

# **Appreciation: The Key to Success in Life and Work**

By Mike Takieddine

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## Introduction

Dear readers,

As I write these words, the leaves on the trees have turned from lush green, to a mature green-brown, then to a rich brown-yellow, and finally, as they prepare to fall, to dazzling yellow. Once again nature, that high priestess of everything that is precious in life, is about to reinvent herself, in preparation for what could be a delightfully white winter.

I love this time of year, when the leaves make a marked and determined separation between the seasons.

I divide my life into those decades when I didn't have any passions, and the ones that followed. Also between the years when I was a skeptic, going around challenging everything around me, and the years when I became at peace with myself, when I learned to be compassionate and love nature and mankind.

You can probably already gather that I am long in the tooth, as they say—getting there in my older age. I'm not yet ready to "go "however, for I have tons of things to look forward to, plans to make, people to enjoy, and dreams to see unfold.

I divide my life between the years when I used to hate being a little overweight, and not as tall as I would have liked—also perhaps not as handsome, eloquent, athletic and artistic—and the years when all that stopped mattering to me as much as the wonders of the world around me.

Sometimes we go through life looking for the good things when the good things have always been all around us. Sometimes we go through life looking for a passion when the passion always resided inside of us.

It's all a matter of our outlook.

Don't worry though, for we will discuss all these matters in great detail in this book. We will work together on getting just the right outlook to move us from a dark outlook to one where the sun shines brightly every day.

Are you willing to make a few little adjustments in your attitude? Are you ready to be happier and more fulfilled?

Here is our promise: every time we discuss a point or concept for you to consider, we will try to give tips and examples to make the process so easy to understand and follow. That is our promise to our readers. If you open your heart and want to feel the many joys of life, just read on.

Did I already tell you how I divide my life? Ha-ha! But here is another angle: I divide my life between the years when I had no guidance, no role models, nothing to steer me in the right direction, and the years when I found my way, when I learned that, true to how the saying goes, “the best things in life come in little packages”. Came a point when I could suddenly see, when I could feel, smell, savor, and hear. We all think that we do those things routinely, but I ask you, when was the last time you truly marveled at the chirping of a bird, or the aroma that a plant may emit? When was the last time when you relished simply walking barefoot on a slightly muddy patch of forest? Or when you held in your hand, amazed, a newborn bird that had fallen off a tree?

So, here is what we are going to do: we are first going to examine some of the things that are part of our current lifestyles that prevent us from seeing the light, the things that without our knowledge become major obstacles in our lives. For example, the anxiety that we carry with us every day, our frequently negative thinking, some of the white lies we use in our communications simply because “everybody” does it, and the self-confidence that somehow escapes us just when we need it.

Again, every time we bring out one of those obstacles, and many others, we will illustrate how to overcome it in easy, step-by-step guidelines.

We will learn how to appreciate—not appreciate anything in particular, but appreciate everything in one big compassionate leap forward.

We will learn to see the light. We will bring a new and invigorated way to enjoy life. Not just enjoy our big achievements, or what we do once in a while, but enjoy every part of this magnificent life that we were blessed to be a part of.

Are you ready? Have you opened your heart and made yourselves “available”?

Let’s do it then. Let’s go to work. Let’s learn to appreciate.

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# Chapter One

## The Anxieties that Fill our Days

### ***The Noise Within***

In this first chapter we are going to discuss how the mind generates a continuous stream of unnerving noise that rattles us and keeps us in a state of dazed tension.

Until I started reading about the noise within—and the stress it generates—I had no idea of what was going on. I thought it was just me, whereas in reality it was me and over seven billion people on earth.

So here is the first truth that should make you feel a little better. Stress hits everyone. So stop thinking that you have been singled out for this harsh and never-ending treatment. You haven't!

For those blessed people among us for whom sleep comes easily, the darkness of night becomes a cushy refuge from the endless barrage of images, emotions, and scripts that just keep streaming like a horrible movie in our minds.

Just think of this: it is estimated that your mind can conjure up over twenty thoughts per second, which translates to almost one million thoughts a day. One million! Naturally, many of that million are merely the same images and sentiments repeated over and over, particularly the ones that keep you tense, your nerves jittery. They are typically single-shot images that keep popping up from the bottomless reservoir that is your memory, surfacing like fast in-and-out rebirths from the past.

They used to drive me nuts! I used to even take calming pills just so as to be able to carry on with life and work.

This relentless thinking process lifts us by the scruff of our necks and never gives up. The worst part of it is that our minds evoke in us fears and emotions associated with sketches from our past, at times going all the way back to when we were children. In our minds we are constantly evaluating, judging, lamenting and projecting bad things from the past into the future, rehearsing hypothetical dialogues, and simply keeping mental gibberish flowing at the speed of light.

I used to transpose my fears and other emotions—guilt, frustration, stigmas, and feelings of ineptness—into an imagined future. I used to aggrandize the issues that trouble me the most, and although on the face of it I naturally aspired for a state free of anxiety, I kept getting increasingly mired in the frenzy of monstrous activity that is inside our minds.

To give you just the one example, let us say that one day I had an encounter with a client that didn't go as well as I might have liked. Well, I would spend endless hours later on rehearsing the dialogue that I should have used in that encounter, the words that might have been better, and particularly the arguments that might have won the day for me. My mind wouldn't let go of it, even though I may not have done all that badly to start with. From that you can imagine, going one step further, what my mind would have done to me if I had in fact been rude or less than fully empathetic to someone at the office. That would have caused me endless anxiety.

Is that the kind of thing that's going on in your life as well?

For thousands of years, writers, poets, philosophers and theologians have been advocating their particular methods or techniques for silencing the noise within us. They all came to more or less the same conclusion that decent peace of mind can only be attained by subduing the ramblings of the mind, even if only for a minute or two. Millions of people around the world spent endless time and resources in an effort to prolong those precious few minutes and somehow turn them into a way of life.

Just imagine what ten minutes of uninterrupted deep quiet within us— or one hour or two—would bring about. In his gem of a book titled "*The Power of Now*", Eckhart Tolle gives us an exalting response to our hypothetical. "In those peak moments," he writes, "extraordinary capacities evolve: of love, bodily awareness, vitality, intuition, perception..."

In the meantime, out came all the different techniques for quieting the mind: visualization, breathing exercises, yoga, meditation, chakra and many others—modalities that for the most part have been common-place in the Far East for thousands of years.

Far Eastern Buddhists and other monks come as close as feasible to subduing the noise with their meditations and overall "enlightenment" or "awareness". These concepts strive to get us out of the past and the future and into the "now"—the present.

But we are not monks or Buddhists. We are everyday people, and the noise within keeps us rattled and unable to perform at our best.

## ***The beast known as stress***

The noise within is our main obstacle in life. It generates the stress that seems to have been our daily companion from the day we are born.

Don't you often feel ill at ease for no particular reason, with perhaps a knot in the stomach, dark sentiments, and your nerves jittery? That is the nature of stress. It is your mind playing its usual tricks of generating stress.

The bad news is that we cannot get entirely rid of that stress. There is no silver bullet, no magic wand that we can waive and be stress-free.

That is the story of stress, and it repeats itself a million times as we make our way through life. Stress, this eternal accomplice of ours, hardly ever leaves our side. It is as though it has lifetime tenure inside of our mind, body and soul. It had a terrible effect on me as I was coming of age and even later in adulthood. I am sure it affects many readers among you in varying degrees.

There is good news however—very good news!

For although admittedly we cannot wipe out the stress that invades every part of our lives, we can learn to manage it.

Managing the stress in your life is a big part of this book.

At the risk of bugging you with my personal experiences, I have to say that although it took a long part of my life, I finally managed to expose stress for what it really is, and I thereby learned how to subdue it, not just in fleeting moments here and there, but as a way of life—a mindset and a lifestyle. And I never practiced meditation or other stress-relief techniques. Regrettably, these never made it into my daily routines.

I say "regrettably" because I fully realize that had I indeed practiced some of those modalities, I would have been even better off, but I am here trying to tell you that there are other ways to mitigate the influence of stress that are truly simple to understand and embrace.

We can't learn to appreciate much of what life offers us as long as we are constrained by jittery nerves and ugly thinking processes that drag us down. We have to rise above all that, albeit in tiny baby steps.

This book is about those baby steps that are so easy to learn, adopt, and put into practice on an everyday basis.

We are not going to discuss what all of us already know. For example, we all know how great a lifestyle can be when it is infused with plenty of exercise and healthy eating. When was the last time you felt "on top of the world"? A rigorous workout will get you there, and when you feel on top of the world is precisely the time when your stress level is contained. Similarly by consuming nutritious food and avoiding processed food that is full of sweeteners, preservatives, dyes, enhancers, and other artificial stuff, you come out all the more energetic and enthused in life.

But we know all that, so we are not going to discuss it. We are also not going to discuss the effect of yoga, meditation and the other well-known stress-relief modalities. I can only encourage you to take up one of those, but because I never did, I don't feel particularly qualified to discuss or promote them.

By contrast, what we will talk about in great detail are other lifestyle aspects that you probably aren't currently aware of and therefore can't deem them so important to you. Although, believe me, they are of critical value to your wellbeing and growth in life and in your career.

Let me give some examples of what we're talking about:

Do you think the stress in your life is less or more impactful when you are depressed, or when your self-esteem is low, or when you have little confidence in taking on new tasks, or when you are beset by a sudden illness, or when you have been unkind to a loved one, or when you feel there is no direction in your life, or when you have just told a big lie, or, or, or. . .

I think you get the message. I think you fully realize how your mind goes wild when any of those circumstances affect you. Your mind loves to aggrandize your fears, guilt, and frustrations.

Here is what we hope to introduce to you in this book:

Certainly, you will punish yourself endlessly when you have been “bad”, but truth be told, the reverse is also true. The reverse is even more important than the scenarios we have laid out just now.

Let me give some examples about that as well:

Don't you feel “great” when, at an important juncture for you and the important people around you, you chose to tell the absolute truth, or you instinctively knew the difference between right and wrong in a situation, even when that difference was subtle and almost indiscernible, or when you approached someone with compassion, or when you had the confidence to improve a process at the workplace, or when you thought you were worthy of your accomplishments, or, or, or. . .

Again, open your heart and “listen” carefully, for the following chapters hold secrets of tremendous value to the rest of your life.

That is what this book is really about.

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## Chapter Two

# The High Road

### ***The righteous path***

For our purposes here, we interpret “the high road” as away of life that embraces everything that is righteous or “good”, as in good versus not-so-good, and good versus outright evil.

When you hug the high road, it becomes part of your mindset, directing you at every significant crossroad in your growth as a “worthy” human being. We put “worthy” in quotation marks to emphasize that it is self-worthiness that we are talking about, and not necessarily worthy in the eyes of other people. It is our great hope that by the end of this book, you will have stopped worrying about what is in other people’s minds, or what other people think about you. That is an obsession that plagues many individuals—though not us.

To paraphrase from the great poet Rudyard Kipling, he said: “. . . If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you. . .” That is the high road that we speak of, when the difference between right and wrong may be in everyone else’s mind –hardly ever in yours.

Pursuing the high road is not an easy endeavor. It can be a rocky pursuit in which you are on your own. There frequently is no one other than your inner self to tell you how you’re doing, or whether you’ve veered off course in dealing with something or other. You will be making choices that at times are not the easiest or self-evident. You’ll want to reflect and ponder about the best way for you.

Here is what the poet Robert Frost had to say in his famous “*The Road Not Taken*” which became better known as “*The Road Less Traveled*” (this is the last of four stanzas):

*I shall be telling this with a sigh*

*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I  
Took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

You see clearly there how the poet agonized over which road to take, the difference between the two divergent roads not easy to detect. In pursuing the high road, you too will at times have to take the road less traveled, prompted solely by your inner fabric –your solid foundation.

When you are confronted by two roads that are unusually similar, both perhaps leaning on the side of good, and you are baffled as to which one to take, your rule of thumb would be to take the one that is based on more love and compassion. When love and compassion guide you, it is difficult to see how you can go wrong.

And when you are making a long-term plan, and you're not sure about it, the rule of thumb is to break up the plan into its various milestones, and assess how you like yourself at each of those intersections—meaning your level of self-worthiness. Once again, you have to feel righteous at every step of the way, and when confused, measure the level of love and compassion that would come about if you take that particular path.

### ***Time for self-appraisal***

Self-appraisals serve to flush out the bad habits that find their way into your behaviors and mannerisms. From these examinations you can keep track of the degree to which your conduct of late measures up to the standards you have set for yourself. You would naturally want to be as honest as possible in seeking the truth from the following:

#### **10 Questions to Gauge your Truthfulness:**

1. How often do you say things irresponsibly or without much thought?

2. How often do you think that you might have been more delicate in dealing with someone?
3. Do you have a path for knowing when to say things, or when to keep silent?
4. Do you find yourself embellishing things or “inventing things” in order to impress?
5. In what scenarios do you find yourself coming out with white lies, or withholding some of the truth?
6. Are you likely to engage in gossip? Do you gossip at another person’s expense, someone who is not there at the time?
7. Do you at times say one thing and do something else? Do you prefer people to watch what you say but not what you do?
8. In the last few weeks, do you think you’ve hurt one or more people more than you’ve helped them?
9. Do you like to do what your peers want you to do, or do you find yourself sometimes saying no?
10. Do you habitually have trust in yourself, and do you think people generally trust you or what you say?

Here is an even more complex question: there are times when you might mean well, but you make a grand—and too ambitious—plan, only to later realize that you neither have the willpower nor the energy to see it through. Other times you find yourself simply running out of steam in the face of troublesome obstacles. And finally, yet more times you simply put off a task

that you had set your mind on. You then deem it acceptable to simply not do what you had promised yourself you would do. Do you do all these things when, after all, you're not hurting anyone in the process?

The rule of thumb in cases like that is simply to observe how you manipulated yourself into accepting what you did and how you did it, learn from that, and then not repeat that trajectory going forward.

When we talk about love and compassion, it boils down to the love that your actions generate. If after each action you observe that the level of love and compassion you generated between you and the various other factions, then that is righteous and a manifestation of the high road.

Just as long as you keep your head up and sense that you've done the right thing.

## ***The Power of Words***

One of the fundamental pillars of the high road has to do with the word patterns we use. Integrity requires that we speak with clarity and finality, as in: "Here is my position on this matter."

We all know people who are less than careful with what they say. They impulsively undertake to take certain actions only to then change course and disappoint. People like that often speak of things that they have no know-how or experience about. They amplify and overstate matters to appear like they are "in the know", at a time when all those around them promptly realize that they are just making things up. People like that also take a little something that they heard or read and embellish it, adding their own imaginary colors to it, thinking that they can thus impress others, when clearly those impressions are short-lived and invariably backfire.

Be careful with the language you use. Avoid talking convincingly about a topic unless you have first-hand knowledge of it. And even when you think you have such knowledge, it would serve you greatly to maintain a certain humility in how you depict matters, always leaving room for others to contribute as well, or to even correct you.

And, most important of all, never use language that puts down others. When you have a low opinion about someone, leave it alone—don't harp on it. One of the worst sentiments that feeds the rumblings within is the guilt

that we feel when we belittle someone else. It never serves your cause to mock, ridicule, vilify or even criticize. Just leave it alone.

Your top asset in those matters is your personal credibility. Develop your growth among family, friends, peers, coworkers, bosses, and other loved ones by keeping a watchful eye over your credibility. Wouldn't it be simply great if your words are considered authoritative and entirely trustworthy when you speak?

Your credibility is a measure of your personal integrity. Those two are inseparable, and they both, individually as well as together, set you free.

Watch diligently over your communication style, for communication should be an integrity-boosting force, and not the other way around.

The avoidance of outright lies therefore becomes of vital importance as a bedrock foundation of your level of righteousness. Avoid all the types of lies: fibs, white lies, embellishments, story-amplifications, adding personal touches to an event, dispelling gossip, re-cycling events, and indulging in half-truths.

Don't ever kid yourself about the nature of lying, for when you lie, you do it knowing precisely what you're doing, intending to deceive. You should also know that you would be creating an artificial and altogether fantasy world that you and the other parties to your lies will have to live with for the long run.

In the world you function in, because lying is prevalent among many, you may start believing that it may thus not be all that bad to your pursuit of the ways of the high road. Those are false assumptions: embark on a lie, and you have been detrimental to your higher goals.

Besides, it's altogether unnecessary. Why bring this wall down on your credibility and peace of mind when it achieves nothing of value to your life?

White lies are the worst, if only because they bring the rest of the wall down on you. Don't ever try to talk yourself into believing for example that a lie is acceptable when it prevents hurting someone's feelings, or that "it brightens someone's day", or that it's all right as long as no one gets hurt, or asking someone to "tell them I'm not here". The truth is the exact opposite: it is your lying that does harm to others, if not in the immediate, in later stages of your relationships. The worst thing you can do for friends and

loved ones is to lose your credibility, even when that loss is perceived to be only in your own assessment.

Examine carefully how succinctly the Scottish author and novelist, Sir Walter Scott, put it when he wrote:

*Oh what a tangled web we weave,  
when first we practice to deceive!*

The more “tangled webs you weave”, the more realities you create, and the more lying you will have to do, bringing upon yourself an energy-draining load that will steer you further apart from the high road. The high road requires that you remain sound and whole –in *the* only reality.

That is why the above ten questions that were set for your self-appraisal mostly revolved around the power of your words. For you can’t have it both ways: you can’t be the master of meaningful words while at the same time practicing lying and deceit.

## ***Retrieving the Honest Path***

So, what do we do right now? We’ve all engaged in some degree of lying, at times with blatant untruths, other times with an assortment of white lies and exaggerations, gossip and the like. How do we regain the high road?

The first part of our recovery program is to observe carefully how we speak. Do we say only what we mean? Do exaggerations, gossip, and language that brings someone down come easily to us? Are we using the measuring stick of love, self-compassion and empathy?

Here we can only repeat what we have already depicted in more contexts than one. Note that the word “love” was added to the concept of truth-telling. For you frequently do not have a clear-cut assessment of where the truth exactly lies. You may choose not to share a particular truth out of respect for someone else. What would be helpful is a personal code of integrity that you can abide by without second thoughts. Someone thus came up with a simple solution: “There are three questions to ask yourself before you speak the truth. One: Are you certain it’s true? Two: Is it necessary? And three: Is it kind, or is it compassionate, or are you

empathetic enough, meaning that you are putting yourself in the other person's shoes?" Ideally, your statements will pass all three tests.

So you arrive at a point where you are determined to make the necessary corrections to your communications style. Ask yourself if you always keep your word? Go back to commitments you made in the past and ask that question: did you live up to those ideals? How often did you not follow through, or when you made yourself promises that you conveniently forgot about?

Things like that may hamper your ability to fully embrace the high road. Don't forget what we started with all along, that the high road will set you free, that it is one of the fundamental ways you can mitigate the noise from within and calm down your stress, fears, frustrations, and overall jitteriness. Always keep in mind that hugging the high road should be viewed as one of your highest priorities for a life of relative calm and enhanced creativity and adeptness.

Make those necessary adjustments and you will promptly start reaping rewards by the truckload! Start by taking the necessary steps even in small ways, one at a time.

If you are afraid to scorn others with the truth, you may wish to re-examine whether that relationship is one you want to keep. You may indeed have to do some housekeeping and rearrange some relationships in order to hug the high ground. Shedding some friends may pave the way with replacing them with more honest-loving people.

Everyone knows someone who is thought to be "as honest as they come", meaning with a high sense of integrity. Usually that person stands out as not suffering too many quandaries in their daily life, and as speaking the truth in a measured way. Needless to say, that person is perceived to be "happy".

If in this chapter you felt you'd been given some direction towards a more fulfilling life, the reason may be that multiple realities that come about as a result of telling lies and half-truths can't be all that appealing to anyone. You will find yourself to be a much happier person when your words match your intentions. The ultimate barometer in matters like these is that you will find yourself sleeping better when at night you won't have to lie awake thinking of what impact something –a half-truth- you told someone will have on them.

In addition, as your words gain prominence and become increasingly more meaningful, your reality will begin to reflect that. You will speak from a place of integrity, and you will use powerful language in the service of your highest options. Above all, when at a crossroads, you will find ways to let love factor in. When that happens, you'll know you are on the right path and headed in the best possible direction.

One final time: you are truly free when you hug the high road.

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## Chapter Three

# Seeking Purpose

### ***Looking Back in Time***

You may find that there have been times when you have lamented having on occasion missed out on watershed opportunities.

Perhaps you never bothered to nurture that budding relationship you had with someone who later became a leader and innovator or, at a simpler level, you regretted the time you went to a critical interview without having bothered to read up on the company or prepare in some other way.

And although missed opportunities are part and parcel of your growing experience, you have to ask yourself what it is that blinds you to turning-point events which in retrospect seemed to have stared you in the face, inviting you in.

Naturally, the answer lies not so much in the makeup of the opportunities themselves as in your mindset when they occurred. You simply weren't listening, watching, or questioning. You weren't present, and you certainly weren't ready.

You were at the time being buffeted by a mindset—frequently rationalized thoughts—that dragged you away from your central focus, noise reverberating in the echo chamber that is your mind, consisting mostly, as we have already discussed in chapter one, of inconsequential riddles.

You were ill-disposed and ill-primed, and you watched wistfully as the wind passed you by filling other people's sails.

Those were youthful days, you might say, days when you didn't care much about anything, and days when you were not accountable to anyone, not even to yourself. Well, the premise in that line of thinking is that much has changed since then, a 50/50 proposition at best.

Many of you readers may have already learned how to gain purpose in your lives, how to maintain a meaningful focus on the plan you have carefully crafted for yourself, a plan that includes an energetic lifestyle, compassionate and loving relationships, hugging the high road, and a nicely calibrated career plan.

This in no way means that you can't let your guard down and reflect on light, commonplace issues, for having fun and indulging in laughter must be part and parcel of the master plan. In fact laughter itself is universally recognized as being the ultimate fighting tool against stress. What it does entail is navigating a path that continuously keeps you on track with your better judgment and nurtures your ability to stay purposeful and not be swayed by reveries that lead nowhere.

## ***The Lightning Rod***

Purpose is the lightning rod that fills that void in your lives and becomes your prime source of energy, motivation, inspiration and direction.

Purpose is the multi-dimensional passion that prods you forward from the moment you get up in the morning and sustains you through difficulties and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. And although no one can or should tell anyone else what precise purpose or set of purposes anyone should embrace, perhaps a framework can be provided here to better identify the challenge.

Firstly, it's critical in shaping your lives not to allow others to pitch-in too fervently. One thing you can bet on is that there will be concerted efforts by others to do precisely that, efforts that will haunt you as you scramble to find your own parameters.

At an early age, your parents and friends will have an endless array of prescriptions for your so-called happiness, and the prevailing social norms will pressure you endlessly as well: get a great job, get married, have children, get a house in the suburbs, become a lawyer like your dad, and much more.

In fact, if you don't exhibit fortitude of character and steadfastness, this stream of what society wants you to be and do will follow you all the way to the grave.

Many people will in reality welcome having their purpose in life handed to them on a silver platter. It is a relief for them not to have to struggle on a fundamental quest like that. That sense of relief will promptly vanish however when they discover that the purpose and existence they had espoused were anything but what they wanted for themselves.

They thus become frustrated and diminished like wilted plants, their visions unfulfilled.

Drifting aimlessly through life's ups and downs is like swimming against the current. We remain in place no matter how much we push and sweat. The visions of what we could have achieved would torture us and wreak havoc to our spirit. No control and no direction end up with no motivation—nothing to aspire for. And being the bizarre humans that we are, we frequently put on disguises and dress up our hopelessness, lest people realize how weak we are. By drifting aimlessly, we thwart the potential we are given at birth.

The search for life purpose—for our 'calling"—should not be conducted with anxiety, as if something tangible is missing that needs to be discovered right away.

Instead, we ought to think of our life purpose as our contribution to mankind, the amount of love we can muster and spread around, the amount of light we can diffuse on the darkness that permeates our universe, and the amount of healing we can dispense where it is vitally missing. We can never go wrong hugging the virtues of love, kindness, and empathy.

### ***When Love Abounds***

Love is not a circle with strict confines but rather an open-ended fusion with large and small creatures, with nature, with the cosmos and with Man's past and future predicaments.

And where you never before outlined what is required of you in terms of love, you ought to spend time each day reflecting on love. When you are filled with love, you acquire an overarching glow under which your calling comes to life.

Love, thoughtfulness and compassion thus constitute the necessary framework for molding your specific purpose. A calling or life purpose becomes your preferred way of making your contributions, each contribution bearing the hallmark of someone with purpose, someone who can indeed withstand the current. From that framework of being at peace with the world everything else flows, and eventually the glow that surrounds you will engulf the manifestations of your life purpose in the other aspects of your lives, such as career, relationships and lifestyle.

You can't focus on these manifestations—career, relationships and other—in an attempt to derive a clearer overall calling. That would be like picking up a wild flower and trying to put additional petals on it. Conversely,

by dedication to the cause of love and respect, all the details of your calling will become evident, including career, relationships, community affairs, and other issues of mind, body and soul.

## ***Clarity and Constancy***

Clarity and constancy of purpose are the first principles of success. A life purpose is no more than a temporary goal if it's not entirely clear. For example, while it may be amusing to dream about being rich and famous, you obviously have to do much better than that when it comes to your calling. When there is clarity of purpose you know what steps to take. With clarity of purpose you focus on the goal, without enduring distractions and wastage of time or energy.

We all have dreams, although unfortunately they are often opaque and not easy to discern. They are also frequently of changing looks, at times appearing what they were not originally meant to be. We thus lose confidence in our dreams, and they end up being discarded. Our dreams are not always to be invented, but rather to be discovered, for many of our dreams have been within us all the time. However we cannot discover any dreams if we are not of the correct mindset, open to the influences gained by our virtues and preparation, such as being of a high moral grounding.

This takes us back to the high road. For being there sets us free to aspire for more in life—to be inspired, creative and self-confident.

## ***Seven Guidelines for Going from "goal" to "calling"***

1. When you are striving and struggling for a particular goal, you do well to think not of the prize or wealth you would amass at the end, but of how the project would impact your character. If you deem that the impact would be positive, that would beckon you to move forward.

2. When you are striving and struggling for a particular goal but are not sure whether its impact on your character would be positive, you would do well to take a step backwards and visualize the anticipated proceedings. You would need to focus on all of the project's thresholds and gauge how well you would cope at every stage, not from the point of

view of necessary effort, but from that of whether you would remain true to your values.

3. For inspiration, you can accord a few minutes each morning to reading up on any one of a previously arranged list of 10 or 15 personalities whom you think are in the "great leader" category. You would in particular be interested in what got them going in the first place, what triggered that enormous intuitive energy.

4. You would also do well to ask yourself the question: "What was I placed on this planet to achieve?" Although that is a very difficult question to cope with, it is hoped that it would unleash within you a string of issues that would climax in added enlightenment about your cause.

5. You should always remind yourself that men around the globe frequently have no option but to pursue their lives at the subsistence level. You should therefore be thankful if you find yourself in more fortunate circumstances. The question thus becomes whether you can impact a few among those who are less fortunate. That could give you impetus for shaping your calling.

6. Smart are those who are never afraid to ask for feedback or assistance. Those of you who don't have a mentor should try to find or cultivate one from the ranks of college professors, pastors, doctors, or wherever else you feel your natural talent would best be accommodated. Similarly, you can reach out and be of help to others, mentoring those who could use some of your experience. The rewards from mentoring are infinite.

7. Finally, you could do worse than to put your trust and confidence in the fortress that you build with your set of virtues. Those pillars are impenetrable, your souls full of the glorious rewards of love and giving.

## ***How to find your passion in life***

In a stressful world that keeps changing at warp speed, a life passion is commonly deemed as a necessary component to our fundamental survival strategy.

Most people however look at the existing paths to success and think within those confines. They consider, for example, how they can become a lawyer, a doctor or some other occupation that they perceive pays well. But for the most part, they do not commonly think of the options outside of what is laid in front of them. Going after a passion is the worthiest of pursuits. It is fundamental to human nature, part of our quest for something greater in this world, for life could get awfully uncomfortable if we just stood there seemingly motionless.

The how's and where's of finding your passion may not fall into place until later in life. And although it is easy to get obsessed with identifying with a specific passion in life, having such a passion is nevertheless very energizing.

So how do we go about securing this fiery and elusive mindset? How do we turn our everyday appreciations into one or more passions? That is the million dollar question that people often contemplate in vain.

A passion, whether work-related or in life generally, is not splashed as from a bucketful of paint onto a blank canvas. It is, if anything, an unhurried phenomenon, one that commonly grows with deliberation from the inside out, rather than from nothing to everything. Once more we emphasize this: it is also certainly not one that is invited in from a position of desperation.

A passion takes time, creativity, trial and error and a subtle approach. It cannot be manipulated or coerced with forceful determination or sheer willpower. On the contrary, it is often sufficient that one be an aware and non-judgmental observer of one's keen appreciations in life for the bud to blossom into something meaningful.

Incidentally, one of your critical friends in life is your ability to observe things in a non-judgmental manner, as though you were looking down from a hot air balloon, or viewing a bunch of microbes through a microscope. The lessons learned in that fashion get etched on your consciousness until infinity.

A passion can start drenched in vagueness, akin to simply a fanciful inclination, before it acquires a strong dose of excitement, then magnetic-like distinction, and finally into a certitude, an acknowledgment of fact, your passion.

The process is not unlike that of 20-year old college students trying to determine what they'd like to major in. They may start from an entirely confused state, make choices, only to have life itself tell them, in a pretty direct way, to reconsider and keep searching.

In other words, the quest for purpose can be sketchy and does not move in a straight line, no matter how much one might like it to. You can falter, get infatuated with one or two notions, only to find yourself back at your muddled starting point.

In the end though, the passion that settles within you, and the inevitable spurt of adrenaline that normally accompanies it, will move mountains for you, but only if you nurture it and work hard at refining your skills and becoming the best that you can be in that domain.

## ***Your Strengths and Weaknesses***

Finding your calling may start by identifying your particular strengths and then implementing smart strategies that leverage those strengths. Once that process is under way, a matching effort would be on working to make improvements on your weaknesses.

### ***Here are 6 guidelines that might help:***

1. Focus on the one or two things in life that you truly enjoy contemplating or doing, be they art forms, hobbies, innate talent or work-related acquired skills.
2. Empty your mind from as much chatter as you can. Try to concentrate on the present –the now- by slowing down the noise from within, even for a short while.

3. Nurture and learn to trust your intuition. When facing a situation for which there is no past experience, you have only your intuition to rely upon. Use it to be mindful of the essence of what moves you: the joys and pains in your life.

4. Pay special attention to thoughts that spark in you a desire to undertake good deeds, for positive passions frequently produce feelings of empathy and love.

5. It is difficult to be impassioned at a time when your self-confidence is low. So, this would be a good time to work on your righteousness and other virtues you possess (we will have more on how to boost your self-confidence in a later chapter).

6. Think about the things that friends already come to you for. Do they ask you about which sneakers they should buy? About which cat foods are the best? No, but they may come to you for more worthy advice. You can thus begin by dispensing the information that people already ask you for, and then envision yourself specializing in that field and becoming an authority at it.

## *Chapter Four*

# Positive Thinking and Appreciation

### ***Our Outlook on Life***

We have already established that as we subdue the stress in our lives, we position ourselves in a better place to appreciate the people, events and circumstances that life throws our way. By the same token, our basic attitude to life has a lot to do with how we handle stress. We may bring stress upon us involuntarily by having a cynical viewpoint to most propositions we face, or by upholding a pessimistic outlook in our minds and walking around dejected and with low self-compassion.

The same applies to appreciation. For how can we appreciate things in life when we are down and indulging in dark thoughts?

If we are natural-born pessimists, or “contrarians”, i.e. people who like to think and argue on the opposite side of every suggestion, perpetually refuting the goodness in other people, then we are going to view everything that is going on in this world as being of a depressive nature: famines, wars, toxic contaminants in the air that cause environmental stress, rich versus poor issues, and “life isn’t fair” perspectives. Those and many other similar concepts will foster an unforgiving sense of anxiety. They will constitute major obstacles to “appreciation”.

By contrast, we can use our smarts to promptly reduce the levels of stress in our lives and lay our hearts open to truly appreciate the little things that come our way.

If we convert to a positive mindset and switch to an extroverted lifestyle, developing friends with whom we can laugh and share experiences and go and play occasionally in a natural setting, like a park or a forest, we can get on our way to overcoming our anxieties.

The healing process can frequently begin with a positive attitude, followed by finding out what resources are available out there that might help in the process of “lightening up” or recovery. Seeking practices of recovery is always a meaningful sign for someone intent on taking health matters in hand.

Research demonstrates that when someone functions with a positive mind, say in an office environment, performance at every level is enhanced. That person is more productive, better engaged, more focused, more creative, and thinks faster.

Similarly, positive thinking = better appreciation = happiness.

And although the general feeling is that one is happy when one attains certain targets, in fact the opposite is true in the long turn: if one has a positive frame of mind, one is more likely to attain good objectives. There is also ample evidence to suggest that donning a positive attitude and having success in business go hand-in-hand.

On a different front, it is important to realize that life attitudes are not entirely hereditary and can be easily adjusted. Peer influences, and interactions with parents, school mates, and co-workers make it commonplace for someone to move from a somber to a cheerful outlook.

There is much to learn from relatively recent findings in the field of brain neuroplasticity: the brain can be rewired and made to change. In fact, if you practice something new, acquire a new lifestyle, or take on new habits, the brain adjusts. Changing from dull into positive attitudes can start with acquiring new habits of the positive kind.

Stress is also frequently self-induced and mismanaged, causing great harm to our ability to fight off depression. When stress is left to its own devices, it can only degenerate and become harder to manage.

Our emotions run high at times, leaving our energy at or near empty. Fear can do that, or relentlessly elevated stress, or feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities.

In addition, some research conducted by the University of Missouri points to the finding that spirituality often enhances health irrespective of a person's faith or lack thereof. To provide credible attributes for this phenomenon, it was pointed out that when people start thinking about something greater than themselves, they stop musing about their own sorrows.

Readers must understand that what we mean by spirituality may have nothing to do with faith or religion. By spirituality we mean a higher power,

or something greater than yourself. That can be your spirit, religion, or anything you want to attach to, including for example your instincts.

## ***6 Steps towards a positive outlook***

You would be mistaken if you were to think that a positive mindset meant that you could approach your problems in a casual and non-caring way, or that you could simply ignore them, in effect denying that they actually exist. On the contrary, a positive outlook requires that you approach life thoughtfully, taking responsibility for your actions and finding little joys and rewards along the way.

### **Here are six helpful guidelines:**

1. Study after study have shown that laughter is one of the best tonics to mitigate the insidious effects of the high-speed, high-stress world that we live in.

Laughter is the ultimate antidote to stress. Make it your personal metric for how things are going in your life. Bring laughter back into your days. Start by counting and writing down the number of times you laugh out loud in a single day, and build on that. Make a concerted effort to create settings for laughter, with family, with friends, even with a mirror all by yourself.

The day you can start laughing at your personal predicament, that day would mark the start of something monumental in your life.

2. Take responsibility for everything that comes your way in life. Stop blaming others or your bad luck and, instead, acquire a sense that everything is rooted in your actions and/or inactions.

For example, say it is raining outside, putting you in a foul mood, which in turn makes you irritable and stressed. You certainly can't change the rain, but you can willfully and with determination change your mood, turning your frame of mind positive which, by definition, boosts the odds

for appreciation and good things to ensue. You can't just wish for things to happen but, instead, you can make them happen, simply by taking charge and planning the way forward.

3. Focus on what you want in life, what specific purpose or passions you particularly want to pursue. We previously discussed how a life-purpose is the lightning rod that fills the void in your days and becomes your prime source of vitality, motivation and inspiration. Seek it in a casual way, and when you think you have found it, nourish it until it goes from a seed to a healthy plant.

4. Make it a habit, even if it is strenuous at the beginning, to frame events in a positive manner.

For example, if an event unfolds in a positive way for you, instead of saying something cynical like: "Even a desperately sick person gets a break now and then", you could say: "Wow, this is great. You never know when something wonderful will occur."

5. Once and for all, shed that destructive and incessant self-criticism that you harbor, and replace it instead with forgiveness and acceptance of who you are. Focus also on the goodness that resides within you, and the goodness in the people around you, for we all have it in us to be benevolent and compassionate –and to have the capacity to love and be loved. That is the way to build up your self-confidence, a necessary step towards turning positive.

6. Avoid moaners and faultfinders, for they will drag you down. Instead, seek the company of gregarious, extroverted people who have a healthy lifestyle and know how to generate laughter with their friends. Seek diversity also by befriending more than one group of people.

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## Chapter Five

# Appreciation Requires Discipline

### ***Structure in your Life***

When you start reading this chapter, you may find me too finicky about little things that in your mind couldn't matter all that much. Trust me, they do matter, so please reserve your judgment until after you're done reading and you've started putting some of my recipes into practice.

In this chapter we hope to demonstrate that without structure and discipline in your life you lay yourself open to being blocked at every major crossroad. You may not be able to be well positioned to take advantage of the openings that come your way.

We made a similar argument when discussing stress, meaning that if you don't manage the stress in your life, you may miss out on some important opportunities. This is just one more manifestation of the same principle, in that if an opportunity finds you in a chaotic state, lacking in disciplines, it may just pass you by.

People may think that structure can prevent them from being out-of-the-box creative enough to be able to take advantage of opportunities, but it is quite the opposite, for without discipline and structure, they may in fact be out of control when something that holds promise for them comes calling.

In an ideal world one should structure their life where they have as much control as possible over their workload and other duties. In having control they also maintain the ability to be totally available to be able to continuously explore new opportunities, something a relatively out of control person cannot easily accomplish.

I discovered early on in my life the wide-ranging benefits that structure in one's life can bring, especially when it comes to structuring the daily events in my life. The list of what structure means to me is potentially long. I've narrowed it down in this section to the organization and disciplines that played a particularly positive role in my life and work.

**Here, in no specific order, are some of my more important findings:**

•**On being organized:** If you want to be able to view the proverbial forest instead of being continually mired in the trees, there is no substitute for regimenting much-needed organization into your life.

I work from home, and keeping my home and work station tidy means that I don't have to fumble all over the place when looking for something, a fact that has allowed me to better relax and do the other things that I hold dear to my wellbeing. Many studies have shown that visual clutter decreases focus. As with all signs of low self-discipline such as having a bedroom floor covered in laundry and other objects. These should be minimized whenever possible.

It also means that I'm ready for whatever opportunity jumps out at me, including my own and frequent surges of creativity that benefit from my being in a position to give them my immediate attention. Moreover, being organized translates into less stress which in turn paves the way for a healthier and more productive life.

•**Departmentalizing and prioritizing loose ends:** Going back to what we discussed right at the beginning of this book, for many of us, the fiercest handicap in life stems from right within us, from the chatter of the mind. This echo chamber inside of us thrives on the added agitation in our minds, the open-ended and "unresolvedness" that loose ends generate.

Many of us incorrectly think we have no choice but to endure such unfinished business, if only because life and work have many dynamic situations. Life, they claim, presents us with circumstances that can't always be neatly filed away. The answer is to departmentalize and prioritize as many of such pieces as possible, a form of structuring that serves as the next best thing to filing them away.

•**Habits, balance and our comfort zones:** Much of our average day is dominated by habit-functioning, at a time when willful or deliberate activities take second place. The uncanny part about that is that our brain's anatomy falls into a groove that thrives on habits and those

comfort zones that we construct around us that are stress-free and so easy to simply wallow in.

Neuroscience corroborates this “groove” phenomenon, with an upside however: change into positive thinking and a better network of habits, and you can change the brain’s disposition. You can replace the prior pathways with new ones that serve you better.

For one of the worst outcomes of lounging full-time within the warm and fuzzy confines of our comfort zones is that we never find out what would have been in store for us had we ventured out more often. Besides, the pillars of balance in our lives, i.e. a healthy lifestyle, strong family ties, compassion that finds manifestation, laughter and other uplifting activities, are necessary for success. Finally, a focus on balance in life will invariably result in professional growth, and life and work balance are intertwined.

## ***Disciplines in your Life***

•**The early morning discipline:** Much has been written that corroborates how I feel about effective early morning routines. I like to take a few moments to clear my mind of the night fog, and then I like to visualize how I want the day to unfold, and particularly the important milestones of each day.

The early morning discipline that has served *me* very well for many years now goes a step further:

When I get up in the morning, and after a few minutes of reflection, I like to make my bed. It gives me a sense of pride, and it frees me mentally to begin to engage in my other tasks.

By the end of the day, that one completed task will have turned into many completed tasks. Besides, if by chance I have a miserable day, I will come home to a bed that is already made, and a made bed gives me encouragement that tomorrow will be better.

•**Have a meditative practice:** Set aside at least a few minutes per day to clear your mind and form a plan of what you want to accomplish during the rest of the day. This could be a walk, a workout, breathing, visualization or a traditional meditation. You can even download any one of several apps on iTunes and other app stores for guided meditations

that calm the mind and permits you to think more clearly and re-center yourself.

In addition, if you think that this is not part of many people's daily routines, think again, for the list of companies that offer awareness sessions and other types of meditation as part of employee benefits today includes Apple, Time Warner, Howard Hughes, Yahoo, Raytheon and many others. Through meditative practices, these companies arm their employees with the tools to be more relaxed, productive and successful.

You have probably seen in films how in Japan they prepare for their work day. Not only do they have sessions on thoughtfulness, but they also have the entire workforce undergo physical exercises.

**•Focus on longer-term visions and attainable goals:** Many of us focus only on short-term, day-to-day results, finding it difficult to think like a leader and focus on achieving a long-term vision, although that would be precisely what is needed in order to optimize your performance. In a vision, you state where you want to be at some future date, the plan enabling you to maintain a good focus and prioritize your activities.

But you also need to translate that vision into actionable goals, and the more attainable those goals, the more you will be empowered to remain committed to your objectives. Your goals thus need to be specific, realistic or attainable and measurable, meaning that at every part of each goal, you can lay back and gage your success to date.

Furthermore, your goals have to be relevant to your life and work: it doesn't help much if you are an accountant and formulate a short-term goal of becoming a ballet dancer. If anything, that would take your focus away from your accounting performance.

Finally, your goal should also have a time limit. In other words, it should not be open-ended. You thus need to say to yourself for example "that I really want to finish this hard task I have been assigned, and I want to get it done by tomorrow afternoon."

**•Incremental progression:** You may be all the time resolving to take actions that are aimed at improving yourself. By the same token, you may also be all the time adding to your frustrations, primarily when you cannot keep up with your resolutions. The prescription that comes to

mind I refer to as “incremental progression”. This is a great facilitator in life that avoids getting frustrated and thereafter relinquishing what you set out to accomplish. In this book, I have referred to incremental progression as taking goals in “baby steps”, if only so that you keep yourself motivated and avoid the feeling of ineptness when confronted with a massive goal.

When you set major benchmarks or goals, break them down into specific targeted activities, with distinct timelines and landmarks on your road plan.

### ***Eight Actionable Disciplines***

**1. Extreme punctuality:** If you say you will call at 2:30, call at exactly 2:30, not a minute before or after. This makes a great impression at the beginning of every interaction, people assuming that you are equally respectful and thoughtful in other aspects of your dealings.

**2. Unquestionable follow through:** If you tell someone you will do something, it is crucial that you do it, whatever it takes. Your basic credibility is at risk here, for if you plant a seed of uncertainty around your commitments, it can only be detrimental to you in your business.

**3. On communication:** When doubt creeps in, as it sometime does, communicate with clients, coworkers, employees. The mere talking about your issues and airing them intelligently might expose potential weaknesses for you to correct. Besides, other people’s feedback is often worthwhile.

**4. Write down ideas:** Write them down, as they occur to you, and revisit them later. You will be amazed how appealing some of your “bad” ideas are a day later, and how terrible your “great” ideas were. Nothing like the morning-after editing of written ideas to isolate good thoughts from the less practical ones. Being a writer, I should know!

**5. Keep a daily journal:** Journaling is vital for having your creative potential come to fruition. When done correctly, it will bring about improvements in every aspect of your work. Besides, like in the preceding

paragraph, writing something down frequently brings forth better structured ideas.

**6. Be careful not to over analyze opportunities:** Be the detached observer looking down on your work from a perch above it all. This would prevent you from falling into the trap of over analyzing an opportunity and not seeing its core values. When confronted with an appealing opportunity, pretend you're up on your hot air balloon, or looking down at it through a microscope. Try to be nonjudgmental. Besides, it is not sufficient to learn something from an intellectual perspective, for it is much different and often more difficult to actually put that learning into practice.

**7. Endless learning:** The onus is on you to ensure you keep growing in skill and knowledge. If you're after clients, they will come to you primarily because they like you, but also because of your accumulated knowledge. Towards that purpose, it would serve you well to maintain a reading regimen as part of your daily life.

**8. It is important to have an opinion:** Practice your opinions on important matters so that they come out clearly and in a compelling way. And be prepared to meaningfully defend them, though not in a belligerent way. While it would be ungainly for you to have an opinion about every subject that comes up, you would appear more convincing when you offer opinions that reflect on your eloquence and clarity of thought.

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## Final Thoughts

### ***Jonathan's mind-blowing story***

When I graduated from high school back many years ago, it was the year that this particular person made school history, mostly by proving pretty much everyone wrong. When I say everyone, I mean the whole school, including myself!

This particular individual, a guy named Jonathan, had received a full-blown football scholarship that would pay all expenses at any ivy-league university of his choice. It was a dream scholarship that all good students aspired for.

In retrospect, and with the benefit of hindsight, in time I realized precisely why he had received such a huge award.

It all began a couple of years earlier when Jonathan, shorter than most and a little beyond the coach's standard weight level, was considered a grossly undersized player. He also did not have any of the talent and skillset to be on the football team.

Still, he nevertheless earned a spot on the team, although he stayed mostly on the bench and had very limited actual playtime that first year. I think he only played some 20 minutes during the entire season, with a big zero next to his stats.

Despite that horrid setback however, Jonathan never gave up on his goals. He was determined and super-disciplined, and he exhibited an inexorable keenness to work hard and put every ounce of effort into what he did. People saw him, over and over again, working harder than even the most hardworking players on the team.

For example, Jonathan was in the habit of always showing up first among his team members for workouts and practice, and always the last to leave the gym. He would be already drenched in sweat before practice even started and, after practice, he would spend an additional hour or two practicing some more!

Needless to say, I was astounded by his work habits. He had a knack for always doing the right thing even when there was no one to witness what he

was doing, and the even more impressive thing about it was that he always held his head high and never gave up.

Jonathan's diligent work, and particularly his integrity and perseverance, in time paved the way for his success at our school. In his senior year, he was not only playing more minutes but also starting in the last 10 games. His performance and stats then caught the attention of the most sought after college coaches.

As I mentioned earlier, Jonathan then went off to college. By this time you are probably saying to yourself that Jonathan would razzle-dazzle in college, like he did earlier in high school. To everyone's astonishment however, mine included, at one point he suddenly dropped out of college. I had no idea why he did that, and I eventually lost touch with him.

I could never fathom, up to now, why Jonathan had such a hocking and swift ending to his college career.

But here's the interesting part: just some ten years later, I got a phone call from someone calling from an insurance agency, selling financial instruments. When I took it upon myself to do some research on their agency, I discovered, to my huge amazement, that Jonathan was the agency's Senior Director -their top executive!

You can probably guess the rest: today Jonathan owns the agency and is well on his way to attain many more career milestones -if that is indeed his goal.

Reflecting back on the way Jonathan had attained his personal growth and success, I started putting all the pieces together.

Even when he was back in high school, it is now obvious that Jonathan had made his decision to create for himself a set of structures and personal disciplines that became the hallmark of his development.

He shaped his life based on the values of a high moral grounding, an unflinchingly positive mindset that beckoned him forward at every crossroad, and hard work -always hard work.

When trying to get on the football team in high school, he approached his workouts and practice with passion and laser-sharp focus. He had clarity and constancy as the great ideals that moved him.

With those virtues working for him, he was destined to attain any objective he set for himself, and here's the thing: IF JONATHAN COULD DO IT, SO CAN YOU!

Hope you enjoyed this book and found in it at least one meaningful guideline that helped you along.

*Thank you!*

## About Mike Takieddine

I am a Lebanese-American, in the United States since the late seventies. From living in embassies in several countries as a child, I later studied at the Victoria College in Cairo, followed by reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford. Since then, I have been a stock and commodity broker, president of a Luxembourg firm selling international mutual funds, general manager of the affairs of a Kuwaiti business mogul, a night club owner, president of two trading organizations in the United States, and finally, for twenty years, director of a homecare agency. In the last decade, I have freelanced as a writer and consultant for other homecare businesses. I have also recently finished writing a memoir, *The Ambassador's Son*, that will soon be published.

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