

INTRODUCTION

Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes.

—OSCAR WILDE

I have a lot of experience to share with you. I recently came across this proverb: “The tongue of experience holds the most truth.” My own path illustrates the validity of that proverb.

Years of making and correcting mistakes, enduring the process of unlearning what did not work, reframing dysfunctional perspectives about what I believed to be my realities so that I could learn and act in far more productive ways—these experiences guided me to craft this book. *What’s Next?* is designed to provide you a way to navigate change and embrace new chapters in your life that don’t replicate what was but rather help and inspire you to lay the foundation for an uncertain next chapter in your life.

This book is designed to give you clarity, focus, and purpose. It will stimulate your curiosity to explore previously unseen, even unimagined, possibilities. Your path may reveal your potential that is different from your current state of being. You will undergo change.

Change almost always produces some level of fear-based angst. Ever since we became modern humans 300,000 years ago, our brains have been hardwired to resist change. In the distant past, we needed to resist change to ensure that our species survived. You will read

about how that hardwiring operates today and how it impacts our decision-making.

That unconscious fear of change will forever remain in your thoughts, but you can consciously override fear and replace it with knowledge, certainty, and curiosity.

The knowledge you will gain will be a deeper understanding of who you are, of the capabilities you possess that will take you beyond your self-limiting beliefs, and of the strong foundation you will build.

The certainty relates to the confidence you will feel in the soundness of your exploration, the belief that your process will lead you to the place and space you want to be. A specific, fully defined absolute, however, is unpredictable. Scientists and philosophers have assured us that we cannot forecast the future, we can only imagine it. That is why you must believe the process will work.

Once you have acquired knowledge and certainty, curiosity emerges and overrides fear. Curiosity opens doors that lead you to explore previously unimagined paths, reignites passions you filed away in your unconscious mind as unachievable fantasies, and connects you with people who offer ideas you never considered. You will welcome surprises. You will consciously override your resistance to change.

When you replace stress with belief and curiosity, you contribute to your brain's health.

Change, and the growth you can experience from making change, seldom comes knocking on your door. You must seek and find your path. To do that, you must understand the process, the elements that make up the process, and the tools and skills you'll need to engage in the process, and this book will be your guide.

These elements will contribute to your learning, skill building, and active participation on your journey. As you read you will gain the following knowledge:

- How our brains progressed in their structure and behavior from the time modern humans first appeared on earth up to today. Understanding that will help you adapt to modern life.
- How instinctive behaviors that, in ancient times, served to protect us from danger today often lead to irrational decisions and stunted growth. You will learn how to prevent those primitive instincts from controlling you and how to replace them with wiser decisions and more productive actions.
- How to effectively use two tools that can help you experience a more rewarding period of growth than you ever have imagined. You will be able to overcome your self-limiting beliefs about what is possible for you to achieve and to be.
- How to create your vision, define your values, and understand your greater purpose. Those three elements form the foundation that will enable you to explore with confidence, clarity, and healthy curiosity.
- How and why those three elements must align with one another and how, if they do not, your actions will work at cross-purposes and keep you from achieving your goals.
- How to put all of this understanding and these tools together, and in doing so, how to chart your path to your gratifying next chapter. You just might discover that your years ahead will be the most rewarding years of your life.

I am not providing a formulaic recipe for an aspirational picture of your life transformed into an otherworldly fantasy about to come true. Rather, I offer you a process that will help you become more than you think you are. A self-limiting state of being defines most of us, but with this book, I intend to help you experience the joy of reaching your full potential. You will learn how to make the difference in this world that you were born to make.

The process you are about to learn is more complex than you might imagine. Alas, I am not offering you a read-the-content-and-check-the-boxes approach. As stated at the beginning, the antidote to angst is certainty, specifically one that is flexible. It is not cast in stone. As you read, you will learn to find opportunities that align with your vision, values, and greater purpose. Some will readily align with your preconceived ideas, while others will offer you possibilities you never imagined. I urge you to examine them all.

This certainty is spiritual. When you put yourself out there, announce your intentions, and have clarity about what you want your life to be about, you will uncover possibilities from previously unknown sources. You will feel opportunities speaking to you: “Pursue this, do this, master this.”

You must examine your certainty within its proper context, which will shape the way you want your life to play out. For example, suppose you are an extraordinary dancer. Dancing defines the context within which the vast majority of your talent lies. Thus the genres from which you will choose—ballet, modern, hip-hop, or ballroom—define your content. If you are a ballet dancer, auditioning with a hip-hop group will likely be pointless, unless, of course, you wish to creatively combine the two genres.

Or say that you decide to be a full-time writer. Writing defines the context for your talent. But will you write fiction or nonfiction? And if you decide to write fiction, will you write science fiction, crime, historical fiction, or children’s stories? Or will you turn to investigative journalism and write for a magazine? These elements of content all fall within the context of being a writer.

And for one more example, let’s say you are passionate about health and wellness. You want your life to be about continuously learning and teaching others about the benefits of wellness, so wellness defines the context within which you want to engage. You have multiple areas to choose from. Do you want to specialize in yoga,

meditation, acupuncture, weight training, cardio activities, nutrition, or a combination of some of them? Those areas of specialty define the content of what you will choose to do and be. They all fit within the context of wellness.

Back to your angst. For those of you whose trajectory in life has been traditional, around the age of fifty, angst may begin to creep into your consciousness. Many of you, however, may have experienced disruptive change, either existentially or self-created. You can experience angst at any age.

Considering or embarking on a career or lifestyle change can produce angst. Initially, you may not feel too worried, but when you begin to realize that your life is heading in a new direction in the foreseeable future, you are likely to say to yourself, "Things will change; I must change." Your angst increases.

Among the examples that supercharge this kind of change and angst are divorce, the death of a spouse or partner, a relocation from the city to a suburban or rural town, or graduation from college and entering the workforce without a clue as to what you want your career to be. Each of these changes, and many more, can produce angst.

How do you replace angst with positive anticipation? How do you imagine a future that is not an extension of your past? How and where do you search for something with a focus that eliminates the frustration of exploring possibilities that will lead you down dead-end alleys? That's a lot of questions and no clear answers.

But this book will help you uncover the questions and begin to find answers. As you progress by learning to develop your vision, affirm your values, and define your greater purpose, your angst will melt away. You will replace that angst with knowledge, confidence, and healthy curiosity about a future not yet formed but that you know awaits your discovery.

You are not a category or a data point. You are an individual, a distinct, unique human being. You have a gift that only you can

deliver. At any time in your life that you choose or that unforeseen circumstances choose for you, you are capable of defining who you are and what you want on your terms.

To find your answers, all you need to know are what questions to ask, what avenues you need to explore to answer those questions, and a set of criteria to help you evaluate the possibilities so that you choose what is right for you.

I am not offering you a quick fix. Instead, I've created a guide to the work you must do that will enlighten you, stimulate your conscious mind, and help you adapt to changes that will enrich your life.

Let's get started.

CHAPTER ONE

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The past can inform the present,
but it need not foretell the future.

—ANONYMOUS

The story of values began approximately 300,000 years ago when modern humans first appeared on our planet. Since then, with all the inventions, discoveries, advances, and complexities in the way we live, one fact has remained unchanged: our brains are still wired as they have been since our beginnings.

Had you lived 300,000 years ago, you would not have considered having a vision, values, or a purpose beyond your desire for day-to-day survival. In those days, life revolved around staying alive and procreating. Death lurked around every corner. You would have been focused on finding food and shelter and hanging out with trusted tribe members.

To detect and navigate the perils of this hostile world and to stimulate a desire to increase the population, the human brain was wired with two instincts: (1) a desire for *instant gratification*, the short-term fulfillment of wants and needs, because being alive tomorrow was not a given, and (2) an *avoidance of discomfort*, because discomfort often predicted either serious injury or imminent death.

Both instincts are triggered in the amygdala, the small, almond-shaped cluster of neurons located deep in our brain's temporal lobe. The amygdala controls emotions and stores emotional memories of events we've experienced.

Our instinct for instant gratification produced a desire to procreate, which lives on today but has expanded to confront a vast array of choices involving tradeoffs between immediate rewards and the possibility of longer-term benefits of greater value.

The amygdala also triggers fear, a vital protective emotion. We make emotionally driven decisions faster than we do decisions that require thought and analysis. In ancient times, making a fast decision might spell the difference between living and dying, and the amygdala always played a critical role in ensuring that we stay alive—definitely more comfortable than dying. Making emotionally formed decisions also burns fewer calories than do those requiring thought and analysis, thereby keeping more calories in reserve to improve our ability to make better future decisions, again increasing our chances for survival.

Unlike our long-ago ancestors, today few of us face a daily risk of injury or death. We face different challenges, yet our brains remain hardwired with those original instinctive preferences.

Here's where challenges arise: although we cannot erase those hardwired default preferences—what we call our *instincts* or *human nature*—we must learn to override them. Those hardwired instincts influence our decisions and actions in ways similar to how our values influence us.

I call those two instincts *shadow values*. The big difference between instincts and values is this: instincts reside in our unconscious minds, and values live in our conscious minds. The difference determines whether we act instinctively or in a state of conscious awareness. Both states produce results in the same way, but acting with a conscious determination to live your stated values produces

far better results. (In chapter 6, you will learn how to override your shadow values.)

Why Choose to Override

You may be wondering why you'd wish to override your shadow values. After all, what's wrong with instant gratification? Why would you want to give up ways of avoiding discomfort?

When you are under pressure, or when the pleasure within your reach is especially compelling, and you are not consciously aware of your values—especially ones that conflict with your instincts—your behavior will be driven by your shadow values.

Somewhere along the way, most of us learned that when we make decisions based on a desire for instant gratification or simply to avoid discomfort, in the long run we often get into trouble.

Envision, for instance, the way the actions listed below, driven in each instance by shadow values, almost always produce unintended, unwanted results:

- Instant gratification:
 - Eating a hot fudge sundae after committing to losing twenty-five pounds
 - Playing a video game until three in the morning the night before an early interview for a job you desperately want
 - Getting high on cocaine before a meeting designed to impress your friend, girlfriend, or boss
 - Having unprotected sex when the last thing on earth you want is a child
 - Buying clothes you don't need to ease your depression
- Avoidance of discomfort:
 - Marrying someone you don't love because you're the last of your friends who is single

- Deciding to have a baby because your parents long for a grandchild
- Not asking someone you like out for a date because you're sure they'll say no
- Coming up with every excuse you can imagine to avoid getting a colonoscopy, mammogram, or blood test
- Staying in a job you hate because the money is good

Over the course of your life, you likely have faced, and will continue to face, many such situations. In the throes of sexual passion, having drunk too many glasses of wine, nobody is thinking about raising a baby. But when a pregnancy occurs, you may ask yourself, "What was I thinking?" Marrying someone you don't love because all your friends are married may result in years of unhappiness and the emotional trauma of divorce, and you may wonder, "What was I thinking?"

Actually, you were *not* thinking, you were *feeling*. And while immersed in feeling, you likely acted on your shadow values. There's a good chance at least one of your conscious values might have helped you exercise the restraint required to avoid a life-altering mistake—for you and for others affected by your actions.

Shadow values often prompt regrettable decisions made solely to avoid the discomfort of change. Our resistance to change is pervasive in every area of our lives. All change is uncomfortable, so we invent a rationale to make our resistance seem logical, well-reasoned, and appropriate. With rare exceptions, these stories we tell ourselves are lies, designed to make us look good or hide our fear or both.

To resist change is to resist learning and growing. It's easy to see this resistance when we observe other people's behavior. It's painfully difficult to see it in ourselves. Some of us may see it but offer excuses: "This is who I am. I'm too old to change." That belief is simply untrue, a subject further explored in chapter 6.

One More Instinct

We also resist change because of another ancient instinct, our *tribal instinct*. Most of us feel safer being with people who look, talk, sound, behave, and believe the way we do. Such people usually feel more trustworthy and comfortable.

In our 300,000-years-ago selves, the drive to be among our tribe was normal and widely accepted. Today our resistance to being inclusive, to expanding our tribe, if you will, has become more nuanced.

A Story of Tribal Instincts

A woman had a flourishing career in management, and she was wholly absorbed in her work. Her primary outside interest was breeding, training, and showing dogs. She was a widow with two grown children.

One day she met a guy, fell in love, and got married (despite her sister's warning that such a thing would never happen).

She was lively, physically active, intensely involved in studying and applying nutrition and healthy living practices, an outstanding chef and baker, and an eerily good listener with empathy to spare.

Her husband loved his job and had no plans to retire, but she had decided to retire, and she looked forward to finding a few new friends and joining new groups, formal and informal. She figured doing so would be easy. She had always gotten along well with people. Besides, she wasn't looking for full-time activities, but simply meaningful relationships with women who had similar or compatible interests, shared values (respect, integrity, honesty, and no cheap gossip), authenticity (no superficiality), and an interest in what was going on in the world. She sought people with whom she could have meaningful conversations.

What she discovered was tribalistic rejection. Sometimes the rejection came with apologies that were transparently disingenuous. Sometimes it came with snobbish coldness. Some employed the newest social norm—ghosting.

Even for the most psychologically strong person, rejection can feel like a knife that cuts so cleanly, you barely feel it, at least at first. But even when that rejection does not detract from the rest of a full life, it leaves a cut.

Rejection left this woman—leaves most of us—asking questions such as, “What is wrong with me? What is it about me that is not good enough?” Even if the thought is fleeting, that wound is there.

The rejection she experienced became a topic of conversation with her husband.

I know this story because the woman is my wife, Arlene.

We both understood that the rejection Arlene experienced was living, breathing evidence of the way shadow values and tribal instincts often shape the trajectory of people’s lives, lives led by a persistent resistance to change.

Arlene is not a moper. She looked at the situation as a problem to be solved. And because she is a great problem solver, sooner or later she will find solutions to overcome these rejections. When she does, her experience will trigger new discussions about how a few people were able to override their shadow values and tribal instincts to avoid discomfort and thus were able to experience growth through a new friendship.

For Arlene, this is a work in progress. Most of us are leading lives that are works in progress.

For those of you seeking to continue to grow and change—and you wouldn’t be reading this book if you were not—understanding and overcoming the negative impact of tribal instincts is a vital step.

The Upside of Our Shadow Values

Of course, our shadow values may also serve us well. Some examples of activities where shifting mores that enable our shadow values to serve us include the following:

- *Shopping*—For millions of people, internet shopping offers the scope, ease, price and value comparisons, the quality ratings, and the ability to save time that make it an essential lifestyle choice. It can be gratifying and offer a new form of comfort. You might feel pangs of sympathy for small local merchants who cannot compete, but our needs are a worthy basis on which to justify achieving greater comfort and instant gratification.
- *Ridesharing*—The discomfort of driving and parking, especially in dense urban environments, can, for some, be eliminated by using a mobile app. Voilà, within minutes a car appears (with a driver, for now) and away you go. More comfortable—check. Instant satisfaction—check. Putting traditional cab drivers out of work? Regrettable but inevitable collateral damage.
- *Working remotely*—Remote work is complicated. The presumptive gains include more time with family and friends, less wear and tear on the car, lower gas and dry-cleaning costs, the ability to adapt and work with a schedule that can improve the quality of life, and the opportunity to live in a variety of places that are more affordable, have better schools, are safer, and have better recreational facilities. Potential losses include loss of human connection, decline in the quality of work, loss of collaborative opportunities, and a possible decrease in productivity. Is there less discomfort? Possibly. Less emotional satisfaction? Possibly. Again, our values come into play, and

to assess what is right for us, we need to ask ourselves questions about what is most important to us.

You now understand at least part of our evolutionary journey from birth to the present, from simple beginnings focused on survival to a world filled with complexities that grow over time. You also understand that while your shadow values will always be with you, you need not allow them to rule you.

Remember, your past can inform your present, but it need not foretell your future.

EXERCISE

Write your responses to the following prompts with pen and paper:

- Make a list of your current behavior patterns that align with one or both of your shadow values. *Be honest with yourself.* No one but you needs to see this list. It will be an important part of the framework to help you establish the values that will serve you as you move into the next chapter of your life.
- Write a list of three to six situations that bring back vivid memories of unintended results you experienced as the result of acting on your shadow values.
- Rewrite the history of those experiences by telling the story of what *would have* happened if you had chosen a different set of values to guide your actions.

Next up, you will learn two skills you need to create your vision, choose your values, and define your greater purpose with the wisdom and depth that will have you living life at your full potential.