

THE BIG LEAP

Conquer Your Hidden Fear and
Take Life to the Next Level

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O N E

Preparing for Your Big Leap

The One Problem and

How to Solve It

HOW TO BEGIN

If you would like to make your journey to the Zone of Genius smooth and rapid, please take a moment now to answer four questions. Start with this fundamental one:

Am I willing to increase the amount of time every day that I feel good inside?

When I use the phrase “feel good,” I’m talking about a natural, inner sense of well-being that’s not dependent on outside factors such as what you’ve eaten or what you might be doing. It’s important to begin with a willingness to feel good inside, because there’s no sense enhancing other parts

of your life at the expense of your inner well-being. I'd like you to spend more and more time every day enjoying an organic, deep feeling of body/mind wellness. That's what I'd like you to say yes to, if you're so inclined.

If you said yes to increasing the amount of time you feel good inside, let's extend the question to the outer aspects of your life:

Am I willing to increase the amount of time that my whole life goes well?

When I use the phrase "whole life," I'm talking about your work, your relationships, your creative pursuits, and any other aspects that are central to your life. What I'd like for you, if you're willing, is for all of your life to flow more positively and easefully, for longer and longer periods of time.

If you said yes to those questions, consider going one step further than merely increasing that amount of time:

Am I willing to feel good and have my life go well all the time?

At first glance, you might ask who wouldn't say yes to all of these questions. Well, for many of us, the idea of all of this positive emotion seems far-fetched to begin with. It is easy for us to just assume that with the positive comes the negative. To that I say, "Why not get willing, and see what happens?" We humans have a long and wonderful history of transcending our beliefs about what's possible. In the early days of the steam-powered train, learned scientists urged capping the speed at

thirty miles per hour because they believed that the human body exploded at speeds greater than that. Finally some brave people risked going beyond that limiting belief and found that they did not explode. I think we're approximately at that same stage of development with regard to our ability to feel good and have our lives go well. In my life I've discovered that if I cling to the notion that something's not possible, I'm arguing in favor of limitation. And if I argue for my limitations, I get to keep them. Ultimately we have to ask ourselves, "What's the payoff for arguing forcefully for our limitations?" In the case of the steam engine, scientists were trying to protect people from harm. The limiting belief was well-intentioned even though it was erroneous. From my experience with a lot of people, as well as myself, over the past few decades, I think we can put our minds at ease: being willing to feel naturally good and have our lives go well is not a safety hazard.

In my view, saying yes to that question is one of the most courageous actions a human being can take. In the face of so much evidence that life hurts and is fraught with adversity on all fronts, having a willingness to feel good and have life go well all the time is a genuinely radical act. Going into space is no longer radical; you can buy a ticket online. However, going into your inner depths, where your most deeply held beliefs about what's possible reside, counts in my book as a radical act. If we think it's even remotely possible to feel good all the time and have life go well all the time, we owe it to ourselves to find out how many of us can do it.

Feeling good and having your life go well are wonderful outcomes, and I hope you say yes to both of them. However, I think they are just stepping-stones and launchpads to something really spectacular! If you are willing to feel good and have things go well all the time, consider the ultimate step:

Are you willing to take the Big Leap to your ultimate level of success in love, money, and creative contribution?

MAYNARD'S BIG LEAP

Maynard Webb said yes, and his example inspires me to this day. When I first met Maynard, he was the chief operating officer of eBay, serving during the same time period in which Meg Whitman was CEO. Almost everyone knows about eBay and its phenomenal impact, but fewer people know that Maynard Webb was one of the main architects of its meteoric success. By the time I met Maynard, he had already earned the respect not only of the employees and shareholders of eBay, but also of the larger community of high-tech executives across the world. Yet in my view he was operating in his Zone of Excellence, not his Zone of Genius. He had already amassed a sizeable fortune and could easily have rested on the laurels of his accomplishments at eBay. That's not the way Maynard Webb operates, though.

He chose to confront his Upper Limit Problem and make the Big Leap into his Zone of Genius. He saw how staying

within the world of eBay would be staying within his comfort zone. The comfort zone is no place for a person like Maynard Webb, and I hope not for you, either. Your true home, and Maynard's, is in the Zone of Genius. It's the only place where we can fully celebrate and express the gifts we've been given.

Maynard's Big Leap took him out of the comfortable niche that had made him wealthy and into the unknown of a new start-up company, Live Ops, which is revolutionizing the field of customer service. As CEO of Live Ops, Maynard has the pleasure of knowing that when he opens his office door every day, he is opening new territory in himself and in the world. He's using himself fully, using everything he's learned to make a bigger difference in the world.

Now, contrast Maynard's story with that of a person I didn't get to know until after he ran head-on into his Upper Limit. Dr. Richard Jordan had created a successful small business that attracted the attention of a larger firm. The firm made him an offer of three million dollars for his business, plus a generous two-year employment contract for himself. After weeks of negotiation, they were on the verge of signing the deal. Then one morning Dr. Jordan woke up with some last-minute concerns, the main one being that the new employment contract offered him two fewer weeks of vacation than he was used to taking. He got into an angry confrontation with the negotiator over this detail, which resulted in a letter from the company stating that "due to the force of your remarks," they were no longer interested in acquiring the business.

In a letter to me, Dr. Jordan said, “In that phone call I waved good-bye to three million dollars in cash, salary, and incentives.” Fortunately, Dr. Jordan was able to learn from the experience. His letter continued: “Over the next few years I would awaken many nights with a knot in my stomach. Then I finally found the diamond in the dust. After much work and introspection, I discovered that what I was really saying to that man was ‘Wait a minute! Three million dollars! That’s way more than I’m worth. I cannot allow this!’” He decided to use the experience as, in his words, “the Three-Million-Dollar Gift.” He formed two wonder questions to use in his life going forward:

How much love and abundance am I willing to allow?

How am I getting in my own way?

These questions cleared the way through his Upper Limit Problem, and ultimately he sold the business to another buyer. The story has a happy ending moneywise, but, more important, Dr. Jordan shows us how to turn dust into diamonds by understanding the Upper Limit Problem at work in this kind of situation. Another person might have continued to blame the other company or himself and gone on down that path to bitterness and despair. Instead, Dr. Jordan had the insight and courage to ask big questions and savor the big rewards that come along with them.

FOCUSING ON YOU

Now, turn your attention to yourself. Did you answer yes to those three questions I posed at the beginning of the chapter? If you did, you've taken the first crucial step in the journey. If you got a no or a maybe, let's explore why you might resist the idea.

When you consider the possibility of consistently feeling good and having things go well in your life all the time, you may find yourself thinking, "That's not possible." If so, I understand. I once felt that way, too. I urge you, though, not to waste much of your precious time worrying about whether it's possible. I've proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that it *is*. The only relevant question is whether *you* will let it be possible for *you*. If you would be willing to accept that possibility, you're on the way to experiencing real magic in your life.

I've asked thousands of people if they would be willing to feel good and have things go well all the time, and I've had the great joy of watching what happens in their lives when they say, "Yes!" I would love for you to enjoy the same results, and it all starts with a sincere "Yes!" to those three questions.

If you feel resistance and would like to explore it, you can begin by letting yourself know that it's quite natural to feel that way. After all, human beings have very little experience with consciously cultivating the ability to feel more and more positive energy. There wasn't a class in elementary school or college called "How to Tolerate Longer Periods of Success

and Good Feeling.” I think it’s remarkable that we can go all the way from kindergarten to a Ph.D. or MD without anybody mentioning something so fundamental, but that’s the world we live in at present. We’re going to change that world, though, and we’re going to reap phenomenal benefits from doing it.

There’s an even bigger reason you might feel some resistance about transcending your Upper Limit Problem. Speaking personally, I found that my biggest resistance was the fear of owning my full potential. As I explored this fear, I realized that making such a big commitment put everything on the line. It eliminated any excuse I’d ever allowed myself for failing to achieve what I set out to do. In the past, I could always say, “Well, I failed, but I wasn’t really trying hard. Maybe I’d have succeeded if I had really tried.” Or “I failed, but I might have succeeded if I hadn’t gotten sick.” But now, after making the commitment to going the distance, any excuse that crept into my mind sounded hollow, even ridiculous, as if Columbus had sailed back to Europe and said, “Well, we didn’t find land, but we might have if I hadn’t gotten a nasty cold.”

Many of our fears are based on the workings of the ego, the part of us that’s focused on getting recognition and protecting us from social ostracism. In the Zone of Genius, your ego is unnecessary; living there is its own reward. In the Zone of Genius, you cease to care about recognition or ostracism. Once you make a commitment to inhabiting your full potential, your ego is suddenly faced with extinction. It’s been

making excuses for you throughout your life. Now, if your commitment to taking your Big Leap is sincere, your ego will need to be shown the door. Unless you're lucky, your ego will probably not go quietly. It has a lifetime of employment history behind it.

Faced with annihilation, your ego will set off a smoke bomb of fear. It will attempt to sabotage you by telling you tall tales of the terrors you'll experience if you take the Big Leap into your Zone of Genius. Using the smoke screen of fear as your own inner IMAX, it will project pictures of financial ruin and other disasters sure to befall you. All this is understandable, because fear is always about the unknown. This is unknown territory. Your ego has never been in this fix before. Ultimately, fear will be banished, because fear disappears when you're fully engaged in the Zone of Genius. Until you get there, though, you'll find yourself befogged more than once. Fortunately, this territory has been mapped out. There's something to help you find a way through, although it is probably unlike any navigational tool you've used in the past.

THE WAY THROUGH

There's only one way to get through the fog of fear, and that's to transform it into the clarity of exhilaration. One of the greatest pieces of wisdom I've ever heard comes from Fritz Perls, MD, the psychiatrist and founder of Gestalt therapy.

He said, "Fear is excitement without the breath." Here's what this intriguing statement means: the very same mechanisms that produce excitement also produce fear, and any fear can be transformed into excitement by breathing fully with it. On the other hand, excitement turns into fear quickly if you hold your breath. When scared, most of us have a tendency to try to get rid of the feeling. We think we can get rid of it by denying or ignoring it, and we use holding our breath as a physical tool of denial.

It never works, though, because as Dr. Perls has pointed out, the less breath you feed your fear, the bigger your fear gets. The best advice I can give you is to take big, easy breaths when you feel fear. Feel the fear instead of pretending it's not there. Celebrate it with a big breath, just the way you'd celebrate your birthday by taking a big breath and blowing out all the candles on your cake. Do that, and your fear turns into excitement. Do it more, and your excitement turns into exhilaration. I find it very empowering to know that I'm in charge of the exhilaration I feel as I go through life. I bet you will, too.

When you reach the end of your life and are wondering whether it's all been worthwhile, you'll be measuring whether you did everything you possibly could with the gifts you've been given. When I was growing up, my next-door neighbor Mr. Lewin shared a powerful bit of wisdom with me. I've kept it in mind for more than fifty years. On Judgment Day, Mr. Lewin said, God will not ask, "Why were you not Moses?"

He will ask, “Why were you not Sam Lewin?” The goal in life is not to attain some imaginary ideal; it is to find and fully use our own gifts. The meaning of that saying was clear even to a ten-year-old (who sends long-overdue thanks to Mr. Lewin, a successful seventy-year-old businessman when I knew him, for his willingness to shoot the breeze on many a Florida afternoon with a philosophically inclined kid).

MOVING BEYOND THE HARDEST PART

If you say yes to taking the Big Leap, you have done the hardest part. Your sincere commitment to going all the way to your Zone of Genius is the entry gate to the garden of miracles we will explore in this book. My intention is to show you exactly how to free yourself from the self-imposed limitation that is keeping you from your ultimate success. If you are already successful yet sense there is a quantum jump in your success that awaits you, you can take that quantum jump with the tools in this book. I guarantee it. That may sound like a bold claim, but this method has been taught to hundreds of people who were already achieving ordinary success and then took the Big Leap into the extraordinary. Later, we’ll meet several of those people. Some of them are famous, some are not, but they all have one thing in common: they learned what I’m going to tell you about, and they transcended ordinary success to a level they hadn’t imagined possible.

HOW THE UPPER LIMIT PROBLEM WORKS

Let me show you specifically how the Upper Limit Problem holds us back:

Each of us has an inner thermostat setting that determines how much love, success, and creativity we allow ourselves to enjoy. When we exceed our inner thermostat setting, we will often do something to sabotage ourselves, causing us to drop back into the old, familiar zone where we feel secure.

Unfortunately, our thermostat setting usually gets programmed in early childhood, before we can think for ourselves. Once programmed, our Upper Limit thermostat setting holds us back from enjoying all the love, financial abundance, and creativity that's rightfully ours. It keeps us in our Zone of Competence or at best our Zone of Excellence. It prevents us from living in the ultimate destination of the journey—our Zone of Genius. We'll explore these zones in more detail later in this chapter. For now, though, what you need to know is this: if you make a spectacular leap in one area of your life, such as money, your Upper Limit Problem quickly enshrouds you in a wet-wool blanket of guilt that keeps you from enjoying your new abundance. Guilt is a way our minds have of applying a painful grip on the conduit through which our good feelings flow.

In childhood, our Upper Limit Problem develops in acts of misguided altruism. Specifically, it develops with our attempts to take care of the feelings of others. Children are uncom-

only skilled at reading body language. Perhaps you notice that the smile disappears from your mother's face when you outshine one of your siblings. You quickly learn to pull back a little from shining to take care of your mother's feelings. Many years later in adult life, you may find the very same pattern operating even though there is no mother around whose feelings you need to protect. In the next chapter, we'll explore in great detail the underlying mechanisms of the Upper Limit Problem.

A RADICAL IDEA

Take a close-up look at how guilt operates in conjunction with the Upper Limit Problem. It shows up when we're feeling good (or making extra money or feeling a deeper loving connection in a relationship). When we're feeling good, we may come up against the hidden barrier of an old belief such as "I must not feel good, because fundamentally flawed people like me don't deserve it." The churning froth of these two powerful forces clashing with each other is the chief constituent of the irritating, itchy, slow-drizzle feeling of guilt.

When the old belief clashes with the positive feelings you're enjoying, one of them has to win. If the old belief wins, you turn down the volume on the positive feeling (or lose some money or start an intimacy-destroying argument with your partner). If the good feeling wins, congratulations! Your practice in expanding your capacity for positive energy

is paying off. Your capacity expands in small increments each time you consciously let yourself enjoy the money you have, the love you feel, and the creativity you are expressing in the world. As that capacity for enjoyment expands, so does your financial abundance, the love you feel, and the creativity you express.

Take a moment to appreciate how radical this idea is. Most people think they will finally feel good when they have more money, better relationships, and more creativity. I understand this point of view, because I felt that way half my life. What a powerful moment it is, though, when we finally see that we have it the wrong way around. All of us can find and nurture the capacity for positive feelings *now*, rather than waiting until some longed-for event occurs.

If you focus for a moment, you can always find some place in you that feels good right now. Your task is to give the expanding positive feeling your full attention. When you do, you will find that it expands with your attention. Let yourself enjoy it as long as you possibly can.

As you get more practice, you will be able to use this radical act of appreciation in other areas such as money and love. Instead of waiting to feel good until you have all the money you want and need, go ahead right now and appreciate your current money supply. All it takes is a few seconds. Find a place in yourself where you can feel good about the money you have. Give your full attention to that place of satisfaction. If you can't find any place in you where you feel good about

money, create a positive thought about it in your mind. Float a new thought through your mind such as “I enjoy the money I have” or “I always have plenty of money to do everything I want to do.”

Try it out in the area of love. Instead of focusing on loneliness or stagnation in a relationship, find a place in yourself where you can feel good about the love you have in your life. Give your full attention to that place of joy or satisfaction. Feel it expand as you give awareness to it. As you get more skilled with this practice, you discover that your positive feelings, your abundance, your love and creativity all begin to expand. Then, the outer aspects of your life change to match the expanding good feeling inside you.

Because few people understand how the Upper Limit Problem works, many of us believe we are flawed, not destined for greatness, or simply not good enough to deserve the dreams we want to achieve. Others miss out on big-time success and chalk it up to bad luck or bad timing. Millions of people are stuck on the verge of reaching their goals, can't seem to scale the wall, and are struggling under a glass ceiling that is completely within their control, waiting to be removed. But here's the good news: You're not flawed or unlucky or anything of the sort. You've got the Upper Limit Problem, and it can be transcended in the wink of an eye—if you're equipped with the right tools and a willing heart.

Here's a deeper look at how the Upper Limit Problem keeps us trapped: When you push through your Upper Limit

thermostat setting by making more money, experiencing more love, or drawing more positive attention to yourself, you trip your Upper Limit switch. Deep inside your mind a little voice says, “You can’t possibly feel this good” (or “make this much money” or “be this happy in love”). Unconsciously, you then do something to bring yourself back down to the thermostat setting you’re familiar with. Even if you do achieve a glorious new height, it is often short-lived.

If you want some real-world evidence of the Upper Limit Problem in action, take a look at the studies of lottery winners. One study found that over 60 percent of them had blown the money within two years and returned to the same net worth as before their big win. Some were even worse off financially than before they won the lottery. Add to their financial woes the large number of divorces, family squabbles, and conflicts with friends that lottery winners often experience, and you have a classic example of the Upper Limit Problem at work. A man named Jack Whitaker, winner of more than three hundred million dollars in the Powerball lottery, has been extensively studied because of the litany of disasters that have befallen him after his big win. Here are some (but by no means all) of his post-win misfortunes: his wife left him; he was robbed of \$545,000 cash when he passed out in a strip club; his granddaughter died of a drug overdose in his home; he has been arrested for drunk driving and assaulting a bartender; and he has had more than four hundred lawsuits brought against him by friends, family members, and

others. Ironically, he was already a millionaire when he won the three hundred million dollars, so it is quite clear that the massive infusion of new wealth pushed him past his Upper Limit thermostat setting.

Each of us has an unconscious tendency to trip our Upper Limit switch, and each of us can eliminate that tendency. We deserve to experience wave after wave of greater love, creative energy, and financial abundance, without the compulsion to sabotage ourselves. That's what I want for you, and I hope that's what you want for yourself. If you want to eliminate your Upper Limit Problem—if you will make a commitment to clearing it out of your consciousness—you're more than halfway there.

THE UPPER LIMIT THERMOSTATS OF FAMOUS AND HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE

Once, as a young man, Bill Clinton stood in line to take a tour of the White House. He casually said to an attendant, "I am going to live here someday as president." And he achieved that goal. But then his Upper Limit Problem kicked in. He self-sabotaged his success by getting involved in a sex scandal that led to impeachment and disgrace. He failed to understand his Upper Limit Problem, and it kept him from enjoying fully his place in American history.

Here are a few more prominent examples of the Upper Limit Problem in action. John Belushi rose to enormous

success quite rapidly; at his peak he had a number-one album, the top-grossing movie, and a hit TV show. Then, his Upper Limit Problem got him; he self-destructed as meteorically as he had risen. Then, there's Boris Becker, who won Wimbledon at the remarkable age of seventeen. Almost before the trophy was on the mantle, though, his Upper Limit Problem kicked in. He decided to fire his coach—the man who'd taken him to tennis greatness. The next year Boris hardly got in the door at Wimbledon before getting beat by the seventy-first-ranked player. The actor Christian Bale starred in the Batman movie *The Dark Knight*, which had one of the most profitable openings in movie history. In London for the movie's premiere, he got into an altercation in his hotel room (with his mother and sister, no less) and ended up with assault charges filed against him.

People often experience big breakthroughs . . . and then find a way to avoid relishing their achievement. They receive an award at work and then have a screaming argument with their spouse later that same night. They get the job of their dreams and then get sick; they win the lottery, then have an accident. The newfound success trips their Upper Limit switch, and they plummet back to the familiar setting they've grown used to.

My wife, Kathlyn, and I have enjoyed Bonnie Raitt's company as a friend, and have celebrated her evolution as an artist, for close to twenty years. She is a great living example of how to find your ultimate success by taking the Big Leap. Although she lives securely now in her Zone of Genius, her

path to get there was long and arduous. In the first part of her career, Bonnie earned an excellent reputation as a blues musician. Her blues albums were seldom best sellers, but they always did well enough to keep her devoted fans happy and the clubs full. Like many of her idols in the blues lineage, though, she paid her dues by years of struggle with addictions. Battling her demons consumed a great deal of her energy, and it wasn't until she got sober that she made her Big Leap. Two of her best friends, Stevie Ray Vaughan and John Hiatt, inspired her by kicking their addictions and succeeding in Twelve-Step programs. Finally she made the commitment to get clean and sober, and that's when the real magic began.

With the new energy and clarity she gained through sobriety, Bonnie took a look at her career and made a fateful decision. She decided to jump out of the trap of "Excellent Blues Musician." She made a conscious choice to launch herself into the bigger world of mainstream rock music. She was hearing songs inside herself that didn't fit into the traditional themes, rhythms, and keys of the blues. So, she said a loving good-bye to the friendly confines of the blues world and took the Big Leap into the unknown. She recorded an album of the new music and went on the road with a new band. In her meditations, she visualized herself onstage at the Grammy Awards, receiving the accolades of the music industry for the new music. She even visualized the specific dress she would wear when she received the award. Not long afterward, she was standing onstage receiving a Grammy for

that new album, *Nick of Time*, which went on to sell millions of copies. Now, nine Grammys, sold-out stadiums, and millions of albums later, she is living testimony to the power of claiming your Zone of Genius.

It took a Big Leap on her part to go from clubs to stadiums, but she took that risk and has reaped incredible rewards. Beyond all the Grammy Awards and other material benefits, though, is an achievement that's purely a gift to the soul: the deep satisfaction of living in her Zone of Genius. That's what I want you to experience. You know deep inside you that you will never be fully satisfied until you have anchored yourself in your Zone of Genius. To do less would be to hold back, and long ago you made a handshake deal with the universe that you wouldn't do that. The seductive comforts of success, though, can lull us into accepting the status quo. In that state of comfort, it's easy to forget the deal you made with the universe to use yourself fully.

SOLVING ONE PROBLEM AND FREEING YOURSELF

By its very nature, the Upper Limit Problem is unsolvable in your ordinary state of consciousness. If you could solve it that way, you would have solved it long ago. Solving the Upper Limit Problem is possible only by a leap of consciousness. Once you learn this way to solve problems, you'll have a tool you can apply wherever and whenever you want to increase your success.

Specifically, the Upper Limit Problem cannot be solved in the usual way we solve problems: by gathering information or replacing one set of information with another. The Upper Limit Problem must be *dis*-solved, not solved. You dissolve it by shining a laserlike beam of awareness on its underpinnings—the false foundations that hold the Upper Limit Problem in place. When you shine the light of awareness on the underpinnings, they disappear. Then you are free to soar, explore, and rest at home in the no-limits zone of your ultimate success.

Our activities in the world occur in four main zones:

The Zone of Incompetence

The Zone of Incompetence is made up of all the activities we're not good at. Others can do them a lot better than we can. Surprisingly, many successful people persist in wasting time and energy doing things for which they have no talent. When you focus awareness on yourself by using the tools in this book, you may be surprised to find how much time you spend operating in this zone. When you free yourself from this zone, you will be rewarded with a remarkable new feeling of energy and zest for living.

The best way to handle most things in your Zone of Incompetence is to avoid doing them altogether. Delegate them to someone else, or find some other creative way to avoid doing them. I got a call one Sunday night from a friend of mine,

Thomas, a business consultant with whom I play golf from time to time. He told me he'd spent a frustrating weekend installing a new thousand-dollar printer at his home. Most frustrating to him was the four hours he'd spent on the phone with the technical-support people at Hewlett-Packard. I happen to know that he is just about as unskilled as I am at mechanical things. I also know that he bills his consulting time at ten thousand dollars a day. His hourly rate for over-the-phone executive coaching is one thousand dollars an hour.

I asked him how many hours in total he'd spent wrestling with the new printer. "Thirteen," he said, sounding a bit sheepish. "Hmmm," I said, "you spent thirteen thousand dollars trying to install a one-thousand-dollar printer. Did you ever get it working?" "No," he said, "I eventually called a college kid in the neighborhood. He came over and got it working in an hour." "And you paid him how much?" I asked. Thomas said, "At first he didn't want anything, but I made him take a hundred bucks."

I forgot to mention that his frustrating Saturday had been capped off that evening by an argument with his wife. You can probably guess what the argument was about: all the hours he was spending on the printer installation instead of with her and the family. Add that cost to the thirteen thousand dollars, plus the hundred-dollar "service" tab, and you have an expensive excursion in the Zone of Incompetence.

One thing I've learned from a lifetime of observing: being smart doesn't keep you from doing dumb things. My grand-

father had a colorful phrase he used: “stuck on stupid.” It meant that you kept doing the same dumb things over and over without learning from them. I felt a bit like that when I first realized how much time and energy got consumed when I was doing things I was not good at. It’s worthwhile to do something you’re not good at if the intention is to enjoy or master it. Skiing was like that for me. I grew up in Florida and never saw a snowflake in person until I was twenty-three years old. My first outing on skis was probably laughable viewed from the outside, but from the inside it was memorably painful. I fell so many times that when I got home that night I felt like I’d been hit repeatedly by a bus. It was worth it, though, because I wanted to enjoy skiing someday.

For my friend Thomas, spending all weekend fretting over a printer did not come from an intention of someday mastering printer installation. In his words, it came from “trying to save a few bucks.”

The Zone of Competence

You’re competent at the activities in the Zone of Competence, but others can do them just as well. Successful people often discover that they expend far too much time and energy in this zone. Not long ago I worked with a woman in her mid-forties who contributes a classic example of the Competence Trap. An executive in a small firm, Joan was referred to me by her medical doctor, who felt that some of her health issues

were due to what I sometimes call “diseases of unfulfillment.” When people are not expressing their full potential, they often get illnesses that have vague, hard-to-diagnose symptoms. Chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia are good examples of what I’m describing. I’ve seen both of those illnesses disappear when people began to break out of their sub-Genius zones and move toward fulfilling their true potential. In the course of several sessions, Joan moved from talking about chronic fatigue syndrome to telling me about a workplace frustration that had recycled for several years. Because she was good at organizing things, she got called on more and more to handle tasks outside her job description, from the company picnic to the travel schedules of the other executives. “One of the executive assistants could do those kinds of things,” she told me, “but I end up doing them because it’s quicker to do it myself than to delegate and follow up on them.” I asked her, “If you could stop doing that sort of thing, what would it free up time for you to do?” She mentioned a few activities, but none of them produced any expressions of liveliness or excitement on her face. I asked her to go a little deeper: “If money or your job description were not an issue, what would you really like to be doing in the company?” Here we struck gold. “I wouldn’t be doing anything in the company,” she said. “I’d be working on an environmental project I’m obsessed with. I think it could turn into something big, but there’s a big gap between thinking that and making a living at it.” That admission turned the

key. We made a plan that first called for her to eliminate the extra organizational tasks that kept her in her Zone of Competence. It took her a couple of weeks to extricate herself and delegate those tasks to others. Just taking that initial step cleared up most of her physical symptoms. She felt so much better that the second part of the plan took an unexpected turn in a new direction. She decided to cut back to half time at the company and devote her newfound energy to working on the environmental project. Time will tell if she can stake out a life in her Zone of Genius, but at least she is not carrying the burden of unfulfillment and its attendant symptoms.

The Zone of Excellence

In the Zone of Excellence are the activities you do extremely well. You make a good living in your Zone of Excellence. For successful people, this zone is a seductive and even dangerous trap. To remain in this zone is to hobble yourself from taking the leap into your Zone of Genius. The temptation is strong to remain in the Zone of Excellence; it's where your own addiction to comfort wants you to stay. It's also where your family, friends, and organization want you to stay. You're reliable there, and you provide a steady supply of all the things that family, friends, and organizations thrive on. The problem is that a deep, sacred part of you will wither and die if you stay inside your Zone of Excellence. There is only one place where you will ultimately thrive and feel satisfied, and that's . . .

The Zone of Genius

Liberating and expressing your natural genius is your ultimate path to success and life satisfaction. Your Zone of Genius is the set of activities you are uniquely suited to do. They draw upon your special gifts and strengths. Your Zone of Genius beckons you with increasingly strong calls as you go through your life. (*The Call to Genius* is the name I've given to these inner promptings.) By age forty, many of us have tuned out the Call to Genius and are getting loud, repeated alarms hidden in the form of depression, illness, injuries, and relationship conflict. These alarms are reminding us to spend more time feeding our natural genius and letting it do its magic in the world. In this book I will show you how to heed this call and move gently and gracefully into your Zone of Genius.

I use the phrase "gently and gracefully" for a particular reason. If we don't heed the call and make a gentle, graceful move into our Zone of Genius, we often get painful life whacks that tell us with blatant clarity that we're not paying attention to the Call.

I recall a coaching conversation with Bill, a brilliant forty-three-year-old entrepreneur, who had been turning a deaf ear to his Call to Genius for far too long. He came in for one session, in which he told me about the bind he was in. Bill wanted passionately to pursue a certain new project, but he said he couldn't do it because of pressure from his com-

pany, his wife, and others. He said they could not afford to have him take the several months necessary to work on the new idea. As he described the new project, I could tell it was clearly in his Zone of Genius. I counseled Bill to do whatever it took to make it happen, even if he could spend only an hour a day laying the groundwork for it. At the end of the session he told me he was going to “try” to find that hour a day, but I could tell by the look on his face that it was unlikely to occur. He told me he would call me in a month to schedule a second appointment “when things slowed down a little.” It was our last conversation, because Bill died of a massive heart attack a few weeks later.

I have replayed that hour with him in my mind more times than I can count. Bill was seemingly in perfect health. His wife was a yoga teacher; they were both devoted to a healthy lifestyle. I’ve always wondered if there was a way in which I could have been more forceful with him in helping him make a life-changing, and possibly life-saving, commitment to his Zone of Genius. I’ll never know, but from that experience I made a commitment to myself to do everything I could to spend more time in my own Zone of Genius, and to make a passionate case to everyone I care about to do the same.

Given the right tools and a little wisdom, we can learn to heed our Call to Genius, sparing ourselves the unpleasant consequences of plugging our ears to keep from hearing it. The book shows you how to establish yourself in your Zone of Genius, beginning with a modest investment of ten minutes

a day and culminating in spending upwards of 70 percent of your time expressing your true genius in the world. I hit the 70 percent mark in the mid-nineties, and rebirthed myself at midlife into a previously unimaginable degree of success in love, financial abundance, and creativity. That's what I want for you. If that's what *you* want for you, you will find precise tools here for identifying your natural genius and expressing it in the world.