

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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**Life Strategies**  
Phillip C McGraw

# CONTENTS

COVER

TITLE PAGE

DEDICATION

INTRODUCTION

ONE—Get Real

TWO—You Either Get It, or You Don't

THREE—You Create Your Own Experience

FOUR—People Do What Works

FIVE—You Can't Change What You Don't Acknowledge

SIX—Life Rewards Action

SEVEN—There Is No Reality; Only Perception

EIGHT—Life Is Managed; It Is Not Cured

NINE—We Teach People How to Treat Us

TEN—There Is Power In Forgiveness

ELEVEN—You Have to Name It to Claim It

TWELVE—A Guided Tour of Your Life

THIRTEEN—The Seven-Step Strategy

FOURTEEN—Finding Your Formula

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# **LIFE STRATEGIES**

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*Doing What Works,  
Doing What  
Matters*

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**PHILLIP C MCGRAW**

**Vermillion**  
LONDON

*This book is dedicated with love and affection to my wife, Robin, and her gentle and caring spirit, and to my sons, Jay and Jordan, who inspire me with their vibrancy and energy.*

# INTRODUCTION

*Nine-tenths of wisdom consists in being wise in time.*

—Teddy Roosevelt

## **TARGET: AMERICA'S SWEETHEART**

As Oprah moved silently down the long, winding staircase in the pitch black of night, she was totally alone, a rare circumstance given the intense schedule we were following in Amarillo. Since a conventional hotel would have been a security nightmare, we were living in a rambling, three-story house on the outskirts of this West Texas town. The armed guards who kept twenty-four-hour watch around the perimeter of “Camp Oprah” now sat in the dark, huddled against the cold. They had no idea she was on the move; every floor appeared dark and asleep. Except for the familiar low moan and creak of the frigid wind from the north, everything was silent. Descending a second flight of stairs, she tapped lightly on my door with a single fingernail. I knew it was she, and she knew I would know, so she spoke not a word. It was well after midnight. She had gone to bed two hours earlier, but I knew she would sleep fitfully, if at all. It was like that for all of us, but especially for her. Behind enemy lines in cattle country, we

all slept light and kept our guard up, alert to the reality of hostile feelings from certain factions in Amarillo.

Over the course of the previous day, I had seen a certain change occur in her eyes. At the federal courthouse downtown people were not saying nice things; they were attacking her staff in order to get to her. Like a mother lion whose cubs were being threatened, she was up and on the prowl. Could it be the enemy had gone too far?

When I opened the door, she looked forlornly alone, and her face betrayed the painful struggle that was keeping her awake. There were tears in her eyes, but these were not the tears of sympathy and love that millions of viewers had often seen on her television show. In her familiar flannel pajamas and huge fuzzy house shoes, she looked much younger than she was. She needed to talk. It would be a long night.

The private Oprah and the television Oprah are about as close to the same as anyone might imagine. But no one had ever seen her in a situation like this. In some ways, the experience of this trial was foreign to her; in other ways, it was the same old test, different classroom. Oprah's high-spirited, "always on," self-assured persona sometimes caused even me, who had come to know her so well, to forget that she was as vulnerable to hurt as any of us. As I came to learn, the trademark self-assuredness that twenty million Americans see every day springs from her being masterfully in control, even in what may seem like spontaneity and chaos, and from doing what she dearly loves—two conditions obviously not present in her situation in Amarillo. Nevertheless, she remained the trouper, always doing for others, always concerned, even under siege.

But her face at my door reminded me of her humanness, and of how terribly alone one feels when under attack. She wasn't feeling sorry for herself or playing the victim; that's not any part of who she is. But she was hurting, she was frustrated, and she was confused. We were living a strange

and high-pressured existence in a surreal world, where it seemed that time had stopped its march long before social progress had been made. The concepts of logic, fairness, and common sense seemed to have been suspended. Members of our group had spotted anti-Oprah buttons with a red diagonal across her face. Hostile bumper stickers were commonplace, even being distributed at the local schools, a stark contrast to the respect and admiration that were the currency of her day-to-day life. Even the president of the city's chamber of commerce had circulated a letter to his staff warning against supporting this "outsider." As a result of these conditions, security was tight, even though tens of thousands of adoring fans were also keeping a constant vigil.

Oprah was facing civil charges of fraud, slander, defamation, and negligence, among other more technical claims. She feared a "kangaroo" court. She was publicly accused of lying and manipulating the truth to sensationalize a story about Mad Cow disease in the beef industry, all allegedly to generate higher ratings. Her integrity and ethics were being trampled, and her accusers were telling America that she was not who she presented herself to be. They had depicted her as a greedy, irresponsible betrayer of the truth. In court, her accusers pounded the table and said that she was not to be trusted—that she should be humiliated and penalized to the tune of over \$100 million. The attacks on her professionalism were painful, but it was the attacks on her staff, whom she cared about so much, and also the personal attacks on her that were cutting deep, very deep. Moreover, in contrast to her world, where she could freely answer questions as to the truth, the rules of federal court required her to sit silent, and an ironclad gag order from a no-nonsense federal judge muzzled her in the public domain, at least while the trial continued.

In my opinion, the millionaire power-broker cattlemen who had filed the suit, and dragged her to Texas in the intricate net of a dubious state statute, smelled blood in the water. Through legal maneuvering, they had her on their turf, cornered in their own backyard. Here was an extremely wealthy black female, whom they were portraying as the beef industry's scurrilous enemy, trapped in Amarillo, Texas—the white-male-dominated, undisputed beef capital of the world. All that Oprah could say, all she could feel, was that it was not fair: “I can't believe this is happening. This is so unfair. Surely this isn't happening to me. It can't be real. Why is this happening to *me*? There has to be some reason for all of this.”

Hadn't she been the one who refused to sell out to the circus-freak atmosphere that had come to dominate the talk show circuit? Hadn't she been the one to take the high road? Against all the pressure to grab higher ratings through a grotesque parade of misguided humanity, trying to “out-bizarre” one another, hadn't she been deeply committed to staying the course and doing things right?

Was there no justice? Could people not see through the sham of this lawsuit? Oprah just didn't get it. The problem was, I knew that if she didn't get it soon, they were going to get her.

As with any other television or movie star, we are mesmerized by the image of Oprah. We might imagine that in every moment of her life, she's somehow bursting onto a stage, hugely confident and in control, arms outstretched in that familiar wave as music washes over the whole scene. She may seem to be bigger than life. She is not. But even under siege in Amarillo, even in the grip of this inner turmoil, Oprah Winfrey kept up the standard. Millions of viewers had come to rely on her as a daily “rock” in an otherwise crazy world, a breath of rational fresh air. And she, in turn, honored her commitment to those viewers,

even while being attacked. She continued to be “Oprah.” The show must go on.

January nights in Amarillo are typically freezing, but the quaint Little Theater never lacked for warmth. Every night, as 400 people sat shoulder-to-shoulder inside, it was hard to tell whether their excitement or the brilliant spotlights overhead gave off more energy. “Hollywood” had come to town. The buzzing murmur of anticipation gave way to a hush as a producer in headphones raised a hand, then an explosion of cheers and applause filled the room as the first notes of the “Oprah” theme song suddenly boomed from gigantic speakers.

As Oprah herself strode eagerly out into the lights, there was no doubt that people were in the presence of a star. Everything was perfectly put together, from the set to the music to her personal appearance: all of it sophisticated, colorful, stylish, but at the same time relaxed and unpretentious—something you couldn’t help getting caught up in. But everything on the set seemed to be just a backdrop to that smile—a smile that expressed an innocent delight in life, a love of her audience and of what she was doing. And through two consecutive one-and-a-half-hour tapings, the audience returned the love; they cheered and stomped their feet, their applause flowing wave upon wave, in a Texas-style lovefest. It was *her* world again. She was in control; she was doing what she loved; she was Oprah.

For those three hours at the theater, everybody was having fun, and she more than anyone. People wanted to touch her, hug her, as if doing so would win for them some of her warmth and energy. That energy seemed to be bottomless. Long after the theater had emptied, when most of her audience had gone to bed, she would still be there alone with her crew, videotaping promotional spots—still at work, that smile still glowing: America’s sweetheart.

But in the quiet house it was after midnight, and I was witnessing the end of the energy. In the near-dark of the

basement gameroom, America's sweetheart wasn't smiling. She sat with me on the floor, her hair awry, hugging her knees. Like so many days before, this had been a long day. *Tired* isn't a big enough word when days start at 5:30 A.M. and include being pounded on for nine hours in a courtroom *before* taping two talk shows back to back. Still, sleep would not come. Sitting there with Oprah in the basement, I knew that "they" were getting to her. She was reeling, struggling to find herself.

The broadside attacks were causing unwanted feelings from times long past to float back to the surface. In the face of crisis, Oprah had lost herself. She was responding in a very human way. She was responding with behavior and thoughts that, frankly, are epidemic in American society today. They are behavior and thoughts and patterns that can cripple a life, and cripple a society, for that matter. And whether they are your behavior, Oprah Winfrey's, or those of the society at large, they are the kind of response that promises certain disaster.

As a friend, I wanted to hug her, to tell her that it would be okay and that she shouldn't worry. But I knew better. I knew if she didn't snap out of it and snap out of it soon, she *was* going to lose and she *was* going to be labeled by a verdict, however unfair. What's more, I knew that there were already would-be plaintiffs in a whole slew of other states, waiting to yank her into their own courts if she lost here, all smelling money. But I wasn't there to commiserate with her and be a sympathetic ear. I was there as a strategist to generate a plan for winning this jury's minds and hearts, and winning this trial.

Everyone has something they do. Some people build houses; I build strategies for living. I am a strategist; I study human nature and behavior. Along with Gary Dobbs, my partner, my best friend, and someone I believe to be the best legal analyst in America, I design plans to help get people what they want in life. It's all I do, and if it's your

*life* with which I am dealing, the stakes are always high. For Oprah, they were exceedingly high, monetarily and otherwise. Coming in second in a \$100 million trial is not an option. I had a plan, a well-thought-out, well-researched strategy, to get the truth out and get it out effectively. This strategic plan had been months in the making. Not surprisingly, Oprah was a huge part of that strategy. Without her, all of her, we could lose this trial in cattle country and lose it big.

We needed her; we needed the totally focused energy that is the essence of who she is—and we needed all of that *now*. Getting Oprah ready was a big part of my job and I intended to do it. The truth was on her side, but make no mistake: the courtroom is no crucible of truth. Just as in life, if you walk into court without a plan, a really good plan, you're kidding yourself. I could wait no longer for her to come around.

This trial was underway and it was building speed every single day. Decisions were being made, plans were being executed, witnesses were coming and going. All of it was building toward Oprah. The press, the plaintiffs, the jury, even all of us—her defense team—were waiting for her to tell her story. But our star witness was struggling with the “insanity” of it all, stuck in denial, and not coming to grips with the fact that this “Twilight Zone” experience was really happening. Not even lead counsel, Charles “Chip” Babcock, Oprah’s extraordinarily gifted media trial lawyer, could pull this plan off without her and her complete focus. Every day, Chip asked me, “Is she ready? We must get her ready.” Trial lawyers don’t come any better than Chip Babcock, but he knew this case was dangerous because Oprah was out of her element. He had successfully defended super-high-profile media people all across America, and although he had a great track record, he knew that nationally, 80 percent of these cases are lost at

the trial level. He was good, really good. In this venue, he would need to be.

Sitting on the floor across from this woman I had come to admire so very much, I searched my mind and heart for the right thing to say. We had been talking, analyzing, and working for some time now, but Oprah continued to struggle with the why of it all. What I knew was that, regardless of “why,” we were here and she was in the crosshairs. Finally, I just took her hand and said, “Oprah, look at me, right now. You’d better wake up, girl, and wake up *now*. It *is* really happening. You’d better *get over it* and get in the game, or these good ol’ boys are going to hand you your ass on a platter.”

Now I suppose when you are arguably the most influential woman on the planet, people don’t often step up and tell you how the cow ate the cabbage. I saw a flash of anger in her eyes as she instinctively recoiled. But I recognized that her anger had nothing to do with me. To have said any less would have been to cheat Oprah: This was the truth told in a way that she would hear. She deserved no less. As direct as I am, it was hard for me to be so blunt with her, but Oprah knew me, and she knew that my interests were her interests. She looked me in the eye, and with a resolve I had not heard in all of our previous work together, said, “*No they will not.*”

I truly believe that at that precise moment, the cattlemen lost their case. Until that instant, Oprah had been fretting over whether this deal was fair or unfair, rather than accepting that, either way, it simply *was*. She had been philosophically distracted instead of focusing on what she must to do in order to win. From the very beginning, she believed deeply in the rightness of her actions; she believed passionately in her First Amendment freedom to hold an open debate on public health and safety, including our food supply, whether the mega-millionaire beef factories liked it or not. But the viciousness of the

attack on her person and profession had so unsettled her that she had stopped being Oprah Winfrey. She fought back from her head, but not from her heart. She had done a lot of right things to help in her defense: moving her show to Amarillo, agreeing to be in trial every day, working and studying the facts every night. But she had been hung up on the belief that because it was unfair, something would derail the problem and it would go away.

The nonstop attacks on her production staff had also seriously distracted her, because she viewed Harpo Productions and all of its people almost as family. Preoccupied by what she believed to be the totally disingenuous nature of the complaints, she had given her power away. I saw that she was letting these men, the judicial system, and the whole circumstance of being under such vicious attack deprive her of her identity. Had she taken the stand in that state of mind, full of self-doubt and distracted by that inner turmoil, to face the three days of relentless, tedious, manipulative, and grinding cross-examination, it would not have been good. Without a strategic plan that included clearly defined objectives, she probably would have sent a very bad message to the jury. They would have wondered, "If Oprah is not sure, how can we be?"

That night, Oprah faced her demons, some of them spawned by the trial itself—a struggle that she later came to see as a microcosm of her whole life—some resurrected from years gone by. She had a choice: She could continue to resist accepting the situation because she didn't like it, or she could grab onto it and stand up for herself and those being attacked with her. Once she took off the blinders and *dealt* with the real deal, rather than *debating* it, she was "back." She did take the stand, and she looked the jury squarely in the eye, told the truth, and told it effectively. Likewise, she looked her accusers in the eye, and her message to them was clear: "Gentlemen, if you have a

problem with that show, I'm your girl. The buck stops *here*. If you have a problem, see me, and *leave my people alone*. You wanted me here; well, you got me. Take your best shot. I am *not* running, I am *not* settling, and I will *not* be intimidated." Oprah Winfrey is a formidable woman. Oprah Winfrey is a winner. And once she committed herself to working the problem and defending herself and what she believed in, her accusers were toast: signed, sealed, and delivered.

## CHAPTER ONE

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# GET REAL

*We do not deal much in facts when we are contemplating ourselves.*

—Mark Twain

NOW I KNOW we're unlikely to read about your problems and challenges in the *New York Times*, or see you tonight on CNN—at least I hope that's true. I know that you're probably not an international star of television and movies, whose battles, trials, and tribulations are scrutinized minute by minute in the worldwide media. But just like Oprah, you face problems and challenges each and every day. You, too, may feel that what is happening to you simply is not fair, and you may be right. Just like Oprah, you may feel that at times the world spins out of control, forgetting who the good guys are and letting the bad guys go too far, sometimes way too far.

At times, people aren't fair or sensitive, but that's just part of life. Sadly, it seems that the more successful you are, the more potshots people take at you. Either way, fair or unfair, just like Oprah, you have to help *you*.

The fact that your problems aren't headlining the six o'clock news does not mean that your problems are

unimportant, at least not to you. Believe me when I tell you that if you don't step up and fight for you, no one else will. At the same time, I think you may find that the person you most need to stand up to in this world is *you*. We'll talk more about this later, but you can probably guess that in this war we call life, most of the decisive battles are fought within *you*.

In the meantime, let's agree that what makes a problem big is simply that it's yours. To the clerk in the store down the street from Oprah's studio, it might not matter a great deal that Oprah Winfrey was under siege in Amarillo with her very character being impugned, but it mattered a whole lot to Oprah Winfrey. Your problems, in turn, may not matter much to your next-door neighbors. It doesn't mean that they don't like you or have good hearts; it's just human nature that they would put their own concerns first. But it does mean your problems need to matter to *you*. If they don't matter to you, they won't matter to anybody who can really change them.

Don't feel as if you should minimize your problems, or apologize for them. Our world has for too long conditioned us not to make waves. We don't want to make a scene or disrupt the flow of things. As a result, we settle, quietly, much too often. If a problem is important to you, then that's enough; that qualifies it as worthy. It's important, because *you* are important.

Nor should you concern yourself with whether your problems seem trivial in the grand scheme of things or not. If I've broken my ankle, and the guy in the next hospital bed has just had his leg amputated, that's terrible, but it doesn't make my ankle hurt any less. If it's your problem, then of course you should care about it. Also beware of getting bogged down in a debate about the fairness or unfairness of what has befallen you. If it is unfair, then it's unfair, but you still have to deal with it.

Your life really can be different—you just haven't had the tools, the focus, and the "inside scoop." Keep moving along with me, assuming that your problems do count and that maybe, just maybe, there is something here for you, something you deserve. I realize that at this point, you don't know where all of this thinking is headed. But *what if* this book is exactly what you need to have what you've been wanting in your life? A closed mind or attitude of resistance could cause you to cheat yourself out of an important chance for a better "ride." If what you're doing isn't working, you might as well at least consider an alternative approach. You can start by admitting you may not know everything you need to in order to get what you want.

Oprah didn't have any experience in the courtroom. She had plenty in life, but not in the courtroom. She was willing to admit what she did not know, and hook up and learn it. She was not resistant to learning, and when she did learn the rules of the game, she created victory. So can you. Learn how to play this game and you might be surprised at the result. The courtroom is relevant here, because it is indeed a microcosm of life. In any trial, somebody is trying to take something away from somebody else. So it is in life. That is why I shared with you Oprah's experience in Amarillo. In that compressed life drama are a series of valuable lessons.

Trials reflect the competition that characterizes so much of our lives, although trial results are often more sharply focused: at the end of the day, there's a clear winner; there's a clear loser; freedom may be lost; money may be taken away. But by far the most compelling parallel is this: In life, as in the courthouse, when the competition starts, or when the world starts coming after you, you'd better have yourself a really good strategy *and* know the rules of the game, or the bad guys will be dividing up what *used to be* yours. They'll be getting your paycheck, or dating your

sweetheart, or in some way cutting you out and taking your turn.

Ask yourself right now: Do you really have a strategy in your life, or are you just reactively going from day to day, taking what comes? If you are, you simply aren't competitive. There are "a lot of dogs after the bones" out there, and just stumbling along is no way to succeed. The winners in this life know the rules of the game and have a plan, so that their efficiency is comparatively exponential to that of people who don't. No big mystery, just fact.

You, too, need to know the rules of the game and have a plan and a map. You need to ask yourself: "Am I really headed where I want to go, or am I just out there wandering around?" "Is what I'm doing today really what I *want* to do, or am I doing it, not because I want to, but because it is what I was doing yesterday?" "Is what I have what I really want, or is it what I've settled for because it was easy, safe, or not as scary as what I *really* wanted?" Hard questions, I know, but don't you really already know the answers?

## **The Epidemic**

Oprah's situation in Amarillo highlights lessons of widespread application that can show you where the rubber meets the road in your own life. What makes Oprah so appealing is the fact that she is so real, so human, and has the same frailties that we all do. Her initial reactions to the Amarillo attack, the tendencies that she at times demonstrated during that experience, are identical to those I see being applied by people from every walk of life in the face of day-to-day challenges. In fact, those very behaviors are present in epidemic proportions in America today, infecting the lives and goals and dreams of millions of people, young and old, sophisticated or not.

The difference may be that Oprah has developed her life-management skills to the point that it takes a huge crisis to throw her off track. For you, the breakdown may occur way short of a \$100 million lawsuit, where the entire world watches as you are personally attacked. That's okay; I will meet you wherever you are. It doesn't matter whether you have a good life that you wish could be better, or a horrible life that you know you must change. This book is designed to give you the tools you need for purposeful, strategic living. Taking a long, hard look at the negative behaviors in your life, and at your current life strategy—if you've even got one—can be more than enlightening; it can be the beginning of a Life Strategy. This self-check of how you are living day to day is of tremendous importance, since you will be, and are, *accountable for your own life*.

Most people, and I'll bet you are no exception, cheat themselves by not asking themselves the hard questions, not facing their true personality and behavior, and therefore not addressing the nitty-gritty issues undermining their efforts to succeed. My position is this: Let the rest of the people live in a fog of self-deception. You take off the blinders and deal with the truth, and you'll leave them in the dust.

So what are the patterns that threatened Oprah in her challenge in Amarillo, and which are also so commonplace in America? What are the patterns that may be destroying your chance to change your life and have what you want?

The first common tendency is denial. Oprah resisted accepting that something so unjust could happen to her and her staff. And all the while it was, in fact, very much happening. Failing to acknowledge that actuality, one that would only grow more complicated with neglect, she fixated on why it shouldn't be happening, rather than dealing with the fact that it was. Her reaction was totally logical, because she knew the truth about what she had done, and she understood the *real* motives of her accusers.

But the world is not always logical. Often you are forced to deal with what is, not just what should be. Oprah, for example, felt bad about even being involved in the matter in any form or fashion. She felt the process was nonproductive and a waste of everyone's time. She would never have chosen to be there. That was part of the "denial dialogue."

But you don't always have a choice. For example, having arrived at a nice restaurant, you most likely would not start a fistfight in the lobby. But suppose you just happen to be standing in that lobby when some jerk goes nuts and starts swinging at you—guess what? You're in a fistfight. What's more, you'd better deal with it or make plans to get your dentist out of bed, because it *is* happening. Denial can take the form of totally failing to see what *is*, or seeing it, but resisting it, because you don't like it. Either way, denial is dangerous. This common mistake can have uncommonly bad results.

The second pattern involves making initial assumptions, then failing to test them for truth or accuracy. If you adopt some position, opinion, or belief, and fail to test or verify it, subsequent thinking that is otherwise totally sound and logical can lead you to conclusions that are way wrong. Oprah *assumed* that, because the lawsuit against her was so obviously insincere and "unfair," it would ultimately be revealed as such, and then vanish in a puff of smoke. She *assumed* our justice system would ferret out and eliminate the frivolous. She *assumed* that someone in authority would intervene and tell these cattlemen they could not abuse the court system to try to get richer. She clung to these assumptions because *she wanted them to be true*. Had she tested those assumptions unemotionally, she might have awakened sooner to the fallacies of our justice system and her assumptions. But if you trust yourself and therefore have confidence in the rightness of what you believe to be

true, it can be very easy to close your mind to additional possibilities.

The third problem is inertia: paralysis caused by fear and denial. Picture an airline pilot sitting motionless in the cockpit of his fully occupied but disabled jet as it rapidly loses altitude; imagine him saying, “Golly, I can’t believe this is happening. There’s bound to be some divine intervention in a minute”; or “It can’t be all that bad—I’ve never crashed before. Something will happen to save us.” If you deny things that seem too painful to accept, then let their impact, once realized, rob you of efficient, energetic acts of self-preservation, you will fail. Oprah Winfrey rose to a challenge, but she had to grasp it and its gravity first. So, too, must you grasp your true challenges before you can efficiently mobilize. Inertia takes your greatest resource out of the game.

Another pattern involves deceptive masking. Oprah, like so many of us, can wear a mask. Her persona can be so mesmerizing that people forget that she has needs, too. Sometimes we adopt a “stiff upper lip” because being in need, and admitting it, can seem to us to be a show of weakness. But by insisting on “toughing it out,” you may close yourself off from forthcoming help, since others are taken in by your show of strength and fail to recognize your needs.

Many people also fail to grasp that, when you choose the behavior, you choose the consequences. By choosing to keep her focus on the “unfairness,” Oprah could have continued to let precious time and energy slip away, time and energy that could have been focused on working the problem rather than resisting it. This behavior was a choice on her part. No matter what her rationale, she was *choosing* the behavior of denial, and in so doing, *choosing* the consequences of falling behind the power curve of defending herself. Fortunately, in a dramatic turnaround, she chose not to keep resisting, and to start coping. She

made a choice to take action, and thereby chose the consequence of her eventual victory.

These are all interrelated and common mistakes that when mixed with a dangerous set of circumstances can spell disaster. Obviously, the bigger the problem, the bigger the downside if it is mismanaged. As you think back through your life—and surely there are key events that stand out in your memory—what results were created when you were living in denial, or basing your decisions on what turned out to be faulty initial assumptions? What was the effect when you were stuck in inertia and, by hiding behind your mask, you blocked others from helping? Perhaps most importantly: What choices have you made that set you up for an outcome you did not want or need? Have your problems been mundane, or have they been monumental?

You may have known people who seemed to have stepped blindly into a disaster, and your first thought was, “What in the world could they have been thinking?” I predict that before you are through with this book, you will very probably step back from your own life and wonder how in the world you could have been thinking what you were thinking, not seeing what you were not seeing, and choosing the behaviors you chose. Your challenge, at least in part, is to determine what these patterns have done to your life, your dreams, your needs. Are they alive and going strong, or are the epidemic behavioral patterns silently raging in your life, allowing your problems to fester, poisoning your dreams?

Even in everyday life, we see dramatic examples of dreams that die from that which we choose not to see. Perhaps it is parents deluding themselves that their son is not on drugs until his body is found after an overdose; a woman denying that there is a lump in her breast until it progresses beyond treatment; or the spouse who foolishly believes his or her mate is really an agent for the FBI, with only weekend-night assignments. In each of these cases,

the result is the same. Problems and challenges almost never resolve themselves; they don't get better with inattention. The only thing worse than having a child on drugs, a serious disease, or a philandering spouse is having the problem but not recognizing it, or, worse yet, knowing it but pretending it isn't true.

Reading this book is not intended to be a passive experience. As you progress through it, you'll see that it is interactive: the key principles in later chapters rely on themes developed in the earlier ones, and all of it calls on you to play an active role.

**Assignment #1:** *Your first assignment is to challenge your beliefs right now, by listing in order of significance the top five things in your life that you have simply failed to fully and completely admit or acknowledge to yourself. This requires some new thinking. You may think, "If I know it, I'm not denying it," or "If I'm denying it, how can I know it to write it down?" I said new thinking. Ask yourself some of those hard questions about what you would rather not think about. Write them down, because you'll be referring to them later. What is it that you know in your heart is a problem not acknowledged or at least so painful that you avoid it?*

Be advised that you are going to be writing down a lot of things as we progress through the rest of the book. I recommend that you get some type of journal where you can do all of the "homework" that arises as we move forward. I recommend a spiral notebook, where the pages are attached and can therefore be kept together. This journal is highly confidential and should be for your eyes only. Treating it as such will allow you the freedom to be totally honest.

I would wager that whatever made your list is at least in part a product of your own behavior. I also suspect that the main difference between your problems and the more terribly tragic situations we hear or read about is the

result, not the behaviors that led up to it. For aren't the patterns in your life, and those present in the more tragic stories, very likely the same? You've driven a little too fast down a neighborhood street; you've left the kids unattended while you ran next door "for a minute"; you've driven yourself home from happy hour, when discretion should have told you to hand over the keys; you've engaged in unprotected sex; you've fudged on your income tax. The "shocking stories" are often about people who have done the very same things. But only because of a tragically different outcome, they wound up in jail, or burying a child, or dealing with HIV.

Maybe your driving drunk or speeding through a neighborhood didn't leave anyone dead, unlike the person you see on television who did the same thing but ran over a child. You're not audited, whereas the next person is. Your kids are still safe when you get home. It's not that you behaved or chose any better; you just got by with it. But if you are habitually practicing poor life-management skills, you are playing with fire. You may not be getting away with as much as you think you are.

You don't live, choose, or manage your life in a vacuum. It happens in a context called the world. Given the current state of the world, naïveté or a rose garden perception will likely land you in trouble you don't want. You don't live in Mayberry, because it doesn't exist. These days, when you hear people use the word *coke* in a conversation, the odds are that they are not talking about the soft drink. If you decide to take your honey for a midnight swim, you're likely to end up in jail for trespassing, or worse, glowing in the dark because you were bobbing around in a toxic dump or Superfund site you only thought was pristine. Take a twilight stroll down the lane or through the park, and you might not be sleeping at home tonight (don't you hate those hospital gowns?). Oh, and before you leave the house, you might also want to write your name on your arm—better

yet, write it on your leg, since that's less likely to get smudged if you decide to fight back.

The world has changed; it is tough out there, of that there can be no doubt. I am sorry to sound like a cynic, but you know I'm right. This world we have conspired to create is drastically different from the one our parents and grandparents knew. If there ever was a Mayberry, there certainly is none now. As we hurtle headlong at breakneck speed toward the millennium, we are caught up in the fastest-paced, most rapidly changing society in the history of humankind. Our world is like an unguided missile, with more speed than control.

You've got a mess on your hands, for sure. You don't need a Ph.D. in behavioral sciences to know that in virtually every dimension of human functioning, America is, in varying degrees, failing. The divorce rate in the United States is estimated by some authorities to be as high as 57.7 percent, and the average length of new marriages is twenty-six months. Sixty-two percent of our society is obese. Reported emotional neglect of children has increased 330 percent in the last ten years. One in four women has been sexually molested. Suicide is increasing at an exponential rate. At least one out of every six of us will experience a serious, function-impairing depressive episode at some point in our lives; thus, antidepressants and anxiety-reducing agents are now a multibillion-dollar industry.

Violence is rampant, not just in the streets, but at home. Each year, our society witnesses nearly forty million crimes: 74 percent of us are victims of property crimes, while 25 percent of us fall prey to violent crimes. Our teenagers are headed in the wrong direction, as well. Teens between the ages of fourteen and seventeen commit approximately 4,000 murders a year. Each year, over 57 percent of public elementary and secondary school principals report at least one incident of crime to law

enforcement authorities. Perhaps the saddest statistic of all: by the time they reach the eighth grade, 45 percent of American children have experimented with alcohol, and 25 percent with drugs.

As a society, we are losing it. When it comes to managing our own emotional lives, and training our children how to manage theirs, we're out of control but desperately pretending otherwise. We project an outward image of "I'm all right. I can take it. I'll be okay," because we fear judgment. Well, it's not okay, and we'd better start changing this world one life at a time, or God only knows what the millennium will hold. The life for you to start with is your own. If you want to be a winner instead of a statistic, you can do it, but lean forward, because it is not easy.

In every church I have ever attended, the people with real problems hid them rather than seeking support, and those who didn't hide them wished that they had, after the doses of guilt, judgment, or alienation they received. We hide our problems, and judge those who don't or can't hide theirs. It's not working, people—not even close. We have forgotten the basic laws of living in general, and living together in particular, and therefore violate them constantly.

I am convinced that the fundamental Life Laws that govern our world and dictate the results of our conduct have not changed. Certain characteristics of the game are different, sure, but it's the basic Life Laws that still dictate our results. Understandably, living in ignorance of or consciously ignoring these Life Laws has created huge problems and a society desperate for answers, one desperate for guidance and knowledge about human experience. Count on us, as a society, to try to quench that thirst with answers that are often harmful, silly, or both.

If you want to know why we as a society are spinning out of control, consider what sorts of "solutions" we're

currently being offered. As for psychology as it is practiced today, I am not too much of a fan. In my view, it's too fuzzy, it's too intangible, it exists in a world of opinion and subjectivity. Maybe that's okay if you live in some ivory tower and can afford to pontificate about ambiguous and abstract elements of life. But I don't think that's what you want and I don't think that's what you need. You're living in the real world and dealing with real problems that need real change. You don't just need insight and understanding into your problems; you need them to change, right now.

Consider, too, the "self-empowerment" industry that dominates our culture. It really has very little to do with empowerment, and lots to do with somebody else's bottom line. It is largely unfocused, lazy, gimmicky, politically correct, and above all, marketable, often at the expense of truth. The gurus seem to have everything but verbs in their sentences. You're trying to pay the rent and get your kids to go to college instead of jail, and they want you to play with your inner this or your inner that, or yourself; perhaps a poor choice of words, but appropriate.

You are sold "self-improvement" the same way you're sold everything else: it's easy; five simple steps; you can't help succeeding, because you're so wonderful; your results will be fast, fast, fast. But we are paying dearly—in more ways than one—for this polluting flood of psychobabble. I say polluting, because, instead of stripping away our excuses and jacking us up to deal with our true lives, the psychobabble provides us with a whole new set of excuses. The result is more distraction and more problems.

To the extent that our current pop psych does identify legitimate disorders, those terms are now so overused as to obscure those cases that are genuine. A mom who despairs over the behavior of her spoiled-rotten brat is told that her child is "hyperactive" and is "engaging in negative attention-getting." Outrageous behavior in the classroom is routinely ascribed to "attention-deficit disorder." If you're

shooting it up, snorting it, or drinking yourself to sleep with it, you're suffering from a "substance abuse problem." When a middle-aged woman, longing for something more in her life, certain that there's something missing, picks up a book that at last promises answers, it tells her that the answer to her yearnings lies somewhere in her exotic ancestry, several incarnations back. Tell them what they want to hear: it's not their fault; they are victims. What's astonishing is that *we are actively participating in the game, gobbling up these illusions*. You would think that if a ship just kept on sinking faster and faster or was getting farther and farther off course, somebody would finally stand up and say, "Hey, anybody notice this ain't working?"

Well, I'm saying it. I'm shouting it. You need a new strategy, badly. It may not be "nineties en vogue" or politically correct to say so, but I just don't too much care about providing you with vague philosophical pronouncements, rah-rah rhetoric, clever buzz words, or quick-fix solutions as to how life should be or why it should change. What I *am* interested in is your having a clear knowledge-based strategy for winning by overcoming your problems, patterns, and obstacles, and getting what you want in this life, for you and those you care about.

Whether "winning" for you means healing a relationship or a broken heart, having a new job, a better family life, a skinny butt, some inner peace and tranquillity, or some other meaningful goal, you need a strategy to get there, and some guidance on how to create one. Why should you listen to me? For one thing, I am not suggesting that you substitute my judgment for your own, not at all. Challenge every word I say, but first hear it. I've studied the Life Laws, gathered them into one place, and am going to explain them, I hope, clearly.

I have had the privilege, over the years, of designing winning strategies with and for thousands of clients, people from all walks of life, and in every imaginable predicament.