LIFE CHANGING

A Philosophical Guide

by

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Introduction

This is a book about change and how to deal with it. It is a practical book, written for ordinary people who are tackling change, whatever sort of change this may be. Moving to a new town or country. Having a child or dealing with the death of a loved one. Starting a new job or career, or facing the prospect of retirement. Sooner or later, we all have to muddle through change. We struggle with change every day at work, and we worry about the changes that are taking place in the world about us. Yet for all our experience of change, we are novices when it comes to dealing with it productively. Change trips us up as often as it hauls us to our feet, and blocks our path as often as it speeds us on our way.

This is a book of philosophical lessons for change. Don’t worry if you’ve never studied any philosophy (or even if you are wondering what the word means): the book is written for the unschooled. It is written for people who are more interested in living than in philosophizing about life. To make things easy, I have embedded the philosophical lessons in simple exercises, one at the end of each chapter. By doing these exercises, you’ll learn how to take a philosophical attitude to change. You’ll learn how to confront change creatively, and cope with its shocks and blows. You’ll learn how to use change to expand your sense of capacity and potential. You’ll learn how to see new opportunities in change – how to tap into the adventure of change and use it to forge into the future.

Life Changing is an introduction to the art of reflective change. Philosophy – real philosophy – is life changing stuff. If this is what you are after, read on.

The world is changing and the pace of change is speeding up. This should be clear to anyone living in hi-tech consumer society. Since the invention of the microprocessor in the 1970s, the pace of technological change in society has increased exponentially. Each year brings the roll out of a new generation of computers, phones, gadgets and games, each generation more innovative and multi-functional than the last. As more new technology comes onto the market, it increases the pace of change in life generally. A few years ago, an author could reasonably expect their reader to be consuming these words tucked into a chair with a copy of the book in their lap. Chances are you are reading this book on an iPad or Kindle, fielding emails as they pop into your inbox, and surfing Facebook and Twitter as you break between sections.
This connectivity comes at a cost, and it is not only financial. Thanks to smart phones, Wi-Fi and mobile broadband, it is now possible to connect with people all over the world anytime and anywhere. The positive benefits of this are enormous. But mobile internet makes us information-rich and time-poor, exposed to myriad prompts and interruptions that we are expected to respond to in real time. For many people, this is too much. Just keeping up with the flow of information is an exhausting proposition. Technology can tire us out as much as it empowers us. If we can’t see or make use of the opportunities that it provides, a rich web of connections is so much noise.

The same technological changes are changing how we work. Change has been a constant in the business world for decades, where it is often confused with progress. Many managers have come to appreciate the toxic effects of continuous workplace change. Meanwhile new technologies have transformed the workplace more radically than Joseph Schumpeter (the father of creative destruction) ever imagined. Conversations that used to happen around the water cooler now take place via Facebook, LinkedIn, or hashtag-denominated Twitter-feeds. Increasingly, the information that circulates in an organization comes from outside the organization, through the flexible channels of new social media.

Thanks to social media, the boundaries dividing the inside and outside of business organizations are rapidly collapsing. Information is constantly flowing in and out of organizations through SMS, Skype, Twitter, and Facebook. A common response on the part of managers is to try to shut down these flows by banning the use of social media during work time. Saying ‘no’ is the easy option, but it is not very creative. A more forward thinking response is to affirm these changes and embrace the role of new social media in the workplace. By opening their organizations to ideas and influences from outside, smart managers are tapping into the wisdom of the crowd.

Technology is not the only driver of change in the twenty-first century world. When we step back to take in the volatile and uncertain nature of politics and economics in recent years, we see that global society is on the brink of incredible changes.

Our global financial predicament will have escaped no one’s notice. The global financial crisis triggered by the US subprime mortgage crisis in 2008 morphed, in 2011, into a series of sovereign debt crises in Europe and elsewhere that have severely damaged public and investor confidence in the global financial system. Middle class citizens have been racking up debt for decades on the assumption that economic growth would continue forever. With the US in decline and the Greek, Irish, and Portuguese economies in tatters, it seems
increasingly likely that this assumption was false. We are entering a dark and uncertain period of economic volatility and recession. While Australia (this author’s home country) is in a good position to weather the storm on account of the export value of its mineral wealth, its close economic ties to China (which carries a substantial portion of US debt) means that we are not shielded from the crisis. With the cost of living continuing to rise and over a quarter of household spending financed by credit card debt, the worsening of the global financial crisis is bad news for ordinary Australians, particularly the Baby Boomer generation who face an austere retirement. Our political leaders seem to have no plan for getting us out of this mess short of pressing on with business as usual.

When we look ahead, the picture doesn’t get sunnier. Indeed, things become dark indeed. Among the many challenges that human beings face in the twenty-first century, we confront the cataclysmic problem of climate change. We are caught in a pincer grip between our systems of energy production and global ecological disaster. The scientific consensus on climate change gets stronger every year. By burning fossil fuels, we are pumping record amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This is trapping solar radiation close to the surface of the Earth, driving up the temperature of the planet and playing havoc with climate and weather systems. Left unchecked, climate change will cause major disruption across the planet this century, challenging the life support systems that human beings have forever taken for granted. It will imperil water supplies, triggering local, regional and international conflict over these scarce resources. It will drive up the costs of agricultural production, placing stress on our collective ability to feed ourselves. The combination of ecological and economic body blows will place a colossal strain on our institutions and crisis management systems. Climate change will ultimately challenge the ability of states to govern their territories and the stability of the world as we know it.

There has been much political bickering and shuffling of feet in recent years over how best to deal with climate change and all it entails. Judging by the levels of inertia we’ve seen so far, the period of transition ahead will be difficult indeed. We know that massive cultural, economic and infrastructural change is required to prepare our societies to cope with climate change and its effects. We have been slow to set about making these changes – too slow. It is hard to believe that the rules of the game could have changed so suddenly and dramatically. Yet this is where we stand today.

We should admit that we are unprepared for it. As individuals, we may be used to dealing with change in the workplace and elsewhere. But as societies, we lack the courage to make
the decisive changes that we need to make today – game-changing moves that could transform our crises into twenty-first century opportunities.

James Martin, the founder of the 21st Century School at Oxford University and author of *The Meaning of the Twenty First Century* (2006), has a powerful analogy for thinking about our contemporary situation. We are, Martin says, like a group of canoeists paddling down a broad, deep river. For a long time, the current has been steady and slow. We have relaxed into the ride, hypnotized by the flow and the canopy of blue overhead. Suddenly the vessel quakes. We look up and see a bottleneck canyon ahead. The mighty river is being forced through the canyon. When a river runs through a canyon, things change quickly. The water turns to rapids – indeed it is already churning into foam about us.

No one knows how bad these rapids will become. We don’t know if we can make it through the canyon. Still there is only one way ahead. Into the rapids we go.

When the river of life gets rough, there is only one thing to do. Put on that helmet, strap on that life-preserver. It is time to get ready for change.

**Life Changing: A Player’s Guide**

Philosophy can tie you in knots. The simplest ideas can take your mind and twist it mercilessly before releasing you onto a new plane of insight. This is exhilarating but it can be tiring as well. If you find that you are struggling (or just getting bored) with the ideas in this book at any point, skip straight to the exercise at the end of the chapter. The exercises contain the core content of the chapters. Each exercise begins with a short vignette that crystallizes the idea that is explored in the chapter. Each exercise takes you deeper into the world of philosophy. By doing these exercises, you’ll learn how to muster courage like an Existentialist philosopher; how to control yourself like a Stoic sage; how to cultivate your Nietzschean will to power; how to use Spinoza’s philosophy to open up a world of social possibilities. You’ll learn how to tease out the implicit opportunities in change and take a visionary approach to the future. You’ll learn how to take adventure from the heart of crisis and fulfilment from the struggle with adversity.

I want to teach you to affirm change. I want to show you how to leap into life, seize on the changes that are happening about you and unlock their every opportunity.
Life Changing has its roots in a seminar that I taught at the University of Sydney called ‘Philosophy for Change’. The exercises in this book were originally included in a workbook for seminar participants. My breakthrough moment in designing this seminar came when I realized that what I had assembled was a playbook as much as a workbook. Any kind of exercise takes discipline and this means work. Thinking philosophically calls for a kind of self-discipline that takes mental energy, focus, and concentration. To this extent, the exercises in this book do take work. Ultimately though, the work that is required for these exercises is negligible. What is crucial is not so much that you commit to putting work into the exercises, but that you find a way of integrating the exercises into your life in order to make them work for you.

To achieve this, you need to be playful with the exercises. I’d like you to think of these exercises as philosophical games that you can play out in pretty much any circumstance. When you run into an unexpected situation, take an exercise and apply it. Plug it into the real life situation and explore the insights that come out of the mix. The more that you play out the exercises, the better you’ll become at dealing with change. The better you become at dealing with change, the easier it becomes to benefit from it.

Change isn’t a game but you can gamify it. This is how you make change an adventure.

Life Changing shows you how to take a resilient, agile, visionary approach to life and change. It shows you how to pick out new opportunities in change – opportunities that may not exist for other people. Most people walk through life in a dream. When the path of life changes, they find they don’t have the resources to deal with it. You don’t need to go through life being continuously bowled over by change. Life Changing shows you how to prepare for change and use it. It shows you how to develop the resilience to deal with change, the agility to be playful with it, and the vision to exploit it by forging new paths into the future.

Philosophy can’t change the world. But philosophy can change the way that you see the world, and this can make all the difference, especially in times of change.

It is possible to flourish amidst the worst kind of change. All that you need to do is to identify the opportunities. Resilience, agility, and vision are the essential qualities and skills we require to achieve this shift in perspective. They are qualities and skills that we all require as we prepare to ride out the twenty-first century canyon.
These qualities and skills don’t come easily. You need to apply yourself to the exercises in this book in order to develop them. Consider setting aside some time each day to reflect on changes that are happening in your life and how you might apply different philosophical approaches to them. Just as an athlete needs to train in order to keep her body in peak condition, you need to practice the exercises in this book in order to develop a finely tuned philosophical mind.

It is not easy but it is worth it. Stay with the program, deepening your insights and correcting mistakes. Build on your achievements until the practical wisdom of the exercises becomes second nature and you find you are thinking like a philosopher.

At the back of the book, you’ll find examples of the worksheets or ‘charts’ you should use to do the exercises. Draw up a copy of the relevant worksheet on a sheet of paper before you begin each exercise. This will give you someplace to record your thoughts and insights as you complete it. Once you become familiar with the exercises, you may no longer need to use the worksheets in order apply the ideas to change. Still, it helps to use the charts in order to really get inside problems and sound them out. If you use the charts effectively, you’ll be able to return to the exercises for repeat meditations on your problems – not so as to wallow in them but to explore more creative solutions. Learning to think in a philosophical way is not like learning to solve a crossword puzzle, where finding the answer marks the end of the process. It is more like learning a language, where mastering the medium opens up new worlds of possibility for you to identify and explore.

**Change for Change’s Sake?**

Am I affirming change for change’s sake? Absolutely not.

Human beings have a deep instinctual need for order and control in life. Our desire for order and control is, on the whole, a positive force that can be put to work in helping us deal with change. Imagine that while you are reading this book, the kids are going crazy in the other room (perhaps you don’t need to imagine this). You can’t concentrate. So you take a moment to focus and relax. You breathe deeply, close your eyes, and try to order your thoughts. You recite a comforting mantra. This may seem like a straightforward thing to do. It is, in fact, an ancient technique incorporating centuries of cultural wisdom. Taking time to chill out and focus the mind is a strategy that human beings have developed over millennia to satisfy their need for order and stability. It is one of many tools and techniques that we can use to help us deal with the chaos of change.
*Life Changing* is a collection of techniques that help you become better at change. Instead of celebrating change, it celebrates the tools that we can use to help us deal with change, to ride out the turbulence of change, and to turn times of change into an adventure.

This book is a toolkit for change. It is a ‘how to’ book for people who want to learn to change reflectively for the better.
1. Seize the Day: Question the Meaning of Life

Lester Burnham was tired of life. Lester (played by Kevin Spacey in 1999’s Academy Award-winning film, American Beauty) lived in a shining McMansion on a leafy street. His wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) worked in real estate, and had selected the home for its appeal to families much like the Burnhams, if disposed to pay a premium price for a suburban home on a postage-stamp lot. Lester and Carolyn had been voted in college the couple most likely to succeed. From across their white picket fence, the Burnham marriage looked as picture-perfect as the crimson roses in their yard.

Behind closed doors, things were different. Lester and Caroline’s marriage was icy cold. Daughter Jane (Thorna Birch) despised her parents, and treated Lester, in particular, like a jerk. Lester was starting to suspect that his daughter knew him too well. He had dreamed of becoming a media analyst or an editor on the Times. Now, sliding into middle age, he was a glorified copywriter, with few prospects for advancement. Each morning as he shaved, Lester would peer into the bathroom mirror and wonder what had become of his life. It seemed like only yesterday that he was young and energetic, with a world of opportunity in reach. He’d had passions, dreams and convictions, and the courage to act on them too. That courage had seemed to drain away, like tendrils of soap spiralling down the plughole.

Today will be different, he’d tell himself. Today, he’d find the courage to change.

Change, when it happened, came fast. It started when Lester found that he was about to be made redundant in the course of workplace restructuring. On the spur of the moment, Lester blackmailed his boss for a five-figure sum. He had trashed his career but he’d done it himself and that made all the difference! The taste of transgression left Lester hungry for more. He splashed out on his dream car – a 1970 Pontiac Firebird – and found a job with ‘the least possible responsibility’ at local a burger restaurant. He scored some pot from the next door neighbour’s son, and started pumping iron in the garage in hope of attracting the attentions of his teenaged daughter’s school friend.

The consensus on both sides of the picket fence was that Lester was going off the rails. Yet something interesting was happening along the way. To see this, we must ‘look closer’, as the tag line for the movie suggests.
Lester found that he was changing in ways he hadn’t expected. By violating the norms and expectations of his family and peers, he had become an alien in their midst. He had lost access to his everyday support networks, which meant that he had lost his ability to draw on familiar sources of strength and power. Yet, at the same time, he had discovered new resources within himself, and this had altered his sense of what he was capable of doing and being. Previously, Lester acknowledged, he had allowed himself to be defined by conventional social roles, such as husband, father and corporate professional. His time in the wilderness had led him to reflect on a broader range of things that he was capable of doing in life – out of the box possibilities that would have seemed foolish from the perspective of his previous life, yet which now seemed entirely reasonable. The more that Lester thought about this, the more his sense of potential opened up about him. It was as if his struggle to become a member of adult society had actually truncated his whole person. If he could find the courage and resolution to affirm his potential, Lester felt sure that he could launch himself into a whole new life.

If you’ve seen American Beauty, you’ll know that Lester’s path to enlightenment is circuitous, dark and dreadfully funny. It is only in the final moments of the film that Lester appreciates the beauty of responsibility itself, and resolves to return to the life of husband and father a changed man. The tragedy of Lester’s tale comes in a post-climactic twist. The moment that Lester achieves his enlightenment, he is murdered by his neighbour, Colonel Fitts. Nevertheless, in Lester’s closing narration (presumably delivered from beyond the grave), he reveals that he has no regrets. In Lester’s view, the discovery of his whole person gave meaning to his life and made it complete. As the camera pulls away from his suburban home, Lester relates:

I can’t feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure. But don’t worry – you will someday.

Too bad he’s dead because Lester Burnham is finally ready to live.

Lester’s transformation in his final moments of life is a great example of how anyone, encouraged and emboldened by circumstance, can become a philosopher. We often associate philosophy with dry academic arguments and impenetrable books. But philosophy is born in a simple attitude towards life, an attitude of wonder and awe in the face of everything that exists. Lester Burnham discovered this attitude in his final moments of life and it filled him with a passion for positive change. This chapter considers a shortcut to Lester’s reflective disposition that should help you achieve a
comparable state of mind without the heartbreak and calamity of his journey. Taking our lead from nineteenth and twentieth century Existentialist philosophy, we will explore how to cultivate the courage to change by reflecting on a perennial philosophical question – a question that Lester asked, if only implicitly, throughout his American odyssey:

What is the point of it all? What is the meaning of life?

I hate to disappoint anyone reading this book in the hope of getting a final answer to this question, but the question of the meaning of life should remain open. Personally, I am not sure there is a final answer to this question, and I gravely doubt that seeking to determine it once and for all produces the greatest rewards in life. Yet, asking after the meaning of life has value nonetheless. To ask this question seriously and reflectively transforms you. It helps you muster the courage you need to make deep and lasting changes in life. Asking after the meaning of life can be a terrifying experience. Thinking this question through cuts to the core of your being. But, if you really want to change your life, there is no better way to go about it. To bring your life into focus and to fire your passion for positive change, you need to take a good hard look at the meaning of your life as a whole.

Now, here comes the scary part. The question of the meaning of life is not the kind of question that can be taken lightly. To really get inside this question and experience its weight, you need to assume an appropriate state of mind. This is a philosophical state of mind – grounded, centred and honest. This state of mind involves grasping life in its finitude and contingency. It involves facing up to the fact of death.

It is a fact – we all die. Science, to date, has found no way around it. Acknowledging this fact, however, needn’t be a bleak and gloomy experience. As strange as it may seem, confronting death can be an uplifting experience – assuming that you take the right perspective on it. This is a philosophical perspective. With a philosophical perspective, confronting death becomes an enlightening, rejuvenating experience that reveals what is truly important in life and puts you on the path to achieving it. Confronting death is the first step towards a joyous life of empowerment and change. If you want to cultivate the courage to change, you need to start by confronting death.

All I am saying is: be strong. Have the courage to face your mortality. As Anïas Nin said: ‘Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage’.

Heraclitus Says: Go with the Flow
Most of us avoid thinking about death. It brings us down. We hold thoughts of death at arm’s length, sweeping them to the corners of our consciousness, where they sit in an untidy pile with all the other bad business we’d rather not think about – insecurities, guilt, and that tax return we’ve been putting off completing for years. My first goal in this chapter is to convince you that trying to dodge thoughts of death in this way is a mistake (I shall say nothing more of taxes, though death and taxes are as inevitable as one another, they say). Confronting death should be a healthy, life-enhancing experience. It opens your mind to your true potential. It puts you on your unique path. It brings you back to your whole person, and inspires you to be the best that you can possibly be.

The Existentialist philosophers who we’ll consider shortly believed that confronting death is vital to living a rich and fulfilling life. They urged that is necessary to approach the topic in the right frame of mind. It is no good brooding over death like Hamlet, or running about worrying when death will strike you. This will only make you feel strung out and depressed. In order to make reflecting on death a positive experience, you need to take the right perspective on the matter. To ease you into this perspective, I’d like to begin with some brief reflections on the role of death in the cycle of life. You might think of these reflections as warm-up exercises to prepare you for the heavy lifting to come.

The reflections come from the work of the ancient philosopher, Heraclitus (530-470BC). Heraclitus believed that life is like a river. The peaks and troughs, pits and swirls, are all are part of the ride. Death, too, is part of this waterway. Do as Heraclitus would – go with the flow. Enjoy the ride, as wild as it may be.

Heraclitus was born in Ephesus into a wealthy family, but in middle life he renounced his fortune and went to live in the mountains. There, in a tiny hut deep in the forest, Heraclitus had plenty of opportunity to reflect on the natural world. Heraclitus observed that nature is in a state of constant flux. ‘Cold things grow hot, the hot cools, the wet dries, the parched moistens’, he noted (EGP, 115). Everything is constantly shifting, changing, and becoming something other to what it was before. Heraclitus concluded from this that nature itself *is* change. Like a river, nature flows ever onwards. Even the nature of the flow changes.

It follows from these observations that change is the most natural thing in the world. So too is death. Death, Heraclitus observed, is part of the cycle of life. Heraclitus liked to say, playing on the double meaning of the Greek word *bios*, which means both ‘life’ and ‘bow’: ‘The name of the bow is *bios* [life], it’s function death’ (EGP, 115).
Heraclitus wrote a number of books, but none have survived to this day. Everything that we know about Heraclitus’ work comes from other philosophers who presumably had access to his texts. All we know about Heraclitus’ major work, *On Nature*, was that it was profoundly obscure. Socrates, who read it, said: ‘What I understand is splendid, and I think that what I don’t understand is so too – but it would take a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it!’ (EGP, 100). This seems to have been the common opinion of Heraclitus in the ancient world – brilliant but obscure. They called him ‘the riddler’. Reading the fragments of his work that have been handed down through history, the nickname doesn’t seem unfair.

Perhaps the only straightforward thing about Heraclitus’ work is his views on change. Heraclitus articulated an insight that has resounded through the ages: *everything changes*. Nothing is stable in the great chaos of life – everything is constantly on the move. From generation and birth to degeneration and death, change is ubiquitous and unstoppable.

Heraclitus expressed this insight in his famous epigram on the river of flux:

> We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not. (EGP, 117)

The standard interpretation of this passage is that Heraclitus is saying we can’t step into the same river twice. This is because the river is constantly changing. If one strolls down the banks of the Danube, the water before one’s eyes is not the same water from moment to moment. If the river *is* this water (which is a debatable point, but let us leave that aside), it follows that the Danube is not the same river from moment to moment. We step into the Danube; we step out of it again. When we step into it a second time, we step into different water and thus a different river.

Moreover, we step in and out of the river as different beings.

Heraclitus isn’t just talking about a river. Heraclitus is making a point about human existence. As we step in and out of the river, ‘[w]e are and are not’.

The river changes – and so do you!

Heraclitus understood what modern biological science takes for granted – that human beings, as living organisms, exist in a constant process of change. Physically we are self-replicating and dying all the time. Our bodies absorb light, oxygen, vitamins and nutrients from the external world to sustain our organic structure. Meanwhile, we are shedding
waste and cellular matter constantly. Each person sheds tens of billions of cells every day – a volume equaling our total body-weight in the course of a year. Like a river, we course and flow. Change is our law and identity.

If change is an integral part of life, so is death. Each of us embodies death in our physical structure through programmed cellular apoptosis, or cell death. Even as we grow, our cellular matter dies in order to allow for ongoing cycles of organic regeneration. Just as trees shed their leaves in winter, we constantly shed parts of ourselves to perpetuate the process of growth. Given the integral role of cell death in biological processes, it is ironic that we worry so much about death in the future. As living beings, we are dying all the time.

Perhaps this is what Heraclitus meant when he said, in his inimitable way:

Gods are mortal, humans immortal, living their death, dying their life. (EGP, 117)

Ultimately, death is not the end of life at all. Death is part of life’s natural cycle. One needs to learn to see death as part of life in order to appreciate life in all its glory.

To appreciate Heraclitus’ point of view, take a hike, go bushwalking or camp in the woods. Sit on a rock and watch the processes of nature unfold about you. Take off your clothes, if you’d like. Go natural. Expose yourself to the cycles of life. See how the sun arcs through the canopy and the saplings rise up to meet it? The green shoots push up between rotting branches, and feed on the dead leaves that fall to earth. There is death here; it is part of life.

Nature is this cyclical process of birth and death, flux and flow. There is nothing evil in it. Everything is precisely as it should be.

Go with the flow. Meditate on life’s cycles and you can be at peace with death.

**Out of the Zone**

Perhaps you are unconvinced. Fair enough too. When dealing with matters of life and death, caution is advisable. It is one thing to think abstractly about death as part of life’s natural cycle. It is another thing entirely, one might say, to confront the inevitability of one’s own death – the fact of personal mortality. For most people, thinking about death is about as appealing as root canal surgery. For some people, the anxiety induced by the
thought of death can be so extreme that death becomes a ‘no-go’ topic that they can’t approach under any circumstances.

Our tendency to resist thinking about death is understandable. It is also problematic. People who refuse to deal with death close themselves off from a profound truth of human existence. People who are incapable of making peace with death can spend their whole lives hiding from this truth and thus hiding from life itself. People who have the courage to face death, on the other hand, know that the greatest danger in life is not that a given life ends. This is something that happens to all living beings. The greatest danger in life is that, in our fear of death, we retreat into comfort zones that restrict our possibilities and limit our powers of becoming. Out of fear of death, we become too fearful to live. We seal ourselves off from our true possibilities. We slip into shrink-wrapped lives that slowly close about us until we suffocate.

This is what happened to Lester Burnham. Lester’s comfortable middle class life became a lodestone about his neck that dragged him down into a pit of despair. In order to renew himself, Lester had to shake off his life and wander in the wilderness awhile. Now, you may not wish to commit yourself to quite the order of transformation that Lester undergoes in American Beauty. But if you want to learn how to change freely and well, you need to follow Lester’s example. You need to learn to identify your comfort zones, and to figure out how to break out of them when necessary. You need to shake off social expectations and take hold of your life, placing yourself in the driver’s seat of life, rather than just coming along for the ride.

Face up to death. It knocks you out of your comfort zones. But it brings you back to reality. And there is no other place to be.

What is a comfort zone? People talk about comfort zones as if they were all in the head. Adventure seekers and adrenaline-junkies say: ‘That took me out of my comfort zone!’ – as if a comfort zone were a kind of personal bubble that we lived inside that we sometimes stepped out of or was popped by events. It is true that there is a subjective dimension to comfort zones. The kinds of people and places that you or I find comforting are not necessarily so – others may find them excruciating. Yet, comfort zones are not wholly subjective phenomena. While the pleasure (or pain) that is produced by a comfort zone may differ from person to person, the zone itself is a feature of the real world. Some people find comfort zones in the workplace. Others find them in family
contexts, in home and kin. Others find comfort zones in friendships, on or beside sporting fields, or at clubs, bars and social events.

A comfort zone is not in your head. A comfort zone is a real world environment that makes you feel empowered, capable and at ease.

We all have comfort zones that we like to slip into. Whether they are rowdy, boisterous places or quiet, intimate spaces, our comfort zones give us the opportunity to use those powers that we most enjoy using and to soak up a sense of wellbeing in the process.

Different people are empowered by their comfort zones in different ways. Consider the classic workaholic. Assuming that this character isn’t driven by anxiety or despair, it could be that they are wedded to their work because the workplace provides them with a unique context in which to realize their powers. The workplace is a comfort zone because it enables them to be organized, focused and productive, or to take charge of life, which may be an experience they don’t get to enjoy much outside of work. Now consider a different character that leaves work each night for a quiet drink at the local pub. Let us assume that the talk around the water cooler isn’t true: this person isn’t a drunk or an apprentice barfly. It is simply the case that the ambience and regulars at the local establishment give this character the chance to be the kind of sociable, easy-going personality that they love being, and rarely get the chance to be at work.

Comfort zones can empower us in all sorts of ways. Fundamentally, what is empowering about a comfort zone is that it enables us to be the kind of person that we most like to be.

What habitats give you a sense of empowerment? Think for a moment about people with whom you feel especially relaxed and self-assured. What is it about these people that gives you this sense of wellbeing? One way or another, they all enable you to be someone that you like to be. Ask yourself: who is this person that I like to be? Perhaps it is a mother, father, worker, boss, teacher, dancer, musician... Make it an open list. So long as we are free, we should never stop seeking out new roles and identities to slip into and explore.

We all feel happiest when we’re able to be someone that we like to be. This is what makes our comfort zones comfortable for us. We slip into comfort zones because they enable us to enjoy our most empowering identities and personas.

There is nothing wrong with comfort zones. Everyone deserves an empowering sense of identity, and everyone has (or should have) the right to seek out places and spaces that enable them to become who they like to be. The problem arises when we come to believe
that the identities and personas that we presently find enjoyable, and the comfort zones that facilitate them, define the limit of what we are capable of being. When we let ourselves be defined by our comfort zones, we cap our possibilities in life. Our comfort zones become prisons, restricting our sense of who we are and what we are capable of achieving. When life becomes rigid and fixed, we become rigid and fixed ourselves. Our space of possibilities starts to shrink about us like a noose. Soon we find that we are using our comfort as an excuse to fend off the possibility of change. How often have you heard the refrain: ‘I know what I like ... (and I don’t like change)’? This is the sound of someone who has become way too comfortable in their comfort zone.

Getting caught in comfort zones is something we should avoid at all costs. So break out of the zone. It is time to live again.

Existentialism: Life, Death and the Whole Person

What is the meaning of life? To live is to persist in a state that is not (yet) dead, while consorting with death as part of continuing organic processes. On this basis, we might assume that the meaning of life is living, simple as that. Existentialist philosophers take a different point of view. For Existentialists, the meaning of life is defined by the fact that we don’t know its meaning – or rather, that we look for meaning in life but we find that the answer is not forthcoming. As a result, we experience life as a problem. Existentialism begins with the observation that by confronting this problem and accepting it for what it is, not denying it or trying to resolve it through the reassurances of ideology or religion, we can change our life. It is not that we accept that life has no meaning. This is a way of avoiding the problem by closing the conundrum with an easy answer. It is more difficult, and much more rewarding, to keep the question of the meaning of life open.

Keeping the question of the meaning of life open forces us to make choices and to take responsibility for our decisions. We do more than just persist or endure – we exist.

Existentialism is an umbrella term for the work of a diverse group of writers and thinkers who struggled to forge meaningful lives in the rapidly changing societies of industrial Europe. Notable Existentialists include the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1888-1976), and their French followers, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960).
The Existentialists sought to escape an age of social conformity by thinking about the meaning of life. To make this reflection as meaningful as possible, they sought to frame it in light of an equally resolute confrontation with death.

Kierkegaard was the original Existentialist philosopher. Kierkegaard argued that every human being is obliged to make a fundamental decision about how to live. Deciding which way to take one’s life and what to make of it is an unavoidable task that is faced by each and every one of us. Ultimately, this decision involves a leap in the dark, since nothing guarantees that the life we choose will be the best life for us to lead.

Kierkegaard argued that the greatest leap one can make is a leap of faith into a religious life. This is not a view shared by later Existentialists, most of whom were atheists. But it is a good example of an existential choice. Existential choices are redolent with consequence and risk.

To be or not to be? This is a question we face in every waking moment. On account of this predicament, Kierkegaard argued, we are haunted by an abiding sense of responsibility and, on account of this, anxiety. The only way to allay our existential anxiety is to decide the course of life – to take action and leap in a certain direction. But such a course of action presents problems of its own. The moment that we take responsibility for our life by deciding how to live, Kierkegaard noted, we are presented with an awesome task – that of becoming who we are. When it comes down to it, there is no escaping existential anxiety. Even the most heroic individual faces their ultimate possibilities in a state of ‘fear and trembling’ (the title of one Kierkegaard’s books).

Being an existentialist is hard. Comfort zones can be a welcome retreat. It is no wonder, then, that we flee into comfort zones. To be sure, if we have to deal with existential anxiety either way, why not stick to comfort zones? Why not take the easy option and refuse to make a decision about how to live? The problem, Kierkegaard explains, is that the decision about how to live is the kind of decision that gets made irrespective of whether we choose it or not. Make the decision – or the decision makes you. Sooner or later, life demands such a decision, which we avoid at our peril.

The idea of a heroic responsibility to decide the course of life is an Existentialist motif. This idea is pivotal to the work of Martin Heidegger. In his magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger refigured Kierkegaard’s idea of authenticity for a Freudian era. Heidegger argued that human beings are predisposed to avoid making a decision about
how to live. We avoid this decision by throwing ourselves into the most superficial aspects of everyday life. Rather than take life seriously, we take everything lightly. We give up trying to express our unique identity and we play out conventional social roles. Instead of struggling to forge our own path through life, we follow pre-determined paths that others have mapped before us. We derive satisfaction from being like everybody else – a good parent, an industrious breadwinner, a solid citizen and member of the community.

Occasionally we get the sense that we are short-selling ourselves. We downplay our anxieties by telling ourselves that, when it comes down to it, we are nothing special – pretty much like everyone else, in fact. Given this, we may as well run with the pack.

Heidegger saw things differently. When it comes down to it, each of us is quite unlike anyone else. Each of us is a singular individual with a unique set of skills, drives, powers, qualities, talents and capacities. The risk that we take in settling for ordinary lives is that we lose touch with the powers that make us who we really are. We give up on struggling to realize our whole person, our full potential, our authentic self. We give up on ourselves as unique human beings.

When we discover how to access our whole person, we realize that life can offer us so much more than we ordinarily assume. We realize that we spend most of our lives trying to avoid the challenge of becoming who we are. We realize that our greatest challenge in life is not to make the most money or to have the largest circle of friends, but to take hold of our full realm of potential and become everything that we are capable of being.

Yet, even in this moment of vision, we find ourselves flinching away. Are we equal to this task, we ask? Do we have the courage to reach out and lay claim to our whole person?

Do you have the courage to become who you are? If not, never fear. You can cultivate this courage through an Existentialist confrontation with death.

**Hour of the Mayfly**

Heidegger lived through the period of the first and second world wars. He didn’t fight himself, but he knew that the experience of the battlefield changes a soldier. Amid the shots, explosions and screams, the truth of human mortality is shockingly clear. Death is not something that lies far off in the distance, like the closing scene of a movie or the final
chapter of a book. Death can come anytime, anyplace. The bullets are in flight, the bombs descending. The hand of death may be on you now.

This is the truth of human mortality. Face this truth and it will change you.

What is true for a soldier on the battlefield is true for us all. No one knows when their time is coming. You can exercise regularly, eat nutritious foods and steer clear of stressful environments. It may lessen your chances of cancer and disease in the long term, but it won’t change a thing when a learner driver misses a red light or a once-in-a-lifetime earthquake brings the roof down on your head. Granted, earthquakes are rare and the chances of a fatal accident are slim if you take appropriate precautions. But this does not change the basic fact that you do not control the time of your death.

Death may come in sixty years or sixty seconds from now. The reality is, none of us know. This is what it means to confront personal mortality.

Confronting mortality is like a shock of cold water to the face. When we realize that death can come anytime, anyplace, it changes us. It shatters our fascination with superficial things in life. Suddenly we are wide awake at existential ground zero. We start asking questions. We start thinking seriously about who we are and how we are living. And we start asking what we are really capable of achieving in life. As Heidegger says, confronting death brings to light ‘the totality of our potentiality-for-Being’ (BT, 310). In a moment of vision, we grasp our full sphere of potential – a realm of potential that is ours alone, that we may or may not achieve. We catch a glimpse of our whole person, our total capacity to exist. And we experience a tremendous obligation to live up to our whole person before the finality of death takes this capacity away.

Mostly we shirk the obligation. It is too hard to bear. We retreat into comfort zones. We shy away from what we are capable of being. The novel that you have stowed half-finished in the bottom drawer of your desk. The broken relationship that you could heal with a few gentle words, words that you have never found a way of saying. The mountains of the Himalayas – haven’t they been calling you for years? We all live with a sense of potential sealed beneath the ice of everyday life – dreams and desires that we want to claim, but that we somehow feel incapable of making our own.

Take an axe and break the ice. Confronting death can be a frightening experience. But it focuses you on your unique possibilities and liberates your passion for change.
Often when people stand up and take hold of life, they look back on their blinkered, inauthentic state and ask: ‘What was I afraid of?’ A human life is longer than most, after all. Compare it to the life of the mayfly, the tiny cousin to the dragonfly. The mayfly lays its eggs near lakes and streams in North America. It spends the day buzzing merrily about sunny banks and cool waters, mating and feeding on algae. All day, if it’s lucky. For this is all a mayfly gets – one day or less. A mayfly can die within thirty minutes of bursting from its aquatic naiad stage into an adult form. To watch the mayfly spawn and die is a potent reminder of the transience of life and our necessary human finitude.

Imagine being born a mayfly! Or, imagine being born a mayfly with the knowledge and intelligence that you have today, and knowing that life is drastically limited and that death is literally imminent. Would you flutter to the ground and lie there twitching in despair, waiting for a passing predator to snap you up? Or would you take stock of the numerous possibilities for pleasure and experience that are granted a mayfly in the course of its short life and say: ‘Yes! There has never been a better time for living!’

It would be foolish to do otherwise. The key to taking something marvellous from the shortest span of existence is to affirm what you have and live.

Many people are attracted to this Existentialist teaching, but they struggle to sustain the lesson on a daily basis. To be sure, when you are juggling tasks, racing to meet deadlines and dealing with the stresses and pressures of everyday life, the idea of taking a moment to think about death seems absurd. The real absurdity, however, is that so many intelligent, motivated, and caring people do not apply themselves to an Existentialist life.

Say it loud: ‘Confronting death is good for me’. No one can do it for you.

To enjoy the rewards of an Existentialist life, you need to face death at each opportunity. When you wake up tomorrow, take a moment to reflect on how great it is that you have lived to see another day. Say: ‘thank you’. Life is best when lived in the presence of death. Over breakfast, ask yourself: ‘Would I choose Wheeties for my last meal? Is this coffee the best of all espressos? Would I even drink it if I only had an hour to live?’ Keep mortality in mind as you commute to the office. Who knows, by the time you get to work, you may have decided that you are ready for change.
Affirm life in its contingency and finitude. Affirm each moment as a critical juncture – a moment ripe for decision, for determining the way that you live. Live life as a flash of light in the void. Rejoice in the gift of existence and revel in its profound possibilities.

* * *

Exercise one shows you how to live like an Existentialist philosopher. The strategy that I’ve taken to designing this exercise is the same as that I’ve applied to the other exercises in this book. I have tried to extract from Heidegger’s idea of ‘being-towards-death’ (in *Being and Time*) a simple practice that you can apply to daily life and explore as you see fit.

Initially you’ll want to approach this exercise as a thought experiment. Imagine that you are the character in the vignette. How do you feel? What kinds of changes take place in your outlook and perspective on life as the scenario plays out in your head? Once you get the hang of the exercise, you can forget about the scenario and focus on the attitude and procedure at the heart of it. Practice the exercise as often as you can. Keep at it until the Existentialist approach to life is second nature.

The goal of this exercise is not just to teach you something about philosophy. The goal is to teach you how to live like an Existentialist philosopher – wide-eyed, courageous and ready for life’s opportunities.
Exercise One: The Last Day

Fire your passion. Take an Existentialist approach to life and change.

Summary: For this exercise, you’ll need a pen or pencil, a sheet of paper, and a bold imagination. The aim of the exercise is to show you how an Existentialist approach to life can inspire your passion for positive change.

Joe Morgan was a happy man. Sure, he’d had troubles in the past. But Joe had kicked the booze years ago – now he was a family man, fit and successful to boot. He never expected the call from the doctor that day:

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Joe, but you only have twenty four hours to live!’

Joe dropped the phone as his future vanished before him. Twenty four hours! What would he do? Part of him was screaming for a drink. Perhaps he’d get blotto – why not party the final hours away? Responsibility to Marie and the kids – that’s why not, he thought. They’d be shattered to see him cave in at the last hour, after so many years on the wagon. Dialing Marie’s number, wondering what to say, a curious thought crossed Joe’s mind:

‘Better say it right, Joe. These are words she’s going to have to live with forever’.

Joe understood then what he should have realized years ago. You only get one shot at life – you should approach everything as if it were your last day. His father’s words echoed in his mind:

‘Do it once, do it right’.

‘It’s simple’, Joe said to himself. ‘You have to live each day as if it’s your last. If only I’d realized this before it was my last day!’

Let’s walk a mile in Joe’s shoes. Follow the steps below as carefully as you can.

STEP 1. Reflect on the following scenario:

You come into work in the morning and get a call from your doctor:

‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but you’ve only got 24 hours to live!’

You drop the phone in a state of shock. In a moment, you’ll have to think about how you are going to spend your final day. First, though, you need to come to terms with the
situation. What does it mean to be facing death? It is not just the end of life that you are facing. It is the end of everything that you had planned to do with it.

The way to take insight from confronting death is to think about what death will prevent you from doing or achieving. Death brings to light everything that we want to achieve in life as something that we may never get the chance to achieve. It brings to light our authentic drives and desires by removing our opportunity to achieve them.

**STEP 2.** Think of some things that you would have liked to have done in your life that, on account of your demise, you will now never get a chance to do or achieve. Examples might include travelling the world, climbing a mountain, or forgiving an old friend. These things don’t need to be epic tasks. Intimate gestures like hugging someone you love or forgiving someone you’ve fallen out with are perfectly valid expressions of authentic desire. What is important is that these are things that you have genuinely dreamed of doing or achieving but, for one reason or another, have never managed to do or achieve. They represent unrequited aspirations and desires.

**STEP 2.1.** Take your piece of paper and draw a horizontal line across the middle of the page, dividing the page into an upper and lower section. Write the list of unrequited aspirations and desires from Step 2 in the upper part of the page.

**STEP 3.** Look at your list of unrequited aspirations and desires. Ask yourself:

> *If these are things that I genuinely want to do and achieve, why have I not done and achieved them? What barriers stop me from doing or achieving these things and how can I overcome them?*

What are the things that stop you from realizing your ultimate desires in life? What things block your path to happiness? How might you get around them? Reflect on these questions. Don’t be afraid to admit that the way that you are living today might be incommensurate with your authentic desires. This insight can be a spur to change.

Write whatever answers come to mind in the lower part of the page. Don’t worry if answers to these questions are a long time coming. If you are doing the exercise thoughtfully, your reflections will touch on personal stuff. The important thing is to stay with the process of reflection. You have to stay with the process to learn to think like an Existentialist philosopher.
**STEP 4.** Imagine that you had the opportunity to achieve only one of the aspirations or desires on your list before you died. Which one would it be? Reflect on this aspiration or desire. What does it say about your path in life? How does it impact on and affect your life? Ask yourself:

*Why is this aspiration important to me? In what ways does it reflect the life I want to lead? What does it say about my deep sense of possibility and my authentic motivations in life?*

**STEP 4.1.** Write your answer (or answers) in the lower part of the page. Don’t worry if you feel like you are just making things up. Chances are what you are inventing is a new vocabulary for thinking about your whole person.

**STEP 5.** I wouldn’t want to end on a dour note. Let us say the doctor calls again:

*The lab got the results mixed up. You are going to live!*

Perhaps now you will seize the dreams that you’ve identified in this exercise. Do yourself the favour, at least, of keeping them in mind. You may never get the opportunity to realize these dreams and aspirations. But by keeping them in mind, you can use them as a means of centring yourself, of reminding yourself who you really are.

**Lesson one:** Confronting death can be frightening. But the experience grounds us and fills us with a passion for positive change. Death reveals your whole person as a task to be achieved. It presents you with the awesome challenge of becoming who you are.
2. Check Yourself: Nurture the Power Within

Odysseus was the hero’s hero. King of Ithaca, he sailed to Troy with an army of men to liberate Helen from the Trojans. Odysseus’ leadership and prowess at the siege of Troy made him a legend among his fellow Greeks. Yet, Odysseus had a fatal flaw, and this would be his undoing. Odysseus could master a chariot and a phalanx of soldiers, but he wasn’t always the master of himself. Every now and then, Odysseus’ pride would get the better of him and he would become wild and unchecked, a primal force of passion and fury. In these moments, Odysseus would forget the limits of his powers. He would believe that he was god-like and untouchable, the master of fate and destiny. He would lose his grip on reason. He would overreach himself and get himself into all kinds of scrapes.

Finally, he messed up big time. The epic misfortunes of Odysseus’ life, dramatized by Homer in *The Odyssey*, hinged upon a single lapse in self-control. Odysseus’ error presents us with valuable insights into the kind of self-control that we need to deal successfully with change, and the vaulting hubris we need to overcome as well.

Homer describes Odysseus as a master strategist – a ‘man of twists and turns’. It was Odysseus, at the siege of Troy, who devised the plan for getting the Archaean army into the city. Disguising himself as a beggar, ‘searing his body with mortifying strokes and throwing filthy rags on his back like a slave’, Odysseus stole into Troy and read its defences. When Helen recognized him she insisted that he tell her his plan. Odysseus gave it up reluctantly. The Archaens would build a giant horse and put soldiers in its belly, giving it to the Trojans as a gift. It was a crazy scheme but it just might work! Under the cover of darkness, the soldiers would creep from the horse and throw wide the city gates and the Archaean army would come pouring in. This is how Odysseus, ‘master of any craft’, facilitated the conquest of Troy and liberated the beautiful princess Helen.

Odysseus’ journey back to Ithaca was less successful. In fact it was a disaster. First, Odysseus failed to mobilize his men back to the fleet after they’d sacked Ismarus, city of the Cicones. The Cicones launched a surprise attack as the Ithacans sat feasting on the beach, and many of Odysseus’ men were killed before the Ithacans escaped. Next stop was the land of the lotus eaters, where Odysseus’ soldiers sampled the ‘honey sweet fruit’ and lost all desire to return home. Odysseus had to forcibly reconscript his crew, driving them back to their posts and lashing them to the oars in order to make their escape.
It was at the island of the Cyclops that things really came unstuck. While exploring this island, hunting for goats, Odysseus and his men became trapped in the cave of Polyphemus, a one-eyed giant who happened to be the son of Poseidon, Lord of the Sea. Through the resourcefulness and nerve of their captain, the soldiers blinded the Cyclops and escaped his lair clinging to the bellies of sheep. But as they rowed back to the ship, ducking the boulders that the Cyclops hurled at them from the shore, Odysseus lost his self-control for just one moment. He roared at Polyphemus on the beach:

Cyclops – if any man on the face of the earth should ask who blinded you, shamed you so – say Odysseus, raider of cities, he gouged out your eye…

It was a fatal lapse. Polyphemus called on Poseidon to avenge him. Odysseus, as a result, knew nothing but bad luck from that day. Gods, monsters and stormy weather conspired to drive his ship far from its intended destination. It would be ten long years before Odysseus made it home to Ithaca and his wife and son.

The story of Odysseus’ encounter with the Cyclops offers us two important lessons about self-control in the context of change. These lessons are as relevant today as there were in Odysseus’ time. The first and most obvious lesson is that self-control is a vital commodity for dealing with change. Change throws up turbulence in the form of unexpected shocks and blows. Sometimes, in the thick of change, we can feel like Odysseus and his crew being bombarded with boulders from the sky, and it takes a steely nerve to hold to one’s course or even stay with the ship. Just when you think you are in the clear, you find yourself at the stern screaming abuse at your enemy! By the time you have recovered yourself, it’s too late.

An Odyssean fate awaits anyone who tries to navigate change without sufficient self-control to deal with it.

The second lesson to take from Odysseus’ tale is less obvious than the first, but ultimately just as important. It concerns the limits of personal control. Perhaps you think that you are the master of your destiny. Perhaps you have an incredible capacity to stay calm under pressure, keeping focused while everyone about you is cracking up. Even so, you should not assume that your focus and nerve will see you through every situation. The fact is most of life is out of our control. No matter what your powers, they have limits. Only the gods are the sovereign masters of fate.
This lesson was lost on Odysseus. Fired up from his stellar performance at Troy, he assumed that he was the master of his destiny and could say and do anything he liked. Big mistake, as Poseidon reminded him. This lesson resounds throughout Greek literature:

You are not a god. Do not forget it – or else.

It is a lesson that we are still learning today. Like Odysseus, we have a habit of becoming too fond of ourselves. Boosted by pride and ego, we allow ourselves to believe that we are the lords of our domain, if not masters of the universe. We leap ahead where angels fear to tread. And time and time again, we suffer Odysseus’ fate. We overplay our hand. When our house of cards comes tumbling down, we fall down with it. We lie in the ruins of our dreams, wondering how we could have ever believed in ourselves.

This is not the behavior of someone who is in control of themself. It does not reflect the inner mastery that we need to successfully deal with change.

No doubt we are misled by Hollywood as much as by myth and legend. When we think of how Hollywood portrays self-control, we think of racing car drivers, test pilots, and bomb disposal experts – people who are trained to perform difficult tasks under pressure without breaking a sweat. Tom Cruise’s turn as Maverick in the eighties action drama, Top Gun, is an example. Maverick is pure focus and nerve. As a trainee pilot, he breaks all the rules, confident that he can beat the odds on the basis of raw talent alone. But what happens to Maverick? He gets into a situation that spins wildly out of control. It takes his wingman and it almost takes his wings. Maverick is devastated by the loss of Goose, his friend. He gets drunk, refuses to fly and almost comes apart at the seams.

What happened to Maverick? He was the most self-controlled hot-shot on the strip. Maverick learns that when life takes you by surprise, you need more than just focus and nerve to stay in control. You need equanimity, tranquil acceptance of fate. If we cannot accept the hand that fate deals us, we are forever at risk of being crushed by unexpected situations, and thus of losing control when we need it most. To ensure that we are capable of maintaining self-control in conditions of uncertainty and risk, we need to be prepared to relinquish control, accepting that, under some circumstances, we have little or none of it.

It is a question of humility. We need to recognize that, for the most part, life is out of our hands. When circumstances change and events slip from our grasp, we must shift gears,
reassess the situation, and focus less on controlling what is happening than on trying to control our responses to it.

This is how you cultivate genuine self-control. Genuine self-control is equal parts focus, drive and tranquil acceptance of fate. To get it right, you need to rein in your desire to be in charge of life. You need to temper your pride with humility. You need to be master of your own house before you are in a position to conquer the world.

Chapter one explored the courageous attitude that is required to throw oneself into change and benefit from it. Chapter two explores how courage must be tempered with self-control in order to ride out the shocks and blows of change. Our focus is the form of self-control developed by the ancient Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers. Stoicism was legendary in the ancient world for offering a form of self-mastery as powerful as it was unpresuming. Through a potent blend of will and humility, the Stoics cultivated an implacable tranquility, never allowing passion or pride to drive them to an impulsive act. They may not have won every battle, but the Stoics kept themselves above the fray. In this way, they ensured the victory of their sect through centuries of strife and war.

**Stoicism: Philosophy for Change**

Stoicism rose from humble beginnings in Athens, Greece, in the third century BC, to become the de facto religion of Imperial Rome in the second century AD. Zeno of Citium (334-262BC), the founder of the school, was originally a merchant who lost his fortune in a shipwreck. Casting about for opportunities on the streets of Athens, he came across a copy of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* in a bookstall. Xenophon’s account of Socrates’ life impressed him, and knowing little about anything besides the market price of textiles and dyes, he asked the bookseller where he’d find men like Socrates. It happened that, at that moment, the philosopher Crates walked past the stall. ‘Follow that man’, said the bookseller. Zeno did and so embarked upon a life in philosophy.

Zeno studied under Crates and others for years. He started giving lectures of his own on the *Stoa Poikile* (‘painted porch’) in Athens around 300BC. The people who came to listen called themselves Zenonians, but soon became known as Stoics.

After Zeno’s death, his students Cleanthes and Chrysippus continued his doctrines, defending them from the criticisms of the Platonic Academy, the philosophical school in Athens where most of the theoretical philosophy of the day took place. Contrary to the
academics, the Stoics defined themselves as practical philosophers, concerned more with personal wellbeing and the good life than with theoretical questions. By the time the cultural centre of the ancient world shifted from Athens to Rome in the first century BC, most of the senior philosophers in the Academy were Stoics. So too were leading figures of the Roman republic. Stoicism was no longer a cult, practiced on the fringes of society. Stoicism was the leading philosophy of Roman times.

Stoicism’s success had much to do with its use value, and the uncertain nature of life in the ancient world. The Stoic age was a period of cultural and political transformation. When Zeno gave his lectures on the painted porch in the third century BC, classical Greek culture was already collapsing. The city states of Athens and Sparta were shadows of their former selves. Alexander’s empire, which sprawled across the Mediterranean and the Middle East, had stimulated an influx of populations into the Mediterranean region, challenging the authority of Greek culture. People were turning their backs on the ancient Greek poets and oracles, placing their faith in the teachings of philosophers who questioned the gods. The ancient world was dying. No one had any idea how to save it.

The Roman Republic tried. As Greek civilization faltered, the Romans revived a version of it on the Italian peninsula. The Republic was glorious indeed, but it couldn’t withstand the tides of history. By the first century AD, the Republic had become a bloated Empire, and Rome’s classical experiment was coming undone. The Roman senate was beset by political factionalism and unrest. The gods were falling victim to scepticism and disinterest. Barbarian hordes drove incursions into the hinterlands. Crises loomed. Anxiety was the order of the day.

It was in this period that Stoic philosophy achieved its greatest popularity. The attraction of Stoicism was its usefulness. Academic readers puzzled over the obscure details of Stoic doctrine. But Stoic adherents, for the most part, were happy to set aside these academic arguments to focus on the practical substance of Stoic ‘ethics’ – the Stoic way of life.

This is what interests us as well. Stoicism offers a set of simple techniques that we can use to achieve tranquillity in times of change. As a practical philosophy, it is based in a simple insight. To cope with change and everything that life throws at us, we must use our power of rational judgment to control the wild emotional responses, or ‘passions’, that beset us. Once we know passions for what they are, the Stoics argue, we are no longer bound by them. We are liberated from the passions, even while we experience their effects.
Cultivate the Power Within

The slave ship groaned as it lurched through the heavy seas. Below decks, a boy, Epictetus, writhed in his chains. His left knee, above where the manacle bit into the shin, was bound in a bloodied rag. Two nights ago a crate had come loose in a storm, careened across the floor and crushed his leg. Epictetus had been in and out of consciousness ever since. No one had treated the break. The Roman soldiers who had dragged the crate away retreated when they saw the damage it had done. Now they spoke in whispers and brandished the lash when he begged for help. He was damaged goods. Epictetus could tell that they didn’t expect him to survive the trip.

Epictetus would prove them wrong. All he needed to do was to control the pain. Try as he might, there was no stopping it. He had tried to blank it out, but it was oppressively there. There had to be some way of dealing with it, he thought. What was it that the Stoics taught? *Cultivate the power within*. Epictetus struggled to apply the Stoic teaching.

The pain seemed to occupy his entire experience. Yet, part of his experience, Epictetus reflected, he controlled. He could control his way of thinking about the pain. He still had the power to reason, reflect and decide how to act, even if his body betrayed him at every turn. Two nights ago he had wept unceasingly. Now he swallowed his sobs – he had this much power at least. What else could he achieve? Epictetus forced himself to think about things other than his broken leg. A sunlit meadow. Cool water on his brow. The conjugation of verbs: he ran through his Latin and Greek. He thought about how brave he would feel in years to come when he had endured the trip, recovered and won his freedom. He coached himself: control the pain, don’t let it control you.

The pain continued relentlessly. Epictetus, by controlling his responses, held it at bay.

This is a true story (give or take a few details). The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135AD), who was born into slavery, was crippled for life when his leg was broken while he was being transported to Rome for auction. The experience of surviving the trip, without care or medical attention, prepared Epictetus for the Stoic lifestyle that he would adopt later on. Slavery taught him how to cope with social and political disenfranchisement. But it was the experience of lying below decks struggling with intolerable pain that taught him how to cultivate the power within.

We all have the ability to control our responses. The ability derives from our rational nature: our power to think critically about our experiences and to alter our perspective on them. According to the Stoics, the power of rational judgment is the only true power that we possess in life. All the other powers that we possess, such as powers that we derive from our relationships and communities, our money and possessions, our jobs and roles
in society – all of these can be taken from us. Take them away, the Stoics argued, and we still have an intrinsic power to maintain a rational state of mind. This intrinsic power is an essential feature of our human nature.

The Stoics valued this power over all other things, even life itself. When the Emperor Nero sentenced the Stoic philosopher and statesman Lucius Annaeus Seneca (3BC – 65AD) to death, Seneca (who knew his time was up) called his wife and children to him, embraced them, and instructed a slave to bring a knife and urn. Seneca took the knife and opened his veins. Legend has it that he spoke on Stoic ethics as he died. Seneca’s calm acceptance of death, passing away without signs of fear or suffering, is the Stoic ideal.

Control your state of mind and you can be happy on the rack, the Stoics used to say. It is a grim teaching, but effective.

The first step to taking self-control is to affirm the power of rational judgment, the rational power within. In order to cultivate the inner strength to maintain a calm and balanced state of mind, you need to celebrate this power over all other things. You should focus on what is within your power of control and disregard everything outside of it. Everything that you cannot control by applying your reason is ultimately out of your hands. It is fate. Don’t worry about fate, the Stoics counselled. Fate happens. Treat it with indifference.

We can reduce this Stoic teaching to three simple principles. You can think of these principles as the ‘golden rules’ of Stoic practical philosophy.

**Rule 1:** Focus on what you can control.

**Rule 2:** All you can control is your rational judgment.

**Rule 3:** What is beyond your control is fate. Fate is none of your business.

**Timely Meditations**

The Stoics weren’t the only philosophers in the ancient world to cultivate self-control. Two centuries before the Stoic school emerged, a North Indian prince, Siddhartha Gautama, developed a similar approach to life. Through his teachings and example, Siddhartha became known as the Buddha.
Given the geographical distance separating India and Greece, it is unlikely that there was much direct contact between ancient Stoics and Buddhists. It is not impossible, though, that Zeno heard tales of the Indian ascetics during his time as a merchant. Certainly there are similarities between Stoic and Buddhist teachings. There are also important differences.

Buddhists share with Stoics a Heraclitean view of life as a tumultuous river of change. We are like rafters on the river of life, furiously struggling to navigate our vessel this way and that as the concourse threatens to tip us into the drink. Praying for salvation is a waste of breath: neither Stoics nor Buddhists believe in a benevolent God looking out for us. If we are to survive the turbulence of life and change, we need to learn how to paddle or swim.

We can achieve this by cultivating self-control. ‘Peace comes from within. Do not seek it from without’, the Buddha advised. On this point, Stoics and Buddhists agree. To find happiness and tranquility in turbulent times, we need to cultivate our rational powers.

At precisely this point, however, Stoic and Buddhist teachings come apart. When we consider how Stoics and Buddhists set about cultivating self-control, we see that there are important differences between these two schools.

Buddhists recommend a reflective approach to life guided by four ‘noble truths’:

- Life is suffering
- The cause of suffering is craving
- We can eliminate suffering by eliminating craving
- We can eliminate craving by following the teachings of the Buddha.

Stoic philosophy is also meant to take the suffering from life. And like Buddhists, Stoics believe that to overcome suffering, we need to change the way that we think about life. For the Stoics, however, the chief task is not to eliminate craving, but to get a grip on the passions that we experience in life. If we can control the judgments that lurk behind passions, Stoics argue, we can extinguish the suffering that is associated with them.

This is the Stoic way. It hinges on a critical response to passions that puts them in their place.
The Stoics have a precise definition of passions, but let us leave this aside for the time being and come back to it later on. The idea of a passion is straightforward enough. Think of the last time that you became so mad at someone or something that you couldn’t think straight. That is a passion, right there, and it can be a dangerous thing. Sometimes in the grip of passion, our better sense goes out the window. We rail against the world as if we were the only one ever to be offended by it. Pumped up on indignation and rage, we take everything too personally. If we are not careful, we can wind up causing ourselves more harm than the injury that upset us in the first place.

The other day, for instance, a friend was driving me through town. A car catapulted out of a side-street and cut us off. Instead of apologizing, the offending driver rolled down his window and hurled a torrent of abuse at us before speeding away. I thought it was hilarious, but my friend was incensed. ‘Don’t let it get to you’, I said. But my friend could only see the injustice of it. He had been wronged, and so it made sense for him to be outraged, he insisted. When I saw him again that afternoon, he was worn out and miserable, having spent the whole day fuming about the event.

If my friend had taken a Stoic approach to the traffic incident, he would have questioned his response to the event. He would have asked himself if the incident was really worth getting upset about. Had he followed this line of reflection to the end, he would have concluded that the other driver’s behavior really had nothing to do with him. It is true that the stranger acted unjustly. It is also true that my friend didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of such abuse. But to assume that it makes sense to feel angry in response to this kind of event is to make a judgment call. This judgment can be questioned and reversed. One might imagine Epictetus offering strict counsel:

This judgment you are making – is it rational? What is the benefit of taking on another person’s anger? Given that the situation cannot be resolved, this only results in you carrying about unnecessary emotional baggage until it exhausts you or you forget about it. How could it be rational to choose to assume this unnecessary anger and pain? It is not. So take a rational view. Focus your mind on reversing the judgment that you are making here and get a grip on the passion.

Reversing the way that you think about situations is not as hard as it sounds. In fact it is easy when you know how. In my friend’s case, there are plenty of other perspectives that might have lessened the sting of the event. He might have thought: this guy is an idiot! Or
more charitably: this guy obviously has personal issues – they don’t concern me. Perhaps he is unwell? Perhaps I should have asked him if he needed help.

This is the Stoic approach to self-control. We need to learn to think critically about our responses to difficult or unpleasant situations, with the goal of finding a more balanced and rational view. Taking a rational view on difficult situations always makes them easier to deal with. Most importantly, it helps us to extinguish the unruly passions that these situations tend to produce. By changing the way that we think about a situation, we can change the way that we feel about the situation and the way that we respond to it as well.

In the exercise at the end of this chapter, you’ll get an opportunity to try this out for yourself. First, though, I’d like to dive a bit deeper into these ideas. If you feel that you have already got a sense of how Stoic self-control works and would like to try it out in practice, feel free to skip ahead to the exercise. You can always come back and bone up on the details later on. If you are curious about the philosophy behind Stoic self-control, however, read on. We will begin by reviewing three concepts at the heart of Stoic philosophy: happiness, tranquillity, and judgment. We wrap things up with a discussion of the Stoic attitude towards everything outside of our control – in a word, fate.

**Happiness, Tranquillity, and Judgment**

We all want to live a happy life. Happiness is the whole point of doing philosophy, the Stoics claim. When the Stoics say ‘happiness’, however, they mean something more than just ‘feeling good’. We catch a glimpse of what the Stoics mean by happiness in the word that they used to talk about it. Even Roman Stoics, who spoke Latin, used a Greek word, *eudaimonia*, to refer to happiness. *Eudaimonia* is often translated as ‘flourishing’. It literally means ‘good spiritedness’, or ‘spiritual wellbeing’ (good (*eu*) spirit (*daemon*)).

*Eudaimonia* expresses very precisely what the Stoics mean by happiness. To appreciate this, we need to flesh out the spiritual dimensions of Stoic philosophy. How did the Stoics understand the human spirit? How did they understand its happiness?

1. **What is Happiness?**

The Stoic spirit is the rational part of the human soul. Reason, the Stoics argued, is a natural human capacity. The ability to think rationally is not just a skill or ability that some people happen to develop, but a power that human beings naturally possess by virtue of
being human. Rationality is the mark of our humanity. Mr Spock, the supremely rational Vulcan crewmate of the Starship Enterprise in Star Trek, would have confused Stoic philosophers no end, being both extremely rational and non-human. The Stoics never considered the possibility of rational aliens. In their view, the power of rational reflection is God’s gift to human beings alone.

It follows from this view that when we think rationally, we live out our human essence. We are fully human. This is the first point to keep in mind to appreciate Stoic happiness.

The second point to note is that our powers of rationality, while natural, are tenuous to say the least. Human beings do not always use their reason. We do not always behave in rational ways. We don’t think before we act, or else we do think but in misguided, irrational ways. Sometime we do things that are plain dumb. We give in to our animal nature. If we are in the mood, we’ll even celebrate the fact of being stupid.

Stoic philosophy won’t necessarily make you smarter. It teaches you, however, that there is no virtue in being stupid. Virtue, for the Stoics, derives from the use of reason. It follows that to lead a virtuous life, we need to check our tendency to lapse into irrationality. We need to check our drives, appetites, lusts and desires. This is the perennial human challenge, according to the Stoics: to use reason to combat irrational drives and passions, so that we remain, on the whole, more rational than not, more human than dumb old animal.

Lapsing into animal behaviour is a constant threat and temptation for us. Even when we devote ourselves to rational thought and action, we are constantly tempted by passions. We must actively resist giving into passions, the Stoics counsel. Passions disrupt our rational abilities, and we have no chance of enjoying lasting happiness so long as we allow this to happen. To enjoy the happiness that is the gift of human nature, we must protect ourselves from these urges. We must get our thinking straight. We must establish an inner vigilance and use reason to combat the passions.

The final point to appreciate about Stoic happiness has to do with how the Stoics understood the relationship between the human spirit and the divine world-spirit, or God. Here the properly religious dimensions of Stoic philosophy come into view. The Stoics were pagan philosophers. Their God was not the God of the Christian faith: an omnipotent ruler who watches us from a parallel world and adjudicates the affairs of humankind. The Stoic God exists in nature. Since we are part of nature, God exists in all
of us too. God is the rational spirit, or *Logos*, that governs nature and guides its law-like processes. This vision of a rational God in Nature framed the Stoic worldview and provided a religious backdrop to their quest for rational happiness.

The Stoic idea of God in Nature can be hard to understand. Imagine an enchanted conception of the laws of physics and you are on the right track. A more practical way of coming at the idea is to go out into the wilds and get in touch with Heraclitean flux. Accustom yourself to the cycles and patterns of life. There is a tacit order within the processes of life, and this order, the Stoics argue, is divine. When Seneca muses on the presence of God in a forest grove, he is thinking of the set of rationally ordered processes that have brought the grove into being. This set of rationally ordered processes *is* God. When Marcus Aurelius speaks of ‘living in accordance with nature’, as Stoic philosophers are wont to do, he is not talking about running naked through the woods. Marcus is expressing a religious intuition: the idea of bringing his human spirit into line with the divine world-spirit by cultivating the power of reason.

Now, here is a point worth thinking about. If reason is the expression of a God in Nature, and we achieve happiness through the use of reason, it follows that happiness is more than just a feeling. Happiness is a divine experience. Happiness is a pagan apotheosis.

2. **Passion and Tranquillity**

Stoic happiness is a tranquil experience. We feel tranquil because we are undisturbed by the kinds of concerns that usually bother us. Fear, anxiety, the yearning for recognition or success – these worries fade away. We feel grounded, centred, and present.

The Stoics called this state of being, *apatheia*. This literally means absence of passion.

On the face of it, absence of passion doesn’t sound very attractive. Why would anyone want to be passionless? Passions, after all, can be the source of tremendous joys in life. A life without passion sounds like a life without joy, and who would choose that? Considered in this light, Stoic tranquillity seems empty and cold. Certainly, the Stoics had a reputation for coldness. Seneca, when told that his son had died, reportedly said: ‘I was aware that I had sired a mortal’. No grief, no anguish – just rational detachment. Perfectly composed and inhumanly cold.
Seneca’s attitude to his son’s death reflects a remarkable level of self-control. But is this a state of mind that we’d want to aspire to? Focus and centeredness we certainly desire. But we wouldn’t want to achieve this at the price of extinguishing our emotional life.

Fortunately, Stoic tranquillity does not require us to extinguish our emotions altogether. This is a common mistake that people make about Stoic philosophy. The mistake is to assume that, for the Stoics, passions and emotions are the same thing, so that extinguishing one means extinguishing the other. This is incorrect. For the Stoics, passions and emotions are different things. We see this as soon as we reflect on the four main types of passion criticised by the Stoics: appetite, pleasure, fear, and distress.

Appetite, pleasure, fear, distress are familiar states. But they are not what we’d ordinarily consider emotions. Pleasure could refer to an emotion, depending on what kind of pleasure it is. Fear and distress are better understood as physiological responses that impact on our emotional lives. Appetite is clearly off the list. Emotions come from the heart, whereas appetite comes from the stomach. Appetite is the expression of a biophysical need. It is not an emotion, any more than thirst or sexual desire.

If you are used to thinking of passions and emotions as one and the same, you’ll find the Stoic idea of appetite as a passion confusing. If appetite is not an emotion, how could it be a passion? The Stoic answer is decisive. Appetite is a passion because it renders us passive to its demands. This is how the Stoics understood passions generally; passions make us passive. Passions are internal responses that take us over and enslave us, stripping us of the ability to run our lives rationally. A passion is any experience – emotion, sensation or desire – that overwhelms us and makes us submit to its demands. Any experience that does this – be it an emotion, sensation or desire – counts as a passion.

We see, then, that Stoic tranquillity, understood as absence of passion, does not require us to extinguish our emotions altogether. Emotions are fine – it is passions that we need to be worried about. Stoic tranquillity is freedom from a certain kind of extreme emotion, the kind of emotion that dominates us and controls our will. These extreme emotions are what we need to single out and eradicate in order to be happy. We do not need to extinguish our emotional life altogether.

One might protest: what is wrong with a few passions? Sure, we don’t want our lives to be governed by violent, uncontrollable, states and upheavals. But the fact is some passions can be positive and satisfying experiences. Take love for instance. Everyone wants to be consumed by mad passionate love at least once in their life. Love is the kind of agitated,
unruly, state that enhances life (if admittedly it does make us rather stupid at times). Is it really a mistake to give in to love? Most people would think not. Or take fear – a passion that is explicitly criticised by the Stoics. Biologists tell us that fear is a natural response to dangerous and distressing phenomena. If it weren’t for our instinctive fear of being hurt, we’d probably do all kinds of crazy things that put our lives at risk. Surely it is rational to be guided by fear, even while we resist being totally overcome by it? Kept in check, fear is the kind of passion that can contribute to a long and happy life.

This line of argument puts the Stoic in a tricky position. Ultimately, it poses a challenge to the idea that reason is the only natural and appropriate state for human beings to experience. When it comes down to it, we don’t need to get into this argument, since our concern is to flesh out the practical side of Stoic philosophy. Still, the Stoic answer is worth considering. The reason why we should avoid passions at all costs, the Stoics argue, is because human beings, as rational agents, are essentially active by nature. Reason is a causal power – it makes things happen in the world. If we are true to our nature, using reason in our relationships with things, then we too should be active agents, making things happen, rather than letting everything happen to us. Because passions make us passive, it becomes harder to stay active and creative the more that one lets passions take control. Passions work to prevent us from engaging true happiness in the form of rational tranquillity. Passions prevent us from using our reason to the fullest extent and enjoying the blissful experience of oneness with God and Nature.

I would recommend a moderate view on the passions. There is no harm in letting a little passion into your life. Passions can be thrilling, inspiring and satisfying experiences. Kept in check, they fire the heart and give colour to life. The Stoics are right, however, that we need to work at keeping our passions under control. Passions are liable to dictate our life if we let them run away with us. The practical insight behind Stoic philosophy makes sense. We need to make a habit of mastering our passions through the use of reason. To cultivate the self-control to deal with the surprises that life throws our way, we need to get a grip on our passions by applying the power within.

3. **Question your Judgment**

This brings us to the crux of the matter. How can we use reason to master the passions? To answer to this question, we need to recall a point about passion that I touched on earlier. Usually, when we get carried away by passions, it is because we have made a
judgment call about them. This is a judgment that says that we *ought* to feel passionately about whatever it is that has inspired the passionate response. If it is natural for human beings to master their passions, this judgment can only be irrational. Yet, time and time again, we make the mistake of amplifying our passions in this way. We inflame our passions through irrational judgments about the nature of the passion itself, judgments that say *it is right* to let the passion overcome us and affect us to the extreme.

Question your judgments – and get a grip!

When it comes to passions, we are our own worst enemies. We whip up passions into Category Five storms by feeding them small-minded, egocentric judgments. We sustain these storms well beyond their natural lifespan by insisting on the ‘rightness’ and ‘truth’ of our judgments, propping them up with whatever justifications come to mind. Usually, when we think critically about these judgments and justifications, we find that they are shallow and misled. But we constantly succumb to the heat of the moment and neglect our higher self. We feed our passions without realizing it. By forming irrational judgments about the things we feel passionately about, we turn minor incidents into major calamities. We get swept up in the passion, and the more we feel it, the more we believe in it. Before we know it, we are locked in the grip of an overwhelming experience.

Consider the road rage incident I recounted earlier in the chapter. My friend spent hours wracked with anger and indignation in the aftermath of this event. Had he taken a Stoic approach, he would have turned his focus back on himself, and asked why he thought the incident was worth getting upset about. By questioning the judgments he was making about the incident, he would have realized that it wasn’t that significant after all. The incident only seemed significant because he was telling himself it was so. Correcting this judgment would have gone a long way towards helping him eliminate the passion itself.

Most passions are fed by foolish impulses. If we think that these impulses are worth getting upset about, it is usually a sign that we are not thinking very clearly at all.

The key to taking Stoic self-control is to filter the implicit judgments that you make about sensations, emotions, and experiences. Mostly, when we get carried away by an experience, it is because, on some level, we have formed a judgment about this experience that doesn’t make sense. When we force ourselves to step back from the experience and reconsider the judgments that we make about it, we usually find that we can control the experience and assume a tranquil state of mind.
Here is a meaty example. Years ago, Fat Al, who owned the local burger bar, cooked up a monstrous feast of a meal, the Brontolicious burger. Many a night I’d stroll past Al’s and think to myself: ‘Now I could really go a Brontolicious!’ My rational mind would advise against it. But the moment that I smelt the onions and special sauce, I was a passive consumer. This started happening all the time. I was out of control – clogging-up my arteries with fat and packing on pounds. Inevitably, the burgers left me feeling bloated and ill. But I kept on eating, behaving like a fool. I was enslaved by my appetite, neglecting my rational self, and condemned, it seemed, to wasting my money on junk food.

Finally I took a Stoic approach to my Brontolicious habit. I realized that I could control my passion for Brontolicious burgers by correcting two irrational judgments that lurked behind it. The first judgment was that the burger would taste good. Sure, the burger tasted good going down, but afterwards I’d have to scrub my teeth to get the fatty taste out of my mouth. The second judgment was that the Brontolicious burger was value for money, at least what I’d paid for it. I was relatively solvent at the time, so this judgment was harder to get around. I had to ask myself: what counts as value for money? Is it mere quantity of fat and carbohydrates? Or should I expect some contribution to my health and wellbeing in exchange for my hard-earned cash? It didn’t take me long to see that the rational point of view came up trumps on both counts. This left me with two irrational judgments that I needed to change in order to kick my Brontolicious habit for good.

By addressing the judgments that informed my desire, I managed to transform the nature of the desire itself. Happily, I am no longer enslaved by a passion for Brontolicious burgers. The monkey part of my brain still fires up the salival glands whenever I smell fried onions and special sauce wafting down the street. But the rational part of my mind has learned how to control the desire, and consequently, I can study the desire in an objective, disinterested way. I acknowledge my desire for Brontolicious burgers, but it is no longer a passion. The desire no longer controls me. I control it and I am free.

Fate Happens. Deal with It

Stoic philosophers were the first to see how our judgments and beliefs shape our emotional lives. They understood how an irrational judgment could turn an isolated incident into an all-consuming passion. This idea is commonplace among psychologists today. It forms the basis of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), a popular and effective form of psychological treatment. CBT shows us how to redress and correct the irrational
judgments at the basis of distressing and disturbing experiences. By changing our thinking, we can change how we are affected by life itself.

Of course, we can’t control life itself. We can’t control the world. The world is vast, unruly, and massively beyond our control. It constantly reminds us of this by impeding on our lives, shoving us this way and that. The Stoics had a name for this violent realm of forces beyond our control. They called it fate. Human beings are like rafters on the river of fate, carried along by an endless buffet of causes and effects beyond their control. The best that we can do is to prepare ourselves for the ride, mentally and spiritually. We need to cultivate self-control. We need to cultivate our rational powers so as to maintain a tranquil state of mind through the peaks and troughs of fate.

First and foremost, we must learn to see fate as neither good nor bad. Fate happens – that’s all there is to it. We must learn to become indifferent to fate.

Achieving this state of indifference presents the greatest challenge to our rational powers. But it is a battle worth fighting, for the victory at stake is happiness itself.

Marcus Aurelius (121-180AD), the Stoic Emperor of Rome, summed up the Stoic attitude to life and fate in a remarkable passage in his notebooks. Marcus writes:

In a man’s life, his time is a mere instant, his existence a flux, his perception fogged, his bodily composition rotting, his mind a whirligig, his fortune unpredictable, his fame unclear. In short, all things of the body stream away like a river, all things of the mind are dreams and delusion; life is warfare, and a visit to a strange land; the only lasting fame is oblivion.

What then can escort us on our way? One thing and one thing only: philosophy. This consists in keeping the divine part within us [reason] inviolate and free from harm, [so that we are] master of pleasure and pain, doing nothing without aim, truth, or integrity, and independent of others’ action or failure to act. ... This is in accordance with nature: and nothing harmful is in accordance with nature. (M, 2.16)

Marcus’ last point in this passage is hard to accept. Nothing harmful in nature? Try telling that to the survivors of the 2011 Sendai tsunami in Japan, or the 2010 floods in Pakistan, which killed thousands and displaced millions of people. Try telling it to people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened each day by plagues, storms, and wild animals. If there is nothing harmful in nature, why do we constantly try to protect ourselves from the elements? Of course nature is harmful. To claim that it is not is patently absurd.
These objections are valid, but they miss the point that Marcus wants to make. Let us not forget that Nature, for the Stoics, is rational and divine. Nature, Marcus is saying, does not intend to do us harm. When it comes down to it, the perception of harm is something that human beings bring to events. If we think of nature as a harmful force, it is because we interpret natural events as harmful. Couldn’t we try to change our point of view? The Stoic way of life is proof that it is possible to do it. Once we overcome our fear of death, we find that everything in nature is as it should be. It is the crooked wood of humanity that needs correction. As Marcus put it in the Meditations:

Let any external thing happen … I myself am not harmed unless I judge this occurrence to be bad: and I can refuse to do so. (M, 7.14)

The Stoic attitude towards fate is crystallized in their famous anecdote about the dog and cart. Imagine a dog tied to a moving cart, the Stoics say. Can the dog be happy, condemned as it is to trot with the cart this way and that? Certainly, the Stoics reply – so long as the dog learns to be indifferent to its fate. Instead of struggling against its bonds, the dog should focus its energies on cultivating its peace of mind (we are, of course, envisaging here a special dog with human powers!). Being tied to a cart is ultimately neither good nor bad. It is thinking that decides the matter. The Stoic dog should focus its energies on the only power it has to control the world – rational judgment – and bravely keep pace with the cart, as if to say: ‘Hey, being tied to a cart – it’s a way of life!’

Indeed, what is the alternative? If the dog does not follow, it will be dragged in any case. The best that it can do is to learn to be indifferent to fate. Epictetus put it this way:

Do not ask things to happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do, and your life will go smoothly. (D, 290)

Being indifferent to fate doesn’t mean being apathetic about life. The Stoic sage is ‘apathetic’ in the sense that he or she is liberated from passions. This, however, doesn’t mean that the sage feels nothing at all and stops caring about life, abandoning all attempts to improve his or her lot. It is rational that a dog tied to a cart would look for opportunities to escape its situation. Being tied to a cart is an unpleasant fate, and certain to inspire ugly passions. If the goal of life is to purge oneself of passions, it makes sense for the dog to try to escape the cart. This is a rational thing to do. So too is it rational for the Stoic to try to change his or her lot, if this will help them achieve a state of happiness.
The Stoic philosopher seeks to be apathetic in the sense of tranquil, free from passion. To achieve this state of mind, they will often need to intervene in life and change it.

Yet what if there is no better life to hope for? What if the dog finds that there is no escaping the cart? Should it vent its frustration in howls and cries and collapse in a state of despair? This would be to lapse into passivity. Moreover, such a response would only make the dog’s life more unpleasant. Bemoaning one’s bad luck is so much wasted energy. It is more rational to conserve one’s energy and to use it to cultivate an inner control.

Focus on what you can control and shrug off what you can’t. You’ll find that when fate throws an opportunity your way, you are in a much better position to catch it.
Exercise Two: The Power Within

Get a grip on yourself. Cultivate tranquillity with Stoic self-control.

Summary: For this exercise, you’ll need a pen or pencil and a Control chart (see Appendix). The aim of the exercise is to show you how to cultivate Stoic self-control by distinguishing those things that you can control from those things that you can’t.

Epictetus never missed an opportunity to consolidate his self-control. Each morning as he walked through Nicopolis, he would put this question to everything that crossed his path:

‘Is this within my power of control?’

Epictetus put this question to every thought, every feeling, every experience and encounter along the way. All the while, he repeated the Stoic teaching like a mantra:

‘There is one thing that I know I can control – my judgments and responses to things’.

When Epictetus found he was becoming anxious or concerned, he’d apply his power of self-control to overcome these negative feelings. To everything outside his control, Epictetus said:

‘This has nothing to do with me, since it is beyond my control. It is fate and I shall treat it with indifference’.

By identifying all the things that he couldn’t control, and cultivating an indifference towards them, Epictetus was able to focus his energies on what he could control: his judgments and responses to things. In this way, Epictetus turned his morning walk into a spiritual exercise that helped him cultivate the power within.

By the time Epictetus reached the villa in which his students awaited him, he was no longer troubled by fear and anxiety. He was a picture of tranquillity.

Let’s take self-control the Stoic way. Follow the steps below as carefully as you can.

STEP 1. Think of some recent events or experiences that have made you feel anxious, stressed, or depressed. For the purpose of this exercise, the more distressful, the better.

STEP 1.1. Draw up a Control Chart. Write the events or experiences in the left-hand column of the chart.

FOR EXAMPLE:
**STEP 2.** Reflect on each of these events and experiences in turn. Ask with respect to each of them:

*Does this represent something that I can control?*

**STEP 2.1.** Put this question to each of the events or experiences in the left-hand column of the chart. Now select from the following options:

**Option A.** If you think that the event or experience represents something that you can control, place a tick in the opposite cell of the chart.

**Option B.** If you think the event or experience represents something that you can’t control, place a cross in the opposite cell of the chart.

**Option C.** If you think there are aspects of the event or experience that you can control and aspects that you can’t, place a tick and a cross in the opposite cell of the chart.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES</th>
<th>CAN/CAN’T CONTROL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was upset by a story I heard on the morning news</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argued with my mother on the phone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the way to work, another car cut me off – it made me FURIOUS!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed over for promotion (again!)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Was upset by a story I heard on the morning news ✓

Argued with my mother on the phone ✓

On the way to work, another car cut me off – it made me FURIOUS! ✗ ✓

Passed over for promotion (again!) ✗ ✓

**STEP 3.** The Stoics argue that the only things we can reliably control in life are our judgments and responses. There are many things in the world that we can try to control. But our judgments and responses are the only things that we can control for certain.

Have you taken a Stoic approach to filling out your Control Chart? If not, go back and revise your judgments. Practice, as they say, makes perfect.

**STEP 4.** To this point, the exercise should have helped you bring into focus what is and what is not within your sphere of control. This is a vital procedure, since it amounts to distinguishing what truly belongs to you (the power of rationality) from what isn’t yours and belongs in the province of fate.

**STEP 4.1.** Look at the crosses on your chart. Each cross represents something that is beyond your control. Try to visualize precisely what it is, in each case, that is beyond your control. Say with respect to these things:

‘I can’t control this so it ought not to concern me. It is fate and I shall learn to accept it’.

**STEP 4.2.** Look at the ticks on your chart. Each of these ticks reflects an opportunity for you to take self-control by correcting the judgments you make that inflame your passionate responses. Say with respect to each of these opportunities:

‘Here I have the chance to control myself by cultivating the power within. Henceforth, by rationally correcting my judgments, this is what I shall try to do’.

You can’t control someone else’s driving, or your boss’s decision to promote someone else ahead of you. But you can control the judgments that you make about these events and thus how you think and feel about them. Take Marcus Aurelius’ advice:
Let any external thing that so wishes happen … I myself am not harmed unless I judge this occurrence to be bad: and I can refuse to do so. (M, 7.14)

There are all sorts of ways that you can rationally correct your judgments. No one approach will suit every situation. Try to be inventive. If you are looking for suggestions, Marcus’ *Meditations* is a good place to find inspiration.

- Often we only need to put our problems into perspective. Marcus suggests:

  Think of the whole of existence, of which you are the tiniest part; think of the whole of time, in which you have been assigned a brief and fleeting moment; think of destiny – what fraction of that are you? (M, 5.24)

- Sometimes we need to resist adopting the same irrational patterns of thought that we see in others. Marcus advises:

  When someone does you wrong, do not judge things as he interprets them or would like you to interpret them. Just see them as they are, in plain truth. (M, 4.11)

- Change and death are part of the fabric of the universe. Instead of worrying about them, try seeing them as laws of a divine order. Marcus on change:

  All things are in a process of change. You yourself are subject to constant alteration and gradual decay. So too is the whole universe. (M, 9.19)

  Marcus on death:

  Many grains of incense on the same altar. One falls to ash first, another later: no difference. (M, 4.15)

**Lesson two:** Control your judgments and disregard everything beyond your control as fate. This is how you can enjoy a Stoic life of inner peace and tranquillity. Stoic self-control helps prepare us for the shocks and blows of change. It is a vital part of the resilience that is required to deal with change actively and effectively.
3. Power Up: Celebrate Your Unique Potential

When I was five, I thought I was capable of anything. I was a bit of a dreamer as a kid. Most of the time, my dreams outstripped my ability to achieve them. Still, looking back, my childhood was probably one of the most satisfying periods of my life. As the years turned into decades, I found it became harder to sustain the optimistic, future-focused outlook on life that I’d had as a child. It seems the more that one learns about life, the less one believes that one is capable of achieving. This chapter outlines the affirmative vision of life that turned my head around before it was too late. It is appropriate that I begin by telling you a little more about my early years and how I came to embrace this life changing vision.

I grew up in the coastal suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand through the nineteen seventies and eighties. It is hard to imagine a more peaceful environment for a kid. Auckland runs north and south on a thin strip of land dividing the Pacific Ocean, on the one side, from the Tasman Sea, on the other. My childhood stomping ground was a greenbelt suburb in east Auckland, ringed by farmland and bush, and flanked by pristine Pacific coast. In later years it would be overrun by highways, shopping malls and endless suburban sprawl. At the time it was like a 100% New Zealand ad with a seventies soundtrack. It was a great place to begin a life.

I was a mobile kid. The suburb in which I grew up was springing out of the fields and full of empty streets. My friends and I had the freedom to run, ride and skate rampant. We grew up gliding down newly tarred avenues, as the subdivisions conquered the wilderness. The older we got, the further afield we travelled, ever sure of Ed Hillary’s dictum: ‘Nothing venture, nothing win’. Packed into old Fords and Toyotas, we’d drive out into the country or to a lonely beach. We’d snorkel over kelp and oyster-encrusted shelves, hunting for fish and lobsters. We’d swim out to islands, climb tall cliffs and trees, wade through rivers and beat lonely pathways into the bush.

*Amor fati.* Thank you, fate. This was my childhood and I am happy to affirm it.

One great thing about growing up in suburban Auckland in the seventies is that I was shielded from most of the anxieties and concerns that kids in bigger, busier parts of the
world have to deal with. I was happy-go-lucky and free to dream. Rather than be content with my lot, I fantasized about life in distant lands. Like my childhood hero, Luke Skywalker, I dreamed about a world where the Empire ruled with an iron fist and brave mercenaries and buccaneers made their livings in the shadowy corners of society. By the time I was old enough to appreciate what real life was about, my imagination had expanded out of proportion to my circumstances. Like my Dad’s motorbike, my dreams were just too big for me. I didn’t just want to ride that bike, you see. I wanted to blast it through a hole in the sky into a forgotten world full of spaceships, monsters and heroes.

Spaceships and monsters no longer hold the same attraction for me. Heroes and heroism, on the other hand, are fascinating themes. I have learned over the years that heroes don’t always fight with lightsabers or ride giant black motorbikes. Sometimes they don’t look very exciting at all. Heroes are people with the courage and self-possession to step up to the mark when life calls their name. Heroes don’t step up because they’ve got something to prove. They step up because they’ve got something to be.

Sometimes you need to test yourself against adversity to become what you are capable of being. This is what heroes do. Adversity is the element of heroic existence.

Children tend to live more heroic lives than their parents. As adults, we reach an age at which we feel more or less satisfied with who we are and what we have become in life. We slip into comfort zones. We stop challenging ourselves and we stop learning and growing as a result. From a child’s perspective, the challenges of life may seem far in the future. But most kids know that somehow, someday, life is going to call their name. Around the time that the child becomes a teenager, a question that has been bubbling away in the back of his or her mind finally becomes explicit: ‘What am I going to be in life?’

With this question, the child becomes an adult. With possibility comes choice, and with choices come decisions. Our whole moral existence unfolds from the moment that we take our first heroic step into the future and ask what we are capable of being.

I didn’t find out what I was capable of being until the ripe old age of twenty four. After years of indolence and misdirection, I finally made it to university. I stumbled wide-eyed into class and fell in love with philosophy. At the time, I barely knew what philosophy was. By the end of the first semester, I was hooked. The fact that a discipline like philosophy existed amazed me. Here were a bunch of adults sitting around sharing an
intuition that I had nurtured since childhood: the universe is a strange and amazing place. It felt like coming home. I threw myself into my studies and I have never looked back.

I have never looked back with regret, at least. It is a valuable exercise to review one’s life every now and again, to polish up memories of positive experiences and get a fix on the trajectory that one is taking into the future. When I look back, it is clear that what inspired me about philosophy wasn’t just the people I met or the things that we discussed. Philosophy as a discipline empowered me. Philosophy empowered me in ways that I’d never expected.

The rigors of philosophy helped sharpen my powers of thought and critique. Thinking became an art and ultimately a source of pleasure. Discussing ethical questions helped focus my sense of value and expanded my realm of moral concerns. I became aware of injustices in the world, which changed the way that I felt about life and how I should engage with it too. A dialogical discipline, philosophy opened the possibility of exciting new friendships and conversations, which made for fascinating parties, if nothing else. Most significantly for me at the time, the prospect of a career in philosophy presented me with a set of opportunities that seemed infinitely greater to anything I’d assumed was my lot growing up in Auckland, New Zealand. Suddenly the future was an open horizon.

My friends thought I was discovering my inner nerd. The truth is I was discovering my unique potential and the chance of a heroic existence.

Philosophy can’t change the world. But philosophy can change your experience of the world and open it up in a new way. Philosophy can increase your capacity to think, feel, do and be. This is how philosophy can be empowering.

Homo Potens

Empowerment is a word with many meanings. I would like to propose a philosophical definition. We are empowered when we have the capacity to act and experience life in some way. We are empowered through having the capacity to think, feel, do and be.

Thinking, feeling, doing and being are the building blocks of human experience. Together they encompass an incredible range of human abilities. If we located all the different species in the world on a graph showing their relative powers, with insects and reptiles with basic sensory and motor functions at the one end of the graph, and the higher
primates with rudimentary cognitive and affective powers at the other end, human powers would be off the scale. Of all living creatures, only humans have the power to seize on an issue and think it through; to attune themselves empathetically to the needs and desires of other human and non-human creatures; to respond to a situation with a complex and deliberate set of actions, which can include speaking of the situation; to assume a social role and become a certain sort of person in a social context.

We call our species *homo sapiens*, the wise man. We might just as well call ourselves *homo potens*, the powerful man. Wisdom is only one of our powers. It is all too rarely applied.

We use our powers from the moment that we wake up until the moment that we fall asleep. However, on account of the familiarity of our powers, we tend to overlook them. If we lack power in the sense of authority, we can easily come to assume that we don’t have any powers at all, and that the notion of empowerment doesn’t apply to us. This is a terrible mistake. Our powers may be limited, but no one is powerless. Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out that even locked in a cell we have the power to think and dream, to process memories, to struggle and resist. It is vitally important that we recognize our powers and use them. For the sake of living a rich and fulfilling life, nothing has greater value.

The first step is to admit that you are a powerful being. You may not feel powerful. But the fact is it is true.

Say it now: *I am homo potens*. Celebrate your powers and use them.

To get perspective on our powers, it helps to reflect on the condition of someone who is disempowered, who lacks the ability to act and engage with life. Take a newborn baby, for instance. A baby can wriggle, cry, eat and excrete. It may be brimming over with potential, but its capacity to think, feel, do and be is distinctly limited. This changes as nature and nurture run their course. Soon the baby learns to recognize its mother or caregiver. In doing so it acquires a power that it didn’t have before – the capacity for mental association. The baby learns to associate its mother or caregiver with feeding time, and as a result it feels joy when the mother or caregiver is around. This capacity to associate one thing with another reflects a new level of empowerment. The child is developing its powers to think, feel, do and be. From this point on, its ability to live, act and experience the world will rapidly increase.
Superhero stories offer a wealth of insights into empowerment. Consider the tale of Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spiderman. At the start of the Spiderman saga, Peter is a geeky high school student. On a trip to a science show, he is bitten by a radioactive spider, and the next thing he knows he can spin webs, climb walls and swing from tall buildings. Peter finds himself equipped with a whole new set of spider-powers, and anyone who has seen the Spiderman movies knows just how keen he is to use them! Soon Peter is swinging about New York looking for evil-doers to test his powers on. He has gone from being the high school geek to a 'can do' superhero! Positive psychology, we should note, had nothing to do with it. The fact is that Peter’s new powers give him a heightened sense of confidence and ability. Not only can Peter *do* things that he couldn’t do before. He is capable of *being* something that he’d previously only dreamed of being – a superhero. That is the real kick. It is no wonder that Peter Parker is hell bent on exploring his heightened capacity to exist.

No one knows the full extent of their powers. The adventure of life is to find out. Discovering what we are capable of thinking, feeling, doing and being is a thrilling experience. The only thing that tops it is finding that we are capable of *more* than we expected. These moments are high points in life. We should cherish these moments and do everything we can to create them. The good news is that it is possible to use change in this way. By testing ourselves in contexts of change, it is possible to discover new powers that add to our potential and expand our capacity for being.

Often when life changes our sense of empowerment goes out the window. If you are used to working in a certain way, it can be hard to see the future when the context shifts. By tackling changes in a philosophical way, it is possible to turn moments of change into unexpected opportunities. This might involve using Stoic self-control to stay focused and calm while others run screaming. It might involve yanking yourself up by the bootstraps by taking an Existentialist approach to life. Ultimately, it will involve seizing the moment, confronting it from the perspective of an individual who is ready to learn and grow, and treating the situation as a springboard from which to launch yourself into the future.

Never assume that you know the sum total of your powers. Everyone has the ability to expand their powers to think, feel, do and be. Often all we need is the right situation to unlock our resources. Change can be a door to a different world and philosophy the key.

**Power Tools**
In the next section, we will look at the life and work of Friedrich Nietzsche, history’s greatest philosopher of empowerment. Before moving on, it is worth casting our eye back over what we have learned so far, and asking how it can contribute to an empowered approach to life and change. We have explored Stoic and Existentialist tools for cultivating personal resilience. How might these tools help us take an empowered approach to life and change? How might they empower us in contexts of change, helping us to deal with change in active and creative ways? How might they enable moments of vision, enabling us to transform our perspective on change from ‘crisis’ to ‘opportunity’?

Consider the following scenario:

The company you work for has been purchased by a corporation with some bizarre management and team-building practices. Your schedule is constantly interrupted by wacky games and exercises promoting teamwork and communication. You have always been happy working independently and you can’t see the need for these extravagant exercises.

How can philosophy help you cope?

Stoic self-control is an obvious response to this situation. This, as we’ve seen, involves more than just ‘toughening up’ and taking things on the chin. It is a matter of learning to think differently about situations by critically assessing the judgments that one makes about them. So you are not a team player? Why not? What point of view informs your distaste for team-building activities? What implicit judgments lurk behind your gut response to run screaming when your boss breaks out the crayons and party hats? The key question from a Stoic point of view is: are these judgments rational or irrational ones? No doubt you’d like to see your judgments as rational, but are they really? Here is a question to ask: do they help you maintain a calm and balanced state of mind? According to the Stoics, a calm and balanced state of mind is a natural state for human beings to enjoy. If you are experiencing anything other than this, chances are you are making some irrational judgments that are messing with your point of view.

Do yourself a favor. Root out these judgments and change them. You may never understand why you require team-building exercises in the workplace. Ultimately, though, you are better off withstanding the mounting sense of loathing you feel as your supervisor starts a conga line about the office, than succumbing to it.

Having the capacity to take control of your state of mind is intrinsically empowering. Stoic self-control gives you the focus and centeredness that you need to deal with challenges in
life. By applying Stoic principles, you can shift your perspective on difficult situations, so that you are not overcome by reactive emotions and can devote your energies to identifying what is positive and useful in the situation. If you make Stoicism part of your life, you’ll find that it opens up all sorts of new opportunities, helping you focus on the important things in life, like happiness, discovery and growth.

Stoicism is not the only approach we could take to this situation. We might also think about the situation from a Heraclitean point of view. Heraclitus reminds us that the world is constantly changing and that we are changed with it. Adopting this point of view helps us to become more accepting of change in life generally. So your boss is dancing about the office – what of it? Seek the path of least resistance. Go with the flow. Change is the warp and woof of life. Sometimes we need to change just to keep learning and growing.

Existentialism offers another empowering point of view. In this case, you would recall our tendency to forget that our time on Earth is limited and how this leads us to slip into comfort zones, which offer support but which can also be constraining. Perhaps part of the reason for your hostility towards team-building exercises is that they push you out of your comfort zone and challenge your self-identity in the process. Ask yourself: does my resistance to team-building exercises come from a place of courage, or am I paralyzed by the lack of it? The Existentialist would say: seize the day! Who knows – perhaps cavorting about the office will be a defining moment in your life? You should see this moment of change as an opportunity to shape your life, rather than letting life shape you. This is what a hero would do and an Existentialist philosopher too.

Let’s try another scenario.

You like to socialize, but only with ‘the gang’. Now the gang have left town and you’ve resigned yourself to the quiet life. Your significant other is over it:

‘You complain that we have no friends but you refuse to go out and meet new people! What is your problem?’

You think: ‘What is my problem?’ Perhaps it’s time to change.

How might philosophy help you get off the couch and out into the world again? Stoicism can help you make a start. Perhaps part of the reason why you feel reluctant to go out and meet new people is that you feel anxious around strangers. The Stoic philosopher would advise you to identify the judgments that underlie your anxiety and ask how sensible they
really are. Inevitably there will be a different way of looking at things that can help you change your point of view. You may have convinced yourself, for example, that socializing is hard work. Is this really true? Meeting people is challenging, sure, but it is also replete with opportunities. Once you have identified what is inspiring and empowering in a conversation, it is easy to keep it going.

The way to shift your thinking on challenging tasks is to focus on the opportunities they present, rather than just the challenges. By taking control of your perspective on life, you can change the way that you understand the challenges you face, and the way you feel about them too.

But perhaps what is keeping you at home has nothing to do with anxiety or effort. Perhaps you are not afraid of strangers at all. Perhaps you just can’t see the point of adding new people to your life? Such as it is… Here Existentialist philosophy provides an empowering point of view. Are you sure that you are living the best life possible? Perhaps your time with the gang, pleasurable as it was, actually served to distract you from the important things in life? Perhaps, without realizing it, you have slipped into in a comfort zone that now lacks promise or sociable companionship (your significant other notwithstanding). Perhaps it is time to shake things up. Perhaps it is time for change.

Are you living to your potential? Existentialist philosophy challenges you to face this question and think it through. Confronting death the Existentialist way forces you to contend with the meaning of life. It leads you to acknowledge your full range of powers, and take personal responsibility for achieving your dreams.

Philosophical wisdom is empowering stuff. Given a practical spin, philosophical insights open up new perspectives that can literally change your life. Sometimes a new perspective is all we need in order to turn our life around. Rather than try and fail to deal with our problems in the old ways, we find a new approach that we hadn’t considered before. This can be a life changing experience. When a situation reveals unexpected possibilities, tackling that situation becomes a positive challenge and adventure.

Take that insight and brand it onto your brain. Tattoo it on the insides of your eyelids, so that when you close your eyes to the challenges of life, you know precisely what to look for when you open them again.

Nietzsche: Philosopher of Power
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) knew all about the adventure of philosophy. Philosophy, for Nietzsche, was a vehicle of empowerment, and life was a road upon which to test that vehicle at the greatest possible speed. Nietzsche had no time for the gentle life of the German bourgeoisie. The stultifying safety of middle-class existence, in Nietzsche’s view, was comparable to the life of cattle or sheep. Against the reason of his day, Nietzsche recommended the warrior’s life. It is only under the conditions of greatest adversity that we are able to discover what we are truly capable of being. Nietzsche declared:

[B]elieve me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is – to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors as long as you cannot be rulers and possessors, you seekers of knowledge!

(GS, §283)

Nietzsche’s life was shaped by his attitude towards adventure and risk. His philosophical ideas provide the perfect set of tools for embarking on a life-long adventure. However, Nietzsche’s ardent approach to life set him on a single-minded course that was ultimately too much for him to bear. Nietzsche’s final descent into madness offers a salutary reminder of how important it is to diversify our powers and options when dealing with change. There is one thing worse than being caught in a comfort zone and that is being caught in a discomfiture zone. This is where Nietzsche’s journey led him, with tragic results.

Nietzsche was at war with his times. To understand his struggle, we need to understand the world in which he lived. Nietzsche’s nineteenth century was a time of industry and transformation. Germany was a major industrial and colonial power, unified under Emperor Wilhelm I. European society was being reshaped from within by the emerging middle class, while the working class railed against their conditions and dreamed of revolution as they browsed the works of Karl Marx. One way or another, everyone was looking ahead, inspired by the possibilities of science, democracy, socialism and progress.

Nietzsche smelled something rotten at the base of it. He peeled back the layers of polite conversation and unveiled a simple truth. There was no place for God in this brave new world of science and progress. Indeed, most progressives didn’t see a need to make a place for God because they no longer believed in Him. This reflected a major social and cultural shift. God had effectively ruled European society through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through his emissaries in the Church and State. Religious faith had shaped and colored life at all levels of society, from the rituals of the King’s court to the
observances of the working poor. But God had been sidelined, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the rise of science and the secular state, which had undercut the power of the Church. By Nietzsche’s time, God had become a private matter, if not a superstition. God took ill the day that it became acceptable to question His existence in polite company. He went into seizure the day that science established that it was a better guide to reality than faith. ‘God is dead’, Nietzsche declared. ‘All of us are His murderers’ (GS, §125).

People often assume that Nietzsche sought to dance on the grave of God. Nietzsche’s position is actually more interesting and complex. Certainly, Nietzsche believed that the death of God opened up amazing possibilities for free thought. ‘At long last the horizon appears free to us again’, Nietzsche enthused. ‘[T]he sea, our sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never been such an “open sea”’ (GS, §343). Yet, Nietzsche also perceived that the death of God threatened Western nations with a moral malaise. For centuries, the idea of God had provided a metaphysical underpinning for moral values. Without this underpinning, Nietzsche surmised, the moral values of mainstream society would come to seem arbitrary and false. Already, in Nietzsche’s time, leading thinkers were questioning core values that had maintained the social order for centuries. Darwin, Marx and Dostoyevsky were discussing morality in evolutionary, economic and existential terms. Soon, Nietzsche argued, morality would be revealed for what it truly was: a human invention. And what then, Nietzsche wondered? Nihilism, he answered in his final books.

‘What does nihilism mean? The highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why” finds no answer’ (WP, §2). If God is dead, everything is permitted.

Nihilism was the problem that Nietzsche sought to respond to in his work. Behind the myriad changes that were taking place in nineteenth century society, there was a cultural shift that few were attending to: the implosion of the Christian moral value system. This was no small event. All across Europe and the world, people were being affected by the shift without realizing it. Fascism, anarchism and pessimism were on the rise. Meaninglessness and absurdity were being celebrated as serious intellectual positions. Meanwhile, middle class society bubbled along, oblivious to the problem. Nietzsche looked ahead and saw a crisis on the horizon. If nothing were done, he realized, the twentieth century would know the most terrible wars that the world had ever seen.

The wars came and they were terrible indeed. Nietzsche, who died in 1900, never saw how Nazi ideologists twisted his philosophy, substituting a jackbooted thug for his vision of
the value-creating Overman. For our purposes, the most interesting thing about Nietzsche as a historical figure is the way that he responded to the crisis that he saw taking shape around him. Nietzsche’s response is exemplary. Nietzsche not only identifies the crisis – he seeks to transform it, to turn it around. Nietzsche sought to recast the death of God as an incredible opportunity. If the death of God had undermined traditional moral values, Nietzsche reflected, it was necessary to create a new value system to take their place. This is where Nietzsche perceived his destiny. Drawing on his prodigious intellectual powers, Nietzsche set out to develop a new system of moral evaluation and to explain how it could lift human beings to a new evolutionary level. He called this moral framework will to power.

Will to power is a tool for cultivating new values in a world that has been drained of value through the collapse of the Christian value system.

We will consider Nietzsche’s philosophy of will to power in the next section. For the time being, I’d like to focus on how Nietzsche’s response to the death of God bears out precisely the kind of optimistic, creative attitude that we should try to cultivate towards change in life generally. Confronted with a crisis situation, Nietzsche displays remarkable resilience. He courageously affirms the situation as a challenge that defines the meaning of his life. Creatively rethinking the situation, Nietzsche recasts the death of God as a personal opportunity – an opportunity to draw on his most valued powers and use them. Bravely confronting the changes that he sees happening about him, Nietzsche asks: How could I use this situation to change my life for the better? How could I use this moment of change to launch myself into a life-defining adventure?

Nietzsche’s story illustrates the proactive attitude that we need to make change a positive challenge. Confronted with an unexpected situation, one should always ask: ‘How could I use my powers to turn this situation into the perfect opportunity?’ It takes courage to treat change in this way. It takes self-control to master the confusing impulses that can distract us from seizing the opportunities of the moment. Most importantly, as Nietzsche would underscore, it takes a good sense of our powers, our unique capacities to think, feel, do and be. We have seen how Existential courage and Stoic self-control can help us engage with change in bold and decisive ways. Courage and self-control are initial components of the tool kit that we need to assemble to make the most of change. To deal with change actively and creatively, we need to engage it with our whole person, our full set of powers. We need to bring our whole person to bear in every new situation in order to maximize our chance of unlocking it and revealing the unique opportunities.
The first lesson to take from Nietzsche’s story is: Get in touch with your powers. Cultivate your will to power.

The second lesson to take from Nietzsche’s tale is a lesson that Nietzsche overlooked. It concerns the value of an agile approach to change. Through the 1880s, Nietzsche focused all his energy on creatively addressing the death of God. Applying his prodigious intellectual powers, he sought to convert this crisis into an opportunity. The scale of the task placed a strain on Nietzsche’s health. At the same time, a mysterious illness that Nietzsche had contracted during his time as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian war was getting worse. Stricken by migraine headaches and incessant bouts of vomiting, Nietzsche found it harder and harder to work. The string of philosophical masterpieces that he produced in this decade, including *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *The Genealogy of Morals* is amazing. Yet there were few readers for his work. Nietzsche was too far ahead of his time. His publications sold poorly if they sold at all. Most people thought he was a nutcase.

Nietzsche ploughed on resiliently. If he had found ways of escaping his work, perhaps by relaxing with friends or exploring different forms of creative activity, he might have avoided the worst to come. But Nietzsche focused single-mindedly on his philosophical struggle. The pressure was too much. In the end it broke him.

In 1889, Nietzsche was in Turin, Italy, when he saw a cart driver flogging a horse. He ran across the street, threw his arms about the horse’s neck, and collapsed in a fit of tears. He had suffered a complete nervous breakdown. After firing off a series of frenzied letters to friends, signing them as ‘Dionysus’ and ‘The Crucified’, Nietzsche slipped into a catatonic depression. The Overman would not return. Nietzsche’s mother and sister nursed him until his death of pneumonia in 1900.

Diversify yourself. Diversify your powers and be agile in their application. This is the second lesson that we should take from Nietzsche’s tale. To flourish and thrive through times of change, we need to cultivate a diverse set of powers and apply them vigorously. Nietzsche focused exclusively on his philosophical powers. If he had diversified himself, he may not have suffered his tragic fate. When his audience failed to emerge, he should have worked up another set of powers, applied himself differently, and tried to take his life in new directions. But Nietzsche was caught in an intellectual discomfort zone and committed to a single form of empowering identity.
In the last analysis, Nietzsche lacked the agility we need to make the best of life and change. We will pick up on this point in Chapter four, where we explore strategies for cultivating personal agility through friendship and social relations.

**Nietzsche’s Toolkit**

Nietzsche was an intellectual toolsmith. The best way to understand his books is to see them as toolkits for empowered living. This section looks at two of Nietzsche’s most famous tools: the will to power and the eternal return. Our aim is to learn how to use these tools so that we can put them to use in Exercise three.

### 1. Will to Power

Let us start by getting one thing straight. Will to power is not a drive to dominate people and things. It is not a desire to be alpha dog and leader of the pack. Hitler read Nietzsche in this way, but he was wrong. Hitler’s mistake was to equate ‘power’ with political authority. This is not how Nietzsche understood power. Power, for Nietzsche, is *existential capacity* – the capacity to act and exist. Zarathustra (the hero of Nietzsche’s masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) is a humble sage. He is the teacher of the Overman and the will to power, but he isn’t interested in political authority. When the people in the marketplace mock Zarathustra and run him out of town, he doesn’t respond by raising an army and invading them. He wanders the earth, dancing and singing, offering joyful wisdom to whoever will listen: *cultivate your will to power*.

Thinking, reflecting, talking, listening, singing and dancing are all powers, in Nietzsche’s sense. They are existential capacities – capacities to act and exist. To look at a painting or listen to a piece of music and feel the sentiment that is conveyed by it – this is an existential capacity. To be able to produce a painting or write a piece of music is an even greater capacity. To perform a task with the facility and proficiency that leads others to say that you are a genuine example of this or that kind of person – butcher, baker or candlestick maker – this is an existential capacity. You are applying existential capacities right now in reading this text: the capacity to recognize symbols as words and to derive meaning from these words, perhaps relating them to personal experiences in life; the capacity to remember the content of past chapters and to link it to the present discussion, perhaps projecting forward an idea of where the discussion is headed, or anticipating an outcome to be revealed down the track.
All these things are powers, in Nietzsche’s sense. We are empowered through having the capacity to think, feel, do and be.

To desire power, in Nietzsche’s sense, is not a sign of weakness or corruption. To ‘will’ power is the natural response of a healthy animal to the myriad opportunities that life presents it. Will to power is the drive and desire experienced by all living creatures to employ those powers that make them feel uniquely capable and alive. Lions desire the opportunity to spring into action with teeth and claws. Lambs desire the opportunity to casually munch on grass, far from the danger of lions. When we employ the powers that make us feel uniquely capable and alive, be they powers to pounce on prey or to eat and digest huge quantities of grass, we live to our full extent. We become what we are capable of being – and we love it!

Empowerment is a kick. When we feel empowered, we feel supercharged, ripe with potential, overflowing with happiness, attuned to the possibilities of existence. It is no wonder that we ‘will’ the opportunity to use our powers. We desire power because the feeling of being empowered is the very best feeling in life.

What is your will to power? To answer this question, you will need to get clear on the kinds of things that you find enabling and rewarding in life. Some people find unique reward in helping others. Some find reward in art and creative pursuits. Some find reward on the sports field, at the office, climbing mountains, riding waves, or jumping out of airplanes. We all have our will to power, defined by our essential talents and capacities. The important thing is that we discover what these talents and capacities are.

Try not to set too high a bar for yourself when assessing your talents and capacities. Not all our powers are superpowers. Sometimes the kinds of things that empower us are relatively mundane. You shouldn’t feel bad about this. Being a great parent, wife or husband, creating a beautiful house or cooking up a storm are wonderful ways to feel empowered. Nor should you feel concerned if your powers seem to centre about setting up comfortable, enjoyable situations. Just because you are empowered by comfort zones doesn’t mean that you are destined to be caught in them. Every sailor needs a port to return to when they are not venturing out on uncharted seas. If your greatest power lies in building a harbour – affirm it! There is nothing wrong with enjoying comfort zones so long as you are able to step out of them and challenge yourself every now and again.
Some people never embrace this challenge. The result is that they never scope out their full range of powers and achieve their true potential. Some people don’t have the opportunity to do this. Others simply don’t try. They allow themselves to be defined by the roles and responsibilities that life and circumstance have given them. If this is how you are living – stop now. Don’t waste yourself, as Bruce Lee used to say. There is nothing more depressing than seeing a talented individual waste their life by neglecting to take advantage of their powers. It is like watching a flower starved of water and light. First it loses its color. Then it starts to wilt. Finally it withers and dies.

If this is how you are living, say to yourself: enough! Identify your powers and use them. Cultivate your personal capacity. Celebrate your will to power.

2. The Eternal Return

One day in 1881, Nietzsche was hiking near Sils-Maria, Switzerland, when he was struck by an incredible thought. He raced back to his apartment and scribbled in his notebook the outlines of the thought experiment that would become the eternal return. In a single stroke, Nietzsche had transformed the doctrine of will to power from an idea into a way of life. He had found a way of enabling us to interrogate our will to power, so to identify those things that we find empowering and make empowerment the meaning of life.

Nietzsche liked to present ideas in the form of aphorisms – short, witty pieces that often read like puzzles or riddles. The aphorism that Nietzsche developed to introduce the idea of the eternal return reads like something out of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. Imagine, Nietzsche says, that a demon approached you and offered you the chance to live out your life, exactly as it has been and will be to its end, again and again for all eternity. How would you respond to the offer? Would the thought of eternal return thrill you or horrify you? It probably depends on the extent to which you’ve made empowerment the meaning of life.

Here is Nietzsche’s aphorism in full:

_The greatest weight._ – What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it, you will have to live it once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider in the moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The
eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and I have never heard anything more divine?” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal? (GS, §341)

The key to understanding the eternal return is to think of it as a personal test. To take the test, you need to enter into the scenario outlined in the aphorism and think it through. You need to ponder the demon’s offer and think about how you would respond to it. Initially, this scenario may seem so farfetched that it is hard to take seriously. Try not to focus on the outlandish aspects of the story – the demon and the hourglass of existence, and so on. Focus on the challenge at the heart of the tale. Focus on the eternal return.

The eternal return plays with your head. The idea of repeating the events of one’s life again and again changes how we evaluate them. Imagining the eternal recurrence of everyday events brings to light everything humdrum, mundane and tedious in these events. At the same time, it brings our sources of power to light. We have discussed how human beings, like all living creatures, strive to enjoy a rich and abundant life. Our most fulfilling experiences are experiences of power – experiences that enable us to live to our greatest capacity. Now, if this is true, it stands to reason that were any of us presented with the offer of eternal return, we would tend to affirm, in the first case, those events and experiences that gave us the greatest sense of empowerment. Chances are these would be the only events and experiences that we’d choose to affirm. Everything besides those things that deliver a ‘king hit’ of power would seem nauseatingly tedious from the perspective of eternity. The thought of repeating most of daily life ad infinitum would indeed make us ‘gnash our teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus’!

Try this out for yourself. Think of something that happened to you today. Pick an event, any event. Ask yourself: ‘Could I affirm the repetition of this event again and again for all eternity? Would I, given the chance?’ Reflect on this question. And make a habit of asking it. The point is not to imagine that you are Bill Murray living out an eternal Groundhog
day. The point is to bring into focus the kinds of experiences that you value most in life – experiences that give you the greatest sense of empowerment.

This is how Nietzsche’s eternal return can help us identify our sources of power. By applying the test of eternal return to each passing event in life, it is possible to define the specific acts and experiences that make you feel empowered. Once you understand your powers, you’ll have a better understanding of the kinds of situations that help you thrive and flourish. By clarifying the nature of your will to power, you can learn to love power, love life, and ultimately learn to love yourself.

Nietzsche subtitled his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*: ‘How One Becomes What One Is’. How might applying the eternal return to your life help you become what you are, or could be? Face the challenge, take the test. It could literally change your life.
Exercise Three: Urban Renewal

Unleash your powers. Affirm life with Nietzsche’s thought experiment.

Summary: For this exercise, you’ll need a pen or pencil and an Event chart (see Appendix). The aim of the exercise is to show you how to use Nietzsche’s eternal return as a personal test to identify the things that empower you.

Alexis was in love with life. Fresh out of art school in Fremantle, Australia, she’d picked up a scholarship to study photography under a famous Parisian photographer. Her mother had urged caution, but Alexis persisted – and thank goodness! The course – and Paris itself – was everything that she’d hoped. Her French sponsor found her an apartment in the Latin Quarter, just a stone’s throw from the Place Saint-Michel. Alexis would stroll along the Seine in the evening, up the Champs Elysées to take pictures of the Arc de Triomphe in the flurry of lights. After two months documenting daily life on the streets of Paris, she had enough material for an exhibition. Alexis felt like she was at the heart of life. Things could go anywhere from here.

One night Alexis was speaking to an old friend in Australia. They were reminiscing about their student days, which her friend dearly missed.

‘Do you remember Nietzsche’s eternal return?’ the friend asked. ‘If I had to choose one time of my life to live out again and again, it would be art school days’.

Alexis, for her part, was ambivalent about the ‘good old days’. She realized then that if there was a time in her life that she had to live out again and again, it would be her time in Paris, not Fremantle. The more she reflected on this, the more her life seemed to come into focus. Looking out her window at the bustling streets, she imagined Nietzsche’s demon coming into her room, and making the offer of eternal return. Alexis could hear herself reply:

‘Yes. You are a god and I have never heard anything more divine’.

What are your powers? To find out, follow the steps below as carefully as you can.

STEP 1. Spend a day walking about the city or your local town centre. Pay attention to the things that happen as you go. It might help to imagine that you are a writer or journalist with the job of documenting the details of your urban experience. No event is too incidental to note. You might walk out of the train station to find a magnificent statue before you. That’s an event, right there. As you stroll down the street, you pass this
person and that; a dog sniffs your leg; posters in the windows advertise the summer sales; a cafe owner smiles and beckons you inside; and so on it goes.

**STEP 2.** Retire to a quiet spot. List on a sheet of paper the most memorable events and experiences of your day. These could be events and experiences that you were personally involved in or that you simply witnessed. What is important is that they were *rewarding* events and experiences – the more rewarding, the better.

**STEP 3.** Draw up an Event Chart. Write four of the most rewarding events and experiences in the left-hand column of the chart, in any order.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT CHART</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listened to a street musician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to a local shopkeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ran into a friend I hadn’t seen for years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watched the home team win on a penalty shootout on TV screen in shop window</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 4.** Put these events and experiences to the test of eternal return. Imagine that you are destined to repeat your life again and again for all eternity. Look at the each of the items in the left-hand column of the chart. Ask with respect to each of them:

‘Could I affirm repeating this event forever in a cyclical eternity?’

Note that you are not being asked whether you could affirm the repetition of your life as a whole, as in Nietzsche’s aphorism. The question pertains to these specific events. Does the thought of repeating these events fill you with horror or joy? Which (if any) of these events could you affirm repeating forever and ever and ever?
STEP 4.1. Record your responses in the right-hand column of the Event Chart. Try not to over analyse things. Trust your gut intuitions – they are usually on target.

FOR EXAMPLE:

| EVENT CHART |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES | ETERNAL AFFIRMATION? |
| Listened to a street musician | Absolutely. The guy was a genius. |
| Talked to a local shopkeeper | I enjoyed chatting, but his business was doing badly, so I felt a bit sorry for him. I’m not sure I’d affirm this one. |
| Ran into a friend I hadn’t seen for years | It was great catching up. But there are reasons why we don’t stay in touch. I couldn’t affirm this event either. |
| Watched the home team win on a penalty shootout on TV screen in shop window | The perfect experience to top off the day. 100% affirmation. |

STEP 5. Nietzsche’s idea is that the only events and experiences that we’d choose to affirm for eternity are those that reflect genuine sources of power. It follows that it is possible to work backwards from the events and experiences that you’ve affirmed to get insight into your personal powers.

Looking at the events and experiences that you have affirmed, ask yourself:

‘How is this event or experience empowering for me? How does it enable me to use my capacities? How does it shed light on my unique powers to think, feel, do and be?’

STEP 5.1. Often we are blind to our will to power, or deny it, assuming that it is wrong to desire empowerment. As a result, we don’t make our sources of power central to our lives as we should. Look at the events and experiences that you’ve affirmed, or might consider affirming. Ask with regard of each of these events and experiences:

‘To what extent have I organized my life so as to exploit the sources of power reflected in these events and experiences? How might I change my life so as to make these sources of power central to the life I lead?’
**Lesson three:** Putting life to the test of Nietzsche’s eternal return means holding everyday experiences up to the highest standard. Not all experiences will pass the test. You can be sure that those that do reflect your deep sources of empowerment. Getting clear on the things that empower you helps you appreciate your capacities to think, feel, do and be. This is a prerequisite for dealing with change in a proactive, creative way.
4. Diversify Yourself: Cultivate Friendship and Agility

Annie Kenney didn’t expect much from life. Born into a working class family in Lancashire, England in 1879, she left school at the age of ten to work alongside her parents at the local textile mill. Annie’s job was to clear cotton from under the machines. She would clamber about under the rumbling structures, inches from the bars and threads. One day a whirling bobbin tore off one of her fingers. Annie was barely in her teens. Looking ahead, she saw more of the same – a life of grueling labour amidst the heat and clatter of the looms.

Annie used her imagination as a means of escape. She had been a good student in school and an avid reader. She sought solace in the pages of books. Each night, candle in hand, Annie would creep to a corner of the family cottage to lose herself in romances or the latest penny dreadful. Her topics matured as the years went by. Hunkered on a stool, Annie traversed the world of ideas as the candlelight flickered low. Outside the Kenney cottage, empires warred and corporations strode the earth. Social change was knocking at the door. But Annie wasn’t listening. For the time being, she was lost in her books.

Robert Blatchford’s socialist utopia, *Merrie England*, opened Annie’s eyes to the world about her. Annie was a young woman by the time she read this book. In its pages, she found an order of reality that she’d always known existed – the future. Inspired by *Merrie England*, Annie joined the Independent Labour Party, a new political party that had emerged with the support of Blatchford’s newspaper, *The Clarion*. Annie found the energy and solidarity at Independent Labour Party meetings hugely inspiring. Here were people who shared her secret drives and passions. Annie had found her place in the world. For the first time in her life, Annie Kenney felt like she had the chance of a life worth living.

Then Annie met Christabel Pankhurst. Things took off from there. Christabel came from a middle class background. Her father, Richard, was a well-to-do lawyer, known for his support of social causes. Her mother, Emmeline, was the leader of the British suffragettes. Christabel spoke at an Independent Labour Party meeting about the organization that she had co-founded, the Women’s Social and Political Union. Somehow Annie found the courage to talk to her afterwards. Despite their differences in upbringing and education, Annie and Christabel clicked. Something sparked between them, and it powerfully
affected them both. In no time at all, Annie and Christabel were friends. Before the friendship made them famous, it got them into a world of trouble.

The trouble began at a Liberal party meeting in Manchester in 1905. The speakers on the day were Sir Edward Grey and a young Winston Churchill. Annie and Christabel were in the audience and repeatedly interrupted Grey in the course of his speech, demanding to know where the Liberal party stood on the issue of women’s suffrage, the right to vote in national elections – a right that was denied to British women (as to most other women in the world) at the time. Grey and Churchill made it clear that the Liberal Party had no position on this matter. In their patriarchal wisdom, they sought to move the discussion on. One imagines Annie and Christabel in this moment exchanging glances and seeing in each other’s eyes a different vision of womanhood to that perpetuated by the speakers on stage. Unfurling a banner that read ‘Votes for Women’, they started heckling the distinguished gentlemen, returning the abuse that was hurled at them by the crowd and whipping up a storm. The party meeting collapsed in riotous disorder.

It could have ended there. But Annie and Christabel raged on. When the police were called in, they refused to come quietly. Bystanders were appalled. Ladies did not behave in this manner – it was unnatural! When a policeman tried to haul them away, Christabel spat in his face. She told a journalist from The Guardian newspaper that it was the high point of her day. She had always wanted to assault an officer of the law, she confessed.

In our fascination with legislation and dates, we tend to forget the cultural triumphs that precede political victories. We overlook people like Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst, and what these friends achieved in 1905. Historians agree, however, that Annie and Christabel’s act of protest that day sparked the fire that bloomed into the militant suffragette movement, which, thirteen years later, helped gain British women the right to vote. Annie and Christabel demonstrated that ordinary women could and would fight for their rights. Shrugging off the yoke of ‘feminine virtue’, they affirmed their capacity to become more than what Edwardian society expected them to be, expanding the realm of what women were deemed capable of thinking, feeling and doing in the process.

Annie and Christabel were ahead of their time. Their militant actions defined new worlds of possibility for women’s lives and identities, spawning new ways of being that wove their way through the social fabric and continued to change the zeitgeist.
Annie and Christabel offer a great example of an empowering friendship. Here we have two people from different backgrounds who discovered that, together, they could be more than they could be alone. Empowering friendships are life-enhancing experiences. They challenge us to think and act differently. They help us tap inner resources that we mightn’t otherwise make use of. They shine light on our whole person and open our eyes to the adventure of life.

This chapter explores how we can form empowering friendships with all sorts of people. We are particularly interested to learn how to seek out and enjoy friendships with a broader range of people than we would ordinarily consider friends. By expanding our circle of friends, we expand our sense of power and possibility. The more rich and diverse the web of relationships you sustain, the easier it is to unleash your whole person and draw the full measure of what you are capable of being.

For our guide to empowering friendships, we will look to the work of the Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza. Nietzsche was a fan of Spinoza’s work. When he read Spinoza, Nietzsche exclaimed: ‘I have a precursor – and what a precursor’ (NPPA, 140).

But Spinoza was more than just a precursor to Nietzsche. In a sense, Spinoza’s thinking goes beyond Nietzsche, even though he was writing two hundred years before him. Spinoza avoids the rampant individualism of Nietzsche’s philosophy (which lends itself to a strident, fascist reading) by focusing on the affective impact of social encounters. He develops this focus into a rich account of friendship and community by emphasizing the life-enhancing quality of human relationships.

We learned, in the last chapter, how philosophy can help us identify our powers. In Chapter four, we will take this line of inquiry a step further, and discover how to expand and diversify our powers through friendships and social relationships generally. The goal is to figure out how to adopt an agile approach towards life and change. A diverse set of powers gives you options when life changes. Instead of ploughing ahead with outmoded approaches, you find that you are able to step back from the situation and look at it from other perspectives, selecting from a range of options to decide how to proceed. This kind of agility pays dividends in times of change. There are few experiences more rewarding in life than finding oneself in a new situation with diverse powers, flush with potential, replete with the sense that life could go anywhere from here.

The struggles of the past fall behind us. There are new opportunities on the horizon. All that we need is the courage and resilience to seize them.
'What path my feet would have trod if it had not been for Robert Blatchford and Christabel, who knows?' Annie Kenny mused in her memoirs at the end of her life (MM, 118). In the space of a few years, these relationships changed Annie’s life. A friendship can be a window on a different world or a door to a different life. Our friends help us to discover our higher powers and become everything that we are capable of being.

**Hooked on a Feeling**

I met a man called AJ one day as I was walking down the main street of my town. AJ was enlisting supporters for the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency. He spotted me coming from a distance and lured me in with a parody of my loping stride. By the time we met, I was laughing and he was laughing too.

‘You are wasting your time with me!’ I told him. I explained how my partner and I give a set amount of money each month to a rolling roster of aid organizations. The UNHCR was somewhere on the list. ‘A good conversation is never a waste of time’, AJ replied. It was a sunny day and I was out for a walk – why not take the opportunity to chat?

I liked AJ immediately. He was confident and upbeat. There was mischief in his eyes, but seriousness, too – a tone of gravity underlying everything that he said. I sensed that I was in the presence of a kindred spirit – a street philosopher, of sorts – a man who had seen suffering enough to know that life has no guarantees, yet who is wise enough to appreciate that the only appropriate response is to celebrate each moment.

AJ told me about his childhood in Ghana, his plight as a refugee, and how his abiding faith in God had seen him through to this day. He told me about his dream to start a school for child refugees – a school with a joyous curriculum, so that children from war-torn lands would not suffer impoverished imaginations as a result of their disrupted lives, and could see the opportunities available to them in their new land.

‘Children have spirit’, AJ told me. ‘We must open their eyes to the possibilities of life, so that their spirit may flow into beautiful activities’.

This sounded good to me. I decided I wanted to help AJ out. I took his phone number and walked away. Months later, I realized that I had never made the call.

We all have a story like this. One day, the story goes, I met an extraordinary person. While we were different in many respects, something about this person resonated with me.
Chatting with them was fun and inspiring. I felt that if I got to know this person, the relationship might change my life. *And it scared me away.* We generate excuses. ‘I’m too busy for a new friendship’. ‘I’m too set in my ways to deal with someone from such a different background, with different opinions and beliefs’. ‘What am I thinking – coffee with a stranger?’ In short: ‘I am happy as I am, safely embedded in my comfort zone’.

I look back on my encounter with AJ with mild regret – not just for the lost opportunities that this relationship offered, but for the fact that, in this instance, I failed to live up to my own teaching. Inertia can beat the best of us. Opening ourselves and our lives to new friends is challenging. It is not just the challenge of starting new conversations, which can be awkward enough. It is the challenge of making time for the friendship, and of taking on new obligations and responsibilities. It is the challenge of negotiating differences between new friends and old, or of segmenting one’s life into different groups of friends, acknowledging that the whole group is unlikely to get on. The difficulty of incorporating new friends into one’s life goes some way to explaining why social networking sites like Facebook are so popular. These sites enable you to have hundreds of friends and you scarcely have to set aside time for any of them. Real friendships are a labour of love – with the emphasis on labour. Unlikely friendships are even more of a challenge. It is no wonder that we tend to shy away from them.

There is a limit to the number of friends that one can expect to build into one’s life. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar has calculated that the size of the human brain indicates that we have evolved to thrive in groups of no larger than one hundred and fifty people. In most cases, our circle of close friends is much smaller than this, depending on our levels of amity. Some people are satisfied with one or two close friends. Others cultivate a wider circle of acquaintances, though there is always a tendency to privilege a core group. A tight knit social circle can make for a comfortable social life. Still, it is important not to let one’s circle of friends become too tight. The security of cliques and gangs can easily become a constraint, narrowing our horizons and limiting the range of powers that we are able to put to use. When change comes hammering at the door, we find that we are unprepared for it. We lack the agility to rise to the occasion and strike out on a new path in life.

I recommend a more ambitious approach to socializing. It involves calibrating one’s will to power to social situations. It involves learning to live from the heart.
I am not suggesting that you should go through life collecting friends. I am saying that you should open yourself to the chance of friendship in everything that you do. By opening your heart to the people around you, you’ll find that you learn important truths about yourself. You’ll learn about your talents, dispositions and ultimate possibilities in life. You’ll learn what you are truly capable of thinking, feeling, doing and being. I lacked the courage to follow up on my encounter with AJ and convert our conversation into a genuine friendship. Still, I was open to the possibility of friendship between us, and so I learned something about myself that I hadn’t appreciated before. The reason that AJ and I clicked is that we shared a common passion. AJ expressed this in his desire to empower children by opening their minds to new possibilities. AJ’s passion resonated with me. I found myself inspired by his enthusiasm, and I recognized the same enthusiasm in myself. On some level, I had processed this insight before. But it wasn’t until I met AJ that I grasped it clearly, and saw it could be central to my purpose in life.

I don’t know what path AJ took in life. I hope that he established his school for child refugees. I know what I did, however. I started teaching Philosophy for Change.

Thank you AJ. Meeting you was a turning point in my life. Our encounter helped me get clear on a core facet of my person. This literally changed my life.

Leonardo da Vinci: The Art of Agility

The Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) had more powers than most. In the course of his life, Leonardo explored gifts as a painter, sculptor, scientist, anatomist, architect, engineer, inventor, botanist and musician. The consistent brilliance of Leonardo’s contributions is remarkable. His paintings, which include the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper, are touchstones for the history of Western art. In his sketchbooks and journals, Leonardo developed a new visual language for representing bodies and surfaces, which fed into his artistry and gave his figures an unprecedented realism. Leonardo’s studies of the natural world made a major contribution to the embryonic sciences of anatomy, hydrodynamics and physics. His architectural and engineering designs included bridges, irrigation projects, villas and cathedrals. His notebooks brim over with fantastic inventions, including diving equipment, armoured cars, flying machines, musical instruments and more.

Leonardo is the quintessential ‘Renaissance man’ – a character with multiple talents and abilities who develops them all with verve and aplomb. As a cultural figure, he sets a high
bar for the rest of us. Few could hope to match Leonardo’s success in such a variety of pursuits. Mostly when we dabble in fields beyond our specific training, we wind up conceding that, while we may be happy apprentices, we will never be grand masters.

Still, we shouldn’t be discouraged by this. While you and I may never enjoy the accomplishments of Leonardo da Vinci, we can nurture and explore a wide range of abilities, just as he did. Leonardo gives us an ideal to aspire to, even if we can’t match his achievements. He is someone who cultivated his full potential to think, feel, do and be.

How did he do it? How was Leonardo able to cultivate such an extraordinary range of powers? Biographers have struggled for centuries to account for the source of Leonardo’s genius. But the source of creative power is a mystery that may never be solved. It is possible, however, to establish how Leonardo was able to identify and explore such a range of powers. Instead of asking: ‘What made Leonardo so talented?’, we should ask: ‘How was Leonardo able to identify his wealth of talent? How was he able to cultivate his full capacity, and by developing his powers, become everything that he was capable of being?’

There is no doubting the fecundity of Leonardo’s gifts. Our question is: what made it possible for him to realize these gifts, to achieve the flourishing of his whole person?

To understand how Leonardo da Vinci was able to identify and unleash such an enormously wide range of powers, we need to consider the environment in which he served his apprenticeship. This was the city of Florence in mid-fifteenth century Italy. Florence, in this time, was ground zero of the Italian Renaissance. In 1453, the year after Leonardo’s birth, Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, fell to the Ottoman Turks. Emigré Greek scholars descended upon Florence and other cities on the Italian peninsula, where they were embraced by a rising class of merchants and enlightened aristocrats flush on the thriving commercial markets of the time. This sparked a new age of culture and learning in Italy, and in Florence in particular. The Italian Renaissance had begun, and Leonardo was right at the heart of it.

Imagine the opportunities that Florence must have presented to the young artist and inventor. Imagine having just half of Leonardo’s aptitude and being surrounded by this profusion of talent and energy. It was exactly the environment that the young Leonardo needed to cultivate his personal powers. Each day, as he strolled through the streets of Florence, Leonardo witnessed incredible artistic and cultural achievements rising from the
earth, while rubbing shoulders with (and studying under) the giants who had achieved them. Florence was an artistic hotspot, drawing talent from across the peninsula. It was a liberal and progressive environment, replete with scholarship and innovation, where mathematicians poured over Euclid’s axioms and anatomists explored the fibres of the human body in search of the immortal soul. Florence was, above all, a generous environment, full of dukes and bishops eager to finance paintings, statues and cathedrals to the glory of God and the Renaissance.

The city of Florence said to Leonardo: *Come to me. I value your creation.* To identify, cultivate and realize his potential, all he had to do was be part of it.

No one bursts into the world aware of everything that they are capable of thinking, feeling, doing and being. If we know ourselves at all, it is because we have discovered our powers in the course of engaging and experiencing life. You need to test yourself against the world and see what you are made of. You need to throw yourself into life and experience the affects. Of course, if you leap into every crazy project that comes your way, you’ll only wind up exhausting yourself. Before you leap into anything, you need to find a fit. You need to engage with people and projects in an open-hearted, experimental way, attending to how you feel as you engage with the tasks and relationships – exhilarated, intrigued, encouraged or scared.

This is what Leonardo did on the streets of Florence. It was an education that happened day by day. There were no classes, texts or syllabuses. It was a matter of tapping into a thriving world of initiative and learning to live from the heart.

When you open your heart to the people around you, treating them as friends and companions on a common journey, something magical occurs. The passions that you sense in others start to resonate in you. The challenges that you encounter spark a fire in the soul. It kindles a feeling of empowerment. To enrich and diversify yourself and become a flourishing human being, you should seek out this feeling in everything that you do. Listen to your heart. Let the way that a situation affects you tell you whether it empowers you or not. Taking this approach to social life helps you identify your sources of power. It is by far the most enjoyable way to flesh out and unleash your whole person.

Left to our own devices, we tend to fall back on familiar ways of thinking, feeling, doing and being. Driven by the desire for a ‘quick fix’ of empowerment, we shy away from new, strange or difficult tasks or relationships, and gravitate towards activities that we know we
do well. As a consequence, we fail to explore our full palette of powers. Like mediocre artists, we paint the landscape of life out of primary colours, ignoring the vast array of alternatives that the colour spectrum presents and the thrilling task of discovering them through experiments in combination and mixture.

It doesn’t have to be this way. By opening your heart to people around you, it is possible to turn everyday encounters into illuminating experiences that shine light into the hidden recesses of the soul. Not only is this enriching, it is also the perfect way to prepare for change. The broader and more diverse the set of powers we have to draw on, the easier it is to tackle change in a productive, creative way. Leonardo knew this better than most. By cultivating a staggering array of powers as an artist, scientist, inventor and engineer, Leonardo made himself ready for any new project that came before him. No doubt, for the most part, Leonardo chose projects that played to his strengths in artistry and design. But, having an extensive range of powers on hand, he was able to be agile and experimental when faced with an unfamiliar task, and to alter his way of thinking and working to suit the challenge at hand. If the project stretched the limits of his capacities – so much the better! New challenges can be a learning experience. A new situation can be an opportunity to experiment with formative powers and to work them up so to draw on them further down the line.

This is a way of life you can easily make your own. To find out how, let us reach into our philosophical toolkit and try some new tools. These tools were developed by seventeenth century Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677).

**Spinoza: Philosopher of Friendship**

Spinoza was born Baruch Spinoza in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam. His father was a Portuguese merchant who had fled to Holland with his family to escape the Inquisition. Spinoza senior couldn’t have picked a better place to have moved the family business. Amsterdam, at the time, was the trading capital of the world. It was the height of the Dutch Golden Age, and ships departed Amsterdam daily for Africa, the East Indies and the New World, returning laden with spices, slaves, diamonds and gold. As in Renaissance Florence, the aristocrats and merchant class of the city provided a healthy patronage for the arts and sciences. Through the seventeenth century, the liberal climate of Amsterdam drew a flood of political and religious refugees from other parts of Europe, stimulating a lively intellectual culture. Strolling through Dam Square on any given day, Spinoza would
have rubbed shoulders with French Huguenots, German Anabaptists, Spanish heretics and Scottish freethinkers amidst the hustle and bustle of the markets and trade. No doubt he formed the principles of his philosophy long before he considered himself a philosopher, as a young man walking the streets of Amsterdam.

After completing his formal education at the age of fourteen, Spinoza started working with his father and brother in the family business. Still, he continued his studies informally, keen to learn everything he could about the world outside his door. By day he mastered the art of double-entry bookkeeping and talked trade with the merchants of Amsterdam. By night he engaged with the scholars of history, from ancients like Plato and Aristotle through to contemporary philosophers like René Descartes, who himself spent part of his life in Amsterdam. Spinoza soon realized that he preferred the company of philosophers to the chatter of merchants. When his father died, he shocked everyone by renouncing his share in the family business in order to focus on his philosophical studies. The decision was not taken well by his family. Nor did the conservative Jewish community in Amsterdam appreciate Spinoza’s increasingly liberal views on politics and religion. When Spinoza started publishing these views, the religious elders of the city immediately decided they’d had enough. In 1656, Spinoza was issued the writ of cherem, casting him from the synagogue with the chilling words:

[C]ursed be he by day; and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lieth down; and cursed be he when he riseth up; cursed be he when he goeth out and cursed be he when he cometh in; the Lord will not pardon him… (SVSI, 10)

Spinoza wasn’t fazed. It was the perfect chance to start anew. He changed his name to Benedict de Spinoza, departed Amsterdam, and devoted himself to a life in philosophy.

Spinoza’s masterwork, *The Ethics*, is a classic work of seventeenth century rationalism. *The Ethics* is a fascinating book about God, mind and the nature of happiness. Unfortunately, the core intuitions of the book can be hard to grasp thanks to the approach that Spinoza takes to unpacking them. *The Ethics* takes a ‘geometrical’ approach to its subject matter, treating God, mind and human actions in the same way, as Spinoza puts it, as one would conduct ‘an investigation into lines, planes, and bodies’ (E, III Preface). The book opens with a set of axioms and definitions about the nature of ‘substance’, ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’. It proceeds by deductive reasoning through a set of numbered propositions to a conclusion about happiness and the good life. It does not make for easy reading. To follow the argument, one has to track an expanding network of propositions, connected
by some bewildering logical leaps. Many readers get lost and give up. Most who make it through the book understand it first of all on an intuitive level. Yakov Bok, the uneducated hero of Bernard Malamud’s novel, The Fixer, picked up The Ethics on a whim. He read it, he says, with ‘a whirlwind’ at his back. ‘I didn’t understand every word’, Yakov confesses, ‘but when you’re dealing with such ideas you feel as though you were taking a witch’s ride. After that I wasn’t the same man’ (F, 75-76).

Generations of readers have shared Yakov’s mix of puzzlement and admiration. The French philosopher Henri Bergson aptly sums up the challenge and mystery of The Ethics:

I know of nothing more instructive than the contrast between the form and matter of a book like The Ethics: on the one hand … the formidable array of theorems with the close network of definitions … that power to crush which causes the beginner, in the presence of The Ethics, to be struck with admiration and terror as though he were before a battleship of the Dreadnought class – on the other hand, something subtle, very light and almost airy, which flees at one’s approach … What we have behind the heavy mass of concepts of Cartesian and Aristotelian parentage is that intuition which was Spinoza’s, an intuition which no formula, no matter how simple, can be simple enough to express… (PI, 92-93)

We too seek the simple intuitions at the heart of Spinoza’s Ethics. They are, at base, practical intuitions. The Ethics offers two principles that can help us make change a positive experience. I call them the ‘grounding’ and ‘guiding’ principles. Spinoza’s principles show us how to make friends in unlikely places. They show us how to engage with unfamiliar social situations in a constructive, experimental way, seeking out their implicit opportunities, and learning and growing in the process. You will see how, by taking an honest, open hearted approach to social relationships, it is possible to expand and diversify your powers. By diversifying your powers, you’ll be able to take an agile approach to life and change. This is what flourishing is all about.

The road ahead is not easy but rest assured it is worth it. As Spinoza reminds us: ‘All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare’ (E, V P42).

**Spinoza’s Grounding Principle**

Spinoza’s principles concern the laws of interaction between bodies. By ‘body’, Spinoza means anything with mass. An atom is a simple body. Planets, baseballs, and blades of grass are complex bodies made up out of interactions between simple bodies. The human
body is a complex system comprising a set of interactions between blood, bone, muscle-membrane, cells, and grey goo, all bodies of a certain kind. The universe is a vast set of bodies made up out of interactions between smaller bodies. Spinoza was intrigued to discover the laws that applied to all these various interactions between bodies.

Spinoza didn’t achieve the scientific breakthroughs that Isaac Newton did, a decade after his death. But Spinoza’s reflections on bodies and their interactions have had lasting value in other areas, like psychology and neurology, where they continue to be discussed today.

I call Spinoza’s first principle the ‘grounding’ principle because it grounds us in a Spinozian worldview. This principle applies to every kind of body there is.

**Grounding principle:** Bodies are empowered and disempowered by their interactions with other bodies. Interactions empower bodies by consolidating their internal structure, *increasing* their capacity to act and exist. Interactions disempower bodies by destabilizing their internal structure, *decreasing* their capacity to act and exist.

Since we are interested in using Spinoza’s principles as a practical guide to life and change, we will understand the grounding principle primarily in terms of interactions between human bodies. An interaction, in this case, could be any kind of interpersonal encounter. We interact with other people by touching them, talking to them, seeing them, hearing them, or thinking about them. Spinoza’s insight is that every kind of interaction *changes* us on a physical level. We are *affected* by our interactions with other people. From the nature of this effect, we can determine whether or not the interaction suits us.

Interactions with other bodies affect us in either of two ways. When our body interacts with another body, the interaction either consolidates our structure, empowering it, or destabilizes its structure, disempowering it. Drinking a glass of fruit juice consolidates the structure of your body by flooding your system with the vitamins and minerals it needs to function properly. Drinking a glass of battery acid will disrupt and destabilize your system, potentially to the point that it ceases to operate altogether. This law applies to all interactions between your body and the various other bodies in the world. When two or more bodies encounter one another, they are either empowered or disempowered as a result. Sometimes both bodies are empowered. Sometimes both are disempowered. More often than not, one body is empowered while the other is disempowered to some extent.

What should we make of this abstract principle? To find out, apply it! If you apply the grounding principle to your encounters with other people, you will find it enlightening.
The principle has an orienting effect. It leads us to reflect on the basic quality of our interpersonal relationships: are they empowering or disempowering for us?

Annie and Christabel offer an example of an empowering relationship. Here we have two people, divided by education and class, who discovered that together they could be more than they could be alone. Just as two chemicals, placed together, can trigger an unexpected reaction, Annie and Christabel discovered a common sense of empowerment that they created between them. This was a genuinely transformative power to break free of the chains of social conditioning and give Edwardian society a glimpse of what empowered women could do and achieve. It wasn’t just the product of Annie’s simplicity, her working-class roots, her wistful romanticism fuelled by years of storybooks and dreaming. Nor was it just the result of Cristabel’s idealism and iron will, her education, or her desire to prove herself to her mother, Emmeline. It was an interpersonal power, catalysed through a melding of capacities and characteristics. It was an emergent power – a spontaneous reaction triggered through the combination of two different personalities.

Who are the empowering friends in your life? Who are the people that help you cultivate and sustain powers that you would not possess independently? Sometimes the powers that we create with friends can become so familiar that we forget the value they have for us. It is only when we are separated from our friends that we realize how much we depend on them. Imagine you were stuck in a foreign country without any social contacts, or worse, locked in a prison cell, incapable of forming any kind of empowering relationships at all. Would you be able to be yourself? Only to a limited extent. Without our friends, it can be impossible to actualize the powers that we take for granted every day.

This is why friends are so important to us. Without empowering friendships, it can be difficult if not impossible to access our inner resources and to be who we are. One friend helps you cultivate your creative side. Another picks you up when you’re feeling down. One friend inspires you to be the best that you can possibly be. With another, you just have a great time out on the town. True friends trigger consistently empowering changes in us. Without these people, we might never experience these affects. Our friends help us cultivate and unleash our potential, and become everything that we are capable of being.

Spinoza’s grounding principle offers a guide to the good life: We should go into the world looking for empowering relationships. Yet finding empowering relationships is not easy. It can be hard to identify people who empower us and distinguish them from people who do not. There is always a danger that we'll confuse empowering and disempowering
relationships and fall in with a bad crowd. People seem friendly when we first meet them. Usually, it is only after we have got caught up in their lives that we discover what they are really like, and by then it can be too late to make an easy exit from the relationship.

Spinoza has a simple technique to help us avoid getting caught in disempowering relationships. We need to trust in the subtle (or not so subtle) signals that our body sends us when we engage in social encounters. We need to put stock in how we are affected by other people. We need to learn to live from the heart.

**Spinoza’s Guiding Principle**

Spinoza’s grounding principle pinpoints two basic modes of human relationship: empowering and disempowering relationships. Spinoza’s guiding principle shows us how to apply this analytical distinction for the sake of the good life. The guiding principle pertains to how we experience empowering and disempowering relationships. According to Spinoza, we experience empowering and disempowering relationships directly on an affective level. It follows that it is possible to identify and distinguish empowering and disempowering relationships by attending to our affective experience. This is what it means to learn to live from the heart.

**Guiding principle:** Our affective responses reflect the rise and fall of our powers in the context of interpersonal interactions. Empowering interactions give us a feeling of joy. Disempowering interactions give us a feeling of sorrow.

Spinoza uses the terms ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ to refer to closely related but different things. Affects are the physiological processes that underpin our emotions and moods. Emotions are feeling-states that are shaped by our interpretations of affects. Spinoza’s idea is that affects, and the emotions that correspond to them, reflect ‘the body’s power of activity ... increased or diminished, assisted or checked...’ (E, III D3). The greater power of activity we have, the happier we feel. When our activity is checked, we feel down.

This is the logic of affect. It is the key to Spinoza’s practical philosophy.

Before continuing, I’d like to acknowledge that, as it stands, Spinoza’s account of our affective and emotional life is woefully simplistic. Spinoza was arguably correct to see affects as the expression of bodily alterations (a point established by neurologist António Damásio in his book *Looking for Spinoza*). But the nature of emotions and their role in human life is a complex, multi-faceted issue, one that psychologists, psychotherapists and
neurologists continue to puzzle over and explore. We should not expect the ruminations of a seventeenth century philosopher to give us the final word on emotions per se. Emotions are shaped by more than just the dynamics of interpersonal encounters, but by chemical flows and imbalances, atavistic instincts, buried memories, drives and more.

Acknowledging the limits of Spinoza’s account of emotions, we can focus on the utility of his principles from a practical point of view. Even if Spinoza doesn’t give us a comprehensive account of emotions, we can still use these principles as practical tools to help us clarify the empowering and disempowering effects of our encounters. Treated as a practical tool, the guiding principle has endless applications. To put it to use, we simply need to pay attention to the affective dynamic of social encounters and relationships.

The heart is a map. To follow this map, you need to attend to what is joyful and uplifting in your encounters. A relationship is like a chemical catalyst. The interaction of two beings, each with their own speeds, sensitivities, proclivities and intensities, triggers affective reactions in our physical systems that blossom in the form of emotional responses on the surface of our consciousness. Some people inspire us. Empowering our hearts and minds, they point our lives in new directions. Some people provide knowledge and opportunities that we need to achieve our ends. Empowering our actions, they enable us to make our way in the world, opening doors that would otherwise remain closed. Some people just make us feel good – we spark together. Filling us with joy, they give us the energy we need to keep on going when life gets tough. Friendship is a beautiful thing.

Pay attention to the affects that you experience in social encounters. When you find that you are hooked on a happy feeling, reflect on it. It indicates that something empowers you. Zero in on that sense of empowerment. Dig deep to find the source of power that makes your heart sing. By identifying the kinds of people who empower you, you can clarify the kinds of situations and events that enable you to release your powers. Cultivate these situations. Foster these relationships. Adore them – they are a stimulant to life.

Friendship fires us up and helps us live to our potential. We may never match the soaring achievements of Leonardo da Vinci. But we get by – with a little help from our friends.

It's Not You, It's Us

Sadly not all our social interactions empower us. The truth is that a good proportion of our everyday encounters disempower us. The traffic warden who listens to your story
about double parking in order to pick up a prescription for your child and tickets you
anyway. The consultant who politely explains how workplace restructuring has done you
out of a job. The man you once loved from whom you are now divorced, who drops by
on Tuesdays to pick up the kids. These are examples of disempowering interactions.
Everyone has to deal with them in life. No doubt Sartre was thinking of disempowering
relationships when he exclaimed: ‘Hell is other people!’

Spinoza’s principles can help us learn to deal with disempowering interactions in a
tranquil, level-headed way. When we learn to see disempowering relations as
disempowering, it lessens the sting of the unhappy affects that are produced by them,
which ultimately helps us rise above these affects, or even overcome them. Taking a
Spinozian perspective on disempowering relationships is not like taking a pill that removes
the pain. Even after you have learned to see these interactions in a Spinozian light, you’ll
still experience the unhappy affects that they produce in you. However, learning to
understand unhappy emotions as the product of disempowering relationships gives you a
new perspective on these emotions, and this can change the way that you respond to them
and ultimately how you experience them as well.

The bad feelings don’t just vanish. But neither do they affect us in the same way. We learn
to achieve a certain distance from the affects. We learn to achieve a state of mind that
Spinoza calls ‘blessedness’.

Blessedness can contribute to our closest relationships, as the following story bears out.

Paul put down the phone and stared out the studio window across Prospect Park, Brooklyn. He
had just been talking to his nephew, Peter, who was majoring in film at NYU. Somehow, Peter
had convinced Paul, against his better judgment, to mentor him for a period of months, starting
next week. The deal was that Peter would spend two days a week at Paul’s film studio, helping out
with the shooting and production.

Paul had a sinking feeling inside. He looked about the studio and wondered how Peter, with his
puppy dog energy, would fit into it. He had just made a mistake, hadn’t he? He couldn’t have
devised a more awkward situation if he’d scripted it himself.

Fast forward three months. Peter and Paul’s relationship is in strife. Not that Peter notices it. Peter
is having a whale of a time. Peter is doing precisely what he’d like to be doing – working on a real
live film set. Working alongside Paul, he gets to exercise his creative powers every day – to think
out loud, throw ideas around and chew them over in public. Peter is learning all the time, even
when he is just basking in Uncle Paul’s presence.
Paul is having a tremendous impact on Peter’s power to exist. Peter, as a result, feels an overwhelming sense of happiness.

Paul, meanwhile, is struggling with depression. He is wishing that he’d never agreed to mentor his boisterous nephew. Paul is a quiet guy and a bit on the prickly side. Peter’s enthusiastic nature rubs him up the wrong way. What Paul has discovered in the course of the past few months is that he doesn’t like too much talk in the studio – and Peter chatters incessantly. Paul has no doubt that his powers as a creative artist are stifled with Peter around. He simply can’t think, feel and do the things that he needs to think, feel and do in order to produce his best work.

Paul is facing a serious dilemma. He finds Peter’s company disempowering. Yet, he loves his nephew, and he can’t imagine just telling him to shut up. Ultimately, Paul would rather be the favourite uncle than a mentor. He has come to realize that sometimes these roles can be incompatible.

Here is a common scenario. Two essentially good natured people interact with one another. They both have the best intentions. But some aspect of their relationship rubs one or other of them up the wrong way. As much as they may love one another, they simply can’t get on. Usually things reach a crisis point: there is a flare up and the situation ends in tears.

Sound familiar? Sure it does. All of us have these kinds of relationships – relationships that are empowering and disempowering at the same time. It is normal to experience some disempowering affects even in our closest relationships. This doesn’t mean that we don’t value these relationships. It means that they are occasionally a little difficult.

Now, perhaps these difficulties seem incidental, nothing to make an issue of. No relationship is perfect, it is true. But minor tensions have a way of morphing into anger and resentment. They breed spats, discontent and division. To keep our lives happy and free of strife, it is best that we address tensions in our relationships when they arise, and deal with them as sensitively as possible. This is where Spinoza can help.

How might Paul use Spinoza’s principles to get to the bottom of his problem with Peter and set their relationship back on track? Spinoza would tell Paul: ‘Do not weep. Do not wax indignant. Understand’. Paul needs to understand, first of all, how his sense of frustration around Peter is the expression of personal disempowerment. He needs to reflect on what it is that he is incapable of thinking, feeling, doing or being around Peter, and why this is such a big issue for him. Most importantly, Paul needs to reflect on exactly
what is causing his sense of disempowerment. Is it Peter? Is Paul himself responsible for it in some way? Or could it be that neither of them is uniquely responsible for producing the disempowering affects that Paul experiences? What would follow from that? How might it change Paul’s experience of the relationship if he saw his affective and emotional states as the product of a physical reaction, governed by impersonal laws?

Perhaps Paul might stop blaming Peter for being a pain in the ass, if nothing else. Perhaps he might learn to say: *It’s not you, it’s us.*

Spinoza’s guiding principle has a therapeutic effect. It reminds us that when we feel unhappy in a relationship, it is usually because something in the relationship disempowers us. This implies a subtle change of mind-set. Rather than look at things from a subjective or individualistic standpoint, we learn to look at relationships as relationships, that is to say, as interpersonal encounters. One consequence of this change in view is that we learn to depersonalize the emotions that we feel in our relationships. We learn to perceive our emotions as determined by impersonal laws. Throw water on fire and it will extinguish it – this is to be expected. Who would feel angry at the water for extinguishing the flames? In the same way, it is pointless to blame an individual for the disempowering affects that he or she inspires in us, assuming there is no intention on their part to cause these affects.

This is how a Spinozian perspective on unhappy relationships can help us deal with them. By tracing our feelings back to the law-like relations that govern them, we are able to take a higher perspective on our emotional states. This helps us transcend the blows of our daily encounters, and by ridding ourselves of sadness, to aspire to the state of blessedness.

Let us suppose that Paul reads some Spinoza and tries this out. Paul acknowledges that the reason he feels depressed around Peter is because Peter restricts his ability to flourish as a working filmmaker. This, he acknowledges, reflects a significant truth about himself – namely, that he needs a peaceful environment to do his best work. Peter’s chaotic energy wears on his nerves and disrupts his inner composure. Of course, acknowledging this doesn’t change the fact that it is so. But Paul finds reassurance in the insight, for he realizes that neither he nor Peter is essentially to blame for the way their interactions make him feel. By reflecting on the logic that governs his feeling-states, Paul is able to depersonalise the emotions that he experiences around Peter. Instead of seeing his unhappiness as something that is caused by Peter, or even as something that he (Paul) is responsible for bringing about, Paul finds that he is able to conceive his emotion as the
product and effect of a clash of systems. Something about the body-system ‘Peter’ disempowers the body-system ‘Paul’. This is the fact of the matter.

The question is: how should Paul respond?

We might imagine Paul saying: ‘I hate feeling disempowered’ and cutting Peter off. This would be an uncharitable response, and probably bad for Peter and Paul’s relationship. A more philosophical response on Paul’s part would be to resign himself to feeling just a little less empowered on the days that he’s with Peter than he is used to feeling. So Peter’s presence prevents him from feeling fully empowered. Is it such a crisis, a couple of times a week? Assuming that Paul is not struggling to meet deadlines, it is no big deal. So why not make a concession for his nephew’s sake? No one can expect to feel fully empowered all the time. To maintain our friendships and set our relationships on an even keel, we sometimes need to suck it up and suffer some disempowerment for the sake of the greater good.

Peter, for his part, could also learn something useful from Spinoza. That sense of elevation that he feels in Uncle Paul’s presence? It is a sign that Paul empowers him. Peter would do well to attend to this sense of empowerment. Were he interested in understanding his powers, he might ask: ‘How exactly does Paul empower me? What is it about Paul that increases my ability to think, feel, do and be? What sources of power do I get to exploit in my time with Paul that I don’t get to exploit elsewhere? And what do these sources of power say about me, in the sense of who I am and what I might be capable of becoming?’

Spinoza teaches us to seek out what is joyful in our social encounters. The trick is to approach social life with an open heart and a mind attuned to new possibilities. Pay attention to positive affects. Play around with the powers that they bring to light. Make life a fascinating experiment. The reward of the exercise is life itself.

**Be Creative with Change**

Change can bring out the best in us. Even the most painful and difficult changes can be vehicles for empowerment. Usually, we don’t see the opportunities at first, even though they are staring us in the face. We have to dig down into the unexpected joys that the situation produces in order to discover new sources of power buried in the sand.
Matt King (played by George Clooney in Alexander Payne’s film, *The Descendants* (2011)) is hit by an artillery line of surprises as he is negotiating a multi-million dollar land deal on the island of Hawaii. The body blows come one after another. First, Matt’s wife Elizabeth has a speedboat accident that leaves her in a coma. Second, Matt learns that Elizabeth had been having an affair while he had been wrapped up in his legal work.

The film follows Matt as he tracks down Elizabeth’s lover with his two teenaged daughters in tow. The tension between father and daughters is palpable. Matt has not figured out how to be a Dad to his daughters. Elizabeth had previously assumed parental responsibilities, and fatherhood takes Matt outside his comfort zone. Matt’s eldest daughter, Alexandra (Shailene Woodley) has a drug problem. Frustrated with her father, she breaks the news to him about Elizabeth’s affair.

Tragedy picks its moments. *The Descendants* is a journey of discovery of the most uncomfortable kind.

Being an Alexander Payne film, there are moments of joy in the journey as well. *The Descendants* succeeds through the uplifting moral message of the final act. Reengaging with his daughters turns Matt’s perspective on life around. In the course of his journey, Matt realizes that his daughters are his descendants, and that he has an important responsibility to them. Matt learns what it means to be a father, a moral citizen, and ironically a husband. By the end of the film, he is moving through the pain en route to a new self-conception, grounded in the land of his ancestors and sheltered in the love of his family.

Change threw Matt King’s life around. It also held out a life-changing opportunity. *The Descendants* is the story of how Matt came to embrace this opportunity and changed his life for the better.

Even the most unpleasant changes in life have an upside. To see it, you need to take an affirmative approach to change.

Taking an affirmative approach to change is not easy. It means applying yourself in adverse situations. Drawing on your full set of powers, you need to engage with change in an active, experimental way and see what comes out of the mix. Change is full of opportunities. Let yourself be surprised by them. Once you have learned to see the opportunities in change, you can use change as a springboard to a new life and future.

Has change thrown your life into chaos? Deal with the disaster then consider the emotions that the changed situation provokes in you. Do you find that you are experiencing a curious sense of joy amid the carnage? If so, you may have an opportunity to engage the situation in a new and productive way. Follow that joy – dig down to the source of power from which it springs. It may be that a new mode of being is just what
you need to turn this situation around. Who knows? Perhaps it might transform the situation entirely? Perhaps it might point your life in a whole new direction?

Be creative with change. Don’t just ride it out – use it.
Exercise Four: Live From the Heart

Diversify yourself. Cultivate agility with Spinoza’s approach to friendship.

Summary: For this exercise, you’ll need a pen or pencil, a Group Chart and a Mirror Box (see Appendix). The aim of the exercise is to show you how to use Spinoza’s approach to friendship to expand and diversify your powers.

The Crisis Rangers were flying to Haiti, and Kathy wouldn’t be with them. Not if her parents had anything to do with it. They had been delighted when Kathy had signed up for weekend work with the aid organization. How quickly their attitudes changed when she announced that she’d applied for summer work in the emergency camps outside Port-au-Prince.

They had been sitting for dinner. Her mother froze in the middle of dishing the potatoes.

‘There is no way I’d consider it’, she declared. ‘I don’t think you realize what you’d be getting yourself into, young lady’, her father advised.

Kathy was distraught. ‘You don’t care about how I feel’ she cried, storming from the room. The truth was this is precisely what she had expected. Kathy knew that her parents would do anything to protect her. Caring for her welfare was, in a sense, their reason for being.

Since her eighteenth birthday, however, Kathy had come to realize that she was more than just a headstrong teenager who needed the care and protection of her parents. Through her work with the Crisis Rangers, she had discovered a whole new set of powers and capacities – the capacity to flourish within group environments; to grow (rather than wilt) in the face of public indifference; and a powerful capacity to care, which frightened and exhilarated her at once.

Kathy reflected on these things as she sat fuming in her room. How could her parents tell her no? They had no idea who she really was.

Then Kathy had a moment of vision. ‘When Mom and Dad see me’, she thought, ‘they see the little girl they’ve known and loved from the day I was born. What they don’t see are the people that I’ve come to know through the Crisis Rangers – the activists, the NGO spokespeople and the refugees. They don’t see how these people have changed me, helping me become a stronger, more complex person. Mom and Dad think that they are protecting me. If they could see the powers that I’ve discovered and developed through working with the Crisis Rangers, they’d realize that by protecting me, they are actually stifling the person that I’ve become’.
A Spinozian approach to social life can unlock all kinds of capacities. Follow the steps below as carefully as you can:

**STEP 1.** Confound your social habits for a week. Follow Kathy’s lead and join an activist or community organization. If you are an atheist, go to church, and make sure that you talk to some parishioners. If you are a bookish type, go to a sports game or watch one on TV with some fans. If you spend your life watching sports on TV, head to an art gallery or a book launch. Shop at a store that you’ve always avoided. Drink at a bar that you’ve never entered. Spend time with strangers. The stranger the strangers the better.

The point of this step is to get you to engage with groups of people that you typically find strange and unfathomable. It is important that you pay attention to what empowers these people by studying the things that they enjoy about their ways of life.

**STEP 2.** Give each of the groups a name (for example, ‘sports fans’, ‘gallery hoppers’, ‘bookworms’, etc). Draw up a Group Chart and write these names, in any order, in the left-hand column.

**STEP 3.** Take a Spinozian perspective on these groups. Reflect for a moment on the activities that you associate with each of the groups. Addressing each of these groups in turn, ask:

> *What activities function as sources of power for this group?*

To answer this question, you’ll need to reflect on the joy that group members derived from their activities. Joy is the expression of empowering experiences. You may have attended an evangelical church, and seen the congregation break into song. On the basis of the joy that parishioners seemed to derive from this activity, you would assume that ‘singing in church’ was a source of power for this group.

**STEP 3.1.** List the sources of power in the right-hand column of the Group Chart, alongside the group in question.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP CHART</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### SOCIAL GROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Rangers</th>
<th>Solidarity, funding, global connections.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rugby fans</td>
<td>Winning! Television marathons, drinking contests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage Emos</td>
<td>Gloomy music, vampire novels, striped socks and black leather boots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesspeople</td>
<td>Connections, income and mobility, ‘work hard play hard’ ethic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 4.** Ask yourself: how do I feel about these sources of power? Don’t ask if these sources of power are worthwhile or not – hold your judgment on that. Ask instead:

*What joys or sorrows do these sources of power produce in me?*

**STEP 4.1.** Hold that thought. Draw up a Mirror Box. Enter the social groups from the left-hand column of the Group Chart into the left-hand column of the Mirror Box.

**STEP 5.** In the middle column of the Mirror Box, adjacent to the relevant groups, write about the joys and sorrows that you’ve experienced participating in the respective groups. Trust your instincts. Broad accounts will suffice.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MIRROR BOX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL GROUPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Rangers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rugby fans

The camaraderie was nice. But drinking in the afternoon makes me tired – I went home to bed.

Teenage Emos

I felt old. The music depressed me.

Businesspeople

The business breakfast was nice. People were friendlier than I’d expected.

STEP 6. Review your experiences from a Spinozian point of view. Spinoza argues that our joys and sorrows in social company reflect the rise and fall of our powers. Take a moment to think about the joys that you experienced that you’ve identified in the Mirror Box. Focus especially on unexpected joys – joys that took you by surprise.

Ask yourself:

‘How might these joys reflect new sources of powers, and the possibility of new ways of thinking, feeling, doing and being? How might I engage with the activities that trigger these joys in order to diversify my power to exist?’

STEP 6.1. Write your thoughts and gut responses in the right-hand column of the Mirror Box. Once again, trust your intuitions. Gut feelings can be insightful.

FOR EXAMPLE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL GROUPS</th>
<th>JOYS / SORROWS</th>
<th>REFLECTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Rangers</td>
<td>Just thinking about that government grant and what we could do with it – it’s thrilling!</td>
<td>No doubt about it – volunteer work expands my sense of hope and possibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rugby fans | The camaraderie was nice. But drinking in the afternoon makes me tired – I went home to bed | It takes commitment to be a sports fan. And a strong liver. Not for me

Teenaged Emos | I felt old. The music depressed me | Emos are nice but quiet. I need a less alienated crowd

Businesspeople | The business breakfast was fun. People were friendlier than I’d expected | Definite possibilities for life-enhancement. I’ll make it a regular thing

**STEP 7.** Were you surprised that you enjoyed a certain group? Did you find that you especially enjoyed participating in a group and are not sure why? Reflect on your experience of participating in this group. Try to encapsulate, in a single word, the positive emotional response that you associate with participating in the group.

**STEP 7.1.** Use this sense of joy as a clue to hidden powers. Ask yourself:

> 'What unexpected powers does this group open up for me? How does spending time with this group enable me to unleash powers that I never knew I had?'

**STEP 7.2.** Expand the scope of this reflection:

> 'What else might it be possible for me to think, feel, do, and be? What other groups might help me to discover my full set of powers, my whole person?'

**Lesson four:** No one knows what they are ultimately capable of thinking, feeling, doing, and being. We need to throw ourselves into social life to find out. By diversifying our friendships and examining the affective register of our relationships, it is possible to explore new ways of thinking, feeling, doing, and being. Living from the heart enables us to diversify our powers and take an agile approach to life and change.
5. Change Time: Trigger Damascus Road Experiences

Dark clouds gathered over Damascus, sucking the light from the desert plain. Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, swayed in the saddle, eyes locked on the road ahead. Saul knew what awaited him at the end of that road. For Saul, the new Christian sect was a blight on the purity of the faith and had to be destroyed. ‘For it is written’, he murmured. ‘That prophet shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the Lord your God’. By fire and sword Saul would drive the Christians of Damascus into their graves. This was the path that God had set before him. Destroying Christianity was Saul’s brutal fate.

Then one hundred suns exploded in Saul’s eyes. His horse reared and kicked, and threw him to the earth. Saul lay groveling in the dirt as a voice boomed from the air, saying: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’

Saul couldn’t see a thing. But he could feel his destiny dividing before him.

Saul was taken to Damascus, where he lay blind and ailing for days. Finally, a Christian disciple named Ananias (who’d also been hearing ghostly voices) arrived at his door, laid his hand on Saul’s forehead – and lo! Saul’s fever broke and his sight was restored. Saul was impressed – so impressed, in fact, that upon rising from bed, he changed his name to Paul and took up the life of a Christian proselytiser. According to the New Testament, this is how Saul of Tarsus became Paul, now Saint Paul, the most prolific and influential of the early Christian missionaries.

The story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus has fascinated thinkers for millennia. It is from this story that we get the idea of a ‘Damascus road experience’ – a life-changing event that brings about a decisive change of heart and view. The Biblical account of Paul’s conversion may be apocryphal, but his contribution to the Christian Church is a matter of record. In addition to making three major missionary journeys through the Mediterranean and Middle East, Paul contributed several chapters to the New Testament. Paul’s epistles offer the first systematic account of Christian doctrine and provide a window on the life of the early Church. It is a profound irony of the history of religion that Saul of Tarsus, a man who set out to eradicate Christianity, made the greatest contribution to its longevity.
For us, Paul’s story has an intrinsic value. Paul’s transformation offers the perfect starting point for our reflections in this chapter. I’d like to take Paul’s Damascus road experience as a model for Damascus road experiences generally. When we set aside the religious framing of this story, we find that Paul’s transformation provides a unique perspective on Damascus road experiences and what takes place in them.

Let us dig a little deeper into this story. What changed for Paul on the road to Damascus? We know that Paul had a religious experience that led him to repudiate his past and become a Christian proselytiser. But something else happened in the background of these events: a transformation in Paul’s experience of time. As Paul lay on the road with the ghostly voice in his ears, his sense of the future split in two. Paul found himself looking towards two possible futures. He underwent a doubling in his experience of time.

Consider the difference in Paul’s experience of time before and after the Damascus road event. Prior to this event, Paul (or Saul) was headed to Damascus to persecute Christians. His sense of time was governed by the short-term goals that he’d set himself, such as ‘reach Damascus’, ‘identify Christians’, ‘persecute them mercilessly’ and so on. Subsequent to this event, Paul’s way of understanding his place in time was different. Paul continued to set temporal goals – planning, for example, the missionary journeys described in Acts and Galatians. But Paul now lived and acted within the scope of a whole different understanding of time – a messianic time-frame determined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From this perspective, all of Paul’s acts and experiences sat on a temporal continuum stretching from the crucifixion of Christ, in the past, to the Day of Judgment, in the indefinite future. It was only in the context of this time-frame that Paul could make sense of his appointed task – to prepare the faithful for the second coming by teaching them how to live like Christians.

Damascus road experiences throw our vision of the future wide open. They open our eyes to a big picture vision of life. Everything small and trivial falls away. We find ourselves in the middle of life – at a crossroads, of sorts, with the past behind us and two possible paths stretching ahead. One of these paths is the route we were travelling prior to the Damascus road experience. Most of the time, it leads towards practical goals – our aims and objectives for tomorrow, next week, the coming month or year. The goals that the other path points towards may remain undeveloped and unclear. Intuitively, however, we know that these goals hold the key to our destiny. To take a single step along this other path might change our life for good.
The crossroads is a moment of decision. We are challenged to take an existential leap and actively determine our future. In the poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’, Robert Frost illustrates the difficult choice that we face in these moments of vision.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

... 
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

How do you decide which way to go when the path of life splits in two? Should you press ahead with the route that you intended or should you take the road less travelled?

Whatever you decide, you should cherish this moment of decision and sustain it for as long as you can. You are enjoying a moment outside of time, just off the beaten path of life. It is here that the truly creative experiences in life take place.

If you have applied yourself to the exercises in this book, cultivating personal resilience and the broadest possible set of powers, you should now be in an ideal position to affirm Damascus road experiences and their life-changing impact. Indeed, you should be in a good position to cultivate Damascus road experiences, even if you don’t realize it. Chapter five aims to show you how. We have seen how, by working-up a diverse range of powers, we acquire the agility to exploit change by teasing out its opportunities. With a measure of agility, you heighten your sense of how you could use change to take life in new directions. With a dose of existential courage, you supercharge these experiences. By taking an empowered, agile, resilient attitude to change, you can turn moments of change into moments of vision. In the blink of an eye, life changes. You are standing at a crossroads in time, looking towards a new possible life and future.

By diversifying your powers and courageously applying your full potential to the changes you encounter in life, you can trigger life-changing visions that emerge out of change itself. Engaging change actively and creatively, you can use change to wrench yourself free of the past and transform your journey into the future.
We’ll start by going back to the first lesson of this book. To trigger Damascus road experiences, you need to be wide awake and ready for action. This is easy to achieve. All that we need is a little existential courage.

**The Moment of Vision**

White markings scroll beneath your bleary eyes. The rain is coming down hard on the morning freeway. You are late for an important meeting. An endless stream of cars stretches before you like an army of ants returning to the nest.

You’d left home early in the hope of avoiding the traffic. Instead you have caught the worst of it. Exiting the freeway is excruciating. By the time you hit the city you are ready to burst. You gun the engine at the lights. The moment they turn green you are blasting down the street, leaning into the steering wheel as if trying to project yourself over the traffic ahead. You glance at the clock on the dash – five minutes! You can still make it! Every cell in your body is focused on that meeting.

Nothing can stop you now.

Up ahead there is a crossroads. Get ready for a Damascus road experience.

Green means go. You shoot across the intersection, expecting to fly straight through. A city bus gets in the way. As you pass the lights, a red wall looms from your right, and CRASH! Your car is spinning like a top across the street! You bounce off other vehicles in a howl of rubber, swipe the kerb and THUD! The car vaults to an uncanny angle before slamming its tyres back upon the bitumen.

You sit jammed behind the airbag, staring up the street. Everything is perfectly still. Someone raps on the window. You burst into tears.

If you have experienced a car accident, or any other life-threatening incident, you’ll know how it changes your take on life. The shift is instantaneous. Death comes sweeping past and leaves you behind. In the blink of an eye, everything has changed. Distractions and incidental matters fall away. You are there, at the heart of life, wide awake and ready to live.

What has happened? How exactly has your vision of life changed?

Confronting death sharpens our sense of value. The shocking experience of having almost lost our life reminds us of what we want from it. We acknowledge the deep drives and aspirations that shape our journey through life. At the same time, we acknowledge the sources of power that make these aspirations possible for us to achieve. Confronting death brings to light our full spectrum of powers. It throws us back on our unique
capacity to think, feel, do and be. It focuses us on our essential goals, and reveals, by contrast, the trivial and unnecessary nature of so many of the activities that fill our days.

Confronting death also transforms our sense of time. This is a subtle transformation, easily overlooked. If we can learn to sustain this transformation, it is decisive.

Put yourself in the driver’s seat again. Reflect on the sense of time that is implicit in the experience of racing to work, trying to make a meeting. Compare this to the sense of time that you have in a moment of vision. What is the difference? In the first case, you are ahead of yourself, thinking of that meeting, the place that you need to be. Your experience is one of ‘being towards the future’, and not being in the present. Post-accident, you are precisely where you are and nowhere else. You are smack bang in the middle of life, with the past behind you and a world of possibility ahead.

On a bio-chemical level, things are going crazy. Your body is flooded with adrenaline. Your brain is trying to process the situation, monitoring your senses, searching for trauma while frantically re-knitting neural nets, trying to find a stable state.

Meanwhile, you are having an out-of-body experience. To say that you are ‘in the moment’ doesn’t do justice to this experience at all.

You are trying to reconnect with life as you know it. Simple but important things come to mind. You are someone’s mother, father, sister, brother, husband, wife, daughter, son. You are struck by a desire to call these people and tell them that you love them. You tell yourself that, from this moment on, you will put more effort into your relationships, for they are your deepest sources of power and most valuable assets in life. And for an all-too-brief moment, you realize that all your powers and capacities, all your hopes and dreams and plans and visions, all of the possibilities and opportunities that you take for granted on a daily basis – all of it is a gift.

You nearly lost your life and you never appreciated the fullness of the gift. But you saw your death coming and you lived to tell the tale.

Congratulations! You are having a moment of vision.

You don’t need to have a life-threatening experience to have a moment of vision, but it helps. Life-threatening experiences tear us from our fascination with the immediate things in life and throw us back on our fundamental sources of power. The experience is a bit
like looking at a painting and seeing the frame for the first time. Our sources of power frame our life, but for the most part this framing is invisible to us. In the moment of vision, the frame becomes apparent and our view on life changes as a result. We realize that we are creatures of potential, and that we have this potential because we have sources of power to draw on. We realize that, for the most part, we fail to take advantage of our potential and live to the fullest extent. We have the sense that we are squandering our life. We realize that we should lay claim to life, to reach out and own it.

The question is: how does this transform our sense of time?

Take a moment to reflect on what it feels like to be there, in the middle of life. In moments of vision, our temporal goals fall away, and we find ourselves engaging our own life as it is, has been and potentially will be until we die. Behind us, the relationships, events and experiences that have empowered us lie like markers on a temporal landscape. Meanwhile, ahead of us, the possibilities that we possess by virtue of our sources of power are calling on us, challenging us to claim them. We become aware of the space that we create in time, the field of powers and possibilities that we sustain simply by existing. Our singular time-space inflates about us like a balloon and we sit blissfully suspended in the middle of it.

This is quite different to our ordinary experience of time. Ordinarily, our sense of time points in a single direction: towards the future. In moments of vision, our sense of time extends in two directions: backwards, to encompass the road that we have travelled, and forwards, to scope out the uncharted lands of the future. In one direction, the road reaches back to our earliest experiences. In the other direction, the sun is rising on a new tomorrow. Ahead of us is the future that could be, that should be – that will be, assuming we have the chance to achieve it.

We find ourselves in the driver’s seat of life. We have the power to take the wheel and turn our vehicle whichever way we choose.

Of course, we always have this power. But we rarely use it. We live like passengers on a guided tour, shuttling from location to location, unwilling to chat to the driver, much less change the route. It is comforting to know that we are taking the same journey as everyone else. We can take a good long snooze if we like (hopefully someone will wake us before the journey ends). Confronting death reminds us that, no matter what route we take through life, we are the ones who make the decision to take it. It also reminds us that
we can change the direction we are taking if we want to. All we need to do is to put ourselves in the driver’s seat of life, take the wheel and turn it.

Confronting death reminds us of our creative power – the power to create the future.

**Fate and the Future**

The idea that each of us can ‘seize the day’ and determine the direction of our life is the defining idea of the modern era. It is a dangerous idea. For untold years prior to modernity, authorities rubbish this idea. Individualism was a disruptive doctrine. For the sake of maintaining the status quo, it was vital that people believed that their lives were preordained by God or Fate. Whole religions and mythological systems were developed to support this idea. The ancient Greeks, for example, believed that when a child was born, the Mairae, or Fates, would spin a thread that determined the course of its life. The Fates were depicted as three women. Clotho wove the thread on her spindle. Lachesis measured the thread with her ruler, determining the length of time that each individual would live. Atropos severed the thread with her shears, determining the precise moment of each individual’s death.

In ancient times, personal destiny was fixed. Everything that would transpire in life had already been spun out in advance. The best one could do was to accept one’s destiny and live it out with dignity and resilience.

The Greeks were wrong. No doubt there is much that we can’t change in life. Our blood type, our DNA, our family and our history – all of this is set in stone. Still, there are plenty of aspects of life that we can change, assuming we have the will to do so. One aspect is the way that we draw on and project memories of the past. By changing how we draw on memories of the past, we can alter the direction that we take through life by shifting our perspective on the future.

Our experience of life is thoroughly shaped by our memories of the past. The Greek myth of the Fates provides a useful metaphor here. A thread of recollection runs through life, and it is from the spool of recollection that you weave your visions of the future. Existentialist philosophers like Heidegger argue that this is how human beings bring a world of possibilities into view. Our empowering and disempowering memories of the past form the mental maps that we use to understand reality and grasp the opportunities that it presents. By recycling empowering and disempowering memories and projecting
them ahead of us, we create a personal horizon of anticipation and expectation. The horizon that you create from recycling the past has a profound impact on how you understand and perceive the possibilities of life.

Charles Foster Kane (played by Orson Wells) recycles the past in the opening scene of the classic film, *Citizen Kane*. ‘Rosebud’, Kane sighs with his dying breath, a snow-globe rolling from his hand. A member of Kane’s household relates this incident to journalists, and the rest of film is framed as an investigation into Kane’s life and how the mysterious ‘Rosebud’ figured in it.

Was Rosebud a pet name for a wife or lover? Was it something that Kane owned and lost? A vision of the future or a figment of a dream? No one can say. At the end of the film, the journalists are stumped for answers. Wells’ camera leaves them to their deliberations and travels across a warehouse crammed with Kane’s possessions before finally settling on a wooden sled. Engraved on the sled is: ‘Rosebud’.

Rosebud was the winter sled that Kane played with as a child. We are left to surmise that, all his life, Kane cherished memories of Rosebud and drew on them for strength and inspiration. While objectively, these memories may seem incidental, for Kane they were central, shaping his life and identity at the deepest level.

Rosebud is part of Kane’s fate. Take away Rosebud and you take away a piece of Kane.

If you want to change your life, ask: ‘What memories do I draw on to understand my life? What mental maps do I use to plot my course into the future?’ Follow up by asking: ‘Are these memories empowering or disempowering for me?’ Empowering memories inspire us to creative action. People who have an empowering connection to the past find it easy to draw on their capacity to think, feel, do and be. All of us have empowering memories tucked away somewhere. Often they reflect what others might see as minor, incidental moments – though for you they will be invaluable. The time you won the physics prize in high school – you were so happy that you ran through the park and danced in the fountain. You have savoured that memory all your life, and it has always empowered you. The year you spent backpacking about India – what a life-changing experience it was! Rosebud, the winter sled – what memories you have of hauling that frame through the powdered snow. What freedom, what joy!

Empowering memories are part of who you are. You wouldn’t be able to be who you are if you lost these memories, or had different memories implanted in their place.
If you have lived a life of positive experiences, you’ll be supported by your memories and carried along on a wave of optimism and positive anticipation. If your life has been less fortunate, you might rather shake your memories off. We all have memories of disempowering experiences. It is a challenge to resist recycling them. That wet January in nineteen-two, when you stole your mother’s car and drove it off the road into the gully. You weren’t hurt in the accident but the shame of it is something you’ve never lived down. The year you spent at your grandmother’s house while your parents ‘sorted things out’ – how unhappy you were, how you withdrew inside yourself to survive. You’ve been perfecting that inner retreat ever since, haven’t you?

Do these examples resonate? If so, it’s time you learned to recycle the past differently.

If the past is a heavy burden, it is tempting to live looking back over your shoulder in a kind of rearview commute. Some schools of therapy, such as psychoanalysis, actually encourage this process. Somehow, by worrying over things that have happened in the past, we are supposed to forget about them and move on. In most cases, it is better to stay future focused and optimistic, and to try to figure out where life might take us. This involves positively engaging with the past. The point, however, is not to dwell on events that have disempowered us. The point is to joyously affirm the best that life has given us and to throw it forward as possibility. You need to recover your most empowering experiences, pick them up and cast them ahead of you. You need to proactively project new visions of the future on the basis of your empowering experiences.

Temporal experience is not fixed. Temporal experience can be shaped and transformed. Take this insight and drill it into your brain. It is vital to a life of positive change.

**Star Wars: A Tale of Existential Timelines**

Luke Skywalker stood on the dune at the edge of his uncle’s compound and gazed wistfully at the twin moons of Tatooine. If only the future looked as beautiful as those giant orbs. Luke had been raised by his aunt and uncle, who were moisture farmers on the remote desert planet. When Luke looked into the future, he saw nothing but boredom and toil. Luke’s heart brimmed over with longing for adventure. But life hadn’t given him any resources that might enable him to realize his dreams. Luke’s dreams remained precisely that – dreams. He was destined to work the harvesting systems on his uncle’s farm for the rest of his days. His excitement would be limited to racing his landspeeder through the desert canyons and haggling with the Jawas for droids.
This changed the day that Luke stumbled upon a hologram of a beautiful princess calling for help. He sought the assistance of a desert hermit, Ben Kenobi, who turned out to be a Jedi Knight, practically living on his doorstep. Soon Luke was consorting with pirates, hot-dogging through the stars and fighting space battles with Imperial forces. All the while, his knowledge and experience was rapidly increasing. Luke was too modest to admit it, but his sense of destiny was expanding at an equal rate.

By broadening his base of empowering experiences, working up a rich and diverse set of powers, Luke learned to project a broad and empowering sense of the future. He needed it the day that the evil Darth Vader told him that he was his father. ‘Join me. It is your destiny’, Vader intoned, extending his black gloved hand. Luke, meanwhile, was clinging to a railing over a howling abyss. Death was in his eyes. But he wasn’t beaten. He knew that at least part of what Vader said was untrue.

Darth Vader might be his father, but joining him was not Luke’s destiny. Luke knew his destiny better than that. He had chosen it. Siding with the Rebel Alliance, he would play his part in defeating Vader’s Empire – or die trying.

Luke Skywalker affirmed his destiny. He released the railing and fell.

Luke’s character arc in the original Star Wars trilogy offers a great illustration of how working up a rich set of powers, and projecting new visions of the future on this basis, can transform our sense of destiny. All of us have a sense of destiny. It is the vision that we have of where we are most likely to end up in life, all things being equal. This vision can (and often does) change day by day. You’ll notice that it shifts in and out of focus depending on the kind of mood you are in. When you are feeling ‘up’, in an optimistic frame of mind, the future is wide open. When you are feeling ‘down’, the future is closed. People who have an elevated sense of destiny feed it by trying to stay active and future focused. Moreover, they are constantly scoping out new paths into the future by building on their inventory of powers and figuring out new ways to draw on these powers.

By taking ownership of your powers and projecting them vigorously, it is possible to create empowering visions of the future. Recycling the past differently, you can transform your sense of destiny and change your life in the process.

Heidegger calls the process of creating our destiny by recycling the past ‘temporalization’. I like to think of it as a matter of spinning ‘existential timelines’ into the future. Think of how the Greeks might have seen it. We may not see the rod of Lachesis, to know how long we will live. Nor can we get our hands on the shears of Atropos, to defer the
moment that we will die. But we are spinning threads of destiny all the time. Each of us sits before Clotho’s spindle, reaching into the basket of fate and spinning existential timelines into the future.

This is how you create your sense of destiny. And this is how you can change it.

How much time each day do you spend spinning existential timelines into the future? Don’t think of this as daydreaming. It is future-casting, visioning. We usually associate ‘visioning’ with thought-leaders and innovators. In fact, we all develop visions of the future on a daily basis. We are visioning as we rise from bed in the morning, working on auto pilot, guided by memories. We are visioning as we fall into bed in the evening, exhausted by the day, subliminally preparing for the morning to come.

Visioning is not always a conscious process. Mostly we recycle experiences without thinking about it, subconsciously anticipating the future.

We are so used to visioning that we tend not to notice that we are doing it. Mostly, we focus on the goal at the end of our timelines. We live like laser guided missiles, homing in on our destination. Sometimes we can be so concerned with hitting our targets that we don’t stop to consider what happens when we reach our destination (hint: boom!). The first kiss. (Tick). The first car. (Tick). High school graduation. (Tick). Job. (Tick). Performance review after performance review after performance review (Tick, tick, sigh).

We wake up in the morning and check our calendars to see how the day will proceed. When the sun sets, we review our to-do lists to confirm that all our targets are down.

Do we ever ask: *is this living?*

When we identify with our temporal goals rather than the creation of existential timelines, we forget that we are visioning and crafting our sense of destiny. In the process, we overlook our essential power to create the future. It is vital that you step back and see yourself as engaged in visioning. You are the weaver of your destiny – do not forget it.

There is an art to positive visioning. To spin empowering timelines into the future, you need to anticipate the future from a position of strength. Start by getting clear on your powers. Ask yourself: ‘What are some ways that I could apply these powers right now so that they positively impact on how my life unfolds? Project an existential timeline from the standpoint of your current situation. Do this again whenever your situation changes.
You are throwing open windows in time to forecast your future. Try to open as many windows as you can – it lets the light in.

Perhaps the most valuable thing you can do in life is learn to apply this technique in contexts of change. Next time life takes you by surprise, take the opportunity to apply a new set of powers, or an old power differently, and see what comes out of the mix. By applying your powers in creative ways, you can transfigure the experience of change.

Plant your feet and send existential timelines shooting to the horizon. Reach for the stars. You may grab the moons of Tatooine in the process.

**Failure to Launch? Reprocess and Revision**

A friend of mine, Jem, gets stuck on the launching pad. Jem is full of ideas. Catch him on a good day and you’ll be blown away by his intellect – always leading the conversation, always ready with a proposition for taking things forward. Every now and again, Jem will astound me with a great idea for a book or business initiative. The next week I’ll ask him how things are coming along. He’ll be cagey. ‘Oh, ok’. Time drags on and the great idea drops from view. It is a cyclical pattern: ideas proliferate but plans go nowhere.

Jem is a visionary thinker. He is also a serial shirker. He knows how to prepare the launching pad. But he suffers from a failure to launch.

I was discussing Jem with another friend, Janine, the CEO of a successful business. Janine put her finger on the source of the problem: a lack of self-esteem. If you don’t believe in yourself, it can be hard to muster the courage to put your ideas into action. If you have been told from day one that you are no good, you inevitably come to accept it. Jem is brimming over with ideas. But when it comes to applying these ideas, he doesn’t have the stomach for it. It is not that Jem doesn’t believe in his ideas. He doesn’t believe in himself, and thus he doesn’t believe that he can achieve his ideas in practice.

Plenty of people can dream and vision. Without a robust sense of self-esteem, however, it is hard to move ahead. We know where we want to go. We just don’t believe we have the resources to get there.

How do you overcome a paralysing lack of self-esteem? The solution may seem obvious: you need to change how you think about yourself. If your beliefs about your self-worth are holding you back, you need to correct these beliefs by finding positive, self-affirming
beliefs to replace them. But are beliefs per se really the source of the problem? Not in every case. Often a crisis of self-esteem runs deeper than any set of beliefs we have about ourselves. When one says: ‘I think I am no good’, one is not just stating a belief about oneself, after all. One is expressing a feeling-state – a state that is often linked to painful, deeply-embedded memories. Overlaying one’s emotional state and the memories that underpin it with a set of positive beliefs can help you feel better about yourself in the short term. But it can also obscure the root cause of the problem. It is a bit like polishing a surface without scrubbing it first. We spread the dirt around. Sooner or later, the mould sets in and we are back where we started.

Having a negative view of one’s potential certainly does contribute to a lack of self-esteem. It doesn’t follow, however, that you can beat poor self-esteem through positive affirmations alone. Ultimately, our beliefs about our potential are the expression of deeper psychological processes. In particular, we nurture and maintain our state of self-esteem by recycling memories of disempowering experiences. If you have suffered a life of disempowering experiences, you’ll most likely look into the future and see the same traps and barriers that you’ve encountered before waiting to trip you up. But how do these traps and barriers get there? Not everyone anticipates the worst possible outcome – some people foresee success. When it comes down to it, you put these traps and barriers ahead of you by recycling disempowering experiences.

This is how we undercut our sense of self-potential. We cultivate poor self-esteem through a process of negative visioning.

To beat the cycle of negative visioning, you need to target the process behind it. You need to challenge the pattern of visioning that you use to maintain your concept of the future. You need to burrow down into the way that you draw on the past to create the future and transform this process. This is not easy. When one is down in the dumps, one’s disempowering experiences can seem to fill the entire world. Sometimes it seems like everything good in life has been poisoned by those experiences. Look closer. There are empowering experiences scattered like gemstones on the bottom of a river bed. Pluck them from the water and polish them up. Let them shine in the sun. Say aloud: ‘These experiences are part of who I am. They belong to me. No one can take them away’.

Finders keepers. With this material you can build a glorious future.
For some people, revisioning the future is epically difficult. If you have suffered a genuinely traumatic experience, it can be hard to shift your perspective on life. When you look back to identify your strengths and achievements, all you find is a pit of despair. In these cases, it can be necessary to seek professional help to overcome the traumatic experience. Therapy can yield valuable insights into your problems and patterns of visioning that can help you make peace with the past.

Happily, in most cases, it is possible to shift one’s self-perception through a work of positive visioning. Here are three techniques you can use to facilitate this process.

1. **Apply your Powers.** Think of some things that you do well. Write these powers on a sheet of paper. Now think of some situations that enable you to use these powers. Write these down too. How could you engage in these kinds of situations today? Think about how you could engage these situations in empowering ways and go do it.

   You should apply your powers at every opportunity. The more that you apply your powers, the easier it becomes to use them in creative ways. By applying your powers in creative ways, you add to your storehouse of empowering memories. This helps you build a resource base of positive memories to draw on when you need to scope out the future.

2. **Recall Empowering Experiences.** Think of experiences you have had that have heightened your sense of capacity and potential. Revisit these experiences. Nurture them with context and details. Work them up into empowering memories that you can project into the future.

   Take a moment to try this out. Stop reading and revisit some empowering memories. These might be memories of recent events, or memories that take you back to your earliest years. The important thing is that these are memories of experiences that made you feel vital and valuable as a person. They are memories of sources of power.

   Jot down these memories in note form on a sheet of paper. Now try imaginatively casting them into the future. What kinds of contexts might enable you to enjoy similar experiences today or tomorrow? How might you engage with your life and the world in order to reactivate these positive experiences and rekindle the thrill of empowerment?

3. **Cultivate Damascus Road Experiences.** We are all on a journey through time. We play a role in determining the nature of our journey every step of the way. We do this through a process of recollection and projection. Drawing on our memories of past
experiences, we spin existential timelines into the future and we follow them to the horizon.

What kind of path do you create through time? If you are stuck on the wrong kind of path, you can change it by projecting other futures. The trick is to use new and unexpected situations in life as springboards for projecting new visions of the future. This is how you can use change to cultivate Damascus road experiences.

Take a moment to reflect on your destiny as you see it today. Try identifying the kinds of memories that you draw on to create this sense of destiny. Now think of some alternative timelines that you might project by processing a wider range of experiences. Focus on experiences that have made you feel vibrant and alive. Perhaps you can draw on experiences that Life Changing has helped you bring to light. Reflect on how, by drawing on this broader set of experiences, it is possible to imagine the future differently. Try projecting a life-changing vision of the future starting from this very moment in time. What if, by projecting the past differently, you were able to transform your life starting today? What if this moment were a threshold of life transformation? What if, in years to come, you were to look back on this moment in time as the moment that you changed your direction in life? What if this insight – the insight that you are formulating right now – were the pivot upon which everything changed?

You should apply this reflection to every moment of change in life. By engaging with change actively and creatively, projecting empowering new possibilities from out of the changing situation itself, you can pull yourself free of the path that you are treading and bring yourself to a Damascus road experience.

Imagine you are standing on a timeline that stretches before you into the future. You are preparing to shoot down this timeline like a missile. Then a window opens in your side vision. You shift focus slightly, curious to see what lies through it. It is another timeline branching off from the first. Looking down it, you get a different view on the future. You get a different sense of where you might take your life and what it might be worth.

You are standing at a fork in time, considering two possible routes into the future. Linger for a moment in this experience and savour it. You are enjoying a moment of existential freedom. Do you have what it takes to sustain this moment of vision?
Some people don’t give themselves a chance to explore moments of vision. The moment they glimpse a different path in life, they shut down the vision and refuse to accept it as a possibility. It is a sad fact that creatures raised in captivity often cannot survive without a cage. Freedom is a frightening thing, which is why many people will happily exchange it for comfort. For the rest of us – seekers, adventurers, stewards, visionaries and innovators – it is the stuff of life. Moments of vision are moments in which we really come alive.

Don’t be a victim of the past. You can use empowering memories to revision your route into the future. Change is precisely the moment for you to put this teaching into practice. Seize the opportunities in change. Your time starts now.

Resilience, Agility, and Vision

You won’t change anything by sitting back in your chair and ruminating abstractly on life. Life changing is something that one should do passionately or not at all. So get up out of your seat, have a stretch, stamp the floor or do some crunches – whatever it takes to fire you up and get you ready for action. Say to yourself: here, today, I decide the course of life. Say it loud. Engaging with change should be a life defining activity. Make it so.

This book provides you with life-changing tools that enable you to leap into change and learn from it. Using philosophical examples, I have outlined a simple reflective attitude to change that should permeate life, shaping your relationships, your attitude towards yourself and your outlook on life generally. The reflective attitude is based in three personal qualities and life skills: resilience, agility, and vision. Resilience, agility and vision are the virtues required to flourish through times of change.

Let us review the journey that we’ve taken in this book and pull the lessons together. You might like to think of this as an exercise in positive visioning. Reviewing the lessons of a book is essentially no different from reviewing the lessons of a life. In both cases, we are drawing on empowering memories of the past in order to open up a visionary path into the future. As you review the lessons of this book, imagine how you might use them to transform your life in a positive way. How might these lessons help you cope with the changes that you are dealing with today and tease out their opportunities? How might they help you expand and diversify your powers, so that you can engage with change in different ways? How might they help you project new visions of the future, so as to transform your sense of who you are and where your life is headed?
1. Resilience

Change can come quickly. Falling in love. Facing divorce. A traffic accident. A wave of workplace redundancies. Changes like these happen fast. It is easy to flinch, look away or back off in the heat of the moment and miss the opportunities. There are always opportunities in change, no matter how bleak the situation may appear. To see these opportunities, you need to be able to squarely face the situation and ask: ‘What’s in it for me?’ You need to be a calm centre in the storm, so that you can look through a gap in the clouds and glimpse blue sky on the horizon.

It takes resilience to deal with change. This resilience involves equal parts courage and self-control. Life is change – this is an undeniable fact. We need existential courage to affirm this fact, and self-control to see the possibilities in it. Until we learn to celebrate change, we will always be out of step with life, wishing that it were easier and more predictable, like the comfort zones that we retreat into when we need time out. To find the courage to celebrate life and change, we need to remind ourselves that we are alive. What if you had only twenty-four hours left to live? Would you waste these hours wishing that you’d been dealt a better hand? Or would you take stock of the opportunities that you now possess to live, love and celebrate life, and put them into action?

The key to living a heroic life is to apply your powers at each opportunity, even in the face of defeat. Don’t wait for a mortal challenge to try this out – do it now. Seize the day and embrace your opportunities like an Existentialist philosopher.

Keep a clear head as you do it: Stoic self-control is vital. We need self-control to reign ourselves in when runaway passions like fear, anxiety and (the one that really blindsides us) pride threaten to trip us up. Stoic self-control involves reprocessing the judgments that we commonly make about life and change, rejecting the impulsive, self-defeating and irrational ideas that infect our point of view. All of us are plagued by anxiety, irrational expectation and unnecessary fear. We need to constantly work to weed out these passions from our hearts and minds. Instead of worrying about things that you can’t control, focus on the way that you respond to change.

You can’t control the world, but you can control the way that you respond to it. This is how we take self-control the Stoic way.

What is the worst that could happen, after all? That you fail to make the best of change? That you fail in such an awesome way that your failure becomes legendary and your name
is forever associated with bad plans and dismal execution? Why worry? All of that is fate and it is out of your hands. The best way to avoid it happening is to focus on keeping a clear head. If the worst comes to pass, you can deal with it then.

Existential courage and Stoic self-control are twin components of the resilience that is required to deal with change successfully. By applying these virtues together, you can cut through the noise of life and situate yourself at existential ground zero. With an eye on the moment, look for opportunities. Now muster your resources and launch yourself forth.

It takes resilience to see into the future. You need to be centred and focused on the big picture to see the path to your ultimate existence. It is easy to become consumed by the day to day rigmarole of targets, plans and goals. You need to shake free of all that and get clear on the meaning of your life. What are you here to achieve? What is your ultimate destiny? Take in the powers that you’ve accumulated through the years and the crucial relationships that you’ve forged that offer you support. Get in touch with your deepest resources and envision a future in which you could actually make use of them.

You are preparing a launch pad to blast into the future. Look up. Take in the stars. Houston, we are ready for lift off.

2. Agility

To prepare yourself for change, you need to diversify your powers to the \( n^{th} \) degree. The more diverse your powers, the more agile you can be in situations of change, and the easier it becomes for you to project innovative visions of the future.

It is not hard to recall the powers that you use every day. You climb from bed and fix a mean espresso. You may only be half awake, but you are already using your ordinary powers to think, feel, do and be. You commute to work and spend your day surfing timelines. Whether you are fighting fires, building bridges or jumping through hoops you are constantly applying your familiar powers to exist.

Cultivating personal agility requires you to do more than just get clear on the ordinary powers that you use every day. You need to identify your superpowers – your extraordinary powers to exist. We all have a superhero costume buried somewhere under our clothes. If you are still struggling to identify your superpowers (or stuck in a phone booth, trying to tug off your shirt), take a moment to reflect on the exercises that you
have completed in the course of reading this book. Consider what your responses to the exercises say about your personal powers, be these powers that you possess independently of others, or powers that you derive through your relationships with friends, family members and social networks. Think especially about powers that have come to light in situations that you didn’t think you were capable of dealing with, yet which you trumped in heroic style. We typically forge our superpowers under extreme conditions. Spiderman got a venomous dose of radioactivity. The Hulk was blasted by gamma rays. Batman witnessed his parents murdered before his eyes. These kinds of situations aren’t necessarily pleasant for the individuals involved. But if you can find a way of turning a difficult situation into a catalyst for learning and growth, a legend is born.

This is how superheroes get their start. We forge our superpowers in the furnace of change.

Change is the ideal opportunity to expand and diversify your powers. The key is to pay attention to how you are affected by new situations. Joyful affects are a sign of empowerment. When you find your mood heightened in a new situation or environment, this is a sign that something about the situation or environment empowers you, increasing your ability to think, feel, do or be. The easiest way to expand your powers is to approach new situations in an exploratory, experimental frame of mind, seeking out empowering experiences. Once you have developed the resilience to cope with change, you can take this attitude towards every moment in life. Instead of finding yourself at a loss in change, you can leap into new situations boots and all, heart attuned to empowering stimuli, in pursuit of new experiences and sources of power to make your own.

With a diverse set of powers to draw on, you can be creative when life changes. People who have a limited set of powers tend to hit a dead end when circumstances change. Simple changes become problems. Complex changes become out and out crises. People who have a broad and diverse set of powers are able to be playful and future-focused in situations of change. They treat change as an opportunity to test themselves and explore new approaches to life. If nothing else, they are able to work up their powers by exploring new ways they could be applied to the problems at hand. This agile and creative approach unlocks opportunities in change. Opportunities do not fall from heaven. We create our opportunities by tackling life and change in an agile and creative way.

This is how you burn brightly. This is how you light the world with your glow.
The better you become at creating opportunities, the richer and happier your life will be. People who are ready for change are ready for life. Other people gather about them, eager to follow their lead. They sense the presence of someone with the resilience and agility to tackle the challenges that they all face. They sense a leader with the power to unlock the opportunities in change, and the ability to map out new paths into the future.

3. Vision

Life is empty without possibility. Without a sense of possibility, there is nothing to hope for and life is a pointless exercise. For the sake of personal wellbeing, if nothing else, it is vital that we cultivate a sense of possibility by actively projecting timelines into the future at each opportunity.

You can do this by taking a proactive approach to change. When the landscape of life changes about you, ask: ‘How could I creatively engage this situation in order to take my life in a new direction? How could I apply my unique powers in order to make this moment of change an unexpected opportunity?’

Once you are able to tackle change in this way, you are invincible. Change becomes an opportunity for learning and growth and life becomes an adventure.

The ultimate adventure is to prepare the ground for Damascus road experiences. We can do this by taking a resilient, agile, and visionary approach to change. You need to get used to digging into your arsenal of powers and applying them to new situations in active, experimental ways. You need to make a habit of using change to open up a sprawling set of paths into the future. Each time that you run into a new situation in life, try to project an original timeline from this point to an unexpected future. Focus on radical alternatives to your current path in life. Think long-term – five, ten, twenty years into the future. Don’t be afraid to be ambitious. Yet don’t rush it. If you have time, put the vision under your pillow and dream on it awhile. The important thing is to stay open to the idea that this vision, this timeline that you’ve projected into the future, may in fact reflect how your life will unfold. This may be your destiny.

Dwell on this idea. It is how you trigger a Damascus road experience.

You can’t just decide to have a Damascus road experience. You can’t make these experiences happen. You can cultivate these experiences, however, by multiplying the
number of timelines that you project into the future. The more rich and diverse your sense of possibility, the more chance there is you will recognize the opportunities that emerge out of change. Damascus road experiences occur when we find ourselves in an unexpected situation with at least two sets of opportunities laid before us. They unfold when we find ourselves looking down the line towards an unexpected future and saying with conviction: ‘Yes! This time is my time!’

You need to want the other future with every fibre in your body. When an unexpected future becomes the meaning of life, the process of life change has begun.

When you look down the line towards an alternative future and find yourself filled with desire for this future, something changes in your experience of time. Time splits and doubles. This can be disorientating. It is a bit like checking your watch on a row of clocks in an airport departure lounge and realizing that it 10am in Sydney, 11pm in London, and 2pm in San Francisco all at once. Multiple time-zones co-exist in your head. It is like this in a Damascus road experience. You know you are having a Damascus road experience when you find that you have multiple paths ahead of you, and the strange and unfamiliar path is looking inviting. Previously you were on such-and-such a timeline headed towards such-and-such a target. Now you are mulling over another goal – a personal, life-defining mission – a mission such that were you to accept it, it would change your life completely.

This is not just a new direction in life. It is your destiny.

Take Paul as an example. As Saul, Paul took a timeline toward Damascus, convinced that this was the path to the future. Something happened on the road that changed his way of seeing things. By the time Paul reached Damascus, he was spinning double-time. Now Paul had two timelines ahead of him. He could continue on his path of religious persecution. Or he could endorse the messianic time-frame that loomed upon his horizon, which ultimately posed a more daunting task, requiring him to change his life completely.

Can you picture Paul in this moment of decision? He is projecting two timelines ahead of him, wondering which way to go. This divided moment, in which Paul stands on the brink of radical change – this is a moment that Paul creates himself. Perhaps an angel was responsible for the light and the voice that started him down this way of thinking. But Paul is responsible for sustaining the Damascus road experience, and for solving the quandary that is presented by it, that of deciding which way to go.
We know what Paul decided. Affirming an expanded conception of his potential, Paul affirmed a new life and destiny.

The future is unwritten, as Joe Strummer said. It falls on us human beings to write this narrative day by day.

**The Mystery Art Challenge**

Positive visioning is an aesthetic pursuit. There is an art to doing it well. To vision well, you need to cultivate the frame of mind that an artist brings to their sketch pad or canvas. You need to be creative, agile and inventive – this goes without saying. You need an eye for context, a sense of perspective and proportion, a cultivated taste, and a nose for tone and nuance. Most importantly, you need to love the visioning experience itself.

Visioning is a beautiful experience. The more love you put into it, the better it is.

People who excel at positive visioning are artists of life. Their powers are paints and their canvas is the future.

Imagine that you have registered for a mystery art competition. Your task is to complete a series of seven paintings over seven days, one each day. The catch is that you will not be given any information on the subject of these paintings in advance of turning up to paint them. Each day, you are sent instructions telling you where you should go to find your tools. When you arrive at your destination, there is a canvas and easel, a stool, paints – and a view. Your challenge is to paint what you see.

Does this sound like a nightmare or an excellent way to spend a week? Your answer probably depends on how good a painter you are.

Imagine, first of all, that you are not much of a painter. On the first day, when you turn up to find your canvas and easel, you realize that you have no idea even how to mix the colours in the palette. The mystery art competition is all downhill from there. You are forced to paint in primary colours or murky shades of brown. This makes for an unsatisfactory experience to say the least. You get lucky on the first day, when you are tasked with painting a field of golden corn. You do a passable job of a muddy mountainside on the second day. On day three, when you are presented with a vibrant carnival in a city street, you are defeated.

You complete all of the paintings that you are required to paint. But most of the works are dismal. Overall, you find the process frustrating and dispiriting. There is simply no way for you to do justice to every scene with such a limited set of colours.
It is the same when dealing with change in life. If you don’t have the resources to engage with change in an agile, creative way, change can stop you dead. Change is more than just a disruption in life – it can be a genuine crisis. If, however, you can deal actively and creatively with change – if you can engage with change replete with powers, applying them freely in different contexts – then the experience is totally different. Change is an opportunity to explore your full range of skills and talents, many of which you might not get a chance to use on a daily basis. Instead of a wall, change is a window and door.

Open that window, step through the door. A world of opportunity awaits you.

Returning to the art competition, imagine that you are an excellent painter, adept at mixing color and creating light on canvas. You are familiar with a range of styles and like nothing more than to experiment with new methods and approaches. How does this transform your experience?

You are no longer forced to select between three colours, for a start. You have a range of colors and tones at your disposal. Brightly colored vistas are no longer impossible to paint. You can take a nuanced approach to subjects and do them justice. The result is that the painting competition becomes a positive experience. Whether it is a carnival, a flock of birds, or a vibrant orchid garden, each scene triggers a fresh sense of possibility. Each vista is an opportunity for you to draw on your full set of powers and put them to the test. Instead of compounding your sense of ineptitude, the competition enables you to live to your full extent.

You throw yourself at the canvas with vigor and verve. Each time you are presented with a new subject to paint, you see possibilities waiting to be achieved. You play around with this technique and that. When one approach doesn’t work, you have the resilience and agility to try a different tack. Possibilities explode like firecrackers in your brain. When the competition is finished, you are disappointed that it is over.

A diverse set of powers, and the courage and agility to use them, transforms the experience of change. It allows you to project new possibilities out of unexpected situations. The ability to take an artistic approach to change has an intrinsic value. It transfigures life. It enables you to see the future in scintillating moments of vision.

There are few things as exciting as a moment of vision. Situations that were problems become bold opportunities. One can see what might be done in the situation – sensing it, intuiting it, even if one is not visualizing it precisely. Your imagination runs down existential timelines, measuring distances and scoping out angles. Instead of feeling blocked, you find that you are thrilling to new possibilities. Instead of worrying about how
to proceed, you find yourself asking: ‘Where is this situation taking me? Perhaps this change, which I’d neither desired nor anticipated, might actually work out for the better?’

This is an experience that visionary thinkers have all the time. It is a beautiful experience. Learning to trigger moments of vision transfigures life, unleashing its possibilities.

**MacGyver Change**

Angus MacGyver is a hero for our times. MacGyver shows us how to transform crises into positive challenges by opening new paths into the future.

MacGyver (played by Richard Dean Anderson in the eponymous eighties television series) was a US secret agent with a knack for getting caught in life or death situations. In each episode of the series, MacGyver would be caught in at least one life or death situation, only to escape it, Houdini-like, through the creative application of his powers. It turned out that there was little that MacGyver couldn’t do. As the episodes rolled by, MacGyver revealed new insights into medicine, engineering, chemistry and physics that we, the audience, never knew he possessed. It became a running gag. The show’s writers would drop MacGyver into increasingly desperate situations in order to invent ever more outlandish ways for him to escape them. MacGyver treated every situation with his trademark cool. While other characters panicked or despaired, he would calmly cobble together a rocket launcher, some plastic explosive or an improvised jet ski that he would use to avert the crisis and save the day.

Most of the time it was ludicrous. Still, audiences loved it. Such was the success of the show, one still hears talk of people ‘MacGyvering’ their way out difficult situations.

Critics of the show complained that MacGyver’s inventions were fanciful and the storylines implausible. This may be true, but it doesn’t undercut the value of MacGyver as a hero for our times. MacGyver confronts the challenges of change and turns them into opportunities. He doesn’t worry about what is out of his hands. He focuses on his resources and what he can do with them. Applying his diverse powers in creative ways, MacGyver creates new paths into the future. He projects existential timelines from out of crisis situations and follows them to their conclusion.

*Life Changing* is a book for existential MacGyvers. This is not to say that the point of this book is to teach you how to make unlikely gadgets to escape life or death situations. My
aim has been to show you how to cultivate the resilience, agility and vision to transform the experience of change. With resilience, agility and vision, it is possible to transfigure change and turn times of change into an adventure.

Next time you find yourself in an unexpected situation without any idea how to proceed, ask yourself: ‘What would MacGyver do?’

MacGyver change. Dream of impossible things and forge paths into the future.
Exercise Five: The Moment of Vision

Change time. Transfigure life with a visionary approach to change.

Summary: For this exercise, you’ll need a pen or pencil and a Situation Chart (see Appendix). The aim of the exercise is to show you how to transform your sense of destiny by creatively applying your powers to change.

Her father named her Diana after the goddess of hunting. He would take her shooting when she was a girl, selecting targets that she’d knock down one after another. As the years went by, there was less and less time for shooting. But still he set her targets, and she’d never miss.

Target eighteen: a scholarship to study business at an Ivy League University. Target twenty two: a management position on a Fortune 500 firm (with Daddy pulling strings). Target twenty five: Daddy’s choice of husband and a proposal from a man that she didn’t love.

That night, Diana missed a turnoff on the freeway. Next thing she was at the airport buying a ticket to Nepal. She texted Daddy in the air. ‘Time out’, she said.

With a pack on her back, Diana headed into the foothills of Everest. At 3000 meters, she traded her iPod for a flask of milk from a puzzled goatherd. At 4000 meters, she took her city clothes from her pack and buried them under a heap of stones. At 5000 meters, with the Himalayas towering above her, she stopped to look at some Buddhist flags crackling in the wind. It seemed to her that each of these flags was a path in life that she had decided not to take. It struck her then that, until this trek, she had never decided on any path in life. She was as wealthy as anyone she knew, yet she’d never owned the path beneath her feet.

Now the string of flags took on a different meaning. Each flag stood for a different path in life that Diana might take – a timeline awaiting her decision. Diana had never thought that life could be this full. Enlightenment must feel like this, she reflected – standing at the intersection of timelines, taking in the plurality of possible lives…

Diana turned around and headed down the mountain. She didn’t know what path lay ahead of her. But she knew that she was ready to choose.

Are you ready to revision the future? Follow the steps below as carefully as you can.

STEP 1. Identify a change that is happening in your life. The more decisive the change, the better. The change could be something that is happening in the world that is impacting on your life. Or it could be something that you are doing to change your life.
Possibilities might involve a birth or death in the family; the beginning or end of a relationship; a new job or career; migrating to a new town or country; the start or completion of a major project. The important thing is that this situation adds up to what you consider to be a genuine change in your life.

**STEP 1.1.** Give your situation a name. Draw up a Situation Chart and write this name at the top of it. This is your situation of change.

**STEP 2.** Review your powers. Choose one power that you think might help you deal with your situation of change. Write this power in the left hand column of the Situation Chart.

Imagine that Diana uses a Situation Chart to help her work through the challenge of escaping her father’s influence. Diana has read *Life Changing*, so she knows that she needs to embrace this change as a chance to unleash her whole person and live to her potential. She dubs her situation: ‘Diana achieves enlightenment’.

Diana decides that her business background should give her plenty of opportunities to recreate her life. Her Situation Chart looks like this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITUATION CHART</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHANGE: DIANA ACHIEVES ENLIGHTENMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>POWER 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business training</td>
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**STEP 3.** Look at the power that you have selected. Try to identify precisely what makes it a useful power in the context of your situation of change. Ask yourself:

‘How might this power enable me to engage this situation and turn it into an opportunity?’

Looking at the power that you’ve written in the left-hand column of the chart, imagine how you might use this power in the context of your situation of change to take your life in a new direction. Staring from change, spin an existential timeline into the future. Try to imagine a future scenario in which you’ve used this power successfully to resolve or
overcome the problems that are presented by your situation of change. Don’t be fantastical, but be ambitious. Reach for the stars – you may grab the moon in the process.

**STEP 3.1.** Write some notes on your future scenario on a piece of paper. If you feel inclined, you might try developing these notes into a short story. If you are stuck, try automatic writing, just to get some ideas on paper. Slam down some intuitions and leave them awhile. Come back later and see where the ideas take you.

**STEP 4.** Repeat Steps 2.0 and 2.1. Identify two further powers that you think might enable you to positively engage your situation of change. Write these powers in the centre and right hand columns headed ‘Power 2’ and ‘Power 3’.

**FOR EXAMPLE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITUATION CHART</th>
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<tr>
<td>CHANGE: DIANA ACHIEVES ENLIGHTENMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>POWER 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business training</td>
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**STEP 4.1.** Repeat Steps 3 and 3.1 for each of the new powers. Take your time. This is the kind of exercise that you can complete over a period of days.

**STEP 5.** You should now have three future scenarios sketched on your piece of paper. Your task is to find out if you could commit to any one of them.

Looking at each of these scenarios in turn, apply the following version of Nietzsche’s eternal return. Imagine that Nietzsche’s demon comes to you in the dead of night and tells you that one of these futures you’ll have to live out again and again for all eternity. You get to choose which one it is.

Do you find you are looking at one of these scenarios and thinking: ‘Well – if I had to repeat one course of life forever, this wouldn’t be so bad?’
If so, you may have discovered a new destiny. When you are able to look down an alternative timeline and say with conviction: ‘Yes! This time is my time!’ you have effectively transformed your destiny, and set your life on a different course.

**Lesson five:** Take a visionary approach to life and change. By applying your powers creatively and optimistically, you can use change to unlock empowering visions of the future. Engaging with change as a new beginning, you can project positive visions of the future. This can transfigure your experience of life.

The point of visioning is not to predict the future. The point is to unlock the opportunities in change, so that life is full of possibility.
Worksheets for Exercises
**Worksheet 1: Control Chart**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Events and Experiences</th>
<th>Can / Can’t Control</th>
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Worksheet 2: Event Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events and Experiences</th>
<th>Eternal Affirmation?</th>
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Worksheet 3: Group Chart

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<th>Social Groups</th>
<th>Sources of Power for Groups</th>
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## Worksheet 4: Mirror Box

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<tr>
<th>Social Groups</th>
<th>Joys/Sorrows</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
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Worksheet 5: Situation Chart

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<tr>
<th>Change</th>
<th>POWER 1</th>
<th>POWER 2</th>
<th>POWER 3</th>
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Bibliography

Note on citations: Citations in the text refer to the page numbers of cited works. The following exceptions reflect academic convention. References to Nietzsche cite the section of the text (e.g., GS, §341). References to Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations cite the chapter and section of the text (e.g., M, 4.15). Reference to Spinoza’s Ethics cite the Part of the text followed by the numbered Proposition or Definition (e.g., E, III P4).


Acknowledgements

Many people helped evolve this book from an idea to a finished product. Dawn Mischewski was there at the start and finish of the project, offering invaluable advice, support and editing skills along the way. Janine Brockway and Shari Walton at IT@AMP took a punt on Philosophy for Change at an early stage, offering me my first opportunity to present the material to a business audience. The students in my Philosophy for Change classes at the Centre for Continuing Education, University of Sydney, between 2008 and 2012, challenged me to keep the material fresh and relevant with questions, insights and stories, many of which have found their way into this book. I am especially grateful to Emma Ward, who participated in the first session of the course, for introducing me to Simon Robson. Sarah Downie read and commented on the manuscript and dramatically improved the first exercise. Frank Cuiuli prompted me to address the important role of self-esteem in positive visioning. Mike Harpley at OneWorld read an early version of the manuscript and made excellent suggestions that tightened and focused the whole. Joy Childs at Palmer Higgs patiently answered my questions and introduced me to the world of e-publishing. Rebekah East copyedited the final draft of the manuscript as she waited for Matilda to arrive. Mat Peden did a wonderful job of typesetting the print version of book. Mark Anthony Junkunc III designed the stunning front and back covers and keeps the dream alive.

Thank you, friends and fellow travelers. Stay inventive and dream of impossible things.