

# Never Play It Safe

## **Also by Chase Jarvis**

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# Never Play It Safe

**A Practical Guide to Freedom, Creativity,  
and a Life You Love**

**Chase Jarvis**



**HARPER  
BUSINESS**

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*For Kate*

*For your love and all your help  
in finding my way back to myself.  
Over and over again.*



# Contents

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<b>Read This First!</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	7
<b>Lever 1</b>   Attention—The Superpower	27
<b>Lever 2</b>   Time—The Magic of Presence	61
<b>Lever 3</b>   Intuition—The Art of Trusting Yourself	87
<b>Lever 4</b>   Constraints—Constrain to Retrain	114
<b>Lever 5</b>   Play—The Most Important Work We Do	137
<b>Lever 6</b>   Failure—A Feature, Not a Bug	164
<b>Lever 7</b>   Practice—Success Leaves Clues	199
<b>Conclusion</b>   A Life Played Well	227
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	235





# Read This First!

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Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.

—HELEN KELLER

Safety is an illusion.

It does not exist in nature, so why then do we seek it? Why do we believe it is essential for a good life when in reality the pursuit of safety is what keeps us from feeling the most alive?

Look into your soul for a moment. Think of the mind you've got, the head on your shoulders, and the body you were born with. The heart that beats in your chest underneath all the products and the layers of everything that the world piles on you . . . and that you pile on yourself. Think about it.

*Deep down, do you really believe that you were meant to play it safe? To stay in a little box defined by someone else?*

Hell no. Deep down, you know it's all risky, so why not just go for it?

You were built to be dynamic. You were built for challenge.

For change. For growth. You were built for a wild, rich, spirited, heartfelt, loving, and fascinating ride! Not for frickin' *SAFETY*.

When I say safety, I don't mean seat belts and sunscreen. I don't mean calculated risks or protecting your downside. And I don't mean personal and emotional safety, both of which are essential to our freedom and well-being. The playing it safe I'm talking about is the kind that keeps most people living lives to a fraction of their potential. It's playing small. It's listening to the voice in your head that says, "Who do you think you are to want something more?" It's sometimes delicately—and other times blatantly—hiding from yourself, or perhaps even outright ignoring who you *truly* are and thereby limiting your own greatness. It is what keeps you stuck and betraying yourself—however large or small you measure it—over and over again.

*Playing it safe with your career looks like staying in a job that's just okay or, even worse, avoiding your dream job, ignoring your true purpose, and never embracing your creativity for fear that you'll be judged as too unrealistic or that what you create won't be seen as valuable.*

*Playing it safe in relationships looks like allowing the wrong people to gobble up all your time and space and never connecting with the right people—the ones who lift you up and challenge you.*

*Playing it safe is conformity for no other reason than the fact that well-worn paths seduce us and feel easier because they have been normalized, usually for no reason at all.*

*Playing it safe with your heart looks like never being vulnerable, never risking rejection, and missing out on the love you deserve.*

*Playing it safe in the shadows looks like never being bold enough to stand up and be seen as you truly are.*

Ultimately, playing it safe is about fear. And fear is only optimized for survival—not creativity, happiness, joy, connection, harmony, fulfillment, or any of the gifts you have to give or receive in this life.

Because the truth is that the best stuff in life lies just on the other side of your comfort zone. The world will throw you curveballs until you learn to hit them . . . or you quit playing, take your bat, and go home. It cannot “give” you anything, it can only challenge you. Whether you try to meet those challenges, to dance with them in a playful game of discovery and rediscovery, is up to you. Your weaknesses are blessings in that they give you the chance to grow and be brave.

You may have lost sight of this along the way—decades of lying to yourself about what you really want in life, performative behavior designed to avoid friction and fear, and anxiety can do that to you—or you may have even forgotten, but the opposite of playing it safe isn’t risk without measure. It’s freedom. It’s creating the ultimate game in one moment and playing that game the next. It’s limitless potential. It’s betting on *you*.

At first blush, the idea of seeking discomfort and change without the right tools and proper training can be scary until you realize—actually *remember*—that the tools you need all naturally reside within you right now. Whether you see it or

not, you are brave, powerful, and wildly creative at your core. After all, you've made it to this point, haven't you? Your most urgent task, therefore, is to excavate what has been buried deep inside you and learn to use those tools again, because you have much more leverage over your own experience of life than you think. Your task is simply to rediscover how to use these tools.

You don't have to start a revolution. You don't have to quit your job, move to a different country, get a new set of friends, or blow up your life. (Or maybe you do. That's up to you.) But to create the life you want, you *do* have to make a choice between mediocrity and excellence, between what others want for you and what you want for yourself, between fulfilling your potential and hoping that whatever you're doing now will be enough, between playing it safe and playing by your own rules. **This is a book about how to overcome the things that have controlled you in your past and create a life you love. This is the ultimate creative act.**

If you're hesitating while reading this, don't worry. I don't blame you, but it's worth considering why that might be. The good news is that we don't have to go far to find out why:

*Your attention has been hijacked.*

*There's never enough time.*

*You've been taught to doubt yourself and ignore your intuition.*

*Constraints have always kept you down.*

*Play was always second to work.*

*You were afraid to fail.*

*And no one ever taught you how to build a practice around  
what you love most.*

Until now. You started down a new path when you picked up  
this book. These words are for you.



# Introduction

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*Never Play It Safe* is about living boldly and understanding the tools that reside naturally within you—right now, wherever you are—such that you can gain, regain, or maintain power over the fear that shows up in your life. This book is not about avoiding mistakes or making your life “perfect.” It’s about learning to trust yourself and return to your true nature over and over again—each time more quickly and wiser than before. This process is the ultimate creative act for a human being. There are no rules—only experiences that we have and the lessons we can derive from reminding ourselves of who we are and sharing our stories with, and for, one another.

It would be easy to shirk responsibility for wherever we are today in our journey of life, but playing it safe is really more about what we do to ourselves than it is about what the world does to us. We police ourselves to the point of harming our happiness and well-being. We give up because society’s idea of success or fulfillment or right or wrong doesn’t match our own. Or we stall out, paralyzed. None of it has anything to do with reality or our potential to build a rich or fulfilling life—often it can be as simple and as profound as a lack of awareness and self-knowledge. Paulo Coelho wrote, “Everyone seems to have

a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own.” Truer words.

This is sometimes tough to admit, but the answer to our problems isn't somewhere outside ourselves. We must turn inward for the solution. According to psychologist Dr. Nicole LePera, that revolution is already underway in the form of a wave of increasingly early midlife crises. She sees people in their twenties, thirties, and forties, who played by the rules and followed the plan that society laid out for them asking, “is this all there is?”

That's the tragic part of playing it safe. It's insidious. Like a double agent, we're never sure if we're compromised—until it's clear that we are.

The world shows us a picture of “normal” and then we do the dirty work on ourselves. Whether it's career, relationships, or any other preference for a life we truly long for, we fall into the commonplace trap, crafting a set of seemingly benign, but ultimately self-sabotaging behaviors based on shame, fear, guilt, or another set of emotions we feel for not aligning with the expectations of others. And worse, we begin to tell ourselves—even believe, surreptitiously or otherwise—lies about what we really want from life and what we're truly capable of. Each time, playing it safe starts as a tiny self-betrayal, but just like an explorer who is off by just one degree on her compass, we end up a thousand miles from home.

And to make matters worse, we worry every day about where we are or are not because we have been conditioned by the world to worry.

The silver lining to all of this? It's all bullshit, and it's beatable. We can reverse the damage that's been done. I know because



I've lived both edges of this sword myself, both a victim and a conqueror of playing it safe.

## A Willing Concession of Power

The signs started showing up for me in second grade, in Ms. Kelly's class to be exact. I was the proud creator of a weekly comic strip I published and sold at school featuring my leading character Clyde, who looked like a cross between Sasquatch and the ghosts from Pacman, but was a smartass like Garfield; regular magic shows, complete with card tricks, a disappearing scarf, and a top hat; and a stand-up comedy routine where my final joke was always: "What has fifty-two teeth and holds back a monster? . . . My zipper." I honestly had no idea what the punch line meant, but I distinctly remember loving how it made any adult within earshot very nervous and visibly uncomfortable.

So you could say I was a creative, quirky, happy kid, clearly going about my life to the beat of my own drum. Until the day Ms. Kelly told me I shouldn't listen to that drum.

She banned me from selling copies of my comic strip because it was "a business" and therefore wasn't "appropriate" for school. And I received a hefty serving of disapproval for the magic show and the stand-up comedy routines as well. I may have been just eight years old, but surely, I had better things to do, she said to me *and* my parents. So even though I loved the shot of adrenaline I got from getting up in front of an audience and sharing my creative gifts with the world, I gave it all up in an instant. She was not-so-subtly signaling that there was something wrong with the way I was; the sad part was that I

immediately began to believe her. Her opinion of what I was meant to be and do mattered more than my own, and I didn't want to be left out in the cold. I was too young and not-at-all prepared to understand that how I spent my time and energy shouldn't really have been up to her.

Foreshadowing be damned.

From that day forward, I stopped standing out and started fitting in. I doubled down on being a jock, and my strategy worked, all the way through high school. I was homecoming royalty, captain of the football and soccer teams, and—surprise—I dated a cheerleader. At the Senior Breakfast, I won the “Typical Senior” award. Whatever that meant, I knew even then it wasn't good. My life was a positively uninspired template for matching the expectations of others. *Typical.*

What I see now is that I was living out of fear—most of which was irrational—and conditioning, for which the French historian and philosopher René Girard had a label: mimesis. According to Girard's thesis, most of us just want the same thing that everyone else wants because it's what we see when we look around. As social animals whose safety and identity once came only from tribes, it's easy to figure out how we ended up here. But once you see and understand mimesis, you can't unsee it. It's everywhere. This is, in part, why we love trailblazers in any industry or walk of life. We notice them and notice other people noticing them, and then, quite simply, we want to *be* them and to be noticed by others ourselves. Evolutionarily, this is true and easy to understand, because it is in being seen by our peers that we are less likely to be at risk of the tribe losing track of us, of being left behind, or of being eaten by a saber-toothed tiger.

The sad truth of this is two-fold. First, mimetic desire is a waste because we are no longer likely to become a meal whilst walking to work. And second, this predicament considers absolutely nothing about what you might truly want for yourself—or be capable of—with this one precious life you’ve been granted. Thus, a gold mine awaits the handful of us who become aware, break free, figure out what we really want, and remedy this orientation.

I’d like to say that I stumbled on Girard’s work in college, grew out of trusting other people’s opinions more than my own, and blazed a trail of my own making, but alas, I did not.

*Instead I kept letting myself get talked out of living my dreams by people who had given up on theirs.* And it became a pattern that I repeated well into adulthood. I’d discover something unique and different about myself that I truly loved—go deep into that thing that made me come alive—and then like clockwork I’d put someone else’s idea of what I should be doing above my own. I let myself be pulled toward convention and the illusion of safety again and again. A willing concession of my uniqueness and my power.

In college I traded studies that I loved—art and literature—for premed because it was more impressive when someone asked what I was studying.

I traded a career in professional soccer for medical school at first, and then graduate school later, because I was conditioned to believe it was safer to align around a respectable, well-paying job than make a bet on myself, risking rejection or a blown-out knee.

I even walked away from a dream career as one of the world’s top photographers to run a venture-backed startup because it

was trendy and because people kept telling me it was the “next logical step in my career.” But let’s be honest. I also knew my decision would garner near-universal approval from my peers. Looking back, it’s clear that although I loved the work and the impact our company made, what played a huge role in my decision to change directions was that founding and building a platform that would be used by millions and would create the possibility of a significant financial exit had the makings of the next great milestone to check off in a life based largely on achievement.

These are just a few of the easiest self-betraysals to describe in a sentence or two. But I made dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other such trade-offs in my careers, relationships, and other areas of my life where I willingly, even if unknowingly, swapped my authentic heart and soul for the tidy, well-worn ruts of others. The reasoning was always the same: either *my dream plan* wasn’t reasonable or practical or *I* wasn’t.

To be fair, I narrowly managed to navigate my way through, over, and around each of the escapades above, but each came at an exceedingly high cost. Some came with debilitating illnesses due to stress. Others came with \$100,000 in student loan debt. Others still resulted in family fights, lost friends, wounded egos, and some serious scar tissue.

All of this suffering on one hand, and yet, on the other, a set of remarkable recoveries. I always bounced back . . . perhaps not in a way I could have anticipated. These, I have come to realize, are the unexpected victories that will ultimately define my life—each allowing for an incrementally healthier, harmonized, and fulfilled chapter beyond the one before it. For example, bailing on medical and graduate school gave me the time to pursue pho-

tography full time, and I've earned a hundred times the student debt since then. Leading the startup allowed us to serve tens of millions of students, generate hundreds of millions in revenue, and be acquired by a public company, which provided a financial outcome for the team that made me feel as if the long road was worth the effort in spite of the downside. The family and friends I've bonded with along the way were orders of magnitude more valuable than those I lost, and the bruised ego and scar tissue are what enabled me to take the next step toward *this moment*. I'm much faster now at recognizing the temptation to put my own sense of right and wrong aside in order to do whatever everyone else thinks is best. I'm still not batting a thousand—and I never will be—but I've finally been able to (mostly) short circuit the swing between playing it safe and then needing to course correct.

Hence, this book. We are all in this together.

## The Power of a Lever

When Archimedes spoke of a lever long enough to move the world, he was speaking literally. This wasn't madness, courage, or even ego. It was art and science, both a willingness to dream up the impossible and the discipline to follow through on his vision.

When the king heard the mathematician's claim, he asked Archimedes to prove it. How? By moving one of the largest transport ships in the world at the time. This wasn't just any ship. Rumor had it she had only ever completed a single voyage and now sat in the harbor, collecting barnacles. It was a ship so large and stuck that it was believed to be immovable.

So using the principle of leverage, Archimedes got to work and designed an assemblage of tools that he could operate by himself. Then, from the right vantage point, he used those levers and pulleys to fully relocate the ship out of the port and into the sea. One man, fueled by the power of his own creativity, intellect, and a few implements accessible to anyone at the time, was able to single-handedly move a fully loaded sea vessel, including cargo and crew, without even breaking a sweat.

That's the power of leverage.

When the king saw what had happened, he immediately hired Archimedes, who went on to build all kinds of machines that many engineers still marvel at today. What made all this possible was not some incredible resource or gift. It wasn't a lucky break or big idea. It was the right application of the right tool at the right time.

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all deal with what seem like unyielding obstacles in need of a lever—a powerful tool to move them. It's not just external challenges that push us to our limits. Our internal challenges are often even more relentless: we care too much, we won't fit in, we won't be loved, people are counting on us, or we'll fail in public. We imagine that to move our own immovable “ships” and launch ourselves into the lives we dream about, we'd have to figure out some exceedingly complex solution.

But that isn't the case at all.

What I realize in hindsight—and what I hope will resonate with you—is that there are essentially just two modes of being. We are either growing or dying inside, either playing offense

or playing defense, in alignment or not, either playing for the love of the game or playing it safe. And in each of these cases, we become aware at some point that if we slow down and listen closely enough, time and again, we can always hear the whisper inside that ultimately leads us back to ourselves.

This—I'm also learning—is how life works. Living cautiously won't save us from missteps or losing ourselves. In fact, the opposite is true. Being too careful keeps us stuck or unfulfilled—or both—because safety is ultimately a mirage. It feels real, possible, reachable, and true, but it is nothing more than a lie. In aiming for a safer, more cautious life, we simply make different missteps and lose ourselves in different—arguably worse—ways. So instead, our goal must be to live boldly, make mistakes, and then to use the tools that are naturally alive within us to learn and recover quickly. We don't need to beat ourselves up or give up on where we were meant to go; we simply have to learn to trust that we *can and will* right the ship. This insanely practical sort of wisdom is what I promise to share with you in this book: the knowledge that you are extraordinarily capable, and it's time that you lean into the courage to rely on this.

As such, when it comes to breaking through the difficult things in your own life—or even building a life you previously thought to be impossible—you must remember that you have the same power of Archimedes's lever within you, only instead of moving *the* world, you can move *your* world. The process doesn't start with chasing the latest fad or life hack, or wrangling the best education, job, relationship, or anything external. The job is an inside one, and so it begins with you.

## Levers for Life

It's often said that your specific combination of DNA, your life experiences from childhood up till now, is one of a kind, and that the person you are is somewhere on the order of 1 in 400 trillion. Thus, the odds are long that there has ever been another one of you before nor will there be another you anytime soon.

Regardless of whether the math is accurate, the idea is seductive: you are one of a kind. And yet it seems that this notion somehow paralyzes us instead of emboldening us. Rather than being inspired to make meaning and create a masterpiece from our one precious life, we get talked out of it in an innocuous, almost innocent way. Then we're left without the benefits that come along with a life full of purpose. As a result, we end up conditioned to shape our strengths and interests to fit society, rather than leveraging them into an extraordinary life that's driven by both a rich, human experience and the ability to make the world a better place.

But I'm guessing you know people who have bucked this conditioned pattern. You can just feel it when you're with them because they somehow seem more alive. And my god what a special type of charisma that is. It's magnetic.

Throughout this book, there are dozens—maybe hundreds—of examples of people like this. Some you may have heard of before, while others will be completely new. The caution that I offer is that while the book shares the stories of people who have done extraordinary *things*—*that is to say created extraordinary outcomes*—I would urge you to not focus on the outcomes themselves. “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's



not the answer,” said Jim Carrey, and he’s right. It’s not about fame or money or the car you’re driving or awards or any other validation from the outside world. All of us have magic inside us, no matter if we’re introverts or extroverts, no matter our shape, size, orientation, color, or background. We are all ordinary people remembering that we have a capacity for an extraordinary life in every sense of the word.

I can’t help but think of *The Wizard of Oz*. What we remember from the movie is Dorothy closing her eyes, clicking her heels together three times, and saying, “there’s no place like home.” But equally important is what Glinda says to Dorothy right before that when the Wizard is not able to help her. “You don’t need to be helped any longer,” the Good Witch says. “You’ve always had the power to go back to Kansas.” When Dorothy asks why no one ever told her, Glinda reminds her that she had to uncover the truth for herself to know for sure she had this power inside. The same is true for you. So let’s focus on the resources you’ve got inside you and the practical ways you can reveal and put your very own mojo to work. The external outcomes you seek—and who am I to decide or judge them—are only possible as a downstream effect of looking inside, rediscovering who you are, and using the innate tools within you.

In this book, I share everything I know about these tools, why we get talked out of trusting them (and ourselves), and how to rediscover our natural power . . . all in the name of creating a life worth loving. This is not an easy life per se—there’s no such thing as effortless brilliance—but a life built on these principles is one where you get to write your own story instead of living the one the world is trying to sell you.

On this journey, I'll illustrate just how to do this by sharing strategies and ideas from some of the world's most interesting humans, along with my own lessons and insights.

The goal is not to tell you to live like this person or that one, or to follow someone else's path. Rather, the idea is to get you imagining what just might be possible, just like Archimedes, by using simple, well-directed inputs to yield massive outputs.

In my experience, there are seven basic levers for life but thousands of ways to combine them. Each chapter in this book focuses on one of these tools or "levers" that will help you get more of what you want from what you already have. How you do that is up to you and will be unique to your particular journey. Here's a brief summary of each lever for life:

- **Attention**—Your human superpower, and the first step toward a life you love, requires that you learn to skillfully direct your attention and keep distractions at bay. Your experience of life is what you focus on, and all of this can be entirely of your choosing.
- **Time**—Despite what we've been told, time is not some uniform conveyor belt moving us closer to our death every day. You've had the experience of time expanding and contracting based on what you're doing, how you're doing it, and who you're with. Flow states and all the time to do as you choose are readily available and well within your reach.
- **Intuition**—Trusting your gut is the most valuable tool you've been taught to ignore. Until now. Get

ready to burn the standard-issue map to success (whatever that means) and instead to live by your own inner compass.

- **Constraints**—The world places limits on us, but it's the limits and constraints we apply to our own lives that give us a massive advantage when it comes to unlocking a bold and creative life. In many cases, you'll learn to leverage the very thing that's been holding you back.
- **Play**—It's not board games, glue sticks, and glitter, and it's definitely not just for kids. Relish in remembering that play is the engine of life. Recapture the joy and energy in everything you do to drive better outcomes and put everything into a broader perspective.
- **Failure**—It's time you completely reimagine failure as a stepping-stone to success. This isn't a trite phrase with a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Life isn't about avoiding mistakes—it's about recovering quickly and learning to trust yourself again and again.
- **Practice**—The sum of all these parts: practice is the art of consistent action. Thinking about what you want is not enough. The actions that make up your days will shape your life into what it ultimately becomes, so what and how you practice matters.

While I don't want to be overly prescriptive, I recommend reading the book all the way through on your first pass, over-indexing on the most critical individual levers. Focus on what excites or inspires you the most such that you can reconnect with yourself and your desires, and reset your expectations of yourself and your life. Whether you choose to engage first with what feels most challenging or most accessible, that's up to you, but either way, as you learn to use each of the levers in turn, you'll be increasingly able to see how everything fits together, and you'll find helpful nuggets of wisdom in every single one of the chapters.

While some of the changes you make will feel like a weight lifted from your shoulders, not everything you learn and do here at first will register as "fun." For example, creating constraints for yourself may not initially seem joyful ("I want it ALL!" you're thinking), but learning how to limit your exposure to the toxic traits of others might create just enough space in your life so that you can find the freedom to fail. Or the fact that Practice sounds a lot like work may seem intimidating *until* you see that the chapter is chock-full of insights about building small, easy habits that are key to the life you're seeking.

From that point, you can use *Never Play It Safe* as a reference guide whenever you want to level up or you're feeling stuck. Need to remember how to trust yourself again? The section on Intuition will re-ground you and get you back on track. Spending too much time staring into your phone? Review the Attention chapter. Or when life feels too heavy and you've lost its meaning or its measure, Play is always there for you.

My goal isn't to offer a one-size-fits-all blueprint but rather an indication of what might be possible. Ultimately, a person's

life is whatever they make it. We each can stay stuck in our old patterns of living and being, following the rulebooks given to us by others, or we can dare to build something of our own design. In the end, it's my hope that you'll use this book not to reveal how life is—but how it could be for you. Something you love.

## An Example to Revere

*Why the hell is Brandon calling me at five o'clock in the morning?*

“Hey, man,” I said, half-asleep, blinking through bleary eyes as I rolled out of bed. I looked out the window. The sun wasn't even up yet. “Are you okay? What's going on?”

It was 5:05 a.m. in Seattle. As a native east coaster and a world traveler, it wasn't the first time in our long-standing friendship that Brandon had forgotten about those things called time zones, but it was endearing, and I loved him for it.

“Yo!” he said, full of energy and life. “I'm standing in the town square here in Accra, Ghana, and there's this kid. He stops me, says he knows me from your podcast . . . and CreativeLive. Says his dream is to transform photography in Africa.”

The “kid's” name was Paul Ninson. Several years before, at twenty years old, he and his girlfriend had had a baby out of wedlock. Because of deeply rooted cultural beliefs, Paul felt like his life was over for the shame the baby brought on both of their families. Coming from a poor family, he had no money and no obvious way to support his daughter, but he spent every minute he wasn't in school hustling and trying to provide. At

first, he printed and sold t-shirts, but when he saw a friend make more in a few hours from photographing a wedding than he made selling a hundred shirts, he decided he needed to get a camera and learn photography for himself.

By the time he approached Brandon, Paul had been listening to my podcast for years and was an avid student of CreativeLive, an online learning platform for creators and entrepreneurs that I'd started seven or eight years before, which was being used by millions of people across 170 countries. I didn't know it at the time, but Paul had become so obsessed with photography, so convinced of its power and potential to improve his life, that he'd given up his apartment and sold all his possessions—including his phone—to scrape together enough money for his first proper camera. He was committed to taking photos every day, training his attention to see the world in a new way. And he was imagining a future in which he could give up photographing events and instead earn a living as an African photographer telling African stories.

In spite of not having any money, he kept trying to put himself in the right places to grow, learn, and connect with other working artists. At one point, he traveled from his village to a meeting of “professional” photographers in the capital of Accra, only to be turned away at the gate for his cheap camera and for not having a body of work. He was crushed, but instead of giving up, Paul kept learning and honing his craft. He was so determined that he eventually spent six hundred dollars, all the money he had at the time, to fly to Kenya for a documentary project about a community of women he'd read about who had built a small town to escape their abusive husbands. When the project was finished, Paul celebrated. Finally, he had a story he

could sell to magazines and websites, but after countless emails and cold calls, no one was interested.

Paul felt like he had failed.

But the Brandon that Paul spotted that fateful day in the town square in Accra happened to be the artist behind *Humans of New York*, one of the most impressive, ambitious—and successful—photography projects in modern history. Paul sensed a chance to receive meaningful feedback on his work from a true, uber-successful artist working at the height of his craft. But what began as a chance for Paul to learn from Brandon turned into something more. Brandon, as he often does when meeting strangers, turned the tables on Paul and began to ask him questions about his life and how he had started taking pictures. Eventually Paul showed Brandon the photos from Kenya—the portfolio he had prepared as a downstream effect of previous rejections implying that he wasn't an *actual* photographer—that he now carried with him literally everywhere he went. Brandon immediately recognized the quality of the work, the honesty and integrity of the images, and the emotion Paul had captured with his camera. Each portfolio image felt like an entire story captured in a single frame. Brandon was stunned by Paul's work as well as by how much Paul had accomplished in spite of how few resources had been available to him up to that point.

As for Paul, in the wake of that seemingly random rendezvous on the street with one of his creative heroes, he was intuitively aware of the connection he'd made, but he was reluctant to get too emotionally invested in any future outcome. He'd been burned by "the industry" before, told time and again that his dream to become a photographer was a fool's errand.

When Brandon returned from Africa, we got together to talk about his trip and his incredible meeting with Paul. Over dinner that night, he relayed to me that Paul had applied to the International Center of Photography's prestigious program and that, although Paul had received both the Director's Fellowship and a George Moss Merit Scholarship, it was impossible for him to afford even the partial tuition that remained beyond the stipends. Because of this financial barrier, Paul's application acceptance had lapsed.

I could tell from the look in Brandon's eyes and the tone of his voice that he had a plan up his sleeve. *What if we—as established pros familiar with Paul's work—could somehow help him reactivate his acceptance to the program?* And could we perhaps help offset the tuition gap and maybe even hire him for some work? A plan was hatched.

With Paul's permission, we took to writing letters of recommendation to the ICP asking them to reinstate Paul's admission. Miraculously, the plan worked. Between the scholarships and a small stipend Brandon paid Paul to help him on a series he was filming, Paul could finally move to New York and live his dream of enrolling in a formal photography program and getting to work on his purpose.

This was Paul's season of practice, of putting in the hours to get the most out of his education. He worked around the clock, splitting his time between going to school, studying on his own, and working with Brandon, watching a master in action, telling people's stories on the streets of New York. His attention was completely trained on living his dream, and it was the perfect apprenticeship. Paul's favorite study location was the New York Public Library—which he visited every



day without fail, awestruck by the collection of knowledge. “This place had every book in the world,” he said, especially amazed by the books he found that were full of photographs from Ghana. “When I was learning to be a photographer, these books could have helped me so much.” He also went around the city to secondhand bookstores, buying any books on African photography he could find.

Most of the money he made from working with Brandon was sent back home to his daughter in Africa. Whatever was left was spent almost entirely on the books from which he’d learned photography and had grown to love. Paul was leveraging all of the opportunities that were available to him so that he could learn, grow, and build a life that everyone he knew, including himself, once thought was impossible.

His time in New York was not without challenges, however, and they weren’t only financial in nature. As a foreigner and a person of color he was routinely—both at school and while training as a photojournalist—subjected to racism. Some people wouldn’t shake his hand, while others would shout in his face to “go home” to Africa. He was even handed money on the subway while on his way to work and told to “buy some food.”

And yet Paul pressed on.

Then, on the cusp of his completing the ICP program—as if he’d written his very own script for his life—the world seemingly cracked open for him. One prestigious, well-paying photography job led to another and seemingly overnight he was earning a living like he’d always imagined—one previously thought to be out of reach back in Accra. With ample funds to send home in support of his daughter Ella, an increasing volume of commercial work on the horizon, and a production role supporting

Brandon, his life—and more importantly his growing awareness of what was possible—had reached a completely new level.

Time and time again, Paul could have given up, he could have played it safe, letting the suffering, the friction in his life, and his fear get the better of him. Instead, he focused his attention and time on learning his craft through deliberate practice, and faced down the financial, cultural, and geographical constraints that threatened his idea of what he wanted his life to be. By all accounts, his own and that of the world around him, Paul had become a smashing success. With the tools he had learned to use, he was ready to continue building the bold, creative life he had imagined when he'd fallen in love with photography in Ghana years before.

As the saying goes, “We have two lives, and the second begins when we realize we have only one.” Paul’s second life had officially begun—and with this book, so perhaps has yours.

## Lever 1

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# Attention

## The Superpower

From the moment we're born, we must get attention or die.

Babies are survival machines. Every coo, every cry, every attempt at eye contact—those tiny people have to grab our attention or game over. The way they settle into our arms and sigh . . . the message is clear. “Feed me! Hold me! Sing to me! Love me!” And when we respond, they grow, they thrive, they connect with us . . . and then with others for a lifetime.

But when a baby doesn't receive sufficient touch and connection from a parent or caregiver, even when they're getting proper nutrition, they struggle to make it through the first phase of life. Remember the Romanian orphanages of the 1980s and 1990s, full of thousands of abandoned children warehoused in sterile hospital wards? Sure, these babies received food and some medical care, all assembly-line style, but no one ever held them or soothed them. They lay alone in their cribs for months and years, and most never learned to walk or

talk. Without care and attention as babies and toddlers, they were condemned to a lifetime of health problems and severe attachment disorder if they even made it out of the orphanage at all. Sadly, many died from neglect.

But it's not just kids who are attention-seeking missiles. The world is exploding with adults who demand our attention at work, at home, and online. Actually—who am I kidding? We've *all* been there before. We spend a ridiculous amount of time and energy screaming into the void, “Look at me!” in an attempt to get love, praise, friends, likes, or followers. At every age and across nearly every cultural paradigm, our primal instinct to seek attention is on display 24/7. We're conditioned to believe there is no other way. Getting attention is how a person stands out, makes a difference, finds a mate, gets a promotion, builds a business, and connects with others.

*Getting attention is everything in this life.*

But what if I told you that nearly everything you've been taught about attention is wrong? That as an adult it is precisely the *seeking* of attention that keeps you trapped, stuck, and playing it safe?

We've seen this play out way too often: the kid who was popular in high school, talked loud and fast, and made off-color jokes finds himself later in life jockeying for the big job, hoping to get the gig to feel whole again, even if just for a week or two. Or the parent who lives through the accomplishments of their child—pushing them to be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or whatever the high-status flavor of the month is just so that everyone will tell them what a good mom or dad they are.

Think about the billionaire geek who buys an entire social

network, so he can funnel millions of eyeballs to himself every day of the week.

Or the “influencer.” Look at what I had for breakfast!

It’s an endless loop—seeking attention, getting some; seeking more attention, different attention, getting it; and so on and so forth into infinity. Because at the end of the day, we always want MORE, whether we’re fueling our egos or our biological needs. As a species, humans are social animals.

But what if there’s a better way?

What if, instead of constantly trying to *get* attention from others, you did a 180 and spent all that energy learning to *direct* your attention? What if you became mindful and aware? Narrowed your focus and *strengthened* your ability to be in the now? What if you were able to tackle the tasks right in front of you without losing sight of the ones in the distance that will eventually fulfill your goals and dreams? What if you were able to listen—really listen—to the people whom you love or who interest you? If you weren’t processing what you were about to say while they were speaking, and you were entirely present with their words, ideas, and emotions? What if you could—just by using your attention effectively—send a clear and powerful message to everyone in your presence that you truly see and hear them?

Talk about a transformation.

By extension, what if you were also ruthless with distractions and could ignore them with ease? Not just your phone, but news that doesn’t serve you, the boss who’s lost his mind, the mistake you made at dinner last night, and the annoying traffic during your commute. What if turning off all the noise—literally and

figuratively—was as easy for you as brushing your teeth, or any other habit you’ve developed? What if you were so good at directing your attention that you were squarely in the driver’s seat for all the controllable aspects of your life?

In this day and age, we’ve become willing participants in haphazardly doling out attention to anything and everything. After all, we never *really* have to decide what to focus on. Hop online and an algorithm hijacks your brain until you “wake up,” only to discover that hours have passed with nothing much to show for it. We know we need to turn away from the screens, get outside, connect with other humans, and sleep, yet the fear of missing out on the next news cycle, meme, trend, or viral video has us checking our phones 144 times per day. If your attention is a sleek pane of glass, then technology shatters it into a million little pieces.

But before we blame the wizards designing the masterful UX that keeps us hooked, it’s incumbent upon us to acknowledge our own complicity. When it comes to attention, we play it safe by amusing ourselves to death, staying distracted, and refusing to unplug from the constant onslaught of images and information. To be fair, the scientists who study this phenomenon have warned that it’s a vicious cycle: using technology to soothe our anxiety only ends up causing new, more, and different kinds of anxiety. So when it comes to living a life by design rather than by default, we have to *decide* to step out of the technological fray in order to carve our way through the algorithmic land mines, face ourselves, and figure out what we really want.

*I’m just doing what everyone else does, you might be saying. This is the norm now. Don’t be so out of step.*

But that is now precisely your new goal. If “out-of-step”

means living an intentional life in which you actively choose what to focus on and how to chart your own course in a way that feels as natural and unforced as breathing, then I bet you'd take a double serving.

Consider training your attention the first step toward the rest of your life. To become so out of step that you stop mindlessly giving away your attention and instead reclaim the most precious resource you have. Trust that only when you begin to make that break can you finally bask in the beauty of the unmediated experience of the world and yourself.

Dr. Andrew Huberman, associate professor of neurobiology and ophthalmology at Stanford University School of Medicine, says boldly that the ability to focus and direct attention “is *the* distinguishing factor between those who will succeed in any endeavor and those who won't.”

Read that again. *The* factor for success in *any* endeavor.

Therefore, let's be crystal clear that it's not an overstatement to say that in order to be a happy, healthy, and fulfilled human being—to be your best or get unstuck from any situation now or in the future—you must recognize attention for the superpower it really is and learn to train it on the parts of your life that matter most. This is the most urgent task before you, and it's entirely doable with a little direction and reasonable effort. Let's get started.

## Attention as Life Force

When the Nazis invaded Austria in 1938, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl could have escaped, but he refused to leave his parents to

die. Four difficult years later, in 1942, he and his entire family were deported to Theresienstadt, where his father died from starvation and pneumonia. Then, in 1944, the rest of the family was transferred to Auschwitz, where Frankl's mother and brother were sent to the gas chambers. Frankl's wife later died in Bergen-Belsen.

A different person would have given up entirely, might have even gone willingly to join his loved ones in death rather than enduring years of watching the suffering and torture all around him. Instead, Frankl focused his attention on treating suicidal patients in the camps and set up a suicide prevention group. Prior to the war, he had treated thousands of suicidal women at Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital, and now he focused his attention on work that had mattered to him before the war and that continued to matter to him in spite of the horror all around him.

When Frankl returned to Vienna after the war, the sophisticated, cultured world of the Ringstrasse had vanished, but he set to work rewriting a book on his therapeutic methods, the original manuscript, which had been taken from him at Theresienstadt. At first he devoted just one chapter to his time in the camps, but when his publisher asked him to expand that chapter, he wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* during a feverish nine-day period. Published anonymously in 1946, it went on to become one of the most influential books of all time and the most famous of the thirty-nine books Frankl published during his career.

Frankl understood the power of attention in a way that transcends words. Among his many insights, he writes, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set



of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Even under the worst of circumstances, Frankl found ways to choose what he would focus on—in his case purpose—as a way to stave off the darkness of his circumstances. He spent the rest of his life fighting against what he called the “existential vacuum” of modern life and trying to connect people with their own sense of agency and intention. Talk about a mission that's still relevant today, one that many people would even argue is the meaning of life.

Like Frankl, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi also used the power of his attention to survive World War II. As a prisoner in an Italian work camp, he connected with the idea of flow for which he has become famous. How did he achieve such a unique, enlightened, and effortless state in which the world faded away and the only thing left was the task right in front of him? By playing chess. Using a game of strategy as a way to turn his attention inward—away from the atrocities around him—he was able to fully immerse himself in an activity that not only challenged him but helped him grow. As a result, he fared far better than most of his peers.

There's also Louis Zamperini, whose story was told in the bestselling book and film, *Unbroken*. An Olympic runner turned World War II bombardier, Zamperini was captured by the Japanese after a plane crash left him adrift for 47 days in the Pacific Ocean. His survival hinged on where he directed his attention, so he focused on maintaining his mental strength, even during prolonged torture. His attention not only sustained him but became the driving force behind the faith and forgiveness that defined his postwar life.

Few of us will ever be faced with the atrocities and horror

that Frankl, Csikszentmihalyi, and Zamperini experienced, but all of us can learn from them. In the most dire circumstances, a focus on resilience, forgiveness, connection, or the future not only saved these men's lives and powerfully supported those around them, but it also enabled their postwar healing and redemption. Their stories are a testament to the transformative power of attention and a reminder to all of us that it is one of the greatest powers in the universe.

## A Light in the Darkness

Consider the flashlight.

We switch it on, and, like magic, a beam of light illuminates a circle right in front of us. Outside that circle is darkness—we have no idea what's going on out there—but within the circle, we can see the finest details: blades of grass, a lost glove, a trail, or anything else within that glowing circumference. When we move forward, the beam of light shows us where to go even if we occasionally have to backtrack through the darkness. But the light of the flashlight allows us to examine what's right in front of us and lets everything else fade to black.

Attention works much the same way. When we train the beam of our attention on something, we see it and ourselves much more clearly. Contrary to popular opinion, where we choose to place our attention is something that is almost 100 percent within our control. Yet, most of us don't live this way.

We *think* we have good days and bad days, that there is good weather and bad weather, that we encounter nice people and mean people—all of which affect us in some way. But we don't

really *have* any of those things. What we have—all that we have, in fact—is our attention. As psychologist William James wrote over a hundred years ago: “My experience is what I agree to attend to.”

If we’re trying to attend to everything, if our attention is fractured into a million little pieces, we ultimately aren’t able to attend to anything. In the attention economy, attention is as valuable as housing, food, water, and money. And yet we spend our attention carelessly without realizing it’s the most important resource we have.

*Because, for better or worse, what we pay attention to expands.*

Have you ever obsessively followed a news story only to find out that your office mate or your mom has no idea what you’re talking about? Or maybe you had a disagreement with a friend twenty years ago, but when you apologize, your friend doesn’t even remember that it happened? On the flip side, maybe you do a thirty-day gratitude experiment and almost immediately feel a greater sense of well-being. Perhaps you focus ten minutes every morning on writing a paragraph of your novel, and after two months, you have fifty pages. With the power of our attention, we can dictate the direction and the quality of our lives.

*Paying attention is everything in this life.*

What this means for us as a species—or rather YOU—is profound. You can get swept away by petty aggravations or news or what everyone else tells you is important, *or* you can decide for yourself what the building blocks of your life will be. Much of what you casually pay attention to depletes you or dims your light, but when you decide, *actually choose*, where to focus, you can begin to make things, build things, create things, and that momentum will carry you toward a new life in

which you can jettison the BS and spend your days engaged in work and relationships that bring meaning, purpose, and joy to your life and the lives of others close to you.

As you become more aware of what you pay attention to, you will start to see how much your mind is making up the world you're living in. And that's the moment you can really start to change things. It's not easy, but when we change what we notice, when we *choose* what we focus on rather than relying on chance or worse, everything changes.

## Shutting Out the World

It's not enough to train our attention on what matters. We must also protect it as if our life depended on it. *Because it does.*

Distractions take two distinct forms. External distractions like a pinging phone, task-switching all day long, or toxic, one-sided relationships not only keep us from accomplishing our greatest goals, they erode our ability to pay attention at all. Often we don't even see these disturbances and interruptions as unusual—so many people live busy, chaotic, emotionally amped-up lives—but it's only because we've forgotten that fracturing our attention is not how we're meant to live. We've forgotten the peace and joy that come from focusing on something we love, and we view the pursuit of these emotions as self-indulgent.

But even when we get away from our phones and computers, we still have to deal with the second, and perhaps even more difficult form of distraction: internal distraction. Ask anyone, and they can describe a persistent stream of thoughts running through their minds. *Did I turn off the stove before I left the house?*

*How am I going to make rent this month? Have we missed our chance to save the planet and slow global warming?* In the midst of this near-constant swirl of thoughts and existential worry, we've forgotten that our natural state is deep attention. Constantly jumping from idea to idea or task to task is actually *not* how humans were meant to live.

Yet we insist on distracting ourselves from ourselves because it can be easier than sitting in silence and facing the truth about who we really are or what we really want. Whether this kind of quiet and stillness is part of a ten-day Vipassana meditation retreat or simply a moment of calm in the midst of a frenetic life, it can be maddening when we strip away all the crap and are left alone with our own desires and disappointments. Alas, there is no other way to start to pay attention to our lives and to what comes next.

Though it takes time, practice, and determination, it is possible both to train ourselves to focus on what matters most *and* ignore what drains or doesn't serve us. Then and only then will we be in a position to stop reacting out of habit and conditioning and start having a choice about how we show up and respond to our world.

Do you want more freedom?

Do you want an exceptional existence, one worthy of your potential?

Start by learning to skillfully direct and protect your attention—and prepare to move mountains.

## **We Become What We Behold**

So how do we transform from moving through the world unconsciously, letting our minds skip from subject to subject

without much awareness to being able to use attention to our advantage? In my own case, it happened during the first year when I decided to become a photographer.

Kate and I were living in a tiny apartment, and I was working in a ski shop to make ends meet. There were a lot of voices in my head telling me how I had screwed up the familiar patterns of school and job; plus, I had a boatload of doubt, no money, and few role models. Even though I whispered to those closest to me that I wanted to be a photographer, I was too scattered—and too scared—to actually pay attention to what I might have to do to make that dream a reality.

I spent the first few months of that time dabbling, working in the shop, explaining myself to everyone I knew, and trying, but failing, to hone my craft. My attention was too fractured to get anywhere, but at a certain point, it was do or die. Yes, I had to earn a living, but more importantly, that rare, humble, honest version of myself that sometimes showed up on morning walks or while gazing at golden-orange sunsets had a point: I had to stop fucking around and making excuses. I had to stop paying so much attention to the toxic voices in my head telling me I'd never make it as a photographer and instead go all in on the next right step that would get me where I wanted to go.

And so I went to the library.

I loved photography, but I didn't know how to make the leap from amateur photographer to full-time artist. Today my life is full of people living bold, creative lives, but a couple of decades ago, I was one of just a handful of people I knew who had stepped off a traditional path, and I had almost no real-life

examples of how to do what I wanted to do. So rather than keep my attention focused on all the naysayers, I began—ever so incrementally—by focusing on what might be possible.

I couldn't afford the time or money it would have taken to go to art school, so I jump-started my creative education by reading artist autobiographies and watching documentaries about Basquiat, Rauschenberg, Patti Smith, and the Velvet Underground—I devoured anything about the New York City art scene. I went to museums and art exhibits. And I latched on to Andy Warhol's advice to artists or anyone building a creative life: "Don't think about making art, just get it done. Let everyone else decide if it's good or bad, whether they love it or hate it. While they are deciding, make even more art."

Immersing myself in the stories of artists before me who hadn't played it safe allowed me to focus on what it meant to live this life—the benefits and the pitfalls. I wasn't the first person to go on this journey, so I stopped being so precious and careful, and from there I was able to step into the flow of my attention without the constant distraction of self-doubt. That permission slip freed me up. Instead of paying so much attention to what I was leaving behind, I could focus on where I was going and how others like me had gotten there.

I spent hours in the stacks, pulling out book after book and reading with rapt attention. I took many of the volumes home to reread them to myself and to Kate, who was far less concerned with traditional markers of success than I was and who saw the possibilities even before I did. And I started to know myself and realize that when I got quiet, I had more self-knowledge inside me than I had given myself credit for.

From there, focusing my attention became easier. My friends and I were all in our twenties—they had their first real jobs and were spending money on restaurants, cars, and condos. But I didn't have that kind of money—or any discretionary funds to speak of—so I stopped going out. I needed to focus my attention and everything I was earning on learning to be a photographer. Otherwise I wasn't going to make it. I spent hundreds of Friday and Saturday nights after that developing film in my bathroom-turned-darkroom.

And I didn't mind at all. This is one of the side effects of not playing it safe: when you stop trying to do what everyone else is doing and start experimenting in order to discover what you truly care deeply about, your ability to focus becomes greatly amplified. This is one secret of the people living their dreams. There's a virtuous cycle at work: focused attention on what you love, in turn, creates more focused attention.

Like anything, this is a continual process of improvement, but as with all the levers in this book, the objective has never been perfection. It's momentum. My goal has simply been to keep my ability to focus active enough so that even if I have the occasional setback, I can always return to a place in which I have a choice of what to focus on and what to ignore. I would never equate my experience to Frankl's, Csikszentmihalyi's, or Zamperini's, but I am saying that whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not, we all face a crossroads at some point when we have to decide to use our attention in the first step toward living the way we want to live.

My version of refusing to play it safe with my career was training my attention on my craft and the process of photog-



raphy. I wanted to be an artist and entrepreneur even though everyone around me was skeptical. And sure, I floundered at the beginning. Everyone does. But the repeated process of directing and protecting my attention was a force multiplier that contributed to my progress. I couldn't be what I couldn't see, so training myself to see and believe in my own potential through the experiences of other artists was a key step and the first of many breakthroughs. I've come back to "paying attention" as a strategy over and over again, quite simply because it is the most foundational tool in our kit. That's why attention is the first lever in this book.

## May I Direct Your Attention?

The world is largely out of our control, so managing our attention begins with addressing what we *can* control. Internal distractions are often just as—or more—powerful than external ones, so before we move ahead, let's figure out how to deal with the self-sabotaging thoughts and feelings that most often keep us stuck, fearful, and playing it safe.

Crashing through the jungle of our own minds can be complicated, but if we can see our own thoughts and feelings in a neutral, nonjudgmental way, we can separate them from who we are as people. That perspective gives us freedom to respond to what comes our way without any preconceived notions or judgments. "You have power over your mind—not outside events," wrote Marcus Aurelius almost two thousand years ago. "Realize this and you will find strength."

## You Are Not Your Thoughts

How we feel is not as automatic as we often assume.

The first step in using your attention as a lever is understanding that what you think and believe is not who you are. Yes, emotions are a part of our lives. But how we feel springs from what we allow ourselves to focus on. We might get bad news and have to move through uncomfortable feelings, but you can learn to not be controlled by those emotions. Consider, for example, what happens when someone says something rude to you, and you take it personally.

There are 86,400 seconds in a day, and maybe the insult lasted 5 seconds or even 25. Should the tiniest fraction of the day absorb all of our attention? Obviously not, but how many times do we dwell on these kinds of comments and spend the rest of the day rehearsing what we *could* have said without really feeling any better? Or worse, using those five seconds as the basis for a “bad day”?

I learned early about the power of choice when it comes to focusing—or not—on the negative. When I was in middle school, my father took me to a seminar on sports psychology. When it came time for a demonstration, the psychologist leading the seminar called me to the stage and asked me to close my eyes and hold my arm straight out in front of me at shoulder level as she performed a hypnosis of sorts on me. She told me to imagine that someone had wronged me, and then said that it just so happened that I had a chance for revenge as I was about to compete directly against this person in a sporting event.

“How does that feel in your body?” she asked.

“I feel angry, aggressive, strong, and powerful,” I responded.

She asked me to picture my revenge, besting my competition

in every way imaginable. As I created a vision of the outcome she had described in my mind, she used her own strength and body weight to pull my arm back down to my side. I stood there, fighting against gravity and her weight as she slowly managed to pull it back alongside my body. “Very impressive,” she said. “That’s real power.”

In the second scenario, the psychologist guided me to think about the most beautiful thing I could imagine. Favorite friends, pets I loved, the feeling in my body of winning the state championship in soccer, or being named MVP of a tournament. Again, I extended my arm in front of me parallel to the stage floor. But this time, she was not able to move my arm from its parallel position, and although she was smaller in stature, she was able to literally hang off my arm for a brief moment in what was the equivalent of more than a hundred-pound lateral raise with one arm, a feat that anyone who has spent time in a weight room knows is exceedingly difficult for a world class bodybuilder, let alone a lanky teenager.

The final element of my experience, before returning me from a hypnotic state, was her suggestion to my subconscious that I would be able to remember the experience in great detail, from the feelings in my body to the distinction in the power between my positive and negative emotions, and be able to extend this experience beyond sports to other areas of my life. This became an insight for me and was a powerful force in shaping my future.

To this day I recall these events with a bit of awe. How is it that a silly demonstration from decades ago can have such a profound effect on me both in the moment and to this day? It’s because it made me imagine what results could be possible by

simply training this ability and kicked off a lifelong fascination for me around the power of attention.

The fact is that you, too, have more of a choice of how to respond in that situation than you may be giving yourself credit for. That's not to say other people won't behave badly sometimes or there aren't scars from your past that don't sometimes take hold of the present, but when you stop ruminating, or focusing solely on what hurts, bothers, or annoys you—or better yet allow yourself to experience those emotions in a non-judgmental way and then consciously decide to move on—you can begin to heal, whether from the inconvenience of the person who cut you off on your commute, or from some of life's more substantial challenges.

## You Are Not What Happens to You

There's an old story about a Chinese farmer. One day, the farmer's horse gets out of the stable and runs away, and all the villagers say to him, "Isn't it horrible that your horse got out?"

The farmer responds, "Good news, bad news. Who knows?"

The next day, the horse returns with four more wild horses. Now the farmer has five horses. The village people say, "Wow! Isn't that amazing? Your horse brought back four horses! You are so lucky!"

But the farmer simply replies, "Good news, bad news. Who knows?"

Then the farmer's son is trying to tame the wild horses and gets bucked off. He breaks his leg. The villagers tell him, "Isn't it horrible that your son broke his leg?"

The farmer says, "Good news, bad news. Who knows?"

The next day, the military comes and takes all able-bodied

boys to serve in the army—except for the farmer’s son, because his leg is broken. He can’t go to war due to his injury, and the villagers say, “How lucky are you?”

The farmer says, “Good news, bad news. Who knows?”

And on and on it goes. The farmer experiences life as it is happening instead of placing judgments and expectations on it. His perspective is one of openness and flexibility. Nothing is good or bad to him—it’s just happening. He is aware of the events in his life but decides to remain neutral. This mindset results in a belief that shapes his reality. And as a result, he is free from attachment and can live life as it comes.

With practice, we can do the same.

Some may call certain experiences “good,” and others may call them “bad.” But in the end, those are just judgments about the experiences. How you think about the events in your life is your call and ultimately what determines their goodness or badness. The weather is just being weather. The traffic is just being traffic, and bad things happen to good people. In the words of the band Dawes, “Things happen—that’s all they ever do.”

The true measure of a life boils down to what consumes your attention, and even though it might not always feel like it, you get to decide what that is. Learning to direct your attention is a bit of a magic wand for helping you move from a reactive life to an intentional one—which is the only place from which you can change anything.

## **Train It and Trust It**

Before we can see the world as it is, we must understand how much of it is a projection of our internal state. With this in mind,

sports psychologist Bob Rotella references a concept he calls “train it and trust it.” In his book *Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect*, he shares how most golfers only trust their swings when they’re playing well. But as soon as things start going poorly, they stop believing in themselves. As a result of this judgment, reactivity, and ensuing lack of confidence, their performance declines. “When great athletes stop trusting,” he writes, “they stop being great.”

The same is true for us. The world is largely neutral in nature, so why should we project instead of remaining neutral? The answer is, of course, that we are emotionally rich creatures, bathed in our neurology and biochemistry; therefore, it makes no sense that we are so quick to falter and give away our attention—our power in any moment—so easily when we can train ourselves to behave otherwise.

Thus, any daily practice (see the sidebar below for some options) that trains us to create even the tiniest space between stimulus and response helps remind us to let our attention be the guide rather than our feelings. Instead of “I am angry,” you can remind yourself, “I am experiencing anger,” or rather than “I am happy,” you might say, “I am experiencing joy.” Emotions can be powerful, but they are also fleeting, like clouds in the sky. When we remember to separate our attention from our feelings, we show faith in the training and practices we have developed to stay focused.

## Start with One Thing

If you don’t have a daily practice of quiet and stillness, my question is “Why not!?” The science is so clear (and there are already so

many books on these techniques) that I'm not going to take time here to relitigate each one. I'll just say, for example, that in *Tools of Titans*, my buddy Tim Ferriss found that more than 80 percent of the world-class performers he interviewed had some form of daily meditation, awareness, or mindfulness practice. And my conversations with the most successful, most fulfilled, most creative people in the world reveal exactly the same thing.

If you haven't started down this path yet, don't overthink it. Choose one of these practices—it doesn't matter which one—and give it a few minutes every day. If you already have a dedicated stillness practice, consider deepening it or adding a second one that calls to you. Deciding *where* you place your attention, and then going for it, is an important step toward building a life you can love.

## Meditation

Meditation has been proven to reduce stress levels and is correlated with success for many people; however, I believe that meditation on the whole has been misunderstood. Meditation is not static. It's a dynamic process of focusing, mind wandering, then refocusing . . . over and over again. It is simply becoming more aware of how often your mind likes to wander, suspending judgment about this awareness, and then bringing it back to that singular target. The more you do this—whether you train your attention on your breath, a mantra, or a more guided practice—the better you'll become at learning to focus on what's in front of you. "It's like going back home," Dr. Tony Nader, neuroscientist and leader of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, told me. It's like "going back to the source of everything," he said.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness weaves a state of expanded awareness into your entire day so that you can be more conscious of life and less reactive to it. One practice I use is a body scan, where I spend a few minutes every hour or so checking in with the various parts of my body, beginning with my toes and moving up to the top of my head. I also like Kamal Ravikant's idea of taking ten conscious breaths throughout the day whenever he feels anxious or stressed or Wim Hof's breathing exercises, which he recommends doing one to two times per day (you can find examples of this on YouTube).

## Prayer

You don't have to be religious to consider prayer as an act of attention. Whether it's the Prayer of Examen, a review of the day's activities before bed, or simply repeating a single word in your mind, appealing to a higher power of our choosing gives us a greater sense of meaning in our lives. Sometimes, when life is truly chaotic, our only resort may be the Serenity Prayer, which is a plea for "serenity to accept the things [you] cannot change, the courage to change the things [you] can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Whatever prayer path you may choose, you are never as alone as you think or absolutely without help or hope.

## Journaling

Countless creators attest to the power of journaling as an act of mindfulness and awareness. From creativity experts like Julia Cameron to contemporary comedians such as Mike Birbiglia,



many creative people from all disciplines have cited journaling as a tool for clarifying their thinking. One of the most beloved techniques is Cameron's Morning Pages, three pages of stream-of-consciousness, longhand writing *first thing* in the morning. Other people carry a small notebook around with them to document their lives *and their thoughts and ideas* in real time. Whatever works for you, know that when we write things down, we force ourselves to focus on the events in our lives, to reflect and consider their meaning, and to gain some perspective.

### Gratitude

We all get distracted from what matters most, but a daily act of gratitude makes it easier to stay focused on what we want to do and why we want to do it. Usually, I write down everything I am most appreciative of at the end of the day, no matter how good or bad it seems. "How we paint the world in our minds," neuroscientist Adam Gazzaley told me, "is guided by our attention and that creates our memories and forms our personality." When we paint our world with things we are grateful for, we rescue the past from regret and create a future worth hoping for.

## A Chance to Choose

Learning to direct attention is a lifelong practice.

As you begin to master both internal and external distractions, you will inevitably turn back to the world around you in your quest to direct your attention in ways that bring purpose and meaning to your life. You may know *exactly* where to train your attention, whether you're pursuing a lifelong dream you've

ignored, you're tinkering in the garage and teaching yourself to use a new tool, or you're just doing something as simple as reading for pleasure.

But if you have no idea where to begin, there are three ways to get started that will have the most impact—paying attention to your body, paying attention to the people around you, and paying attention to your environment. By using these techniques, you give yourself the best possible chance to have a choice about where and how to focus.

### **Pay Attention to Your Body**

Athletes are some of the best in the world at paying attention. Not only do they visualize success and live in the moment, but they also understand that attention doesn't just originate in the brain. It's a function of the mind-body connection.

According to Dr. Wendy Suzuki, author and professor of neuroscience and psychology at New York University, meditation, sleep, and exercise are all critical for peak attention. Meditation is a no-brainer. The one thing high-performers in every discipline have in common is a meditation or mindfulness practice of some kind. Period. Ditto on sleep. I spent years skating by on four to five hours of sleep per night, but that was dumb. Sleep is the foundation for brain function, and without it, there's no hope for sustained attention. Ignore sleep and sleep hygiene at your own peril.

But what really grabs my attention is what Dr. Suzuki advises about regular exercise, and just so you know, she's talking about thirty to forty-five minutes of daily exercise if you can manage it. "The best time to exercise is right before you need to use

your brain in the most important way you need to use it every day,” she said on the *Huberman Lab* podcast. That’s because for two hours after every exercise session, we get a mood boost and improved prefrontal cortex function, which translates to deeper focus.

We’ve all felt the mental clarity and rush of endorphins from running, swimming, or lifting, and study after study has proven the connection between a healthy body and a high-functioning mind. Even if you can’t exercise every day for half an hour or more, just ten minutes can help you maintain the habit and reap some of the cognitive benefits of more regular, intense workouts.

The other brain-boosting practice Dr. Suzuki recommends is one I’ve done—at least intermittently—my whole adult life. Cold plunge. Before you skip to the next section, *hear me out*.

Before cold plunge became a trend, I regularly swam in the ocean near our beach house outside of Seattle. Even in the summer, the water never goes much above 55 degrees, and in the winter, it’s significantly colder than that. I’m not always excited to get in, but after so many years, I crave the sense of exhilaration and well-being I get afterward, so I do it anyway. Cold plunge has become such an important part of my life that we even installed an outdoor cold-plunge pool at our home in Seattle. You may never go that far—and you don’t have to. Just a big blast of cold water at the end of a shower will do the trick. I dare you to try it for a month straight and tell me it doesn’t change your life.

## Pay Attention to the People Around You

You’ve heard the saying that you are the average of the five people you spend the most time with. You might have even

heard the very meme-able, “Show me your friends, and I’ll show you your future.” These statements might feel cliché when you’re scrolling, but they illustrate an important point: it *really* matters where we focus our energy and specifically who we focus it on.

Choosing who you spend time with is absolutely critical because, as humans, we are insanely adaptable. For better or for worse. If your friends and your work environment are healthy and positive, you will adapt your own mindset, habits, and practices to match. But the opposite is also true, and it’s easier than we might like to fall in with people who don’t help us be our best selves. This behavior is biological so that we fit in with our tribe since we are a social species.

Though everyone is deserving of kindness, not everyone is deserving of your focus or friendship. That doesn’t mean you have to be cruel or insensitive, but it would be wise to occasionally audit your friends and acquaintances. Are these the most uplifting, confident, and positive people you can surround yourself with? Or is it time to seek out people who support your long-term experimentation and growth?

## Pay Attention to Your Environment

Have you ever stepped off a plane, emerged into a new environment, and felt absolutely amazing? Or entered a room with exquisite design and feng shui and felt your nervous system relax or come alive in a meaningful way? Or maybe you’ve experienced the exact opposite. Say you’ve entered someone else’s space and immediately felt uncomfortable or stressed? Think

back and try to remember what you noticed in those moments. What visuals, smells, and noises come to mind when you think about a positive or negative environment?

Most of us have *some* control over our environments. We may not be able to control how many people in the world drive electric cars or stop everyone from littering, but we can often influence at least some aspects of the places we work, sleep, and live.

Personally, I find my productivity thrives in places where there is some sense of beauty. Minimalist design and clean spaces free of clutter are key to my ability to minimize distractions. To be sure, what I consider “beautiful” is not what you might like, but that’s not the point. The point is we all can do our part to create spaces that inspire us to live and work better.

It’s not about having the biggest house with dedicated space for all our activities. Even if it’s something as simple as cleaning your desk at the end of your workday or making your bed in the morning, we can cultivate places of solace and greater focus. These little acts of beautifying or bringing order to a space can have an incredible effect on our lives.

## Signal versus Noise

A final word about distractions.

They’re like Whac-A-Mole, and just when you think you’ve won the game, they start popping up all over again. In the introduction, I described my own pattern of moving back and

forth between playing it safe and playing by my own rules. Attention is a critical factor in understanding those swings and hopefully, eventually, regulating ourselves. Many of us alternate periods of great focus in which our attention is a laser beam with times when our attention appears as a million points of light bouncing all over the place.

But the goal is not perfection. If you decide that nothing else will do, then you will fail.

The goal instead is to bring our attention back over and over again to what matters. We will not always be able to focus as we might like. But the sooner we get better at recognizing when we've gone astray, the sooner we can gently bring ourselves back to the path we want to be on.

As with the description of meditation earlier in the chapter, the plan is not to arrive at a place where your attention does not wander (you can't), but rather to get good at bringing it back to an anchor like breath, mantra, or a spot on the wall. This will be a recurring theme for almost every lever in this book. The aim is not for a perfect state of being for each of these skills but rather to aim for an increasing level of awareness that allows us to come back over and over again to who we are and how we want to be.

Mastering our thoughts and creating the conditions to both rest and do our best work is a never-ending process that takes its own kind of focus. Most people truly *want* to be aware, it's just that we forget as we go about our daily lives. But ironically, attention is a bit like technology . . . unplugging and restarting is the best way to reset. Just do that over and over. Restart again and again. Anyone who is sincere in their endeavors will see results.

## Ditch the Shiny Object Syndrome

Years ago, I received an email from a photographer named Abby who was trying to break through in her career. “My challenge,” she said, “is that I’ve got a YouTube channel. I’ve got a Teachable account. I’ve got Facebook. I’ve got *everything*. I’ve taken out ads. But I’m still struggling to get traction with my creative endeavors.”

When I took a quick look at her portfolio, the problem was clear. “I don’t know what your ‘creative endeavors’ are,” I told her. “And I don’t think you do either.”

Most of us, when seeking something we want, tend to neglect the *one* thing we should be doing to get there. Abby was doing too *many* of the “right” things, dividing her attention across too many projects and platforms. It seemed like she was on the right track, but by spreading her attention so thin, she was unable to build a body of work that would have earned her the reputation she so desperately wanted.

To be fair, we can all be guilty of shiny object syndrome. When the novelty wears off and reality sets in, it can be easier to jump to the next thing rather than to face an obstacle or settle into how difficult our current projects might be, especially when we’re nervous they won’t work or distracted by all the opportunities that are available to us.

Then we’re surprised when we struggle to get traction, spinning our wheels and wondering why our efforts amount to less than they might. What’s missing for many of us is an understanding of what matters most. “When you know what matters most,” writes Gary Keller in *The One Thing*, “everything makes sense. When you don’t know what matters most, anything makes sense.” As such, this is a vital exercise to any

training of attention: Can you identify what matters most in any situation? What if you had to fashion a guess and commit to that? I'd venture a guess that you'd find out quickly that it either was or wasn't valuable.

## Quit the Comparison Trap

In 2015, Olympic swimmer Chad le Clos was on a mission to defeat the great Michael Phelps. Le Clos, a South African who had previously beaten Phelps, started a public feud in 2015 when his rival announced that he was coming out of retirement. The reason? Phelps said that none of the swimmers seemed that fast. Le Clos took that personally.

Leading up to the event, both swimmers engaged in a public contest of trash talk. All of this culminated in the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, where the world watched as the two Olympians duked it out in the 200-meter butterfly. For the first hundred meters of the relay, they were neck-and-neck. In the second half, Le Clos fell behind. The race ended with Phelps finishing in first place at 1:53.36 and Le Clos placing fourth.

The next day, a photo of Le Clos spread across the internet. It was a picture of Phelps winning his twentieth gold medal while Le Clos swam beside him, a few strokes behind. In the image, the South African is just a head behind the American: mouth open, turned to the side—staring at Michael Phelps. Phelps, however, is looking straight ahead.

Where we place our attention is where we give our power. Awareness of the competition can be a good thing to a de-



gree, but when we put our focus on the accomplishments of others, we leave little energy for ourselves and kill our own momentum. What great performers know is that you are never competing against anyone but yourself. Be different, not better. Sometimes you'll win; sometimes you'll learn. But if you keep growing, you stay in the game.

### **Boredom Is a Gift**

When we become more present, we infuse life with meaning and purpose. The more you pay attention, the more exciting life gets. Contrary to popular opinion, boredom does not come from the object of our attention. Rather, it comes from the quality of our attention. Fritz Perls, one of the psychologists responsible for bringing Gestalt therapy to America, said, "Boredom is lack of attention." Understanding this reality brings profound changes in our lives and helps unlock the magic and mystery of the moment.

According to Manoush Zomorodi, author and host of NPR's *TED Radio Hour*, "boredom is the gateway to mind-wandering, which helps our brains create those new connections that can solve anything from planning dinner to a breakthrough in combating global warming." The key is to sit with the discomfort of boredom rather than running away from it every time it crops up. Zomorodi points to a troubling statistic: in 2007, we shifted our attention at work every three minutes. In 2017, we did it every 45 seconds. Now it's common to task switch every few seconds, all day long, without even noticing. And yet, it's critical to let yourself be bored on occasion, to allow the mind

to wander and see where it lands. Who knows what you might find?

I'm certainly not saying you should be perpetually bored. But if you pay close enough attention, if you go deep into something, even something that at first doesn't really interest you, everything you notice should amaze you. This is particularly true if you're used to constantly having your attention stolen by one stimulus after another. Instead of looking for that next fix, it might be good to be still for a while and see where your attention takes you.

### Decide Who You Will Let Down

It's not uncommon these days to have hundreds of people who know what you're up to on any given day, simply by virtue of posting about it. But the pressure of "what will people think" can become overwhelming because living a bold life, one you can actually call your own, is scary. A good antidote is to decide, once and for all, who you are willing to let down. (And to remember that no one cares *quite* as much as you think they do because they're all too busy worrying about their own problems.)

This could be as simple as making a short list of people you *don't* want to disappoint. When Brené Brown and I recorded a live podcast in front of an in-studio audience, she showed me a short list of people on a one-inch-by-one-inch scrap of paper that she carries around with her in her wallet. These are the people in her life whose opinions of her actually matter to her—and this stands in contrast to the millions of other people

who may or may not have an opinion of her work. People can think what they want, so long as *she* knows that she's accountable to a few individuals who matter most.

## A Tiny Experiment

I wish I could tell you that attention is limitless. But it's not.

There's not a single person on this planet who couldn't get better at paying attention. Not the Dalai Lama. Not Roshi Joan Halifax, Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, or any other spiritual guide. And certainly not any one of us neophytes.

My wife, Kate, actually studied with Tara and Jack for two years, and both were very deliberate in encouraging their students to practice the power of awareness and attention. Kate has a quote from Jack scribbled in one of her journals: "One form of delusion is lack of attention. We live in a culture of chronic inattention fed by the frenzied pace of modern life. When we are lost in thought, half asleep, we don't notice what is happening. It is like the experience of driving to a destination, parking, and realizing that we have no memory of the whole drive. Mindfulness training wakes us up from this trance to see more clearly, to experience the aliveness of our days."

Whether you've been training your attention for years or you're just getting started, I encourage you to try a tiny experiment. Set your alarm for four to six random times during the day, and when it sounds, take notice of where your attention is. Is it on the present? Your awareness of what you're

doing at that moment? Or are you thinking of something else? Take a beat and bring all of your attention back to the present moment.

Again, the goal is not to “get it right,” but rather to simply become aware of your own attention. Then and only then do we have a starting point and a greater sense of the challenges we face in staying present or reckoning with the next lever: time.