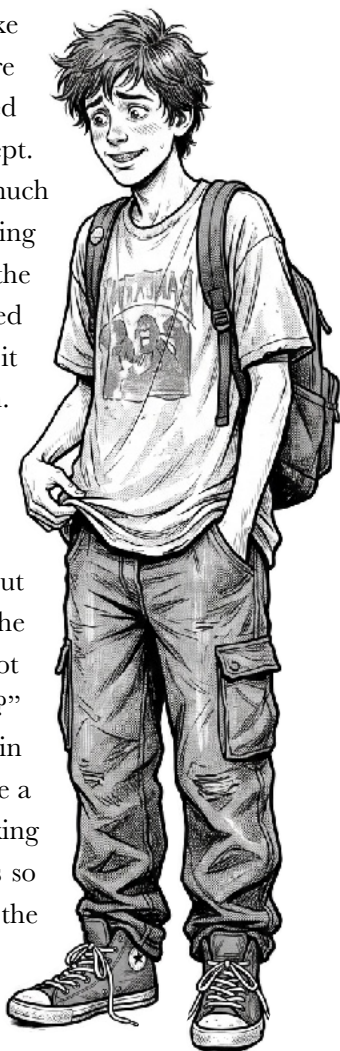
Back at home and school, the people who are "running the show" — parents, family, teachers, coaches — see you changing; sometimes in ways they want, often in ways they don't. They see you, and want you

to thrive, but only according to the patterns they know, and what they believe success is. So they hand you a list of rules and tell you to fall in line instead of actually listening to you... that's the moment when you stop listening too.

Teenage rebellion, at its core, is never really about a lofty notion of defying authority. It's how our all-gas, no-brakes brain responds to feeling hurt (remember, rejection is actual pain) and a last-ditch effort to be heard, valued, and seen as worthy instead of needing to earn it.

None of this is in the foreground. Nobody sits down at fifteen and decides "I'm going to take my fear of abandonment and build my entire social strategy around it." If something worked before puberty again and again, it got kept. Otherwise it didn't get a second look: too much noise, too much pressure, too much happening all at once. Every time going quiet kept the peace, every time the joke landed and deflected the tension, every time bold and brazen made it happen... that track got a little more worn in. A little more rigid, a little more permanent. More "that's how I am" and less "that's something I learned."

Then, you see a girl. Let's be honest about how this usually goes the first time, or even the first several times. When she says "I'm not interested," that "am I worthy of care?" question that's been in the back of your brain since before you could walk takes a beating like a piñata from a kid with a mean streak peeking around the blindfold. It does that because it's so emotionally charged it not only brands the memory into your head, but it also triggers the same systems designed for basic survival.



Your brain feels the danger as much as if it were a saber-toothed tiger or an oncoming train. So, the kid who got laughed at learns to not put himself out there. The one who got ghosted learns to not trust others or need anything. The one who got publicly humiliated by the group learns that his wants are a weakness to be turned against him. They're different experiences with the same lesson underneath: this is dangerous, protect yourself.

You get cautious, you get wary, but your desires and turbo-charged emotions eventually lead you to tentatively try again. At some point, a girl says "yes," and suddenly the feeling of getting approval and status from your favorite group is like driving a rental Honda Civic as opposed to the sphincter-puckering, lumbar-loosening power of the Lamborghini that is her approval and validation.

The relief is so overwhelming that your brain decides that *she* is the source of the feeling. Not the connection, or the experience, or the moment... her, specifically. Which means if she pulls back, the feeling goes with her... your relief, your safety, your worthiness. So, the brain very quickly creates a new operating rule: hold onto this, whatever it costs, because losing it means losing what makes you worthy. Any sign that her interest is slipping triggers your primal survival responses.

And it doesn't stop there. Being **with** her is now a status signal in itself. In almost any peer group, having a girlfriend answers questions about desirability, belonging, and whether you're someone worth noticing. The couple becomes an identity marker, which means losing her isn't just losing her — it's losing the answer to our internal question of worthiness, a piece of who we are, and our badge of desirability in front of everyone (whether they're actually watching or not).

Our status inside the relationship starts to feel inseparable from our status in the world. The same old strategies running inside the relationship with one person... at full volume, with everything rejection taught us about what's at stake if it doesn't work.

The first few times you really fall for someone, you're not just learning about romance. You're building a template. What it feels like

The Paradox Of The Prefrontal Cortex:

Remember that top-notch legal team that couldn't compete? Now they own the neighborhood. They bring the order and perspective that lets us handle the bigger decisions.

The challenge is this crack legal team creates very compelling cases for whatever argument is given the most attention. If you need to convince yourself to do something, like clean your home for incoming visitors, or go after that new job, then they'll make a fantastic and convincing argument to do it.

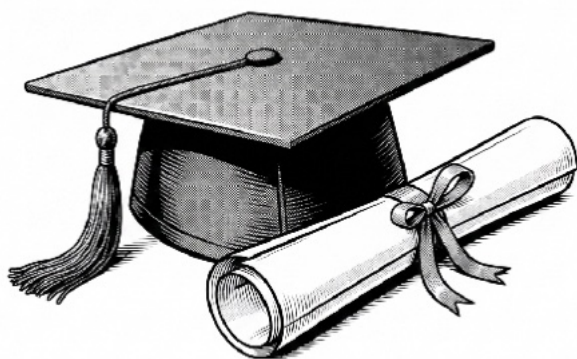
On the other hand, if you give attention to the little voice in your head that tells you that "you suck," or "you don't deserve something"... it will build a case for that too.

It's why so many self-help books, courses, mentorships, and so on push you toward intentionality, gratitude, counting wins, and clarity of vision and purpose. The more you understand this one facet, the more you'll engage other neurological processes that will help you get what you want. More importantly, it will help you become the kind of person you want to be, rather than passively responding to life's challenges, and feeling like you're always trying to catch up.

The prefrontal cortex is very expensive to actively use, and the consistent, repeated focus it needs to create intentional change means that your body needs to have ample resources. Eating well, maintaining your health, quality sleep, natural light within thirty minutes of waking up, moderate and frequent exercise... all of these are necessary to supply your brain with the right conditions to make these changes. It's not about "beast mode," becoming a monk, or intensity. It's about simple, beneficial choices, made consistently and willingly.

when someone chooses you. What it means when they don't. How much of yourself you're supposed to show before it becomes too much. How hard you should work for it. Whether love is something that comes easy or something you have to earn. And let's not forget that she's going through the same process with you, with a different backstory, context, and track.

All of it gets laid down with the same intensity we've been talking about. No prefrontal cortex, all gas, no brakes, so no real ability to course-correct in the moment. That template becomes the baseline. The track that every relationship after it gets measured against, consciously or not. The feeling you spend years chasing or years avoiding. It's the same way that your fingers find the same apps and scrolling patterns when you pick up your smartphone, or you, without ever really considering it, take the same route to the fridge, everyday.



Because by this point the house is decorated, furnished, settled... it's not just a house, it's home. Home is where you have people over. Maybe there's an actual housewarming party (coming-of-age ceremony, anyone?) or maybe there isn't. Either way, you start hosting: family events, holiday gatherings, game nights, movie nights, watch parties... with just a little showing off when people come through the door. If someone criticizes your place, whether it's how you keep, run, or decorate it, you don't just disagree; you bristle, because "my house, my rules."

You join the local library, maybe a club, or a team. You find your people. It hits you one day that you're not exactly sure when you started caring so intensely about the deck, the lawn, the garden, how the place looks from the street, but screw the homeowner's' association... there's a certain pride in the neighbors' approving nods to your efforts.

Inside, things wear out and get replaced, almost always the same size and in the same spot, but almost never a new floor plan. Every replacement just reinforces what's already there. The stuff that gets added happens outside: the deck gets used, the yard gets more traffic, maybe a swing set, pool, hot tub, or trampoline is added to the mix.

And notice how differently you clean depending on who's coming over... a quick tidy for the usual crowd, but scrubbed top to bottom when it's her walking through the door the first few times.

Approximately 25 Until “Mid-Life Crisis”;

The trends we've been talking about continue in our early twenties. The lead-up to and beginning of this phase is the last hurrah of our unencumbered social phase. We meet people much more easily and readily than we will at any point later. We are still the social, status-seeking creatures we were as teenagers, but as we reach “legal age” and graduate from high school, we are now pressured to choose a career or life path, and take actions to become “productive members of society.”

The enormous amounts of time and energy we've spent to “play our part” in various groups in the last stage have been teaching us that our worth is in our usefulness or utility... this concept is reinforced a hundred times over by this new pressure to be “a productive adult.” What we didn't get to see in the last stage is that our raging emotional system made every setback (repeating a year, getting bullied, breaking up) feel like it would derail our life; it sucked and it hurt, but rarely did it leave us truly screwed. Somewhere around twenty-five years old, the emotional system's wild frat party starts to wind down, as the prefrontal cortex finishes getting wired up and now can compete on volume and

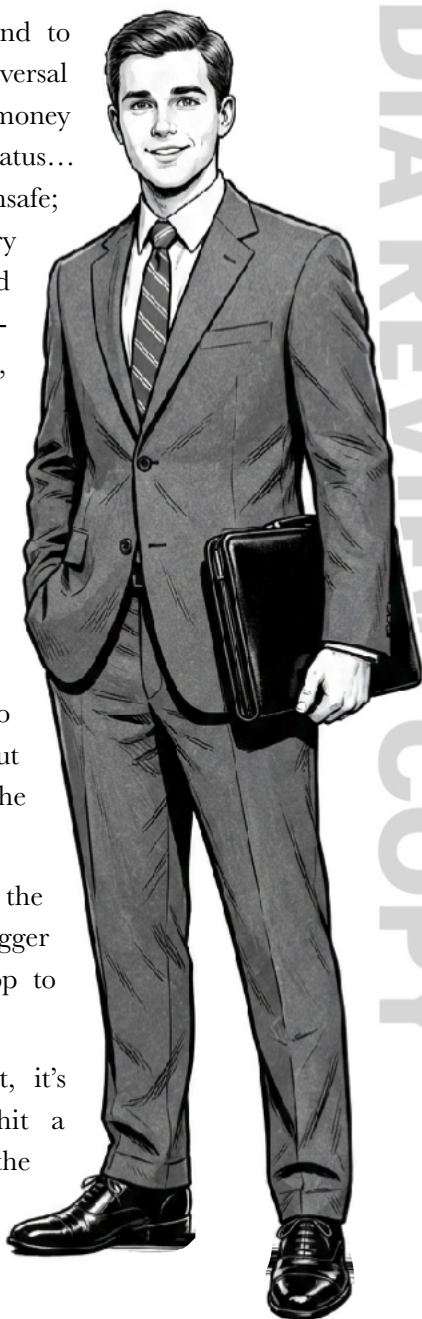
clarity with a clear and logical authority. At least, it's enough to offer a stable environment and perspective that keeps things in check... most of the time.

The world feels higher-stakes because now we need to have a job, or two, to make money (to have options), to move out (to gain freedom and autonomy), and to “make it in the world” (to gain more universal status). Failure now has consequences. No money = no food and no home; no success = no status... this is not just about feeling rejected or unsafe; it undermines our sense of worth. Every success toward autonomy, status, and personal achievement comes with a trade-off: less control over our time, freedom, stress levels, and peace of mind.

There's real pressure to follow the path that society and our respective cultures have been steering us toward: get engaged, get married, have kids, lease a new car, buy a house, take the big promotion... or maybe that's not the path for some of us, so once again, we've got to find our more niche community and find out how to make it work on the fringe of the mainstream.

For many, the path is basically to take the job that makes getting the slightly bigger paycheck suck a little bit less. Don't stop to think, just take the next logical step.

Why do we do this? In large part, it's straight-up biological because we've hit a developmental plateau. At this point, the whole brain is finally completely



connected and running at full capacity; that takes a LOT of energy — mainly glucose (the body's premium fuel, since it can't be stored in fat cells) and oxygen. Your body wants to give it that energy, but your brain is in charge of how resources get allocated.

Our brain isn't stupid. It understands that denying the body glucose and oxygen would be detrimental. So it cleverly increases its efficiency by automating most aspects of our life. These are almost exactly like sub-routine programs, so they run using as little resource as possible:

- how we tie our shoes
- how we drive
- the path we take when we walk to our fridge
- the route we take to work
- what we do when we pick up our phones
(which is why we often default to doom scrolling)
- the clothes we choose
- the restaurants and food we go back to over and over

These automated routines are called heuristics, and automatically acting upon heuristics is what we call habits.

Even if we spend an entire day on 100% autopilot, just going through the motions as though we were sleepwalking, the brain would still require at least 20% of our energy for the entire day to keep the fully automated stuff like breathing, swallowing, digesting, and keeping our heart beating, and the basics like scanning the environment so you don't trip or crash into people while walking, making idle small talk, driving the car on a regular route, and so on; basically, anything that falls under "same old stuff."

This is the biological machine part of us working silently and internally, as we take on our external roles: boyfriend to husband, junior to manager, journeyman to tradesman, father, person of faith, gamer, athlete, son, brother, uncle.

These become our "pillars of identity," each with a story we tell ourselves around it; each is only as strong as the story and our emotional and personal investment in that story. Is being a father still

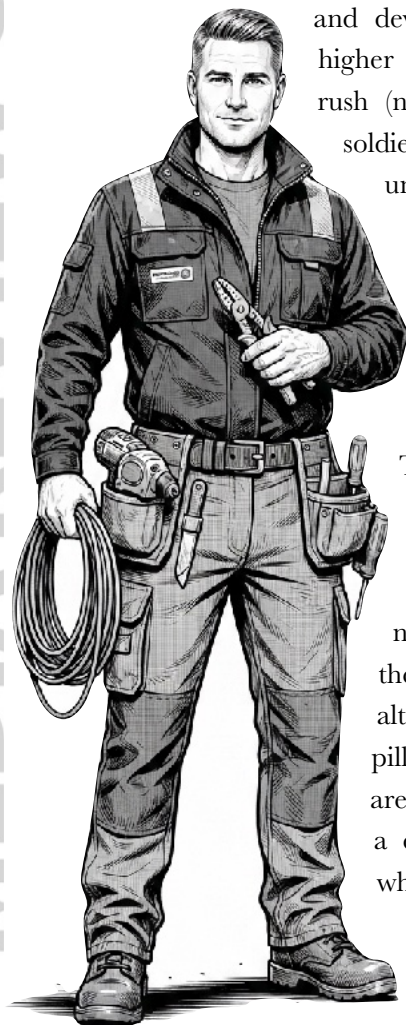
something that shapes how you see yourself, or has it quietly become just another box you check? Do you give the company the best of you to rise to the upper echelons, or is it “just a job to pay the bills?” Sometimes a pillar is a treasured past achievement, like the high-school jock who made the game-winning point. He got to be a hero for a week. Others have now forgotten that game, but he holds on to it for dear life.

Each pillar is only as strong as your investment in and devotion to it. As the stakes keep getting higher and higher, and we get caught up in the rush (no time to slow down or stop), we just soldier on to the next goal, next milestone... until something happens that makes us stop.

None of this changes anything we talked about before. We’re still running those same patterns of status-seeking, belonging, and needing to be heard, respected, and valued.

There are all kinds of shake-ups in life that unnerve us or make us think, but what I’m talking about is something that damages one of our pillars of identity — not the minor ones (some of those erode on their own or take their hits), but the life-altering events that take out a really big pillar, that threaten our very sense of who we are. Our track fails here — maybe an illness, a death, or just maybe, the mid-life crisis, when, in a moment of clarity, we realize that the life we’re living is one we never set out to live and would never have accepted in our youth.

The unexpected loss of our spouse/partner is, without a doubt, one of these, every single time. Nothing prepares us



for when the track no longer works and everything we relied on now needs to be built anew.

We all try to go back, to salvage little bits of what worked, and some of us are daunted by needing to start from scratch live in memories and pine for what was but cannot hold us and they do not move forward... they cling to what they know hoping for the world to mold to them... which we know it will not.

This is the reason for this book's existence. It's the book I wish I'd had when I went through these dark places. It's to help you do the life equivalent of a video game checkpoint where you save your progress. You are the culmination of everything that brought you to this point, and the goal now is to take stock, review your inventory, prepare your strategy, and move forward as your own hero in your own story. If the exercises are used well, you'll also have the "strategy guide" on how to advance.



The house isn't something you really see anymore. You walk through it on the way to somewhere else. The glow of the television in the family room, the stairs, the kitchen at 6 a.m., you don't notice any of these until something registers as unusual. Showing-off your new place, the frequent hosting from a few years back, all settles down into the steady ritual of a few specific occasions: Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, the Super Bowl, even a birthday party every now and then. You keep it up as habit, mow the lawn, fix what breaks, maybe plan to redo the kitchen someday, but it's just maintenance now, not passion. The house stopped being a project a long time ago... it's just where you live.

Maybe you're looking at your own house right now and seeing it a little differently. Big life changes have a habit of doing that to us. So what now? We're not going to run away and leave it derelict, nor are we going to scrap it and start from scratch. Maybe it's time to renovate and renew. That starts with a plan, and the next chapter is all about making your plan.

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CHAPTER 5

THE PLAN

What do I do now?

Ideally, at this point, you've answered the prompts in Chapter 3 and have an idea what your personal save point looks like. Chapter 4 walked you through how humans all develop. Hopefully it took what you answered and gave it the context to show what your underlying patterns look like and why. Everything up to this point is the past... now you look to what's coming. These three rules are the foundation of change... read them, repeat them, embrace them.



Your past has gotten you to this point. Learn everything you can from it and leave it where it is.

The future is simply potential, so have a plan... but be ready to change it as circumstances change.

Your present is rife with opportunities for choice and experience... always embrace the present moment as much as you can.

Rule 2

We have been led to believe two critical lies:

The first lie says that our value as a person is conditional on what we do or can offer. The truth is that our true value is found in who we choose to be, what we stand for, the relationships we honor, and the love we bring to the world.

The second lie says that we're supposed to be entirely self-contained and self-sufficient. We have always been part of a greater whole, in the same way that no one cell in our hand is above or below the others. We need each other and the greater whole needs you. Asking for help where you need it is both strength and wisdom.

Rule 3

Every belief we hold is a choice.

Some beliefs have been inherited from family; others are imposed by society, school, social media, etc.

Choosing who you want to become means looking at those beliefs and making the choices that best serve you.

Every choice you refuse to make or try to ignore will inevitably be made for you... rarely with your best interests at heart.

It's a Trap!

We've been taught some very unhealthy and often outright stupid things about how to change; when it invariably goes "tits up" nobody has any answers so it must be us, right? Let's debunk the most popular traps.

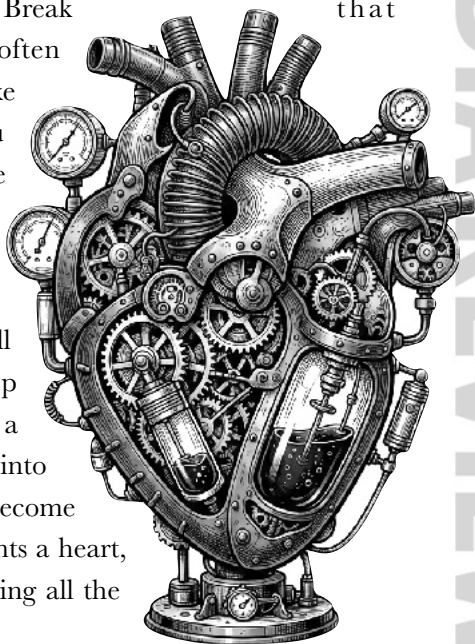
The Intensity Trap is the foundation of every New Year's resolution ever made. You know, these are the ones made in the downtime moments just before New Year's Eve... I'm cutting out alcohol completely, or I'm going to hit the gym six days a week, and I'm going to lose thirty pounds. These are the world's best intentions riding pure dopamine and possibly a little alcohol. What that version of you couldn't account for was your soon-to-be new schedule, that extra project at work, the dog getting sick, the flu that kicked your ass, helping your best friend move... you get the idea. So you set a standard Navy SEALs with a personal chef would struggle to hold, then act shocked when reality knocks it over by February 3rd. We're trained that more and bigger is always better, but that kind of intensity just sets conditions that are unsustainable from the get-go.

Willpower is not a personality trait; it's a survival resource, and a limited one. It works great on a sunny Tuesday morning after a good sleep... much less so at 9 p.m. after a fourteen-hour dumpster fire of a day when your kid won't go to bed and there's crayon on the wall. Willpower is how you white-knuckle your aching body to safety or resist the peer pressure to have that extra drink. Trying to use it to force your life into conformity with arbitrary ideals, even healthy ones, is completely backwards. When it inevitably runs out, the story we tell ourselves is "I'm weak, I have no discipline, I can't follow through on anything." That's honestly like trying to chop down a tree with a butter knife and arriving at the conclusion that the problem is your arms.

In my opinion, the worst trap is the Integrity Trap. Every time we set a personal goal and miss it, something quiet and corrosive happens underneath the disappointment. A small betrayal... against ourselves, a little lie added to on our own personal pile of little lies we've told

ourselves that we keep the silent score of. Do that enough, let those stack up, and we gradually stop trusting ourselves.

Self-esteem isn't built from imagination, grandiose gestures, or great achievements. Like love, it is built from a healthy track record of small everyday considerations, like keeping your word, even in small things, especially when no one is watching. Break that internal contract with yourself often enough, and you don't just feel like someone who fell off the wagon; you start to feel hollow, because the one person you need to be able to trust the most is letting you down. The minute that becomes the story you tell yourself the pre-frontal cortex will build a cracker jack case. Keep reenforcing that case it will become a pillar of your identity, that leaks into every aspect of your life and you become like the Tin Man who desperately wants a heart, walking, talking, smiling, and even doing all the things, but empty inside.



Look Before You Leap...

One of the big pieces of advice I always give to anyone around changing one's life is that change only comes when there is genuine desire for change. Yeah, on the surface it sounds too simple, almost stupid, but hear me out... when someone tells me they want to take up a martial art, my first piece of advice is not to start looking for a course, or a teacher. I tell them to get on YouTube and start watching videos about the different styles of martial arts. Take a couple of weeks and learn as much as you can about the various types, forms, styles... get knowledgeable about what really piques your interest and makes you truly want to go through the very real effort of learning one particular style. The same is true of learning a musical instrument; watch videos,

learn as much as that can teach you. Then go to a music store and look at the prices, try playing with different instruments to see if they feel as good in your hands as the thought of them did in your mind. Back to martial arts: the same is true, find a dojo that teaches the style you want to learn, hang out there several times, talk to the people who are practicing, ask questions, and see if you want to take the path they have. Do you resonate with their experience?

Why do I tell people to do this?

Too many people make choices based on convenience and comfort, rather than from mindfulness and intention. Taking a few weeks to find out what actually sticks in your brain enough to compel you to “want the work” and enjoy the process is infinitely better than quitting after a year or two of going through the motions, because you’re not getting the results you wanted fast enough. A big part of true mastery of yourself is coming to the understanding that the quest for mastery never ends... since you can always become better.

Be Detached From The Outcome

This is one of the most common pieces of advice in self-help; “be detached from the outcome.” The desire for a particular result almost never creates lasting change, just a lot of frustration and disappointment. Instead, the practice of being mindful and curious about the process creates simple opportunities to make small choices, seemingly insignificant on their own; however, these kinds of small choices made often enough tend to stack up, and, in turn, compound into habits.

The Counterintuitive Approach That Works

Success is not a vacation destination that one chooses, passively travels to, and then arrives at. Success is made up of the frequent small choices that become consistently performed habits. These make a person for whom that kind of success is an inevitable byproduct... a symptom rather than a result. I’m not the only person who thinks so. If you want to delve deeper into this particular topic the work of B.J.

Fogg, James Clear, Gretchen Rubin, Charles Duhigg, or Cal Newport would be highly useful to you for further reading.

Western culture is largely driven on the premise of:

- Do** the things (stay in school, work hard, give your all) so you can
- Have** the things (the job, status, the house, the relationship, kids) to
- Be** the person who has “earned” them.

This is completely backwards, and by design, to keep all of us from thriving and threatening the established power base. Instead:

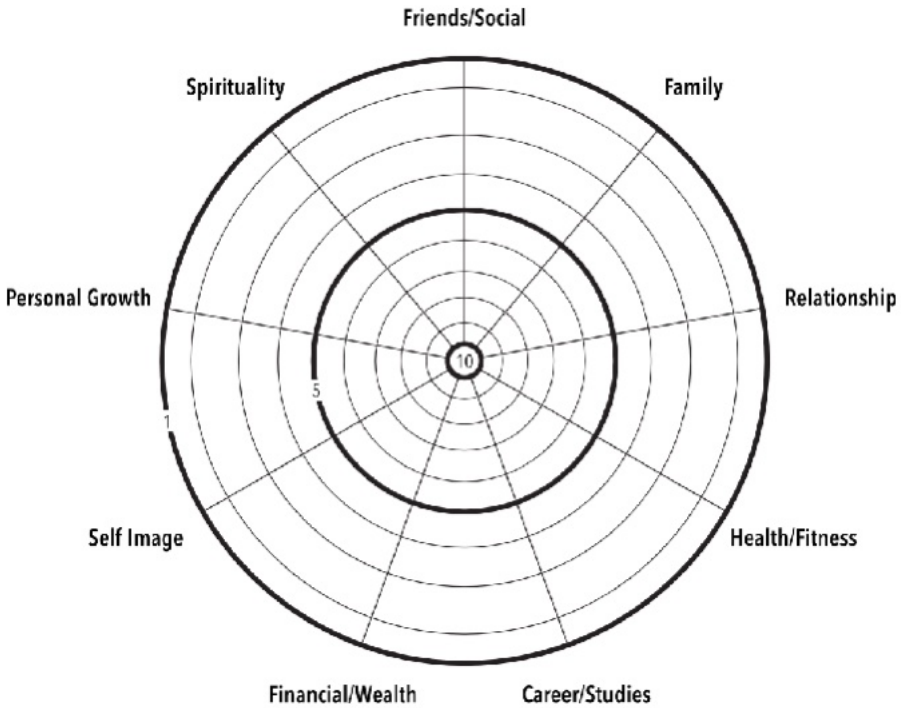
- Be** the man who knows he is already worthy and has a guiding vision to
- Do** what moves toward that vision (even if only the next step is clear) to
- Have** both the peace of mind, rewards, and success (as per your definition of what success means).

I’ve got your back; you’re no doubt thinking, guiding vision?!? That sounds great, but how do I find this guiding vision? Where do I put the effort? I’ll give you my version of Jack Sparrow’s compass (which points to what the person holding it wants to find most, for those who haven’t seen the film).

Here are nine life categories... I need you to give each a current satisfaction rating on a scale from 1 (the trash under a dumpster fire) to 10 (two very enthusiastic thumbs up, highly satisfied):

Friends/Social	Self Image	Health/Fitness
Family	Personal Growth	Career/Studies
Relationship	Spirituality	Financial/Wealth

Plot them on “the Compass” below:



Which Archetype do you most want to be like?

☐ Outlaw

☐ Jester

☐ Creator

☐ Magician

☐ Everyman

☐ Innocent

☐ Hero

☐ Caretaker

☐ Sage

☐ Lover

☐ Ruler

☐ Explorer

CHOICES

Three beliefs or patterns you choose to keep

Three beliefs or patterns you choose to change

Three beliefs or patterns you choose to completely get rid of

BUILDING THE VISION

Okay, the compass on the preceding page should give a pretty good idea of what **areas** of your life need the most focus. The Archetype you chose gives a “vibe” or persona. None of these are the vision... the exercise to find that needs an internet connection and a pair of headphones. When you have about fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time in a safe place where you can relax (this uses a relaxed hypnotic state, so it's dangerous while driving),go to <https://rstrother.com/book1>. Download and listen to the “Future Vision Audio Exercise” file completely.

Have a pen and paper ready so that when you're done you can capture as many ideas, visions, or impressions as you can... hell, record a voice note if that's your preference. Use that to create and collect images, plans, and inspiration... a “vision board” that shows what you want your life to look like, or even a journal about your ideal life if that's more your speed. Go through the audio again from time to time if you'd like. My advice, however, is to somehow record, deepen, and refine the impressions you get from each session before listening again.

PRACTICAL STEPS

Now that you have an idea of your vision, can you see the next few steps in how to get from where you are to your vision? You don't need to see the complete path, just one or two steps that get you closer.

No one has life all figured out, and you don't need to either. The journey begins and you will encounter setbacks and obstacles, but also opportunities and allies that you could never have imagined. You don't need to know how it all fits, and certainty is usually a red flag. It is your ability to adapt and grow, to take each step in turn and allow the path to unfold that matters infinitely more than having a “map” that doesn't allow for improvisation.

ONE LAST QUESTION...

What is your perfect next meal? Sounds like a silly question to put here, right? Take a break and do something good for yourself. Not the thing you need to do, or the thing you “should” do... something that brings you joy. You’ve done a lot so far, and it’s a win worthy of celebrating.



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CHAPTER 6

YOUR IDEAL PARTNER

Getting to the clarity that changes everything.

What You're Looking For In An Ideal Partner

Whether you like it or not, finding someone romantically is more an exercise in marketing than anything else. In this case, it's marketing "you" and I can't emphasize enough how clear you need to be on who your target audience is... your niche. Who are the people you'd form a clique with?

There are countless worksheets, videos, and exercises out there for marketers to find their ideal or best fit client, but more often than not, when it comes to dating, there are tricky and conflicting bits of advice. Make a list, don't make a list, focus only on the dealbreakers, etc.

Here's The Challenge With Lists

Most people tend to rush them. They sit down with a "gotta get this done" mentality. Not your fault, because the instructions never specified what this is really supposed to do for you.

Another challenge is using terms that are vague or categorical; for example: pretty, cute, intelligent, social, active... we both know what you mean, right? So if you asked me to go and pick out a pretty woman

who's also intelligent and active, what are the chances I'd get your preferences spot on the first time?

How long should your list be? A list that is too long or elaborate used "as is" to filter prospective dates will make finding someone near impossible, since no one will match everything out of the gate, and amazing people often get filtered out for something that is ultimately trivial.

Most exercises say order the list by priority. The trouble with assigning priorities by our mood in that moment is that it is arbitrary. How do we establish what's truly important? This is even more true because our priorities can shift by context. Declaring yourself a strict vegan is fine in a large city. That choice gets very interesting at Thanksgiving on the farm, when "no animal products or byproducts" is simply not an option. Adventurous is amazing, until you're questioning your recent life choices because the altitude of the hotel room means that oxygen masks are a must-have.

What if there was a clear and definitive way to take a full master list, break it down, understand exactly how each trait fits? Better yet, how about doing it with someone who would help you filter and prioritize what's really important to create a genuine understanding and a revised short list that is a sure-fire guide to knowing if a potential partner is right?

I will give you exactly that opportunity. The hundreds of people I've done this exercise with have all been surprised with what they found out was way more important than they originally thought, been deeply impressed with how much clearer they were about the type of person they're looking for, and come away feeling lighter and empowered.

Step 1: Make Your Master List

Before you grab a pen and paper, or make a new note or document on your smart phone or computer, I'm going to give you a very specific framing and a few pointers.

Assume that this exercise is not about some abstract list, but that in exactly three months from this very moment a genie will appear before you. This genie grants only one wish, and it's always the same one: I will make your dream woman appear before you, but first you must tell me what she is like.

Genies are generally ill-tempered beings. I mean, you would be too if you were cooped up in a bottle somewhere and only sought out and valued to be used for your magic. For this reason, they get their sadistic jollies through malicious compliance... in other words if they can fuck you on a technicality or for what you didn't specify, they will do it in a heartbeat.

A couple of disturbing but educational examples:

- Crushed by the mountain of gold you wished for
- "Live forever" could be a *Groundhog Day* time-loop (and that's the gentle version of getting screwed on an immortality wish)
- Wishing for several virgins who, it turns out, are all infant boys that you need to take care of

You get the idea. This list is your comprehensive guide to an ideal partner, ideally so that you only get screwed in the ways you enjoy.



A few tips to make this far easier going into the next steps:

1. **I'm all about collaboration, but this step of the journey is a solo mission.** You need to get clear about what you want. Some people have trauma that makes having their own desires feel wrong, others find themselves stuck in indecisiveness or uncertainty, and the temptation to ask for the opinions of others is strong. This is where you need to ignore outside influences, avoid any scrutiny or judgment, face any shame or fear that has previously held you back, and ask for what you truly want. And for all that's good and holy on Gaia's green earth, leave A.I. of any kind out of this!!!

2. **Everything that isn't on the list is left to chance.** Give yourself the gift of consideration and time to really explore, and if you're not sure about something, add it to the list because it can get always get reviewed or edited later. If at any point you think:

- Am I being greedy?
- Am I being too picky?
- Am I asking for too much?

The answer is **NO**. You're doing exactly what you need to be doing, and you're on the right track.

3. **How many items should this list have?** Keep adding until you have a sense that things you're adding are repeating, derivative, or already otherwise accounted for; then, it's time to call it done. Alternatively, if you look through your list on three consecutive days and can't think of anything to add, you can also consider it done.



4. **Avoid negations as much as possible.** Imagine doing groceries or going to the hardware store with a list of things you **don't** want. Better than nothing, but far less helpful than you'd think. That's mostly because negations, by nature, are specific and lead our attention to exactly what we don't want. Here are a couple of examples:

- No smokers: maybe you have an allergy or asthma, or just find the smell repulsive. More often than not this tends to be driven by a higher regard for health, a clean environment, or negative past associations.

- No short guys/Must be this tall to ride: a common trope that all women want tall guys. A difference in height creates a natural tension... but a man that commands his presence and holds that tension creates both a sense of safety and control. Sometimes it's about an aesthetic preference and there's nothing to be done if that's the case but otherwise... consider it a general fallacy.

- No fat girls: a similar theme for guys. There's a big difference in appeal between a woman who is healthy, curvy, voluptuous, and well-put-together, and a woman who is openly frumpy, unkempt, and clearly makes no effort. Note that this is 100% true for men as well!! It's the difference between active dad-bod and dumpy and downtrodden.

Sometimes these kinds of negations are the only thing we know or can think of at the time... and that's okay. If you do choose to put a few on your list, then I'd ask you to put what inspired that particular addition in brackets after it. This is so the context is clear, rather than any need to justify your preferences.

5. **Make sure your items are specific for what you want.** "Intelligent," "Likes the same things I do," or "Sense of humor," are too generic. I doubt you'd enjoy an exact clone of yourself, and I've yet to meet someone who is looking for a stupid and humorless troll. Be specific about such things by looking at what you value. What

does intelligent mean for you; is it emotional intelligence, street smarts, extensive life experience, or formal education?

How about sense of humor? Does it mean fluent in sarcasm, witty banter, wry observations, dad jokes, bad puns, cutting satire, scrotum-clenching dark humor, or folds like a cheap suit at a good old fart joke?

“Liking music” is great, but do they like to dance and sing along, play an instrument, or karaoke all night? Are future stereo purchases a considered and well-researched investment?

6. If you’re unsure about an item, give it the “genie test.”

Think about the term, “be careful what you wish for” because things get interesting when certain traits get amped up to 300%.

- “They like sex more than I do,” can get very tiring if they’re a nymphomaniac, or even if they’re dissatisfied because you can’t keep up with their demand.

- “They cook all the time,” could be a workaholic chef or bakery owner, or breaking the bank on ingredients, and cooking constantly as a stress reliever or coping mechanism.

- “They laugh at everything” is cute, unless it’s the actual condition where one of the only ways their brain can release the tension is through nervous laughter, meaning anything from funerals to grievous bodily harm, a multi-car pile-up on the freeway, or groaner dad jokes can result in “fit to be tied” bouts of laughter (You might laugh, but I’ve seen it first-hand!).

This test just helps to illustrate the importance of being clear about what you’re asking for on the list.

7. A note about sex. There is a LOT of shame, guilt, fear, and judgment around sex for both men and women. Intimacy, sensuality, and eroticism are completely exclusive from the act of sex. If you want to dive deeper into this subject, I’d look to the interviews, talks, and other works of Esther Perel. For the purposes of this book, I will

simply say that being clear about what sex is for you is a very big deal. It could be:

- Validation... my performance proves my capability. My virility is equal only to my prowess.
- Power... sex is about control underpinned by dominance, spectacle, or humiliation.
- Play... sex is about a shared intimate expression of discovery underpinned by novelty and levity.
- Sacred... an intimate and intentional ritual underpinned by reverence and connection.
- Procreation... not for pleasure but for reproduction underpinned by duty, purpose, and/or legacy.

It might also be something other than these, and I promise it's worth discovering. I bring this up because you need to include your desires around sex and put them into this list. There are no judgments or assumptions made here... it's absolutely ok to like what you like and want what you want. Here is the place to say it for yourself.

Step 2: Breaking The List Down

If you've just finished your list and you feel like you finally have a more complete picture, that's great! That's exactly the right feeling to have right now. Stay with it for a moment. That's the feeling when something that felt complicated starts to settle into place. You did something most people never actually sit down and do; you got honest with yourself about what you want.

Here's what I want you to notice.

That feeling of seeing a more complete picture? It's real. And it's also a first draft. Raw material: honest, unfiltered, completely yours. What it needs now is a master craftsman to show you how to refine it so your complete picture becomes a clear and composed masterpiece.

Why? Because knowing what you want and knowing what you need aren't quite the same thing. Right now they feel like they are, but if you use the list as it is now, you're going to meet someone that seems right,

someone who ticks every box, but something's just... off. Or someone who doesn't match half of what's on that list, but you somehow can't get out of your head. Worse, you won't be able to say why.

There's a moment on the list refinement call that happens every time, where the guy I'm talking to just stops, usually when we get to a trait that's been on his list since the beginning, that suddenly looks different when questioned: not wrong... he's just seeing it in a new context. Which ones make the cut and which don't becomes a lot clearer. When the smoke clears, before the call ends, only two things remain (this is not *Highlander*):

- ❑ Your three dealbreakers. Not a catalogue of flaws, but conditions where the relationship becomes genuinely impossible no matter how good everything else is. Some examples would be: sobriety, no kids or no more kids, entrenched life in different locations, different faiths as life foundations, or non-monogamy. Neither person is unjustified or unjust... it's just a point that defies mere negotiation.

- ❑ Your Top five. For any of you who've played poker, this is the "buy-in." Purely the critical criteria. If she has three or four of these, she's a contender. If she is single and has all five, you must go on at least one date.

That's the call. As of the time of the publishing of this book, the call is \$99 USD. You can book it at <https://rstrother.com/book1>. Show up with the list you just made and plan for 2½ hours, ideally with no interruptions. This call does not pitch anything beyond what's already on this page. The real question is what skipping it costs. That cost is usually somewhere between six months and two years of dating with a map that's **almost** right. And almost right is the most expensive kind of wrong there is.

Step 3: A Letter to Your Ideal Partner

Now that you have a much clearer vision of what your ideal partner is like, here's an exercise that makes all the difference in the world. It's time to write a love letter to your ideal partner, but as though you're already two to three years into your relationship... the kind of thing you'd slip in with their lunch or leave on the kitchen counter for them. If you've done the list refinement calls use your "top five" as the guideline. If not use the five items on your list that stand out most. The letter should be detailed and in the first person, just like you would write to them. Things like "I love when we share silly videos to make each other laugh," or "I love the feeling of my fingers flowing effortlessly through your long silky hair as you mumble how great it feels when I do so." The more detailed you can make it, the better.

Why? Since the brain doesn't distinguish between well-constructed imagination and reality internally, this allows your brain to define that vision as your new normal. It engages the brain's built-in filtering system (the reticular activating system) to "tune in" and guide you to opportunities to make that happen (in much the same way that we are "tuned in" to hear our name in a busy mall or notice things that we're passionate about). If you've read about or looked into manifestation or the law of attraction, then you should consider that we are all manifesting at all times, and this letter crystallizes the result that directs our focus to bring that into our experience. While manifestation and the law of attraction tend to be viewed as more metaphysics or 'woo,' there is actually credible neuroscience that explains the phenomenon. (Check out the book, *Mind Magic: The Neuroscience of Manifestation and How It Changes Everything*, by James R. Doty, MD)

How long the letter should be is entirely up to you. The important part is the clarity it brings on what the experience and feeling of being with your ideal partner is like. Keep the letter.

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CHAPTER 7

WHAT NOW?

A few final tips and tricks until the next book.

In this book, I've endeavored to give you the best of my knowledge to guide you through the exact set of tools I use with every person who comes to me for help with dating and finding their someone. It unfortunately cannot include the nuance, wisdom and experience that those I work with benefit from. The knowledge is fascinating, but the magic comes from understanding how to put this knowledge into action, as you internalize and implement it.

If you're reading this and are "chomping at the bit" to run out there and take action, then finish this chapter and go for it. I will offer the following advice:

- 1) Don't overcomplicate things. I mentioned it earlier, and I'll say it again here. You're looking for someone whose crazy is compatible with your crazy. That's it! Avoid getting ahead of yourself by building anything up in your head, because that's not where relationships happen. It's not a "goal" or "happily ever after"... a relationship is an ongoing, ever-evolving commitment for as long as that is healthy for both of you. Real love is found through the culmination of little gestures and moments, despite the big grandiose events being more memorable.

2) There are really only four ways to meet people. These are presented in order — from quickest and easiest to implement, to most effective:

1) Cold Approach: Walk up to people who look interesting and start talking to them. It can be very awkward, and initially intimidating, but building that skill set along with active listening will give you the kinds of mad skills to make every one of these methods easier.

2) Online dating: Despite all the bad press around it, not to mention its sometimes questionable reputation, online dating is very effective when done well (hint: the key is stunning honesty, authenticity, patience, and healthy skepticism). I have a fair amount of content out there around this, and am already working on the follow-up to this book as an actual dating guide building on the clarity in this book.

3) Social networks: Family, friends, colleagues, classmates, teammates, or any group of people with whom you can converse casually. It is naturally easier to meet people with whom we already have some connection and social proof, but the same social connections that carry reputations and make recommendations easier also make extricating yourself from a romantic relationship gone sour a lot more complicated.

4) Become “famous”: I don’t mean full-blown Hollywood or celebrity athlete famous, unless that’s what you’re aiming for anyway. Having a moderate online following, a local radio or television show, a popular local niche business, a recognized presence at sci-fi conventions or Renaissance fairs, a spot in a band, or even being the best singer at the local karaoke club... if people know who you are because of a certain social standing, some of them will want to get to know you personally. This method is highly effective, includes concrete social proof, and despite the considerable effort of gaining that kind of status, it ensures that people come to you.

3) If you're not social, get social. Think about the exercise sheets you filled out earlier and the person you want to be. Go to the places you enjoy spending time, do the things that version of you would do. You'll find other people who like the same things as you and likely share the same values.

4) I completely understand the impulse to rush to "get'er done" so you can get to happily-ever-after. As has been mentioned a few times in this book, relationships are about sharing a life, and life keeps moving as we grow and evolve as individuals. Think "long walk to be enjoyed together" rather than "race to the finish."

5) I've always hated thinking of relationships in a transactional way. Good relationships go far beyond that, but in the initial stages there are some transactional aspects. That being said, if it ever becomes about the wrong things: money, favors, what someone can get out of you, keeping score, or moving too fast... that's a scam, not building a relationship. Look for good give-and-take, and a good mutual pace of progression. If that's not happening, get out of Dodge.

6) Want a quick trick to know if she's the right one? Ask the following questions:

- Would I hand her my car keys, no questions asked?
- Would I hand her my house keys, no questions asked?
- Would I sign a legally binding contract to be paired exclusively with her for ten years, living together, and so on?

If you answered "No" to any of the above questions, then keep getting to know her, build that trust and see if that changes.

Those are the quick practical tips until the next book which I've already started working on. The nuance, wisdom, and experience that come from working directly with someone will always go further than any book can. If you're ready for that kind of support, I've got free weekly Zoom calls, a free one-on-one session, and more waiting for you at thewidowerswingman.com.

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CHAPTER 8

WRAPPING UP

Well. Here we are.

I'm going to assume this is not your first self-help book. Let's be honest, you know exactly what happens in this final chapter. The author implies that the work is done, and through their brilliant guidance and your effort of simply reading the book, you're ready to go forth into the world and conquer every challenge effortlessly. Some line like:

"You've done the work. You've taken the journey. You've climbed the mountain. Now go be your best, most authentic, most radically vulnerable self out there."

That load of horseshit is not what we're doing here. If you read through this book and said these are great ideas, maybe I'll look back at those questions sometime, then this book will be every bit as useless as the rest. Mostly because you'd see right through it, and frankly you deserve better than that after everything you've just been through.

So let me try this instead.

Do you remember where you were when you started reading this? Not where your body was, but your state of mind. Maybe you were the guy who'd been sitting in a dark room at 8 p.m., not because you were tired, but because you felt so disconnected from the world outside that you didn't know where you fit anymore. Maybe you were the guy who'd agreed to go out, smiled through the whole thing, come home, sat down and questioned whether you're allowed to enjoy that time or not. Maybe you were the guy who'd downloaded three dating apps in one

evening, full of hope, vim, and vigor — only to question, days later or even mid-profile, whether there was any chance this could ever work. “Am I really ready?” you thought.

Here's what I want you to notice.

You picked up this book. In the middle of whatever version of chaos you were living in, you reached for something that might help... not a drink, not a distraction, not another app to swipe away the evenings. You reached for clarity. That is what being ready is about.

And hopefully you went beyond just reading this book. You wrote the letter. (*You did write the letter, right? If not, go back, take the step, and watch the change.*) You found the genuinely uncomfortable gap between who you dreamt you'd become and who you have become. You thought about your childhood bedroom for longer than you have in decades, and probably felt something unexpected about it. You mapped the patterns that shaped you. You started to understand why you are the way you are, not as an excuse, but as a foundation.

You built a list. Honest, specific, and completely yours, without asking anyone else's permission for what's on it.

You are not the same man who opened page one.

Not because reading a book changes you. Books don't change people... people change themselves if they really want to. This book was specifically designed to give you a structure for a process that was going to happen anyway; that's what humans do, we process and we grow, and we move forward. That tends to go a lot faster and more smoothly when you're doing it intentionally, rather than just hoping forward motion happens by accident.

Here's the thing nobody tells widowed and divorced men:

You're allowed to want this. You're allowed to want companionship and connection and someone to sit across from at dinner who's glad you're there. You're allowed to want to feel desired again, to feel known again, to feel like someone's specific favorite person again. That's not betrayal. That's not weakness. That's not you “replacing” anyone.

That's you being a human being who has more life to live and has decided, with full awareness of what it cost to get here, to go live it.

That decision took courage. The man who walks back out there now knows something most people don't:

He knows who he is. He knows what he wants. He knows the difference between filling a void and sharing a life. Most importantly, he knows which one he's after.

That's not a small thing.

That's everything.

Now go write your next chapter. I'll be here if you need a hand.

Richard (The Widower's Wingman)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Strother is Western-raised and Eastern-leaning, which is a polite way of saying he's allergic to drama, dogma, bureaucracy, and bullshit. His whole philosophy boils down to one concept: every good relationship comes down to being heard, respected, and valued. The Western world made that complicated by capitalizing on our primal fear that standing out is dangerous... but how can people meet us if we're not being ourselves? As *The Widower's Wingman*, Richard cuts through that noise by only preaching what he practices. Through radical honesty and real authenticity, he shows how to make finding a relationship the fun and uplifting experience it always should have been.

Learn more at <http://thewidowerswingman.com>