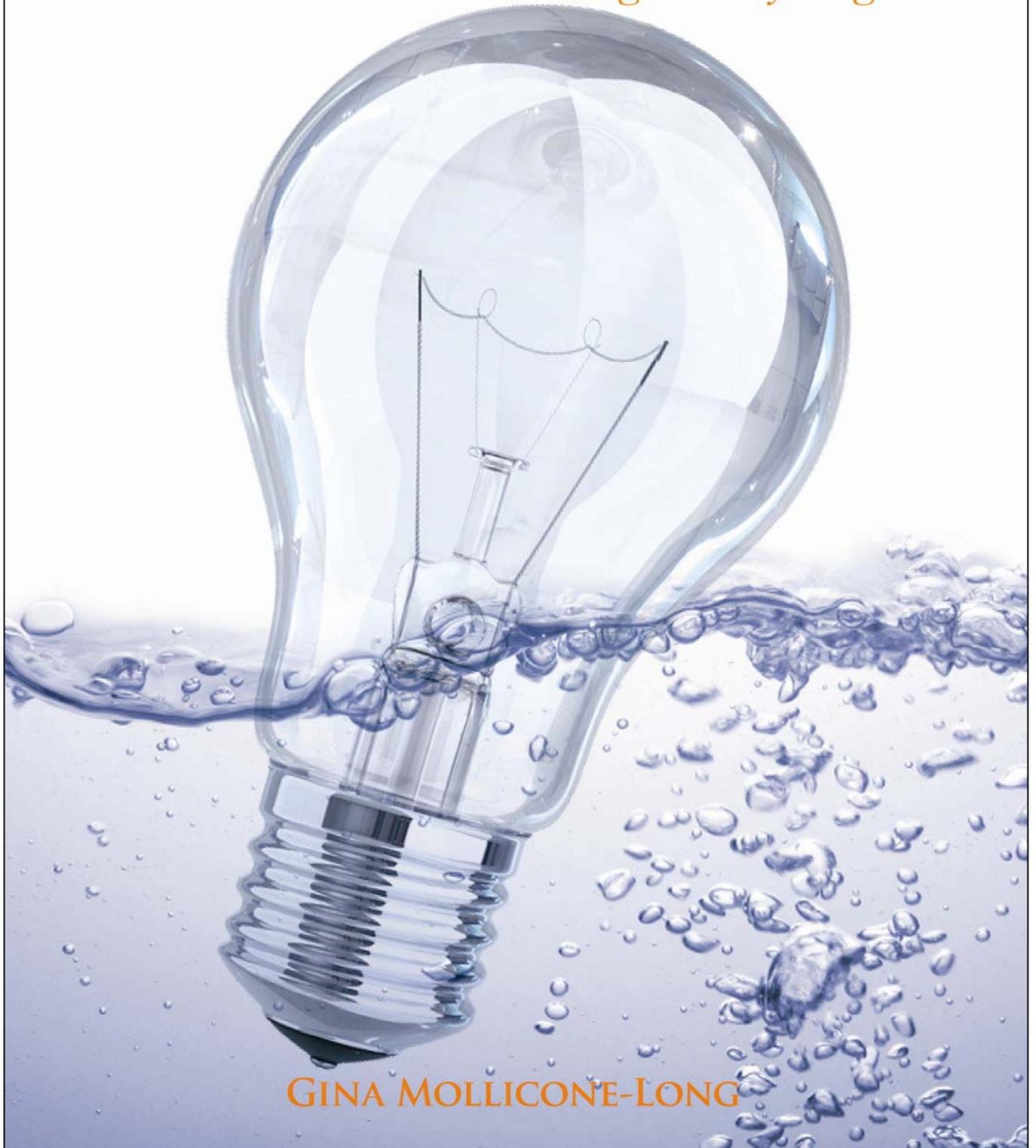


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Think or *Sink*

The ONE Choice That Changes Everything



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–Mary Aitken, CEO and founder of Verity

Think *or* Sink



THE ONE CHOICE THAT
CHANGES EVERYTHING

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CHANGES EVERYTHING

BY
GINA MOLLICONE-LONG



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This book is dedicated to my children, Molly and Simon.

*May you always meet life's greatest challenges with an even greater
strength from within yourselves.*

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*“If I have seen further than others, it is
because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.”*

– Sir Isaac Newton

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CONTENTS



CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS WHAT OPPORTUNITY FEELS LIKE

1

CHAPTER TWO

THE FEEDBACK LOOP OF LIFE

27

CHAPTER THREE

BEING: THE POTENTIAL REALITY

43

CHAPTER FOUR

DOING: THE TEMPORARY REALITY

76

CHAPTER FIVE

HAVING: THE PHYSICAL REALITY

99

CHAPTER SIX

THINGS THAT HELP

122

CHAPTER SEVEN
THINGS THAT DON'T

148

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE SIMPLE PROCESS

170

CHAPTER NINE
42 THINGS THAT WILL HELP YOU SHIFT

203

CHAPTER ONE

THIS IS WHAT OPPORTUNITY FEELS LIKE

*“The world is round, and the place which may seem
like the end may also be the beginning.”*

– Ivy Baker Priest

The paradox of any challenge or crisis is that it is also an opportunity. This might seem crazy at first, but I will show you in the next nine chapters how to turn your adversity into your advantage. A crisis can be any situation of extreme difficulty or danger like losing a job, suffering a divorce or falling ill. During challenging times many people look for and focus on what is wrong. Not only is this perspective harmful because it doesn't bring about any solutions or relief, but it is also the very thing that ensures the continuation of the crisis itself. That's right, focusing on what's wrong will always bring about more of what's wrong. Conversely then, (and great news) is that focusing on what's right will also bring about more of what's right. This is the opportunity that lies within crisis: if you learn to observe it, interpret it and leverage the lessons inherent in it, then crisis can be integral to achieving success and inner happiness.

It all comes down to choice—your choice of how you will

respond. The most important thing that you can do during a challenging time is to become the master of your mind and emotions. You must learn to react outside of your automatic default responses to crisis and to engage all of your creative faculties, problem-solving skills and coping abilities. Failure to think while you are facing any crisis or challenge will only serve to exacerbate the very circumstances that you are trying to change. You will sink into a looping cycle of crisis and reaction that never leads to resolution. The only way out of the crisis or challenge is right through the middle of it. Your problem will cease to be a problem when you discover within yourself the resources that you need to handle it.

There are three states that I consider to be the birthright of every human being. They are *peace, love and joy*, and they are the core of who you are. We often perceive any challenge, crisis or failure as a threat to our right to experience these states. However, challenges, crises and failures do not have to inhibit

"Failure is just another way to learn how to do something right."

– Marian Wright Edelman

our ability to achieve peace, love and joy. Instead, such negative circumstances can serve us in their ability to demonstrate to us, sometimes

very emphatically, that we may be lacking a vital connection to our natural states in our lives. Instead of wishing that your circumstances were different, use them as a cue that you are being challenged to find new resources within yourself.

I want to reiterate what I just said because for many it represents a significant paradigm shift. And one you must make if you are to find any power in a crisis. *A crisis, failure or challenge*

can always serve you because it highlights, in plain view, what is missing. Once you know what is missing then you can take the necessary steps to get it.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I didn't say that crises and challenges feel good. In fact, they always feel awful, sometimes even devastating. Not something you'd choose off a menu of experiences. However, they are gifts. Always! They are gifts because they give you an opportunity to make a major shift in your life. Now, some of you might be saying, "What if I don't want to make a shift? I like things the way they are." I can respect that. The issue is this: you can't remain in one place forever because as a human being you are always moving. You are either moving forward or moving backward, but you are always moving. You may have heard the saying, "You're either growing or you're dying." You are allowed to choose between them, but just be clear that you are choosing. If you're like most of us, you would choose to grow rather than die. Let's take a moment here to define what growth really means. In this context, it means finding new resources within yourself that enable you to cope with stressful circumstances easily and effortlessly. You should understand then that crisis and challenge in your life are part of the growth process. They serve the purpose of facilitating your growth.

"Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly."

– Author unknown

GROWTH TRIGGERS

When things go wrong, you are usually forced to develop a new way of Being. This process ultimately leads to the discovery of

resources that were unknown up to this point. I am often quoted and interviewed on the topic of self-esteem, especially with respect to schools. My viewpoint is that self-esteem doesn't come from a failure-less environment. Rather self-esteem comes in the moment when you fall flat on your face and you decide to get back up. In that moment, you find out that you are made of more than you thought you were. This new knowledge is what raises your self-esteem. Falling down was the trigger that forced you to find new resources, a new way of Being or a new perspective.

There is a type of plant that grows in Australia known as the Banksia. An interesting quality of most species of Banksia is that the seed pods can only be opened by the heat of a bush fire. Many people would share the viewpoint that a bush fire is an undesirable event. However, the Banksia can only release its seeds after a devastating fire. The bush fire acts as a trigger for the Banksia to release its seeds and grow. No fire—no seeds—no growth. In the case of the Banksia, the fire is a good thing. Without the fire, the Banksia never finds out what it can really do. Get it?

When things fall apart, then something isn't working. It indicates that the structure wasn't sustainable, so it broke. For example, let's say a child is building a tower made of wooden blocks. She starts with one block on the bottom and then puts two blocks on top of the one, then three on top of two, then four on top of three. You can see where this is going. Eventually, her tower will fall over because it isn't sustainable. The crashing of her tower is feedback that she needs to try a different approach. Sooner or later, she will discover that it makes much more sense to build a tower of blocks on a solid foundation.

The toppling of her tower wasn't her real problem. Her real problem was that she tried to build an unstable tower. The experience allowed her to grow, expand her knowledge and search for a way to build a better tower.

CRISIS IS OPPORTUNITY

This book is not full of blithe advice about how mere positive thinking in times of trouble is your salvation. Nor is this book meant to belittle your suffering in any way. This book is about a paradigm shift. When you shift into the perspective that crisis and challenge are there to serve your growth, then you can be more powerful when experiencing difficult circumstances. You can make sense of your suffering and you can actually take steps to come out of it.

You can love the life you live once you learn how to access peace, love or joy regardless of what is going on in your reality. We need to learn how to override some of our programs and reverse some outdated and incorrect paradigms so that we can have access to peace, love or joy whenever we choose. I do not use the term "choose" loosely because it is my ardent belief that we have the power to choose our way of Being at any given moment. This book is your step-by-step guide to turning those times of seeming powerlessness and disappointment into sources of strength, happiness and growth.

Every single human being has a hardwired response to challenge, crisis and failure. Where many people run into difficulty is that at some point during their lives, they have developed inappropriate responses to certain situations. In a sense, the problem is overreacting (or even underreacting).

People who are able to come to their senses during a crisis and think clearly will be able to find a solution and peace of mind more easily than those who remain stuck. Therefore, if you want to find a solution to your problem, you need to become a master at regulating your reaction in any given situation. This is the only way to become aware and access new resources. You must learn to think for yourself and recognize when your response is appropriate and when your response is excessive. If you are not conscious of your response, then you can sink into your default response to the situation or the general consensus of the people around you.

RESPONSES DEFINED

We are always responding to external events, whether we are aware of it or not. Our mind is constantly processing external information and matching it up against the models that we have created to determine if there is a match. A match to the model is a signal that we are comfortable and no adjustment is required. The issue arises when there is a mismatch to the model. Any external event that does not match the model creates a stressful situation as the mind attempts to sort, identify and classify the incoming stimuli so that we can return to our comfort zone. For example, if you are used to driving to work without traffic, then a traffic jam will signal a mismatch to your model and this will launch a stress response.

There are two interesting facts to point out about this process. Firstly, that it is a mismatch to the model that causes the stress. It doesn't matter if the model itself is flawed; the mis-

match is the important part. If the comfortable and familiar operating model for an individual is anxiety and uncertainty, then even an event as innocuous as quiet and calm could cause a mismatch and create stress for the individual. In that sense, the individual's model is a key factor in determining what will cause a mismatch and be classified as a stressful situation. The individual is unconsciously driven to experience anxiety states in order to feel comfortable.

The second important fact to note about response has to do with how the matching and mismatching gets determined. Until very recently, it was thought that only the conscious mind could process external stimuli and determine a match or mismatch. However, recent research at the Institute of HeartMath shows that we also process incoming stimuli on an emotional level and can determine a match or mismatch in a situation.¹ What is even more interesting is that this mechanism works at a much faster rate than the conscious mind, so a response to a situation can be initiated before we are really aware of the entire situation.

Consider then that what we call "stress" isn't a "thing" at all. In fact, no one has ever seen "stress." You can't put it into a wheelbarrow. So what is it? Stress actually is a response or a decision by you to classify something as "stressful." It doesn't have to be a conscious choice, but it is a choice nonetheless.

HARDWIRED RESPONSES

The biological response of animals to threat is called "fight

¹ McCraty, R. *Heart Brain Neurodynamics*. Institute of HeartMath, 2003).

or flight.” The fight-or-flight response was first described in 1915 by Walter Cannon who was a professor and chairman of the Department of Physiology at Harvard Medical School. His theory showed that all animals, including human beings, respond to acute stress in the same manner: by preparing the body to run or to fight off the attack. This fight-or-flight response is hardwired into your physiology because it is an essential element in survival.

Because it is hardwired, it is typically unconscious, meaning that you don’t really have to DO anything in order to activate your fight-or-flight response. You don’t need to think about the threat consciously and then determine whether you should react with fight-or-flight. The reaction is preprogrammed into your physiology as a protective measure. This is good news and bad news. It’s good news if you happen to suffer a serious acute attack because it will likely save your life. However, it is bad news when the response is activated inappropriately, like when the perceived threat is not a significant threat to your survival because the stress response depletes many of the body’s resources.

The fight-or-flight response is a “stress response.” The crisis produces stress and the body responds with fight-or-flight. The problem most of us have is that many situations produce a stress response even though the situations are usually not life-threatening. We are seeing an increase in the number of events that are labeled as “crises” or “stressful” in modern times compared with generations past. For example, CBS News reported that worker’s compensation claims for “mental stress” in California rose 200–700 percent in the 1980s. As soon as an event is classified as “stress” then the body launches its hardwired response.

New research shows that we are also hardwired to react with empathy and compassion. The field of social neuroscience is showing us that this hardwired response of empathy gets blocked when our attention is focused on ourselves or our problems (i.e. a crisis or challenge). There was an intriguing study done many years ago at Princeton Theological Seminary showing this dynamic.² A group of divinity students were told they were going to give a practice sermon and they were each given a sermon topic. Half of the students were given the topic of the Good Samaritan—the biblical story about the man who stopped to help the stranger in need by the side of the road. The other half were given random bible topics. One by one, they were told when it was time to go and give their sermon. Some were told to rush and others were not. As they went from one building to the second building, each one passed a man who was bent over and moaning in need of assistance. It was found that over 60 percent of the seminarians passed by without stopping to help. It didn't matter at all whether or not they were contemplating the parable of the Good Samaritan. What actually determined whether someone would stop and help was how much of a hurry they thought they were in. Only 10 percent of those who were told to rush offered help, whereas 63 percent of those who thought they had extra time offered to help the man. This illustrates a new idea that is emerging that says our default empathetic response is affected by our focus; meaning that empathy and compassion gets trumped by a stress response.

2 Darley, John M. and C. Daniel Batson. "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviour." 1970.

Our reaction to a stressful or compassionate event is actually a biological response. So, to understand how it works, it is best to start with a short lesson about our bodies. Please remember that I am outlining some basic functions of the body in very general terms in order to keep it simple. The full range of complexity of the human body is outside the scope of this material. Think of the next section as Basic Physiology.

THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM (ANS)

Your autonomic nervous system (ANS) is a major control system in your body. The ANS affects things such as heart rate, digestion and respiration among other things. Most of the actions of the ANS are involuntary and do not require conscious thought at the basic level. This is very beneficial when it comes to regulating the body. Imagine if you had to remember to breathe every moment of every day. You wouldn't last very long when your mind became interested in another thought and wandered away from remembering to breathe. Your ANS is hardwired to take care of your biological functions to ensure your survival.

The ANS can be divided into two components: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. Neither system is better than the other as both systems are very important and have distinct functions in the body. The sympathetic nervous system is the system that is activated when you are in fight-or-flight response. The sympathetic nervous system runs the show when you are in a crisis. The primary function of this response is to ensure your survival. To that end, sympathetic response includes shutting down or

inhibiting all systems deemed “nonessential” to your survival. This list includes digestion, elimination and procreation, to name a few. One of the most interesting physical reactions to a threat is the loss of peripheral vision meaning that when you are in fight-or-flight mode you have “tunnel vision” and your senses are heightened. This is so you can be attuned to any further danger. You essentially lose your access to creativity in this state because your body has focused all of its energy to ensure you can run away or stay and fight.

On the other hand, the parasympathetic system has been nicknamed the “rest-and-digest” system. The parasympathetic system is responsible for regulating digestion, elimination and normal functioning and behavior. People often view these two systems as being in opposition to each other. It is more accurate to think of them as complementary systems. The sympathetic system is mainly concerned with functions requiring quick response whereas the parasympathetic system is concerned with functions that do not require immediate response. The best analogy is that of a sprinter (sympathetic) versus a long-distance runner (parasympathetic).

HYPOTHALMUS-PITUITARY-ADRENAL AXIS

The hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis is a complex set of interactions between three organs: the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland and the adrenal glands. Your hypothalamus is located just above your brain stem and is responsible for connecting your nervous system to your endocrine (hormonal) system. Your pituitary gland is an endocrine gland about the size of a pea located near the bottom of the hypothalamus in your brain.

The pituitary gland is sometimes called the "master" gland of the endocrine system, because it controls the functions of the other endocrine glands. Finally, your adrenal glands are star-shaped endocrine glands that sit on top of your kidneys. They are mainly responsible for regulating the stress response through the production of hormones, including cortisol, adrenaline and DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone).

The HPA axis is the hormonal pathway the brain and adrenal glands use to communicate with each other. It is one of the two main pathways involved in the stress response.

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

The first thing that happens when you perceive a threat is that your adrenal glands release adrenaline which results in an increase in your breathing rate, your heart rate and your blood

"Tension is who you think you should be. Relaxation is who you are."

– Chinese proverb

pressure. This serves to move more blood to the muscles needed for fighting or running.

Your senses also become more acute in order to detect further

danger. This is the fight-or-flight response to the stressor event and was quite adequate for most of our evolution when the stressors or threats were short-lived as in the case of a saber-toothed tiger attack. The idea of "chronic stress" is a modern issue in that we can't easily escape our stressors because they are recurring (i.e. debt). In addition, we perceive many more instances as threats. All of this leads to an overworked fight-or-flight or stress response.

Adrenaline can cause problems as it prepares you for ac-

tion by diverting resources to the muscles from the areas of the body that carry out long-term body maintenance. As with any machine, regular maintenance is key to optimal performance. If you are constantly diverting your maintenance resources for a crisis, then it will eventually take its toll on your health. Increased adrenaline also interferes with clear judgment and makes it difficult to take the time to make good decisions. It also causes difficult situations to be seen as a threat, not a challenge. When your adrenaline levels are increased, your senses become keener and you are dedicated to discovering any other sources of threat, but you lose the ability to see the “big picture.” You need to be able to maintain big-picture perspective in order to be able to discover new resources and solutions.

Adrenaline is a quick response hormone that has a short life. It doesn't spend much time in your system. However, if the stress is severe or persists for more than a few minutes, then your adrenal glands release cortisol. Cortisol has a much slower momentum (longer life), so that once it is released, it takes a very long time to clear from your system. Studies have shown that one release of cortisol into your system depresses your immune system for eight hours. Furthermore, according to world-renowned brain researcher, Robert M. Sapolsky, sustained stress can damage the part of your brain that is central to learning and memory.³ Too much cortisol can prevent the brain from making memories or accessing already existing memories. The problem with excess cortisol is that once inside the brain, it remains there much

3 Sapolsky, Robert M., et al. “Hippocampal Damage Associated with Prolonged Glucocorticoid Exposure in Primates,” *The Journal of Neuroscience*, September 1990, Ye(g): 2897-2902.

longer than adrenaline and continues to do damage to your brain cells long after the stressful situation is over.

The point here isn't to suggest that we should never have adrenaline or cortisol in our systems. The issue arises when adrenaline and cortisol get released inappropriately in situations that might not warrant a full stress response. Adrenaline plays a positive role when it is used to generate activity not associated with a threat. Adrenaline is what powers your speed in a race and is behind many of the pursuits that we would consider exciting, arousing and energetic. Your body is fully capable of clearing itself of adrenaline and cortisol so that no damage ensues. The problem arises when you are constantly releasing these hormones into the system without sufficient periods of renewal.

DHEA

DHEA is another hormone produced by the adrenal glands and is the precursor to testosterone and estrogen. Precursors are hormones the body uses to produce other hormones.

In addition, DHEA has been linked to the immune system and well-being. Scientific research has shown that adequate levels of DHEA in the body can slow the aging process and prevent and/or improve some chronic health conditions. "DHEA is undeniably one of the most crucial predictive factors in diagnosing aging-related diseases," according to Ronald Klatz, D.O., president of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine.

DHEA levels peak at the ages of 20–30 and then begin a natural decline. When our bodies produce cortisol and adrenaline during our stress response, DHEA production declines. DHEA protects your body from the hormone cortisol and the

stress that triggers its production. DHEA and cortisol have an inverse relationship. When you're under continued stress, your cortisol/DHEA ratio goes up. This means that the excess cortisol is damaging DHEA's protective shield. The cortisol/DHEA ratio is used as a measure of health and aging. The lower this ratio, the better your overall health.

It seems that we should be trying to preserve and produce DHEA as much as possible. One way to maintain an optimal cortisol/DHEA ratio is to reduce the amount of adrenaline and, more importantly, cortisol that gets released into your system. This ultimately means reducing the number of situations that initiate your stress response. Given that you can only control your response to these circumstances, not the circumstances themselves, then becoming conscious of what you consider stressful and managing that stress without overtaxing your stress response is essential. The other way to boost this ratio is to increase DHEA production through positive empathetic and compassionate responses, which are impeded in the presence of a stress response.

RETICULAR ACTIVATING SYSTEM

Your reticular activating system (RAS) is the automatic mechanism inside your brain that brings relevant information to your attention. It is situated at the core of the brain stem between the medulla and midbrain. It is a little bundle of cells in the back of your brain that is known as the "control center" and it filters what enters your consciousness.

Your supply of attention is limited. You are literally being bombarded with an incredible amount of information every

second of every day. In fact, Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi estimates that we can only consciously process about 126 bits of information per second.⁴ This was based on earlier work by Miller (1956) and Orme (1969) and von Uexkull (1957). Miller showed that we could process seven (plus or minus two) chunks of information per unit of time. Then, Orme showed that an “attentional unit” of time was 1/18th of a second based on earlier calculations by von Uexkull. Therefore, we can process about $7 \times 18 = 126$ bits of information per second. It is estimated that there are millions of bits information available to you in any given second. Yikes! You might be wondering what happens to the rest of the majority of information in every second of every day? It gets filtered out through a process of deletion, distortion and generalization in order for you to make sense of all the information. The RAS is the self-filtering system in charge of sorting the information and it chooses what you accept and reject based upon your beliefs, values and attitudes. The information that remains in your attention forms your “internal representation” or “map” of reality. Some people refer to this as your “awareness.”

The focus of your RAS is determined by you and your perception of your circumstances. As you can imagine, when you are in a state of crisis and your adrenaline is running high, you will be automatically instructing your RAS to search out more of what’s wrong as a protective mechanism. As soon as your RAS detects more of what’s wrong, then that sets in motion another activation of your fight-or-flight response, which leads to more adrenaline

⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.

(and cortisol) and further instructions to your RAS to keep focusing on what is wrong. The end result is that you get trapped in a vicious cycle of looking for what's wrong, finding it and looking for more of what's wrong, finding it and so on and so on.

"What we see depends mainly on what we look for."

– Sir John Lubbock

This mechanism can also work to your benefit. By consciously instructing yourself to look for what is right, you are essentially programming your RAS to seek and find this information. As you begin to notice the things that are going right, you will begin to produce the behavior necessary to help you override the vicious cycle mentioned above. This is a critical step in turning adversity into advantage.

FLOWER POWER

Make a point to look for flowers for just one day. They can be real flowers, pictures of flowers, songs about flowers, etc. Just consciously look for flowers for an entire day. Make note of what you find. If you're like most people, then you will be surprised at how many flowers were right in front of you the whole time. Perhaps the solutions to your challenges are also right in front of you? What would happen if you looked for solutions for an entire day?

PHYSIOLOGY OF INNER PEACE

We have already discussed some biochemicals that are involved

during your hardwired fight-or-flight response including adrenaline, cortisol and DHEA. Increased adrenaline and cortisol and decreased DHEA can have adverse affects on your long-term health. However, there are other biochemicals in your body that do wonders for your health. They include the biochemicals that get released when your body is operating in an optimal fashion and NOT having a stress response. Responses such as compassion and empathy are examples of such states.

The following biochemicals are associated with health and well-being. They are also associated with creativity, happiness and hopefulness. Likewise, they are the biochemicals that are depleted or absent when we are suffering from depression and feeling overwhelmed and “stressed out.”

i. Endorphins

Endorphins are neurochemicals occurring naturally in the brain that have analgesic properties similar to morphine. In fact, research studies have shown that endorphins can be up to 10 times stronger than morphine. Endorphins are released during exercise and rhythmic breathing like the type associated with meditation or yoga. This is the chemical that gives rise to the term “runner’s high.”

ii. Serotonin and Dopamine

These chemicals are the “feel good” neurotransmitters. Serotonin is considered the feel good, inner peace, well-being neurotransmitter. Optimal serotonin levels are required for all positive affective states and all balanced emotional conditions. Dopamine is your excitatory neurotransmitter. When your dopamine levels are

balanced, you experience heightened states of alertness and awareness.

iii. Anandamide

This neurotransmitter is released during deep levels of meditation and when we are experiencing something that is new. The name is taken from the Sanskrit word *ananda*, which means “bliss.” Simply put, this is our bliss chemical and it expands our blissful experiences.

PATTERNS, PREDICTABILITY AND BEHAVIOR

Your internal representation is what ultimately dictates your behavior in any given situation. Earlier, I referred to your internal representation as a map of reality. Everyone experiences the world in a different way. In fact, I would argue that no two people possess the exact same model of reality. This is due to the infinite number of combinations of values, beliefs, events and interpretations that can influence each person. Just as the map of the world is not the actual place but rather a representation of that place, your map of reality is just that: a map. It is not reality in absolute but rather your interpretation or representation of reality so that it makes sense to you.

Another way of looking at human beings is as strategy machines. We all have literally thousands and thousands of strategies that we use on a daily basis to move through our lives. You have a strategy for getting up, for getting ready, for driving your car and brushing your teeth. Everything you do in your life is the result of your own strategy. Some of your strategies are more effective than others, but suffice to say that everything you do

is dictated by your strategy about how to do it. Another way to think about your strategies is to call them “patterns.” Over the years, you have developed patterns of behavior (strategies) that deliver the outcomes or results that you desire. To that end, your results or outcomes are predictable to the extent that you are able to replicate your patterns.

The first time that you do something can be classified as a “learning experience” because you don’t have a pattern for achieving the desired outcome. If your first attempt fails, then you usually search for another way to accomplish your goal. Once you find a pattern that delivers your intended result, then you begin to strengthen that pattern. Over time, this pattern becomes the dominant way to produce the intended result.

A great metaphor for this process is to think of a hill covered with snow. The first time you want to take your sled down this hill, you have literally no restrictions on which path you should take down the hill. So, you sit upon your sled and blast down the hill. Now, if you happen to encounter a tree root or a rock on this path, then you will choose a different path down the hill for the next run. Once you have established a “good run” down the hill, then you will continue to run your sled down the same path because it takes less effort than always choosing a new path. After time, your sled run will become a well-worn path and efficient way down the hill. This path will become a pattern and the outcome will be predictable: you will always end up in the same place at the end of your path. Think of each sled track down the hill as a neurological pattern; some are more worn than others, but all paths represent the same process. The outcome is predictable based on the patterns that precede them. It is not possible

for you to take your sled down one path on the hill and end up at the end of another path. In the same way, all results in your life are unique to the behavior pattern that precedes them.

A SPECIAL NOTE ON FEAR

Interestingly, being afraid that something might happen is enough to evoke the same response as if it were actually happening. This is partly because the RAS cannot distinguish between events that are actually happening and events that are being imagined or visualized. It is also due to the way that we define and classify events as per our internal representation of reality. Fear can stop you from moving forward in your life because it evokes a fight-or-flight response, which dictates that you need to focus on survival instead of growth. Fear is created by our minds in an effort to keep us safe. It is a mechanism for preventing our demise when we sense danger. If we weren't afraid of the saber-toothed tiger, then we could just walk up and pat him on the back. We'd be his lunch pretty soon, so fear is a way of indicating that danger. When someone is in a state of fear, they are very easy to control due to the fact that they have limited resources available to them in the stress response that is created. Given that they lose the ability to think critically or see the "bigger picture" they default to any instruction being given to them since they are concerned only with their survival. Fear has been used in the past to control and direct people's thinking and behavior.

*"Fear is an acronym for
False Evidence Appearing
Real."*

– Author unknown

Again, it's not that we should erase our fears completely; chances are, we wouldn't last very long. Fear does have a protective function. However, it is the inappropriate fear response that is detrimental to our well-being. Just like a stress response, a fear response is appropriate in many situations. The issues arise when we begin to overreact to situations that don't warrant a fear response. Inappropriate fear stops you from doing things that might be beneficial and enjoyable for you. Fear can prevent you from living a life that you love.

The good news is that you can learn to be free of fear. You can learn to acknowledge your fear instead of having it control you. The key to being free of fear is to get out of our heads and back into our bodies in the present moment. When we are present to what is actually happening we are no longer controlled by our preestablished patterns. This presence gives us the ability to act *in spite of* our fear and to see options we might otherwise have missed. We can keep moving while being aware of our fear and using this awareness to inform our next move.

To say that I have a fear of heights is a gross understatement. Thousands of people who have been in my audiences have heard me describe in detail how I lose feeling in my legs when I get about 10 feet off the ground. I once did the CN Tower stair climb for charity and literally froze when I discovered that I was standing on the glass floor 342 meters (or 1,122 feet) off the ground. I literally had to be pushed off the floor by someone else because I simply could not move my legs. The fear is a very physical and a very real pattern for me. However, I have devised a strategy for Being fearless, which allows me to override this fear and access my courage, creativity and other

resources that I need in that moment to solve my problem.

Believe me when I say that if I can reprogram my automatic default responses to fear and override my hardwired responses then anyone can. Here is an example of what I have been able to do. You can visit my website www.GinaML.com to see a short video of me Being fearless as I plummet more than 500 feet toward the ground in an exhilarating bungee jump in New Zealand. I'll never forget the feeling of being suspended in that river canyon and the view that I had. I had never seen a river gorge from that perspective before. I was struck with the realization that I had been offered a new perspective through my willingness to move through my fear.

By devising a strategy to overcome my automatic default response to heights, I was able to have a life experience that would never have otherwise been possible. This jump now acts as a reminder for Being fearless in all areas of my life because it reminds me of the incredible rewards that await me when I choose to expand, to grow and to learn.

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."

– Eleanor Roosevelt

By the way, my legs still go weak when I hit the 10-foot-high mark, however my fear no longer has any control in dictating my actions or my happiness. The fear response is still alive and well, but my ability to override the response is what makes all the difference to me.

REMAINING POWERFUL

The real challenge that we face is our ability to remain power-

ful in the midst of crisis, adversity and failure. What is your conditioned response to crisis? What do you define as a crisis or stress? What is your pattern? We've already covered the fact that your initial reaction to a crisis or challenge is an automatic fight-or-flight response. Being powerful stems from the ability to override this response at the very moment that you become conscious of it and the resulting patterns that ensue from it. Being powerful means being emotionally self-aware and directing your responses instead of having them be directed by fear, default or hardwiring.

The amount of time that you remain in "crisis mode" is completely up to you. As I mentioned earlier, it is very easy to fall into a vicious cycle of crisis and reaction. First, there is the actual event that initiated your fight-or-flight response and then, in your heightened sense of awareness, you begin to notice more of what's wrong. This fires off another fight-or-flight response, which leads to more focus on what's wrong. And the crisis cycle has begun. The circumstances do not dictate when you will come out of this cycle. It is entirely your choice. When you realize that it really is your choice, then you will no longer be at the mercy of your circumstances.

CHOICE

I have developed a process that you can use to override your automatic default response in any challenging situation. I call it "The Simple Process" because it is just that: simple. There is one caveat to The Simple Process though, it's not always *easy*. If it were easy, then everyone would view crisis and challenge as opportunities and everyone would be able to override their automatic default

responses, glean the learning in any situation, grow and move on enthusiastically to the next challenge. But, it's not easy because of the ultimate responsibility that comes with recognizing that it is eventually up to us.

It therefore comes down to a choice; your choice. This is what The Simple Process is all about. Because it is about choice, it is not always *easy*. There are pros and cons to every option. There always are and there always will be. But one thing is certain:

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

– Viktor Frankl

our circumstances don't decide our happiness, our choices do. *It's not what happens to us but rather how we choose to respond to what happens that matters.* If you don't consciously choose your response, then a response will be chosen for you, either unconsciously by you or by accepting the prevailing response around. Either way, a choice is made.

Let's look back at our example of the child with the blocks. When her tower collapses, she actually has a choice in how she responds. She can throw a temper tantrum, hurl the blocks and blame them for falling down. Or, she can calmly assess the situation, notice the design issues and attempt to build the tower differently. Which choice do you think will lead to a more powerful and resourceful outcome?

You might be resistant to this way of thinking. That's okay—stay with it. It happens all the time in my seminars, with my clients and even in my own mind. We are often resistant to accepting responsibility for our happiness because it is scary.

I ask you to put this way of thinking on the shelf while you

read this book. I'm not saying that you have to abandon your paradigm, but I am requesting that you merely suspend it while you consider a new paradigm. Think of it as trying on a sweater. You don't have to buy it, but it doesn't hurt to put it on and see how it fits.

It is scary to think that it is our choices that dictate our happiness. Accepting this responsibility means giving up our excuses, our reasons and our justifications. And that feels vulnerable. And vulnerable doesn't feel safe. But I offer that taking back the power from your circumstances is worth the "vulnerability" because the reward of getting your power back is the very thing you are trying to accomplish by attempting to control your circumstances.

Imagine if your happiness wasn't dependent on getting anything, changing anyone or eradicating any circumstance. Imagine if you could be happy regardless of what was happening to you. Wouldn't you be just a teeny bit interested in finding out how that might work?

"The important thing is not to stop questioning.

Curiosity has its own reason for existing.

One cannot help but be in awe when he con-

templates the mysteries of eternity, of life,

of the marvelous structure of reality."

– Albert Einstein

CHAPTER TWO



THE FEEDBACK LOOP OF LIFE

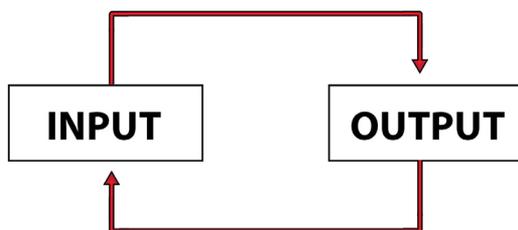
“Evolution is chaos with feedback.”

– Joseph Ford

This entire book is based on an important premise: everything in your life that happens to you is just feedback. At the most basic level, this means that you get out of your life what you are willing to put into it. Your circumstances will always reflect exactly where you are at in your life and what you are putting into it. The real power is learning how to interpret the feedback so you can use it to your advantage. Instead of judging your circumstances, you can learn to *assess* your circumstances so you can learn from them and leverage them to create a life that you love. Instead of having challenges and obstacles be a block to your happiness, you can learn to use these events as stepping stones to an even better experience.

At this point you might be asking yourself, “So what? What does that mean to me? How does that work?” Lucky for you that I happen to have a degree in engineering and did a thesis on feedback control loops. You see, if everything that happens is feedback, then you can use what happens as a tool to get exactly what you want. You can start to look at life as

a giant feedback loop. I know that you might be cringing at such a scientific-sounding notion. Your reaction might be left-over negative energy from a science course that got the best of you. Not to worry. The feedback loop is actually quite easy to understand. A very simple definition is “a process that feeds back some of the output to the input of a system,” and it looks something like this:



Basic Feedback Loop

As you can see, in a feedback loop, you can use the output to help alter the next input, thus achieving a more desired output the next time around. Using this same logic, wouldn't it make sense that you could use your undesired results (output) to help you change (input) so that you can actually get what you want (a better output)? Bingo!

A feedback loop always works in the same way, and you can use this understanding to help get what you want. You can use the information contained in your circumstance (output) to manipulate your next input so that your next output is closer to what you want. I call this process the “Feedback Loop of Life.”

The Feedback Loop of Life

Life consists of a series of feedback loops. We want something (input), we do some behaviors (process) and we get an outcome (output). Sometimes we try to repeat the same loop over and over again, and other times we try only once. Basically, though, it's all feedback loops. Feedback loops all work the same way and are all governed by the same laws. Understanding how they work and the laws that govern them is the key to unlocking the secrets of getting what you want.

The classic example of a feedback loop is the thermostat. A thermostat has a desired set point for the temperature of the room. It is constantly monitoring the temperature. When the temperature falls below the set point, the thermostat tells the furnace to turn on. The thermostat uses the feedback to initiate a process to heat the room. When the temperature reaches the desired set point, the thermostat uses the feedback again to tell the furnace to shut off.

It is interesting to note in this analogy that the thermostat doesn't berate the furnace for not being on. Nor does the thermostat chide itself for failing to produce the desired temperature. The thermostat merely uses the information as a feedback to adjust the system to achieve the desired result. How often do we become upset at the circumstances in our life for being different from what we want? How often do we expect other people to change so we can be happy? Or worse, how often do we beat ourselves up when we fail? The answer in each case is, "we do it all the time."

When you accept the premise that everything is feedback,

you release yourself from being a prisoner of your circumstances because your outcomes are no longer judgment points. Your circumstances are nothing more than simple feedback; information that you can use on your journey to happiness. Consider this idea while you continue reading this book, for it may give you a fresh perspective on challenging circumstances, crises and failures. It may lead to the understanding that you can be happy regardless of your circumstances.

AN ENERGETIC VIEW OF THE UNIVERSE

Thanks to Einstein, we know that everything in the universe is energy in some form. His famous discovery of $E=mc^2$ changed the way all of life was understood. The theory of relativity forms the basis in which scientists have viewed our world ever since. Simply put, Einstein's theory states that any fragment of matter can be understood as an equivalent amount of energy (albeit expanded by a large multiplier). Likewise, all energy takes on a different form in the physical world. The universe is made up of both mass and energy and the two are interchangeable and convertible using Einstein's theory of relativity. Einstein once remarked, "We have been all wrong. What we have called matter is energy, whose vibration has been so lowered as to be perceptible to the senses. There is no matter." In other words, matter is just a term for "visible energy."

All energy is fluid, always moving into form, through form or out of form. The universe holds the potential energy for an infinite number of expressions in matter. True power derives from the ability to harness the unformed potential energy so that we can have what we want in our physical experience.

Taking this view of the world is essential in understanding the concepts and processes presented in this book. Everything is energy, including you and me. We are just a big bundle of energy vibrating at specific levels. The human body is the physical part of this energy and our thoughts and emotions are the invisible part. Thoughts and feelings are more than just biochemical reactions; they are actually electromagnetic patterns of energy. We emit energy every day in the form of thoughts and emotions. We transmit this energy into our physical worlds using our bodies through our behaviors. All energy in the universe is subject to laws that govern energy. One of the most useful (and most talked about) laws is called the Law of Attraction (LOA). But, it's not what you think.

"We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make our world."

– Buddha

THE LAW OF ATTRACTION

Let's start this conversation by focusing on what the law of attraction is NOT because there has been a lot of hype and controversy about the LOA in recent times. First of all, it is not as big a deal as everyone makes it out to be. It is not hard to understand. It does not negate God. It is not only for New Agers. In fact, the LOA is not new at all. *The New York Times* published an article on April 6, 1879 using the phrase "Law of Attraction."⁵ It is not something you need to activate, nor is it something that you can opt out of. You are not required

5 "To Leadville in Winter, Colorado's New Mining Camp." *New York Times*, April 6th, 1879.

to understand it or even believe in it in order for it to apply to you. The LOA is not magic.

Now let's focus on what it is. The LOA is a powerful way of understanding how energy flows. Einstein's theories suggest that the entire universe is just energy vibrating at different levels. Everything vibrates at a particular frequency.

*"Ask and it will be given to you;
seek and you will find; knock and
the door will be opened to you."*

– Jesus Christ

When something vibrates at a specific frequency, it naturally resonates with and attracts other things that have

the same frequency. In other words, like attracts like. This is the Law of Attraction in a nutshell, and it applies to all energy in the universe. It is like two tuning forks; the vibration of one will subtly provoke vibration in the other until both vibrate together in harmony. And like a tuning fork, our thoughts and feelings emit specific energetic vibrations that externally resonate and attract frequencies that correspond to those vibrations.

The Law of Attraction governs the way in which potential becomes reality. In others words, the LOA is a way of explaining how something that is visible (matter) developed from something that isn't visible (potential matter or energy). When it comes to how we can affect our results, the LOA allows us to understand how to transform our thoughts and feelings into the circumstances of our lives (the visible energy). I like to think of it as a series of energetic "reductions." As energy makes the journey into form, the vibrations must be lowered or reduced in order for us to be able to detect it with

our senses and classify it as “matter.” Our behaviors act as a bridge between the starting point and the ending point.

THOUGHT, FEELINGS, ACTIONS AND RESULTS

It is important to understand the mechanics that govern the process by which our thoughts and feelings create our results. Dr. Thurman Fleet was a chiropractor in the early part of the 20th century that developed a model for explaining this process. According to his model, the flow from potential reality (invisible energy) to matter (visible energy) is as follows:

Thoughts ⇒ Feelings ⇒ Actions ⇒ Results

The potential for something to exist begins in our thoughts, really in our imagination, as just that: a *potential* reality. It begins as an idea in our mind. Consider that everything there is began as an idea in someone’s mind. This thought is then activated through our emotions. In a sense, an emotion is what strengthens the energy of a random thought. You may have heard some people define emotions as “energy in motion.” We carry out actions that are consistent with our way of Being. These actions or behaviors are neurological patterns in our bodies that are linked to our states of Being. Finally, the behaviors lead to the manifestation of some type of result that appears in our physical reality (visible energy).

THE BACKWARDS PARADIGM

We have been incorrectly conditioned to believe that stuff

(people, places, things) can make us happy. How many times have you heard, “If I only had more money, then I could do what I wanted and then I would finally be happy”? This paradigm is called “HAVE–DO–BE.” It’s the way most of us approach our lives. And it’s completely backwards. Recall that thoughts lead to feelings, feelings lead to actions and actions lead to results. But if we use the backwards paradigm of HAVE–DO–BE, then it would mean that results lead to actions, actions lead to feelings and feelings lead to thoughts. You can plainly see that this is backwards.

A more empowering paradigm is actually BE–DO–HAVE. Building on the previous diagram, let’s see what happens when we map our new paradigm onto this flow:



You can clearly see that it actually flows BE–DO–HAVE. It flows from the potential reality (invisible energy) to the physical reality (visible energy), and not the other way around. Consider that there is much wisdom in the saying, “money can’t bring you happiness.” But perhaps, happiness could bring you money? The physical result of money is actually the visible end of an energetic cycle. Here is another way to look at it:



The energetic cycle that governs your life, your experiences and your circumstances begins as energy in the form of a potential reality. It all starts with your “Being.” Don’t worry if you are confused by this, people often ask me to explain to them what “Being” means. In fact, I struggled with understanding it myself for many years. The opportunity lies in considering that a potential reality is just that: potential. It is a possible version of reality, but it’s not actually Reality itself. This clarification is the basis for Being powerful in your life.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP OF LIFE

Let’s have another look at the Feedback Loop of Life. All we have to do to have anything we want is to go back to the beginning of the process and make a shift. This is exciting! What makes it even more exciting is that if we do not get what we want the first time (i.e., we have a crisis, a challenge or a failure), then we can immediately use that feedback to inform our next input in order to generate a new outcome. We know exactly what to do because the answer is sitting right in front of us. Our results (or lack thereof) always give us useful feedback that we can use to change our version of reality.



THE FEEDBACK LOOP OF LIFE

In a feedback loop, the output informs and suggests a possible new input. In the BE–DO–HAVE paradigm, we must remember to go back to the beginning of the cycle if we are to truly impact the outcome. Ben Franklin said it first: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over again, expecting a different result.” If we keep getting the same results, it means we haven’t really changed what matters.

The other key distinction to notice within the BE–DO–HAVE paradigm is that our happiness is not dependent on getting anything. Happiness is a state or a mood and according to our diagrams, it is found at the beginning of the energetic cycle and is not dependent on the outcome. Your circumstances have nothing to do with whether or not you are happy. Your state (your happiness) is completely dependent on a combination of your

“Happiness resides not in possessions and not in gold, the feeling of happiness dwells in the soul.”

– Democritus

thoughts and the feelings that you attach to those thoughts. Happiness is a choice and it comes from

inside not outside. And, of course, we are not only talking about happiness. This also applies to the full range of emotional states, especially peace, love and joy.

Throughout our entire lives we have been conditioned to

believe that in order to be happy we have to get *something*, be it fame, fortune, beauty or even spirituality. We have been continually told that the answer to our happiness lies “out there.” WRONG! Happiness is a choice. If we are not happy, then we have chosen it that way. We have the power within us to be happy, no matter what is happening *to* us. In fact, we have the power within us to feel anything that we want to feel any time we like. We have been trained to abdicate this power to something beyond our control and have been conditioned to wait, hope and even pray for something to change on the outside so that we can finally be happy on the inside. Our lives merely reflect the choices we have made about ourselves. If we want to see something different in our lives, we first have to make a different choice.

Happiness is not a condition bestowed upon you by some other force. Circumstances don't make you happy or unhappy, but your choices do. Choice is a very powerful concept because it implies accountability and responsibility. We are all responsible for our lives, every single minute of them, regardless of what is happening to us.

In Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, the main character, Guido and his son are sent to a Nazi concentration camp where he maintains a positive state. As a result, his son has no idea where they are and continues to live his life innocently. How was it possible for Guido to remain happy while he was in a Nazi concentration camp? It was a conscious choice. His son never realized they were in a concentration camp because Guido protected his son's innocent model of reality. By choosing to maintain a positive focus, he saved his son's life. This is

a powerful *choice*, folks. Some of the happiest people are living with the worst of circumstances, and some of the unhappiest people live in a world of unlimited privilege. Happiness is not circumstantial; it is a choice, plain and simple. Happiness isn't gotten; it's chosen.

CHOOSE IT OR LOSE IT

You might be saying, “Why on Earth would I NOT choose to be happy” or “Why would I choose to be unhappy?” It may sound insane to think that when you are unhappy you have chosen it that way. I don't know why and I can't answer that for you. There are a million reasons. I can tell you this though—your choice is being made unconsciously. If you are not choosing to be happy in the moment, then you are giving up your power to choose. A choice will be made for you. Often, we default to the general consensus of the people and circumstances that surround us. This is not a problem when times are good and everyone is in a generally positive state. However, when times get tough and people get down, then it is really easy to sink down with them. If you don't take responsibility for choosing your way of Being, then you will unconsciously choose the prevailing way of Being. Either way, it's a choice.

Over time, we have been trained to think that our happiness comes from something that happened on the outside. We were trained to think in terms of the HAVE-DO-BE paradigm. We have forgotten that we are the ones doing the choosing. Understanding the energetic cycle and the Feedback Loop of Life helps you to regain the knowledge that you have the power to choose. At any given time, you can choose your way of

Being. The choice needs to become conscious. The great news is that even if you aren't conscious of what choice you have made, your circumstances will always relay to you the choice that brought them into being. Your circumstances will always give you useful and accurate feedback.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

This brings us back to a main point of this book, which is how to be powerful when your circumstances are undesirable. Remember that your reaction to any threat is an automatic default stress response, which is designed to keep you alive during a crisis. However, our definitions of stress and threats have become so common that we perceive almost everything as a stressor, and this has led us to create situations of chronic stress. Staying in a stress response for long periods of time is detrimental to your health and well-being. Your long-term well-being depends on your creativity and problem-solving. It depends on your ability to reason, to learn, to grow. All of these things are virtually impossible when you are in a state of fear, doubt, worry or panic.

Fear, doubt and worry are states that bring into reality results that are consistent with those negative states. Namely, more crises, more challenges and more problems. The challenge we face is that once something goes wrong, we tend to focus our attention on what's wrong. We unconsciously direct our RAS to find more of what's wrong, which is unfortunate because our RAS is excellent at following instructions. This new information perpetuates our stress response and we enter the crisis cycle. The only way out of this cycle is to override your

automatic stress response by initiating a state that will not feed the crisis cycle. You must change your focus. The hard part is doing this while you are in the midst of a crisis or a challenge. It requires conscious choice. It requires you to think in a different way.

THE POWER OF CRISIS AND CHALLENGE

Access to power is available for anyone in any crisis or challenge because everything that happens can be used as feedback. Every time we suffer a crisis, a challenge, a failure or a setback in our lives, we are being presented with very useful feedback to what is not working. The crisis can serve us by serving our growth. When used as feedback, failure can be the very best thing that could happen to us. It doesn't feel good. In fact,

"I have not failed. I've found 10,000 ways that didn't work."

– Thomas A. Edison

it never feels good, but it always serves us. This is the ultimate paradigm shift. When you can

begin to view everything that happens to you as ultimately serving your growth and evolution then you will finally be free of suffering from your circumstances. This is the power of a crisis.

You are free to override your inclination to get sucked back into the cycle of crisis by using the feedback inherent in your circumstances to inform you on which choice you should make going forward. By making this choice, you will set in motion the energetic laws of the universe. When you make a change at the beginning of the energetic cycle, then you will ultimately see a different outcome. There will be a lag, how-

ever, because we live in a physical world and it takes time for a potential reality (energy) to become a physical reality (visible energy) through our behaviors. This is where faith comes

“For those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don’t believe, no proof is possible.”

– Author unknown

in handy. The dictionary defines faith as “belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence.” You must have faith in the process.

A SIMPLE PROCESS

By using the Feedback Loop of Life in conjunction with your understanding of the way energy flows, you can literally have anything you want. You have to be willing to repeat the process over and over again, continuously feeding back your results until you have your desired outcome. This is not always as easy as it sounds. I said it was *simple* but not *easy*. Often, our results are hard to swallow because of the meaning that we attach to them.

The human mind is charged with the task of making sense of the world. It loves to create models of the world. In fact, it needs models to explain and understand the physical world. Therefore, the mind is always making up models and comparing the current situation against these models. This, in and of itself, is not a problem. The problem arises when we begin to believe that our models are the only reality or truth in the world. Remember our individual representations of reality are just maps and a map is just a representation of a place; it is not the place itself. It gets harder to

apply The Simple Process when you bump up against one of your “truths.” One of your biggest obstacles to real happiness is clinging to your model of reality as the only Reality.

“Simply the thing that I am shall make me live.”

– William Shakespeare

NOTES

