



THE GREATEST GIFT

VICTOR ANTONIO

The Greatest Gift

# **The Greatest Gift**

By Victor Antonio

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## The Greatest Gift

Regret is fertile ground for negativity and pessimism to set in, which only begets more regret, which can only be remedied by letting go of the past and taking decisive action.

*Victor Antonio, 2013*



## The Meeting

It's nine a.m. and I'm in a quiet café in downtown Boston, sitting by a very large window. As I stare out I see giant, pristine snowflakes falling gently on the ground, covering the concrete's gray-pitted skin. The cars on the street are moving slowly due to poor visibility.

In a few hours I have a speech to deliver at Boston University; I've been invited to speak about success.

As I mentally rehearse all the things I'm going to say, I can't help but look outside and watch people as they shuffle pass the window. I sip my hot coffee cautiously, glancing over the cup's rim and through the rising steam to catch the passing faces burrowed into their scarves with coat collars turned up. My eyes are drawn to their expressions; each face seems to reveal a hint of what the person might be thinking.

I imagine they're all on their way to work. I play a mental game to distract myself from over-practicing my speech. As I stare at each face I try to determine if its owner is leading a successful life, or if the person is just grinding it out to survive.

Suddenly my mental gamesmanship is interrupted by a polite tap on my shoulder.

I look up to find a man with an assortment of melting snowflakes on his long black coat. *"Excuse me,*

*sir, but there are no tables available. Would you mind if I sit at your table while I warm up to a cup of coffee?"*

I hadn't noticed that the small breakfast café had filled up.

*"Sure, have a seat," I replied.*

*"I hope I'm not disturbing you? You seem to be deep in contemplation," the stranger said.*

*"No, I was just sitting here people-watching."*

*"I do that often as well," said he with a smile. "It's fascinating, isn't it?"*

*"Yes, it is."*

*"My name is Simon," he said, extending his hand.*

*"My name is Victor. Pleasure to meet you."*

Simon is a tall frail-looking man who looks eighty years old, if not more. His hair is white and thinned out. His eyes are deeply set and his cheekbones are very prominent, almost regal. He wears his scarf like an ascot, very elegant in its folding. He removes his coat and folds it over his seat before pulling out his chair to sit down. He makes a gesture requesting the waiter to come over.

*"Menu?" asked the waiter.*

*"Not for me, thanks." Simon reads the waiter's nametag. "John, I'd like a hot cup of black coffee. I need to warm up these old bones of mine. Victor, would you like to see the menu?"*

*"No, thank you. But I could go for another cup of coffee."*

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*"John, make that two fresh cups of coffee," Simon proudly declared.*

John gave us a kind nod and headed towards the kitchen.

*"Well, Victor, that's a lot of snow and by the looks of it, it's going to be a tough day for some folks to make it into work. Do you work around here?"*

*"No. I'm in town to give a speech over at Boston University in a few hours. I'm just sitting here collecting my thoughts about what to say in an hour's time."*

*"What's the topic?"*

*"Success," I said with a hint of irony.*

*"That's a tall order you have to fill."*

*"Tell me about it. How do you sum up success in an hour?"*

*"Victor, success is a topic I have studied for many years and I can assure you that you have your work cut out for you."*

John the waiter walked over with our two cups of coffee and placed them on the table.

*"Will that be all, gentlemen?" John asked.*

*"I think so. Unless my tablemate Simon here wants something else?"*

*"No, I'm fine. A good cup of coffee and interesting conversation are enough to satisfy this old man."*

I watched John walk away and turned my attention back to my new friend. *"So, Simon, what do you do?"*

*"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."*

*"That must be great! Come on, you have to do something."*

*"No, I'm retired. I'm just living out my golden years and loving every minute of it."*

I could tell by his tone of voice that he wasn't joking. His eyes had a certain glint of indifference that comes from being at peace with the world.

*"Well, good for you. Are you married?"*

Simon paused before answering. *"Used to be married. My wife died several years ago in a car accident."*

*"Sorry to hear that."*

*"Thank you. It was a rough time for me but I've accepted not having her around physically. But mentally, she's always with me. We spent fifty-two great years together."*

*"Incredible! Do you have kids?"*

*"Yep, two kids, both living their own lives with their own families. I get to see them and my grandchildren a few times a year. They've both done well for themselves in every sense. I'm very proud of them."*

*"They must've had great parents."*

*"Ha! Thanks, Victor. I appreciate the sentiment."*

Simon picked up his coffee and gave several lengthy blows across the rim of the coffee before taking a sip.

*"So tell me, Victor, what are you going to say to those kids today about success?"*

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*"I don't quite know. I have so many thoughts and ideas running through my head that I'm having a hard time prioritizing them. There is so much to say in so little time – do you know what I mean?"*

*"You face a Herculean task. Trying to boil down the essentials of success into one hour seems impossible. Most people spend a lifetime trying to understand it."*

*"Simon, do you remember when you were around twenty years old and you thought you knew everything you needed to know about life?"*

*"Absolutely."*

*"Do you also remember when you were in your thirties and you realized, looking back, that you didn't know quite as much as you'd thought."*

*"Yes, I do. We've all had that experience."*

*"Well, here I sit at forty-five years of age wondering to myself, 'What don't I know that I should know?' Does that make any sense to you?"*

*"Victor, it makes perfect sense. I'm eighty years of age and I still wonder what it is that I don't know. Recall the saying, 'The more you know, the more you know you don't know.'"*

*"Amen to that," I muttered.*

Simon must've sensed a deeper concern in my tone of voice.

*"May I ask what's bothering you?"*

*"Simon, I have to speak to an audience of over a thousand students who will be there to hear me talk about success. Yet, I have to admit to myself that at forty-five I just don't have all the answers. I also have to admit to myself that I won't be able to give them the solutions or answers they're*

*looking for. How can I talk about success when the very meaning of the word has yet to be revealed to me?"*

*"You lost me there," Simon answered.*

*"It's like I said. At thirty I realized I didn't know much at twenty. At forty, I realized how much I didn't know when I was thirty. So at fifty, I'm going to realize how much I didn't know today at forty-five. I think of life as a succession of mountain plateaus. Each stage of my life represents a higher plateau from which I can look back at the valley of my past and see where I went wrong. At forty-five I can look back from this higher vantage point and see my errors at twenty, thirty, and forty. What errors am I committing today that I don't know about? How can I talk about success when I'm unsure of my actions today?"*

*"I can see your dilemma. How can you talk about success without the benefit of hindsight? Is that what's bothering you?"*

*"Yes, Simon. You understand."*

*"Well, maybe you'll find comfort in knowing that success, or the origin of success and what sustains it, never changes. Our approach to success may vary from person to person, but its essence is constant and unchanging."*

I found comfort in what Simon said. I don't know if it was because of the profundity of what he said or my insecurity as I searched for something to cling onto that would help me with the afternoon's speech.

*"You seem to know a lot about success, Simon. Would you say you've had great success in your lifetime?"*

*"I would consider myself among those who claim to be successful. I was married for more than fifty years to the most beautiful woman in the world. I have wonderful kids and I have no financial worries to speak of, I've traveled the*

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*world, seen things most people won't see in five lifetimes, and if I were to die tomorrow I would die peacefully knowing I had a good life. So, yes, I would consider myself successful."*

*"I see."*

Then without thinking I said, *"Simon, can I borrow your eyes?"*

*"What?" he asked.*

I could tell Simon was taken aback by my question as he stopped his cup in mid-lift and returned it slowly to the table.

*"I'm not sure of your meaning?" he asked with a quizzical tone.*

*"I'm sorry. That came out wrong. What I mean is, may I have the benefit of your hindsight? Can you share with me what you see from your plateau at the age of eighty? Tell me what you see as you look back on your life? Can you share with me the wisdom you've garnered in your lifetime? Can you help me see what time has yet to share with me and life has still not shown me?"*

*"What do you hope to gain by this?" he asked.*

*"I hope to gain some insight into things that I may not be aware of yet."*

Simon hesitated. I could tell he felt uncomfortable with my request.

*"I'm sorry, Simon, I have no right to impose my needs on you. We've only just met; you don't even know me. Just forget it."*

*"My silence is not a refusal," he replied. "I'm only wondering if..."*

*"If what?" I asked eagerly.*

*"Well, sometimes people take a long time to learn a lesson. It's not because they're incapable of learning, but because somehow they refuse to listen to what is being taught to them at the present. When my kids were teenagers, they thought I was just a rambling old man who knew nothing about life. Today they see me as wise and they seek my advice whenever they need it."*

*"What changed?"*

*"I would venture to guess that it was their perception of what they didn't know. Once they got out into the real world, I believe they finally realized that all the things I had mentioned to them over the years made sense. So my question to you is, if I share with you what I know, will you discard it as the ramblings of an old man? Or will you really listen?"*

*"Simon, I hope that I will have the patience and understanding to learn from what you tell me. And, in the worst case scenario, I'll look back on this day and realize that the rambling old man was right!"* I punctuated my remark with a loud laugh.

Simon studied my face and took another sip of his coffee. His attention drifted towards the people moving briskly pass the window, all bundled up with somewhere to go. His gaze returned to meet mine and he smiled.

*"All right. You ask the questions, and I'll provide the answers."*

*"Like an interview?"* I asked.

*"Yes, like an interview. You ask and I will answer as best I can."*

*"Simon, that sounds like a good approach to me. Thank you."*

## Life's Alarm Clock

VICTOR: Simon, what is success?

SIMON: Ah, the impatience of youth. Right off the bat you ask the toughest question. Instead of trying to define success upfront, why don't we begin by exploring the concept of success? Maybe we can arrive at a mutual agreement of its true meaning.

VICTOR: Fair enough. Simon, when you came up to me I was in deep thought about the people passing by this window. I was studying their faces and wondering if they were happy with their lots in life. What do you see as you look at them?

SIMON: Each face can tell a story, but each look can be deceiving. It is hard to be sure without speaking to them. But if I were to guess, I would say that many of them are merely existing and not living. Something in their faces tells me that they are on their way to fulfill an obligation and not a destiny.

VICTOR: By obligation, do you mean they're on their way to a job?

SIMON: Yes.

VICTOR: Maybe their job is their destiny. Maybe they were meant to be doing what they are doing.

SIMON: Yes, one could draw that conclusion. But years of experience has shown me that most people

aren't happy with their job or current situation. Some studies put the number as high as 75 percent, if not more.

VICTOR: So you're saying that three out of four people would rather be doing something other than what they're currently doing.

SIMON: Yes. So the odds are in my favor that I am right.

VICTOR: Let's begin with that thought. Why do you think most people are unhappy with their job?

SIMON: That's an easy one to answer. They don't like what they're doing.

VICTOR: With all due respect, Simon, I figured that part out on my own. My question is, why are they doing what they don't want to do? How do people find themselves in that position?

SIMON: They don't believe in themselves. It's that simple.

VICTOR: That sounds *too* simple. How do people arrive at a point where they don't believe in themselves?

SIMON: If we were to draw a timeline from the time a person is born to the present and analyze it, we would find markers, or better yet, indicators that would give us some clue as to when and why they stopped believing in themselves. From our vantage point we can only speculate as to the cause.

VICTOR: I'd like you to speculate, if you would.

SIMON: All right. First we need to agree that no single event or incident can cause a person to stop believing in themselves. Rather, it's a series of events

that over time causes a person to begin to doubt themselves. Where there is doubt, there you will find fertile ground for a doomed, self-fulfilling prophecy mindset.

VICTOR: What do you mean?

SIMON: When people doubt themselves, instead of looking for evidence in their daily lives that will contradict their thinking, they instead gravitate to evidence that will reinforce their insecurity. A person who begins to believe that bad things will happen to them and only good things will happen to others will see every unfortunate event not as happenstance, but as proof of their inability to move forward or succeed. We humans are interesting creatures. We see what we want to see, and we ignore the things we don't want to see. We fool ourselves into thinking that failure is not our fault. Successful people do not succumb to this deluded way of thinking.

VICTOR: I see.

SIMON: Let me take it a step further by giving you concrete evidence as to how this happens. Have you ever bought a car?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: What did you start noticing on the road after you purchased your car?

VICTOR: Uh, I kept seeing the same make and model on the road.

SIMON: Exactly! Do you think that those drivers with the same model car were on the road the day before you purchased your car?

VICTOR: Yes, of course.

SIMON: But you only noticed them *after* you purchased your own car. Why? Because earlier your mind wasn't oriented to perceive their existence. That phenomenon is called "selective perception." Success is all around us. Some can see it because their minds are oriented in that direction. Others see only failure for the same reason and are blind to the opportunities around them, just like before you bought your car, you were blind to those who already had the same car.

VICTOR: So to a large extent people create their own reality of what's really going on? Is that what you're saying?

SIMON: People in this society, in order to make themselves feel better, convince themselves that somehow they're being cheated in the game of life. They'll blame their genes, their family genealogy, their genetic makeup, their neighborhood or society for their lot in life. They believe that nature is to blame for their inadequate abilities and that their social condition further alienates them from the possibility of success. They see others as being lucky or more fortunate than themselves when in reality they ignore, minimize or dismiss that the others have worked hard to attain success; many choose to believe that success was handed to those others. It's easier for a disbeliever to believe that life has dealt them a poor hand and that there is nothing they can do to change that. They accept their fate without question. On the other hand, you have successful people who understand that life can be unfair, yet they continue to work to get to where they want to be. They're not waiting for divine intervention or for someone to give them a break. They're not waiting for luck to happen; they have to make their own luck. This difference in

outlook is what makes one person more successful than the other. This is the irreducible primary when it comes to understanding why some people succeed and others fail.

VICTOR: I just find it hard to believe that people don't want to be successful. What you're suggesting is that they are mentally sabotaging their possibility for success.

SIMON: Self-sabotage comes in many forms: pessimism, inaction, poor habits and so on. Successful people are the chosen few; it can be any one of us who are successful.

VICTOR: I agree.

SIMON: We all know, at least we should know, that we are responsible for our own success. No one owes us anything and predestination is a myth.

VICTOR: Predestination?

SIMON: The belief that we are all born with some predetermined destiny. I remember learning about a Protestant theologian in the 1500s by the name of John Calvin who espoused the theory of predestination. The theory is that everyone falls into one of two camps: you are either to be saved by salvation, or foreordained to damnation. In other words, you have no ultimate say over your life as the matter has already been determined for you. Personally, I strongly disagree with this notion. Many people, however, believe that if they aren't successful, it's because they were never meant to be successful. When they see the lives of the rich and famous on television they see it as something alien to themselves. They could never imagine themselves living that reality. Instead, all they do is dream of living that life, but never really seeing themselves

living it. As children we dream of other worlds, other realities and other possibilities. We envision ourselves living a wonderful life surrounded by all the things we could ever want. But somewhere along the way there is a path of divergence, a proverbial fork in the road. Those who choose to go left will continue to dream about the things they desire. Those who choose the right path realize that in order to make their dreams a reality, they have to make it happen on their own.

VICTOR: But how does that happen? How do people lose their way?

SIMON: Compromise.

VICTOR: Compromise?

SIMON: Small compromises lead to a path unwarranted. In an airplane, if the flight direction is off just by one degree, the pilot can be thrown hundreds of miles off course. In life, small compromises over time can throw one's life off course. We seem to think that compromises are harmless equivocations or at best prudent decisions to avoid conflict or inconvenience.

VICTOR: I'm not following.

SIMON: Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't want to do something, but in order to avoid an argument or confrontation you gave in, thinking it wasn't worth arguing?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: And after you made the decision you later regretted that decision. Something inside you made your stomach turn because you knew you were doing something you really didn't want to do. Did you feel

taken advantage of? Did you feel a little angry? Did you get that feeling in the pit of your stomach?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: That, my friend, was compromise eating away at you. Now take that feeling and multiply it many fold over the length of your life and you may find that you have lived your life according to someone else's plan. Practically every compromise, whether you realized it or not, took you off course by a small degree, until the day you woke up realizing that your life was way off course. You search your soul trying to understand the incongruence between your life and your imagined life, but you can't find that single reason. You search for the meaning of your discontent but your search is futile. Why? Because, like many others, you're looking for a particular reason why your life is off track, when you should be looking at all the little compromises you made along the way that now represent the sum total of who and where you are today. Do you understand what I'm driving at?

VICTOR: So you're saying that people who are unhappy with their jobs really don't have a poor job, they're simply in the wrong place in their life?

SIMON: Exactly. Our problem is that we tend to listen to the wrong people for advice instead of listening to our own inner desires. We listen to others and wind up doing things we had no business doing in the first place. And when we fail, we feel all the worse for it. Having failed once, we give up altogether on trying to extricate ourselves from our discontent.

VICTOR: I think I know what you mean.

SIMON: Let me give you an example. Let's say you have a great idea about something you'd like to do to get your career on track or something that will get your life focused on your purpose. Instead of seeking expert advice, like from someone who has first-hand experience, you decide to talk to a few of your friends and family, most likely people who have no clue what you're trying to do. And there's always that one somebody willing to give you advice they themselves haven't followed. Am I right?

VICTOR: There's no denying that.

SIMON: So what happens? You don't trust your own judgment so you alter your plans based on their advice. From this point on, you go into Lemony Snicket mode and initiate a Series of Unfortunate Events. Let me walk you through the sequence:

- You ignore your own advice and listen to others
- You go out and do it someone else's way, only to fail
- You don't know why because it wasn't your idea in the first place
- You decide to give up on "your" idea and decide to go back to being "ordinary"
- Your self-esteem is shot, your dream is dead, and you go back to your job
- You don't like your current job so you get depressed at the thought of having to return to the same old grind every day

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- You're so depressed that after work you decide to go shopping at the mall to take your mind off your misery
- You go buy some large piece of electronics and charge it on your credit card
- You get it home, set it up and you feel good about your purchase...your mind now numb
- You're no longer thinking about your job – until the next day when you have to go in again
- You get to work and the misery is still ever-present
- You tell yourself to just hang in there and remind yourself that you're there to pay the bills
- End of the month comes and your credit card bill arrives and it ain't pretty
- You get even more depressed because the lousy job you have doesn't pay enough to make ends meet, let alone pay off the minimum credit card payment
- Now you get even more depressed and you find little solace in your large electronics purchase
- Bills begin to mount over time
- Depression and concern combine to produce anxiety
- You can't think clearly because you're in a reactive state, just trying to survive
- You now go to work in a poor mood and your boss starts to notice a decline in your enthusiasm and performance
- Evaluation time comes around and you get a 2-3 percent pay raise, barely enough to keep up with inflation

- Bills are still mounting, you hate your job, and you see no way out
- Now you really feel like a failure
- And the thought of trying something new to get your career on track seems ridiculous since you failed at it already

SIMON: Does any of this sound familiar?

VICTOR: Familiar?! Try *scary!*

SIMON: Do you know someone who may be living this right now?

VICTOR: Yes, several friends and family members.

SIMON: I tell people that “Life didn’t just happen” (that is, these problems didn’t just appear out of nowhere), but that “Life has been happening” to them for a long time (in other words, their predicament has been slowly deteriorating over some period of time). When I talk to people in this state I try to sound life’s alarm clock and tell them to wake up from their stupor of mediocrity. Time is slipping away. We’re all on the clock. And no matter whether you’re rich or poor, time is one thing you can’t go out and buy more of or put on your credit card.

VICTOR: I see.

# Erasing the Board

SIMON: May I be direct for a moment?

VICTOR: Please.

SIMON: No one just lands a lousy job. If they didn't go to school to prepare, don't have an expertise in some field or endeavor, or simply didn't have a plan, they'll have to settle for what they can get. No one "just" becomes broke overnight. What often happens is that their buying habits exceed their capacity to pay for them.

VICTOR: How do you fix it?

SIMON: Fixing your life or getting it back on track begins with introspection. The second step is to remove God from the equation by expecting some miracle to happen to change your life. Lastly, put past circumstances and the excuses that follow from them in their proper place, the past.

VICTOR: Maybe the circumstances aren't right and people just can't help it.

SIMON: You can't wait for the circumstances to be right, because they never will. You don't wait for all the lights to turn green before jumping into traffic, do you?

VICTOR: No.

SIMON: You can't let past circumstances determine your current stance on your life and possible options. The only people that really fail are the ones who give up and stop trying. You can't wait for others to do it for you. I can guarantee you it will never happen. I've always argued that "success happens for a reason." Most successful people followed a plan or a course of action to reach their maximum potential. Unfortunately, "failure happens for a reason" also. Most people fail because they just don't know what to do or how to implement a plan of action.

VICTOR: Can a person's life be fixed?

SIMON: Of course it can. But a person who contracted cancer from smoking can't expect a quick fix to the self-inflicted damage caused by years of smoking. A person in debt can't fix their credit rating overnight after years of financial misconduct or mishap. A person who isn't successful can't expect a quick fix to damage done to their career after years of occupational neglect. The answer to the question I often hear, "How do I change my life?", can be summed up in three simple words: *slowly over time*.

VICTOR: I assume there are no quick fixes?

SIMON: Ha! Even in this high-tech world of immediate gratification, the reality is that things that endure take time to build or fix. If your job stinks, begin planning out a new career, change companies or go it alone. If your marriage stinks, seek professional or spiritual guidance and see if you can salvage it. If your savings account stinks, stop spending your disposable income on frivolous items that only offer temporary gratification. The answer to one's problems or dilemmas does not lie in prayer, hope, or some motivational book. These solutions are

placebos to make you feel good for a short period of time. They don't last.

VICTOR: Where then *does* the answer lie?

SIMON: The answer to any adverse circumstance lies in ACTION. You need to start taking steps to get your life or your dream of who you want to be on track. You need to stop listening to other people and start listening to yourself. Yes, you may fail a few times. So what! Get over it! Get on with it! Make something happen!

VICTOR: In other words, get off your assets!

SIMON: That's clever. I like it.

VICTOR: So getting back to your original point: you believe that by making many small compromises over the years is where people go wrong?

SIMON: Yes. There is an analogy I'm sure you've heard. The question is posed, "How do you kill a frog with water and a pan?"

VICTOR: That's a cruel and unusual question! I have no idea and don't want to know.

SIMON: No. I'm not asking you to do this yourself; just follow me on this. If you put a frog into a pot of boiling water the frog would obviously sense the heat and immediately jump out of the water. The way to achieve the frog's demise is to put the frog into a pot of lukewarm water. The frog will not feel threatened by the water's temperature and it will stay put. What you then do is begin to turn up the heat so indiscernibly that the frog doesn't take notice. As you increase the heat, the frog is unaware of the increase in temperature. Eventually the heat gets to a point where the frog can no longer live, but instead of jumping out, it simply submits over time and dies.

VICTOR: Morbid.

SIMON: I know, but I'm trying to highlight the analogous nature of how people commit what I call social suicide. They kill themselves by submitting to the daily compromises they are asked to make by others.

VICTOR: But compromise can be a good thing, am I right?

SIMON: Compromise is only a good thing if it benefits you in some way. If you enter into an agreement that doesn't benefit you in any way, then I would say you've made a horrible compromise. If you take a job not because you want to, but because you have to, you've just made a decision that will not benefit you in the long run.

VICTOR: Yes, but having a job is better than not being employed at all.

SIMON: This is where people go wrong in their thinking. What you've just stated is borne of a compromising mindset that will lead you down a road of despair. Yes, you'll have an income, but at what price? Have you ever had a job that you've hated?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: Tell me if what I'm about to say is true. Let's say you take a job you don't want because you need an income. A few months after you're caught up on all your bills a quiet discontent starts to set in; you don't like your job. You have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. You dread the thought of jumping into traffic to get to work to get there. Are you with me so far?

VICTOR: Go on.

SIMON: Your mood begins to change as you're frustrated with this new job. You start to get crabby and irritable with people because there is nothing fulfilling about this new job. You now find yourself having a hard time getting motivated and the quality of your work begins to suffer. Your boss is now getting down on you making your job that much more difficult. You also now find it hard to get yourself motivated to find another job because you feel a sense of hopelessness thinking that any other job you get will be more of the same. This sense of hopelessness carries over when you go home. You start to get depressed because it seems everything you try seems to turn out badly. You now start to develop a bad attitude towards your job, colleagues and anyone who comes in contact with you. People around you start to complain about your attitude. Back at the job, you start to have a bad attitude toward everything and anyone until one day the inevitable happens: you get fired. What started out as an innocent compromise for a paycheck has now turned into series of misfortunate events, as we've discussed.

VICTOR: They're right back where they started out, is that your point?

SIMON: On the contrary, they're worse off than before. Financially they may be right back where they started, but mentally they've taken a major fall backwards. A person who tries to do something for the wrong reason and fails at it then has to deal with the residual affects of failure. When we fail at something, it takes time for the mind to heal itself from the punctures of performance. Mentally we begin to doubt our own abilities, whereas before we

were just in doubt about our financial position. Compromise has a sustaining effect on our confidence when the decision we make turn out to be poor ones.

VICTOR: But sometimes we have to take a job or risk being thrown out of our home, or worse, left with nothing to eat. Simon, we all have to take chance on a job even if the job isn't ideal. I'm sure you can see that?

SIMON: You are correct in what you say. We must all at one time or another take a job for the sake of money. But as I've mentioned, this approach comes with the risks I've just described of being left mentally exhausted. When we compromise our values by taking a job just to pay the bills, we must also realize the opportunity cost of our decision.

VICTOR: What do you mean, the opportunity cost?

SIMON: Every decision has an inherent cost, an intangible cost that cannot be calculated in dollars. When you compromise to take a job for the money you have to take into account the cost of not pursuing your true purpose.

VICTOR: I'm lost.

SIMON: If I spent one year doing a job I didn't like, how much time have I lost?

VICTOR: Uh, a year.

SIMON: No, two years. In business there is something called an opportunity cost which is the true cost of any action we taken. No only did the person lose one whole year doing what they didn't like, they also missed out on the opportunity to be one year ahead in their careers if they were doing something they really loved. Every day you spend

doing something you don't like is one day stolen from attaining a personal goal. Compromise is only acceptable if it contributes to your personal goal. Otherwise, compromise is a subtractor, nothing more.

VICTOR: Simon, that sounds good and well in theory, but what if you're really, really broke and need the job?

SIMON: Then you take the job being cognizant of the fact that every minute devoted to doing something you don't like is taking you away from your personal aspirations by the same amount. I once heard a man say that J.O.B. stands for "Just Over Broke." I believe that in the majority of cases that's what you will always be when you work for someone else doing what they want you to do.

VICTOR: Let's get back to the fork in the road analogy you mentioned earlier. I agree, there has to come a time in our lives where we move from dreaming to doing. So what would you say to people who may have taken the left path and are still dreaming of success? How do you suggest they get on the right path?

SIMON: I'd tell them to erase the board.

VICTOR: What do you mean?

SIMON: Erasing the board is a metaphor I use to tell others and myself to let go of the past and start fresh. Too often we hold on to past failures and mistakes and use them as excuses or justifications for not moving forward. If we were to draw all our life experiences on our mental board, there we could see all the reasons why most of us fail to live up to our potential.

VICTOR: It's not easy to erase the board when all your life you've faced adversity.

SIMON: Who hasn't? Yes, some may have faced worse circumstances than others. But how long can we use our circumstances or the past as a crutch? Growing up I know that many of us receive negative conditioning. Over the years this negative conditioning creates a stifling effect on our drive and motivation. Inertia sets in when our lack of motivation leads to inaction. We've all had people around who constantly reminded us that success isn't for us, it's for that other person. We have others who remind us often that you have to be privileged to be successful. Others will say that unless you're of a certain class, race or gender, you can't be successful. Nonetheless, there are examples of success all around us for people who've overcome the most dire of circumstances and still managed to scale the heights of financial freedom and independence.

VICTOR: Simon, I have to confess that I too give into the negative propaganda of the mind. Sometimes I doubt whether I really can achieve the level of success I desire. Many of my friends and family members are struggling financially. So finding inspiration can be difficult at times. Negative thoughts creep into my mind as if the devil himself is questioning my ability to be successful. I have few people to talk to about this, as you can imagine, which is why I'm glad we are having this conversation. It fortifies me to hear your words.

SIMON: This may surprise you but I too have my moments where I doubt whether I can achieve a certain goal or not.

VICTOR: Really?

SIMON: We all do. Having doubts and fears is part of the spectrum of human emotions that we must all deal with. I would consider you abnormal if you were to tell me you've never doubted yourself or have never felt a sense of fear when trying something new. The challenge is controlling these emotions and not letting them dominate our aim or our purpose.

VICTOR: Easier said than done. How can you control these emotions?

SIMON: You start by first embracing them.

VICTOR: What?

SIMON: You heard correctly, embrace them. In all things that I do, I accept and embrace the fact that there will be times when I will doubt myself and that I will be afraid of the outcome. I also accept and embrace the notion that I have the ability to move past doubt and overcome my fear.

VICTOR: How?

SIMON: Our creator has armed us with the most powerful weapon that mankind has ever seen: the mind, the brain. The machinery we have between our ears is so advanced and complex that even the most powerful supercomputer in the world today is incapable of matching the processing power of the human brain. Knowing that I have the tool to solve any problem set before me, I feel confident in what I do and when I do it. We possess a weapon of mass destruction powerful enough to destroy any obstacle set before us. The only thing required on our end is that we use it and act on it.

VICTOR: I know what you're saying, but sometimes getting over the past isn't easy. Sometimes it's hard

to forget our past failures. Sometimes it's hard to be brave in the face of adversity.

SIMON: All that you say is true. Achieving the highest level of success does require courage. But if we let our past drive our future, we're in trouble. Unless we learn to erase the board and forgive ourselves for past mistakes, we'll never move forward. You can't carry the weight of all your mistakes throughout your lifetime. After a while the sum of that weight will crush you and your aspirations if you don't unload them.

VICTOR: But much of how we think, our belief system, is so ingrained in us that it's really hard to not go negative when things aren't going right. It's hard to stay positive in a negatively charged world.

SIMON: Allow me tell you a brief story. I was talking to an old friend just the other day. What made the conversation truly special is that we had not seen or spoken to each other in more than sixty years since our high school days.

VICTOR: Wow! That's amazing.

SIMON: The amazing part of the conversation was our instant reconnection over the phone. Our tone and familiarity as we spoke was as though we had seen each other only last week. As we shared stories about high school, we laughed about the good times we had and we were able to laugh about the bad times as well. We started to compare notes on who we had seen since our high school graduation and what was the latest news on our close high school friends: Do they still live in Chicago? Are they married? What were their professions? Who passed away? After getting caught up on what our friends were doing, we

started to talk about our own lives and what we had done over the last sixty-plus years. I shared with my friend all the things I had been up to, including some down times, but many more good times. I told him that on the whole, if I were to die tomorrow, I would count this lifetime of mine as being a blessed one.

VICTOR: You are blessed. What about your friend?

SIMON: Here's the fascinating part of this story. I then asked him to get me caught up on his life and what he had been up to in the last sixty years. It became apparent very quickly that he was not as fortunate as I had been. His recounting of the years since high school was filled with many tales of poor missteps and mishaps both personal and professional. He went on to tell me about his trials and tribulations; it wasn't pretty in some cases. Like any one of us, he made his fair share of mistakes. But unlike some of us, the mistakes carried with them a high price both financially and emotionally. Now before I go any further, let me be clear in saying that I am not judging my friend. In my lifetime I've learned not to judge others. There's a saying about never judging a man unless you've walked a mile in his shoes. The only person in a position to judge is the individual going through the struggle.

VICTOR: I understand.

SIMON: As I listened empathetically to my friend I wasn't impacted so much by the stories of his misfortunes, but more so by the tone in his voice which, consciously or unconsciously, transmitted the muffled pain of many years of regret. In his voice I could sense him tabulating the mounting debt of lost time and missed opportunities. Many of us make our fair share of poor choices in life; my friend, on the other hand, made more than his fair share

VICTOR: Was he popular back in high school?

SIMON: I wouldn't say he was popular, but he was well known. He, in my opinion, was a gifted musician who I thought would one day for sure be atop the music business somewhere, somehow.

VICTOR: What happened?

SIMON: I asked him that same question. He again went on to describe poor decisions he had made, many regrettable ones. He then revealed something that shocked me. One of the things that held him back from pursuing his music career, aside from personal family matters, was his lack of confidence in his own abilities.

VICTOR: Why were you shocked?

SIMON: You would be shocked too if you saw this guy play a guitar at the age of seventeen. He was a virtuoso back then on the guitar. He was envied by many in our school, including myself. I remember thinking then how wonderful it must be to be that gifted at something. I can only imagine what he could've done if he had pursued his passion.

VICTOR: Why didn't he?

SIMON: Somewhere along the line he lost confidence in himself. I could tell that his biggest regrets were those linked to his inability to take action and follow through on doing the things "he" wanted to do. As I listened to his story I was reminded of the story of "The Parable of the Talents" where a servant buries his talent instead of investing it for growth. Have you heard the story?

VICTOR: No.

SIMON: We'll come back to it later.

VICTOR: All right.

SIMON: As the conversation wore on I told him that he had to stop reliving the “would’ve, could’ve, should’ve” in his life and that it was time to look forward and make some new decisions based on where he was today and what he wanted for himself in the years to come. He agreed with me but I noticed that his conversation kept referring back to the past decisions in his life. I finally said something along the lines of, “You can’t change the past. Some people keep living in the past and never learn to erase the board. You have to learn to erase the board and start fresh.” I couldn’t see his face since we were on the phone, but I could sense his reaction to the phrase, “erase the board.” So I continued, “I’d like you to imagine that in front of you have a whiteboard or chalk board if you prefer. Written upon it are all the bad decisions you’ve ever made and all the plans you never followed through on. Now mentally take an eraser and erase everything on the board and start mapping out what lies ahead.”

VICTOR: What did he say?

SIMON: To be perfectly frank, he didn’t say anything. We exchanged a few more stories and some pleasantries before hanging up. But I got the distinct sense that in my friend’s mind, it was too late for him to erase the board.

VICTOR: Have you spoken to him since?

SIMON: I have not. As much as I enjoyed catching up with my friend, I realized that he had given up on life. The problem with my friend and with many people today is that that they can’t erase their own board. They continue to use it as an excuse or a crutch for not moving forward. They can’t let go of what they can’t

change. I want you to tell your audience today that they have to learn how to erase their board and start again, now. Today!

VICTOR: Simon, for some people starting over can be very difficult. How does one make that type of commitment, that type of shift in lieu of resorting to self-pity?

SIMON: Erasing the board is a metaphor for giving ourselves the permission to start anew without the mental handicap of the past. If you think about it, the act of erasing the board is not about erasing what we've learned from our mistakes; it is about the power to forgive ourselves for past mistakes.

VICTOR: So it begins with simply forgiving ourselves? Can it be that easy?

SIMON: Yes! It's ironic how we are more apt to grant forgiveness easily to others for their trespasses, but we are reluctant to confer upon ourselves the same courtesy. For some egoistic reason we hold ourselves up to a higher standard and we are thereby less forgiving when it comes to our own human actions.

VICTOR: I would have to agree; it seems that we're harder on ourselves for even the smallest infractions.

SIMON: We all, at one time or another, have to forgive ourselves. The author Rob Preece in his book, *The Wisdom of Imperfection*, has a statement that I found profound enough to commit to memory. *"There is humility, honesty and compassion in the capacity to allow our fallibility and frailty as human, sentient beings. To try to be otherwise can be seen as embracing a kind of false self that is in denial of our fallibility. This compassion allows us to be who we are without destructive judgment and self-criticism."*

VICTOR: It seems odd that the simple act of compassion for ourselves could make such a difference in how we view ourselves.

SIMON: But it is that simple, we just choose to make it more complicated. We have to accept who we are and how we are built; can't change that. We are all perfectly imperfect.

VICTOR: Great phrase.

SIMON: Thank you. We can't change the past. All we can change is our mindset and begin to let go of the past along with all the mental anchors that have been holding us down. This is the only way anyone can move forward. My old high school friend finds himself unable to move because he can't let go. Unless he learns to erase his board that is cluttered with all his mistakes, failures, missteps, mishaps and regrets, he will never move forward. He'll always be held back by the "what could have been" in his life.

VICTOR: What did you sense was his biggest regret?

SIMON: I believe my friend's biggest regret was his lack of confidence in his own God-given abilities. Again, somewhere along the way he lost his confidence in himself. He stopped believing!

## Buried Talent

SIMON: You know, since I was thirty years of age or so, I have contemplated death from time to time.

VICTOR: Suicide?

SIMON: No, no, for heaven's sake! I mean I would think about death in an existential way. Death fascinated me because it was a finality.

VICTOR: That's odd.

SIMON: I mean, death is the great equalizer. No matter who you are, you are given a certain amount of time on this Earth. You can't buy or negotiate for more time. Your life has a predetermined shelf life or timestamp assigned at birth.

VICTOR: That's a unique perspective.

SIMON: I think it is and I also think it's a vital one to have. Death is a reminder that we're all on the clock in this world. When someone we know dies, have you ever noticed how their death has a way of refocusing you on what's important in your life and how easily trivial matters become just that: trivial. And you're reminded that what really matters is the present, the here and now and the fact that you are alive to enjoy it. That's it. It's not about how much money you have or how much stuff you own. When

someone close to you dies, aren't you reminded of that simple fact of how limited our time on this Earth is?

VICTOR: Yes, you're right! I remember that feeling and when I attend the funeral of a family member or friend, I'm always haunted by the question: did they live a full life? Did they die empty of regret or full of remorse?

SIMON: A perfect segue to my next point. It is often said that we will regret the things we didn't do more than the things we did do. On our deathbed I suspect that the greatest pain we will feel will be the emotional pain of regret, the emotional agony of knowing that there is no tomorrow to plan for and that all the promises and possibilities of what we intend to do are gone. It is that moment that we are confronted with, and must accept, the sad fact that we did not live a full life. There can be no greater pain. If this is the case, if we know this now, then the image of lying in that bed anguishing over missed opportunities should be enough to propel us into action or starting over.

VICTOR: Starting over can be scary.

SIMON: Dying without trying is scarier.

VICTOR: True, but where do you start?

SIMON: It's usually the start that stops us.

VICTOR: The what?

SIMON: It's usually the start that stops us from accomplishing anything meaningful in our lives. We're all afraid of what lies ahead when it comes to taking chances and making changes in life. Starting over by erasing the board can be a scary.

VICTOR: The thought of failure scares us even more.

SIMON: You are correct. So here is what I want you to keep in mind as you contemplate erasing the board: Failure is painful, but regret is intolerable! The only way to dilute yesterday's regrets is by taking action today and again, leaving the past where it belongs, in the past.

VICTOR: That's an interesting phrase you used: dilute yesterday's regrets.

SIMON: I'm glad you caught it. The more good things we do from this moment on, the more we are able to dissolve the past. If you take a tablespoon of medicine the taste itself is awful. But when you dilute it with a glass of water or juice, the bitterness of the medicine becomes almost unnoticeable. Our past often represents our bitterness, the bad medicine we can still taste. Our future represents the opportunities ahead of us that we will add to our life to rid ourselves of bitterness or regrets from our past.

VICTOR: I get it. But what if you find yourself in a negative environment where everyone around reinforces the belief that success isn't for you? How can you consistently overcome the friction of pessimism?

SIMON: It's a day-to-day challenge to stay positive in a seemingly negative world. We enjoy bad news because it makes us feel better to know that there is someone out there who is not as fortunate as we are. I've also noticed we are more apt to talk about people's failures than their successes.

VICTOR: Why do you think that's so? Is it envy?

SIMON: I'm not sure I'd categorize it as envy. To a greater degree I believe that other people's success reminds us of our own inadequacy or inability to

succeed. We don't like to see others do well because it calls into question why we ourselves have not attained a similar measure of success.

VICTOR: That makes me think of the blue crab story.

SIMON: I think I know the one you're referring to.

VICTOR: It goes something like this: if you put one blue crab in a bucket it will simply climb out. But if you put a group of them into a bucket none, will climb out since each will pull the other down in an attempt to get out themselves.

SIMON: Yes, that's the one. Unfortunately, and quite sad that the other "crabs in the bucket" are oftentimes family members or close friends who deep down inside don't want you to succeed. Their negative comments and discouraging attitudes are their way of pulling you back into the bucket.

VICTOR: Why do you think that is?

SIMON: I think it has to do with economic social distance.

VICTOR: What do you mean?

SIMON: If I told you the top Hollywood star today makes several million dollars a year you would probably shrug it off and think they may be worth it. But if I also told you that your neighbor makes twenty-five thousand a year more than you, which do you think would bother you most?

VICTOR: I'd probably have to say my neighbor who makes more than me.

SIMON: Isn't it funny how the person who is nearest you socially and makes an insignificant amount of money compared to a socially distant Hollywood star bothers you more. Psychologically it's easier to

accept someone we don't know as being super successful rather than a person we socialize with and do know. You could make a compelling argument that this is a good example of envy. But envy in and of itself is not a bad thing. Envy only becomes a destructive force when you use it as a guiding principle to define your happiness. Said another way, it's okay to admire what others have as long as we keep in mind that their reality, or definition of success, is not ours.

VICTOR: So aside from erasing the board of the past, going forward we need to stay focused on what's important to us, and not what others have.

SIMON: When you can erase the board mentally you begin mapping out where you want to go. Looking at what others have and using that to guide you will only lead to the same despair you have today. We all need to stop, evaluate and plan where we want to be in the next five years or so years and begin executing that plan. Planning can only begin to take place when you throw out yesterday's clutter to make room for new ideas and new memories.

VICTOR: Let's say you're willing to let go of the past and be open to a new future. How do you begin? What precautions can you take to insure that you won't fail?

SIMON: Begin by inoculating yourself.

VICTOR: What?

SIMON: When you want to prevent yourself from getting the flu, you go to the doctor to receive an inoculation which will prevent you from catching the flu. In life, inoculate yourself by accepting that failure is part of the success process. You can't prevent

failure, but you can inoculate your mind to help you deal with failure by reminding you that failure is part of the success process.

VICTOR: Makes sense.

SIMON: You can also take further action by minimizing the probability of failure. Common sense and careful evaluation are the only safeguards against failure, but there are no guarantees. Only through experimentation can you succeed. Failure is temporary and can only become permanent when you simply give up trying.

VICTOR: Simon, I agree with what you're saying and it makes perfect sense. But before I can think about failure, what if I have a bigger problem? What if I don't know where to start? What if I'm one of those people walking by this window going to my job and just barely putting up with life? How can I break free when at the end of the day I'm just simply worn out and feel as though life is grinding me into the dirt? Where can I find the strength and the direction to begin?

SIMON: You are right. As I see these folks walking by I can see in their lifeless faces the absence of any personal desire. The only way to find a new direction is to reignite the fire that once burned bright.

VICTOR: Easier said than done. I mean, how can they do that?

SIMON: Think back for a moment. As children we were excited about life as we viewed each day as a new adventure filled with learning new things and encountering strange yet wonderful objects within our reach. Everything from the neighbor's dog to the new playground around the block excited us. It is that energy, that youthful spring of newness that is

missing in many of the lives we see passing by. Somewhere between childhood and now, that sense of wonderment, that heightened sense of excitement of trying something new, has dissipated. Gone!

VICTOR: Why do you think that happens?

SIMON: That's a longer discussion that neither of us have time for right now. The real question is how do we as individuals who have been beaten down by all the negativity and the problems that surround us, how do we rekindle that spirit that drove us to reach out into the world instead of timidly retreating into ourselves and from the world?

VICTOR: Well, I believe the only way we can regain that excitement is by taking time out of our busy lives to stop and think about what's really important.

SIMON: That's a start. What else?

VICTOR: Well, one needs to stop and take a good hard look in the mirror and acknowledge what we haven't done over the years and ask ourselves: what will we do with the life we have left?

SIMON: I agree. We have to be brutally honest with ourselves about what really is and isn't important to us. We have to go back and remember what got us excited, what motivated us to into action. We have to go back and rediscover at least one thing we can really get excited about. When we grow up, we allow our dreams and aspirations to get pushed into the background under the pretense of letting go of childish ways.

VICTOR: What's the point of reverting to our childhood for answers? It sounds backwards. Don't we know more today than we did yesterday? And if

so, aren't we in a better position to know what's good for us today?

SIMON: Your point is well taken. We do know more today than we did yesterday and that could well be the foundation of our unhappiness.

VICTOR: I'm lost.

SIMON: When we were kids, we dreamed about how our life would be when we grew up. Now grown, we dream about how our life was when we were kids. Our life seemed so much better back then, compared to the present.

VICTOR: Never looked it at that way.

SIMON: So, then, how can a life lived with little knowledge be so much better than our grown life with all the knowledge we've acquired over the years?

VICTOR: I don't know. It seems ironic when you think about it.

SIMON: The problem is that we know too much.

VICTOR: Know too much?

SIMON: Yes, we know so much about how our life should be lived that we don't allow any room for spontaneity. We know so much about everything that we refuse to try new things because we already know how it will turn out. We go out of our way to not make new friends because we know that social relationships can be fraught with problems. We don't want to try new foods, because we know that some foods may give us indigestion. We know so much that we refuse to try anything new. And therein lies the weight that sits atop every person's dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

VICTOR: Is it fear that prevents people from trying something new?

SIMON: I don't think it's fear as much as it is complacency. As we get older I think we like surprises less. We try to reduce the number of surprises in our life by pulling back on trying new things. People try to create a stable life, or as I see it, a controlled environment for existence. People simply stop trying new things because they don't like change. Change means uncertainty and people become uncomfortable with the notion of uncertainty.

VICTOR: Isn't it ironic that people who want a change in their life refuse to do the very thing that will help them escape their mundane life, which is change.

SIMON: Yes, it is ironic. The older we get, the more the mold we are cast in hardens. Change doesn't come easy as we get older.

VICTOR: Do people forget that change can be exciting as well?

SIMON: I don't think they forget, they just don't see the cost of change providing an overwhelming benefit of excitement.

VICTOR: Is it that sometimes people need to be forced to make a change in order to remind them how exciting life can be all over again?

SIMON: Yes, you are right. As you were speaking I'm reminded of a time my wife and the kids took a cruise to Latin America. We had three ports of call: Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. In Mexico we went horseback riding on the white sandy beaches of Costa Maya. In Guatemala we decided to ride ATVs, all-terrain vehicles, in the jungle. And when we stopped

in Belize my wife surprised us with an excursion into the rainforest for a zip-lining adventure. Have you ever gone “zip-lining”?

VICTOR: Is that where you zip along a wire from one tree to another using a pulley?

SIMON: Yes, that’s it. I had never gone zip-lining and so I was a bit reluctant. My reluctance grew into sheer panic when we arrived at the area and I realized that the trees we would be zipping between were over one hundred feet tall. I forgot to mention to you that I was and still am afraid of heights, and my wife knew this.

VICTOR: She scheduled this event knowing you were afraid of heights?

SIMON: Yes. When we came into the clearing and I saw others zipping from the tall trees I told my wife that I would not be zip-lining that day no matter how much she wanted to do it. I told her to go ahead without me. At that moment my little girl, twelve at the time, looked up at me and with her big brown eyes and sad face said that one word that would motivate any father into action.

VICTOR: “Please?”

SIMON: Not even close. She said, “Sissy!”

VICTOR: Ha, ha, ha.

SIMON: And when your little girl calls you a sissy, there is only one thing to do; you have to do it! So I told the attendants there to suit me up and get me ready. I remember getting to the top of the platform, strapping in and looking over the edge of the platform that was over one hundred feet in the air. I was petrified. When it came time for me to leap off the platform I hesitated. The attendant was kind

enough to assist me by pushing me over the side with one simple heave. As I began to zip along the line I was afraid to look down. But you know what happens when you shouldn't look down, you wind up looking down. I could see my feet dangling in the air. And the more along the line I went, the more speed I picked up.

VICTOR: Were you scared?

SIMON: Well, here's the funny thing. I was deathly afraid but at the same time it was exhilarating. For a brief moment it reminded me of my childhood. The excitement of trying something new and being afraid at the same time came rushing over me. That's what's missing: that coexistence of fear and excitement is what people are missing today.

VICTOR: It's human nature to move away from the things that may hurt us.

SIMON: Yes, but we have to learn to manage and control our fears if we want to move in a new direction.

VICTOR: Again, sometimes that's easier said than done.

SIMON: I can't argue that. But I will argue that it begins with how we look at things. Too often we focus on the fear and anxiety of something new. We focus on the personal cost of change and ignore altogether the excitement that comes from change.

VICTOR: People need to focus not on the fear, but on the outcome. Or should I say the potential outcome of what good things may come from that particular change. Is that what you're saying?

SIMON: Well put. So let's tie this back to our discussion on why so many people are unhappy with their jobs. They're unhappy because they've given up on trying something new; they've given up on trying to change. But as you aptly pointed out, therein lies the irony; only through overcoming the fear of change do they stand a chance of rekindling their spirit. They are guided by the possibility of failure while others are guided by the possibility of success.

VICTOR: I believe you to be right. Many people won't leave their jobs because they are afraid of change, but don't put any stock in the excitement of a new career. Many people will stay in a bad relationship for the same reason.

SIMON: Change is more synonymous with uncertainty than it is with excitement. If we were to shift our association with change to excitement instead of uncertainty, I could assure you that many more people would be pursuing their dreams and living a better life.

VICTOR: So don't focus on the fear, focus on the fun of trying something new and adventurous.

SIMON: There you have it. I want to add a final comment to my zip-line story. After completing the zip-lining course, we were escorted out of the rain forest. As we exited the gates of the park, we were each given a t-shirt that had one of the most profound sayings I had ever read. It read, "When was the last time you did something for the first time."

VICTOR: That's pretty powerful!

SIMON: Yes, it is. That statement captured the essence of what keeps us excited about living.

VICTOR: Would you still have gone to the rainforest if you knew ahead of time what your wife had planned?

SIMON: Ha! Probably not!

VICTOR: So ignorance was bliss?

SIMON: In this case, it absolutely was bliss. The point I want to make is that all change can be scary but it also carries with it an element of excitement that can reignite the smoldering fire within each of us. The philosopher Lao Tzu said, "Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power." We have to learn to control our fear of the unknown. We have to master ourselves.

VICTOR: Simon, what can you do when you live in a society that ridicules childlike ways and forces us to grow up? Even I have to admit that over the years I've set aside my dreams because others told me I was being unrealistic. I too have given up some of my dreams. I've gotten to the point where I don't like to talk about my dreams for fear that the listener will say something to discourage them.

SIMON: So you bury them deep inside you.

VICTOR: Yes, Simon. As much as I hate to admit it, I have.

SIMON: I mentioned earlier a story call "The Parable of the Talents." I think now would be a good time to share this story with you and I'd like to ask you to allow me to be a bit redundant. I'd like to recap in this story everything we've talked about up to this point.

VICTOR: By all means.

## The Greatest Gift

SIMON: In this story three servants are each given "talents" (which is a monetary denomination used by the Greeks). To the first, the master gave five talents, to the second he gave two, and to the third he gave one talent. The master gave each servant a different amount of money (talents) based on ability. After some time the master returned to see how his servants had used their talents. Two of the servants doubled their money and the master was pleased with their results. The third servant, fearful of losing it, buried his money where no one benefited from it, including himself. When the master summoned the third servant to give an accounting of what he had done with his talent, he was angry and displeased to find out that the servant had simply buried it where the money had no opportunity to earn interest. The servant tried to explain to the master that he knew how "exacting" the master was and he did not want to lose HIS money. The master didn't buy it. He ordered that the one talent be given to the first servant who had been able to convert five talents into ten.

VICTOR: Is this in the Bible?

SIMON: Yes, you can find this story in the Bible, Matthew 25:14 and Luke 19:12. Although I believe the story, or parable, was strictly about economics and frugality, it can be extended to include not only money, but true talent or better yet, true ability. Unless you find out what it is you were meant to do, true happiness will elude you.

Finding out what it is you truly want takes time, patience and perseverance. Now, I want go beyond the obvious of telling you about hidden talents because we all know we have a few in us. I want to address the "how" with regard to how talents were

(and are) buried within us. As children, we all loved to discover new things. We even did things when others advised us not to. Remember when your mother told you not to touch the stove but you did anyway? We were curious, we wanted to learn, we wanted to discover for ourselves the world around us. Failure and pain were not yet transformed into anxieties.

But as we got older, we were expected to act a little more responsibly and be accountable for our actions. Like in any soap opera drama, this is the scene in your life where “society” steps in and starts benevolently imposing its norms on your behavior.

You are now expected to conform, be more realistic, put away childish things, and the most brutal of all norms, STOP thinking about yourself first. So, what do we do? Exactly! We abide by each one. We start to conform by dressing like everyone else, and doing all the things “normal” people are expected to do. We even adopt others’ mannerisms, language and way of thinking. We then stop dreaming and imagining ourselves doing wonderful things because we’re told we should be more realistic.

So what happens next? We no longer create alternative visions of how our life could be, and we settle. In other words, we begin to compromise. We settle for what’s given, the mundane, the routine. We put away our childish ways because we need to be more mature and responsible. No more having fun like water balloon fights, dancing when no one is around, throwing food in the air to catch in our mouth, seeing how many times a person can burp on one sip of Coca-Cola, and so on. You get the idea?

VICTOR: I do.

SIMON: But wait! Then the final act is committed. And as we grow older we commit a form of individual suicide of the mind.

VICTOR: Suicide?

SIMON: This is when we begin thinking of others and how we want to please others, and set aside our own needs. We begin sacrificing our desires for the needs of others.

VICTOR: I don't know if I'd go that far.

SIMON: Yet that is exactly what we do. We begin to worry about what others think of us. We try to find ways to fit in, to conform, to get along. We put the needs and feelings of others before our own. And every time we have the audacity to think of ourselves, we immediately castigate ourselves by reminding our inner self that we can't be selfish. The long-term result? You get a job you stay at, and as you get older you wake up one day to the reality most people experience at one time or another: "Hey, I'm not happy with my life."

You've done everything society has told you to do, but you're still not happy. You have a great family, you have a decent job, the kids are doing well, and you're participating in all kinds of community events and fundraisers and so on. Here's something scarier. You're unhappy but you don't know why or what it is you want to do with your life! You don't seem to have a "real" talent and life doesn't seem to have meaning or purpose.

VICTOR: Hmmm.

SIMON: Most people, society, label this a mid-life crisis. Not me! I'd like to label it: The Awakening.

The quintessential moment in your life is when you wake up, rub the conformist eye gunk away and realize that your life is running out of time. And here's why you can't find your talent. Over the years with every compromise and acquiescence of self, you were slowly burying your talents deeper and deeper. You now have the problem of having to unearth your talents after so many years of heaping selfless dirt on those childhood dreams.

VICTOR: But let's go back to the beginning of our conversation. How do you start uncovering those true talents?

SIMON: Start now by giving yourself some time, a few moments in a day to remember, to think back on those things that gave you great joy and pleasure. Think about what you'd like to do and what would make you happy. Break the bonds of conformity and to hell with being realistic for the moment. Now don't get me wrong here. I'm not advocating a nihilistic view of life where you revolt and jeopardize all you've built; far from it! What I *am* advocating is that you remove the subjective barriers and limitations, and begin to think about your possibilities, your wishes and desires. Then, formulate a blueprint which you can implement over time to help you excavate that ONE talent that lies buried within you. If you were the servant in the parable and the master were to appear before you, would you be like the third servant who did nothing with the talent given? The greatest human tragedy is the death of potential, your gift, your talent, without you ever being aware of it. What people need to do is start digging. Where do you start? Here's a tip. Start with fond memories and recall those times when you

## The Greatest Gift

really enjoyed yourself doing an activity. That's where X marks the spot.

# Mimicry

VICTOR: Simon, assuming for a moment that I did discover that one thing I'd like to be doing, what then? Finding out what you want to do seems like the easy part. Because even if I found it, how can I assure myself that I can make a living doing what I enjoy? Fantasizing is one thing, reality is quite another.

SIMON: We must always take into consideration the reality and the gravity of any decision or action we're about to take. But your words are truer than you suspect. Most people who have an idea of what they want to do only wind up fantasizing in their minds what it would be like if indeed their fantasy did come true. These same people as I've mentioned will, instead of taking action, watch television because the fantasy seems so much comforting than the reality of going out there and achieving their goals. So yes, fantasizing is one thing and reality, the act of doing is quite the other.

VICTOR: So what's the answer? How does one get started?

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SIMON: When I talk about digging for your talents and discovering your true gift, I hope that I am conveying that finding your talents won't be an easy process. You'll have to remove years worth of mental dirt heaped on your true desires. So one can begin by simply trying things that used to bring pleasure and happiness.

VICTOR: So let's say that when I was young my passion was painting.

SIMON: Well, then, the next step is to get right back into it and rediscover why you love painting. Was it the creativity it allowed? Was it your ability to express yourself that you couldn't otherwise articulate? Was it the creation of something outside yourself that you enjoyed? Whatever the reason, reconnect with that moment in time and use it as a starting point.

VICTOR: What then? Simon, I'm sure you're well aware that being an artist is a tough way to make a living to pay the bills. This is what I was referring to when I mentioned fantasy versus reality. You can't...

SIMON: Hold on a minute. I'm well aware of what you were referring to but I can also see that you have some self-imposed limitation in your thinking that has convinced you that making money as a painter or artist isn't possible. Am I assuming correctly?

VICTOR: Well, yeah.

SIMON: Do you know that to be a fact?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: How? How do you know that to be a fact? Have you studied the industry of painters and artists to get an assessment first-hand? Have you interviewed artists? How do you know?

VICTOR: Well, I just do. Talk to some artists and I'm sure they'll brag about how true artists starve for their craft.

SIMON: The answer is, you really don't know. You've just heard that artists are poor from a few friends or the media, but the truth is that you don't know for a fact. You also don't know for a fact that it is or isn't possible to make a lot of money as an artist. You're making an assumption based on some notion of self-sacrifice. Is that a fair statement?

VICTOR: Well, uh, I don't know. You may be right, I guess.

SIMON: The biggest mistake you can ever make in pursuing your dreams is to listen to other people and take their opinions as gospel, when in fact their opinions are just that, opinions. You can't base your outlook on what people tell you. You have to go out and find out for yourself. I'm sure that if you look long and hard you will find painters who are making not only a decent living, but a remarkable living painting. Don't be led astray by public opinion. Learn to think for yourself and more importantly, learn to investigate things for yourself.

VICTOR: You're right, Simon. I've never taken the time to see for myself if it's possible to make a good living as an artist or painter.

SIMON: I think it's critical to seek out people who are doing what you want to do. If you love to paint, find painters who are making a good living. Whatever your passion, find people who are out there making it happen and learn from them. Imitate what they're doing.

VICTOR: I would bet that these people have been working on building their businesses for years.

SIMON: I wouldn't doubt it. Any person who dares to follow their dream and believes that it will happen overnight is suffering from delusions of grandeur or is just plain delusional. Success won't happen overnight. That indeed is a fantasy.

VICTOR: So where is one to start?

SIMON: Once you find someone who is doing what you want to do, put together a "mini business plan" that includes small steps in that direction. We've often heard the question, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer is, of course, "One bite at a time." Building your business is about breaking down your overall goal into small, measurable and attainable goals.

VICTOR: Why not just go for it? Why not expect success right off the bat? It seems to me that you are now the one suffering from self-imposed limitations!

SIMON: My exuberance for success right off the bat, as you put it, has been tempered by years of experience. That experience tells me that someone making it big right away from the get-go is a rare occurrence. If it happens to you, God bless you and may you prosper. But unfortunately, the majority of success stories out there tell the same story over and over again about how hard it was to build a business and all the personal sacrifices required to achieve your dream. So while it may seem that I'm self-imposing some type of limitation of my success, I'd like to think of it as a prudent calculation of what is possible and how to do it in a given period of time.

VICTOR: But why not aim high at the outset?

SIMON: A man once said that you should shoot for the moon because even if you miss you'll still be amongst the stars. I've always relished that saying because it reminds me that even if you don't hit your target, at least you are one of the very few who dared to try. And in my book, anyone who tries to pursue their passion and doesn't hit it right away is a star in my book. But to answer your question directly, I must say that there is a danger in aiming too high, too soon. Many careers have been stifled or snuffed out because that first failure was such a major blow to the person's ego and self-esteem that they were never able to recover. I've seen people mentally destroy themselves by not taking a step back and setting what I would consider reasonable goals.

VICTOR: In other words, be realistic.

SIMON: I'm not comfortable with the phrase "be realistic"; it has no real meaning. What does being realistic really mean? What's realistic for one person can be impossible for another one and shortsighted for someone else. A man who says, "I want to make a million dollars" may hear his poor colleagues saying, "That's not realistic." Yet a man of wealth might respond by saying, "Why are you selling yourself short? Why not ten million?"

VICTOR: So what would you say then?

SIMON: Everyone has their own definition of success. But upon attaining that level success, they will undoubtedly seek more success. Life is funny. We say we would be content with a million dollars and as soon as we attain it we're already talking about how a million isn't enough and we want more. Such is the nature of economic man in today's hyper-consumptive society.

VICTOR: I'm confused. You don't want to say that people should be realistic, and now you're saying that success is a moving target. So what should one aim for and how should they set their expectations?

SIMON: You pose a tough question especially when you factor in that most of us are not in control of what happens to us.

VICTOR: Now you've lost me.

SIMON: I know and I'm sorry. My mind wanders in many directions. Most people want a simple answer to a complex problem but unfortunately life isn't a straight line and unlike the laws of physics, the rules are constantly changing. When a person sets out to do something, it's not a matter of being realistic, it's a matter of proof. By that I mean that sometimes you have to look around and see what others are doing and how they're doing it. We're visual creatures and we learn by seeing and then by doing. Success is my opinion is one-part creativity and one-part mimicry.

VICTOR: Mimicry?

SIMON: The best way to improve our chances of success is to find others who are doing what we want to do, or something similar, and then mimic what they do. We learn best by example, taking small steps to get closer to our definition of success. Once we attain our defined level of success we feel validated. Validation is what underlies one's self esteem. If we can prove to others and most importantly to ourselves that we can do it, that gives us the confidence to say, "What next?"

VICTOR: It seems ironic that a sense of satisfaction brings with it the seeds of dissatisfaction.

SIMON: Ah! Yes! You have hit upon the head of the proverbial nail of what plagues the human condition. Even when we achieve our desired level of success, our natural impulse is to want more, bringing on a new round of dissatisfaction and the need for creating new goals.

VICTOR: So dissatisfaction is a motivator.

SIMON: Dissatisfaction is, to extract a phrase from Ralph Waldo Emerson, the hobgoblin of the mind; it's the troll under the mental bridge of complacency and contentment. Because even when we reach the top of the mountain, instead of appreciating the view, our mind is focused on a nearby mountain that's higher, and a new desire is created. Contentment becomes a momentary aberration.

VICTOR: By your definition, no one can ever be successful because as soon as they attain their goal, they will be dissatisfied.

SIMON: No, you go too far. I'm only pointing out that we humans are peculiar creatures when it comes to acquiring success. I'm only trying to point out that success is not some fixed point in time or space, but a state of mind. We've seen poor people who are unhappy and we've seen people with more money than they have who are unhappy. So clearly money isn't the final answer.

VICTOR: So you should be careful what you wish for, eh?

SIMON: Yes. This gets back to my point about doing something you enjoy. Enjoyment of one's craft is the best distraction from the sad realities that often surround us and make us unhappy.

VICTOR: What does that mean? No one has ever tied enjoyment to distraction like that.

SIMON: When we are in the moment, doing what we love to do, our focus and attention is aimed at activities that will sustain that moment. The more we are into something, the less room our mind has for people and situations that are outside our purview.

VICTOR: So it's like wearing rose-colored glasses?

SIMON: Yes, something like that. When you are in your zone of success and are enjoying what you do and love, the world around you seems a bit gentler and more palatable to the mind.

VICTOR: Sounds like escapism to me!

SIMON: Yes and no. Yes, you can escape into your zone of success, but one must always keep an eye on the realities surrounding your success. Your business could be booming and you feel like you're on top of the world, then one day the economy slows or goes into a deep recession and you're forced out of your zone.

VICTOR: There's an economic term for things that happen beyond your control but I can't recall what it is.

SIMON: The word you looking for is "externalities." These are events that happen outside our control, beyond our sphere of influence. Which is why it is wise to keep in mind that when things are going well, it's not an excuse to turn inward and escape, as you say, the real world.

VICTOR: Simon, based on what you've said so far, success is about trying to enjoy the moment or moments when things are going well but at the same

time one should worry about losing it all; it makes no sense.

SIMON: To navigate the waters of our happiness we should moderate or temper our enthusiasm on one side and our fears on the other. Things can change in a hurry. So when someone says "be realistic," I don't know what that means. Since no one knows what's going to happen from one day to the next, how can you tell someone to be realistic?

VICTOR: I'm still lost.

SIMON: Well, I apologize for your mental discomfort. I'm sure it's hard to listen to the ramblings of an old man.

VICTOR: No, no...that's not what I meant, I...

SIMON: I know. Let me come right to the point. Success is always temporary, much like failure. When things are going well, it's best to remember that change is constant. When things are going poorly, you would do well to remember the same. Learn to moderate your exuberance when things are going well and moderate your feelings of despair when things are going wrong. In eastern philosophy they call this "finding the Middle Way."

VICTOR: All right. So if you don't like the phrase "be realistic," what would you say to someone who's going after their dream?

SIMON: I'd rather say to someone, "be flexible." That makes more sense to me. Success has more to do with adapting rather than accepting some vague notion of being realistic. Adaptation has been humankind's greatest intrinsic asset when it comes to survival in the wild. The same holds true for survival in this concrete jungle we call society. Rigidity in thinking

and in action render you prey to the whims of the market forces.

VICTOR: That's very Darwinian of you – survival of the fittest.

SIMON: The economist Adam Smith talked about the invisible hand that moves the market. I believe that hand exists and if you don't monitor the forces around you, you may get slapped upside the head when you least expect it. It's more like "survival of the smartest" in today's world of high tech.

VICTOR: I won't argue there; things seem to be moving faster every day.

SIMON: And those who can adapt and be flexible will be the beneficiaries of these disruptive changes we see all around us.

VICTOR: So in a nutshell your position is that success is temporary.

SIMON: Yes, and so is failure. When things are going well you would do well to remind yourself that fortunes do change. And when they're going wrong, remember that they'll eventually go right. Maintaining this mental equilibrium is what will help you maintain a balanced view of your situation.

VICTOR: Simon, I always hear people talking about how well things are going for them, and sometime even I feel as though if it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all. It seems unfair at times...

SIMON: Stop for a minute and think about what you just said. People talk about things when things are going right. You may not have noticed that they never tell you when things are going wrong either, do they?

VICTOR: You're right about that.

SIMON: It's like those folks who travel to Las Vegas to gamble. They always come back telling you how much money they won. If you listen to what they say, you'd swear that Las Vegas was just giving money away. But we both know that Vegas wouldn't be Vegas if they were losing money. When gamblers lose money, they aren't so anxious to talk about it. The same goes for people in your life. They'll talk a good game when things are going well, but they'll clam up and become scarce when things aren't going that well. So my advice to you is to stop paying attention to what others have or don't have, and worry about yourself.

VICTOR: I have to admit, it's hard to rise above the pettiness when things aren't going your way.

SIMON: I know. I've been there. I've thrown a few self-pity parties in my lifetime. But I'll circle back to our original discussion about success. There aren't a lot of things you can control in life, but the one thing you *can* control is how you respond to adversity when pursuing your dream.

VICTOR: Easier said than done.

# Awakened to Purpose

SIMON: I remember listening to a Napoleon Hill recording done in or around the 1930s, I believe. In an interview with the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, he divulged the secret behind the key to success. He said that the secret to success was the *ability to control one's mind and to direct it to whatever means you desire*. Now when I first heard that, it took me a while to grasp its profundity.

VICTOR: I'm not sure I'm following you.

SIMON: What he was saying was that our mind is the most powerful processing machine known to man and we each own one free and clear. It's how we use the machinery that will determine our success.

VICTOR: How?

SIMON: Well, if you think negative thoughts, your worldview will be negative. But if you can control your mind, the machinery, and keep it focused on positive thoughts, inevitably you will make progress towards achieving your goal.

VICTOR: I see.

SIMON: The point he was trying to hammer home was that each of us has been given usage of the most complex thinking machine in the world at no cost. It is therefore left up to us to determine how we will use

this thinking machine, or unfortunately for those who success eludes, how it will not be used.

VICTOR: So if I believe in something, I shouldn't let any negative thoughts interfere with my goal.

SIMON: I believe Mr. Hill used the phrase "definite of purpose." Once your mind makes up its mind about what it wants to do, it's left up to you to defend it against any errant thoughts that would undermine your belief in what you're doing.

VICTOR: There are a lot of naysayers out there in the world.

SIMON: This is what Hill and Carnegie were getting at. You will come across people who are too negative and will criticize you every step of the way. But how you handle that criticism will determine your outlook. Again, the ability to control your mind and point it to whatever means you desire is what separates the winners from those who've strayed or have regressed to their mediocre self.

VICTOR: How do you stay strong against the tide of negative messages we hear every day?

SIMON: Good question. It begins with an awakening.

VICTOR: An awakening?

SIMON: Yes. A moment in your life when you look at where you are and say to yourself, "There has to be something better than this for me." The awakening occurs when you wake up from the reality you're in and begin to see an alternative reality for what you want to become.

VICTOR: In a weird way I think I understand what you're driving at.

SIMON: Good. Explain it to me.

VICTOR: Well, this may sound a bit off the rails, but I was recently watching the sci-fi movie on television called *The Matrix*. The story starts out with this guy named Neo who has a burning question, "What is the matrix?" He knows it exists but doesn't know that it is. He is eventually led to a person named Morpheus who can tell him exactly what the matrix is, but in order find out he must take a pill. Morpheus warns Neo that there is no going back once you discover what the matrix is. Neo takes the pill and goes into shock. The next scene shows him encased in an egg-like container hooked up to cables that carry the electricity from his body to some central location. After being rescued, he learns that his life has been a dream and that he's been encased all his life generating electricity for the machines that now rule the Earth. The matrix was the illusion that he was alive, when in fact he was being sustained in order to harness his electrical impulses to run the machines. So when he took the pill that was the beginning of the awakening process.

SIMON: Yes. Good example. A bit dramatic, but on point nonetheless. Unfortunately there are people today who are walking around, doing what they believe they're supposed to do, instead of waking up to the possibility of what their life could be if they would only abandon their fear of the unknown. Too bad there isn't a Morpheus today who will give them the pill to wake them up and pull them out of the social matrix.

VICTOR: How does one wake up?

SIMON: Unfortunately it takes a shock to the system that causes an awakening. Sometimes it's when someone loses their job. Or, maybe when you're

sunken so low that the fear of getting up is no longer fear. It could be a death in the family. There's nothing like having a close personal friend or someone you know die, to awaken and refocus the mind on what's really important. An awakening comes in many forms, and sometimes it's disguised as bad news.

VICTOR: A friend of mine lost his job and I remember how devastated he was. He didn't know how to tell his wife and he was afraid of what his friends might think. A few days of searching for different opportunities helped him land a job doing something completely out of his area of expertise. Today he loves what he does and he'll be the first to tell you that getting fired was the best thing that could've ever happened to him.

SIMON: That's what I mean. Fortune is sometimes disguised as misfortune. When people reach a point where they have nothing to lose, and dare to risk it all, they reach a quixotic moment. It is in that moment that new careers are made as new realities are realized.

VICTOR: Quixotic moment?

SIMON: Yes. Like the fabled Don Quixote who attacked giant windmills thinking they were ferocious monsters. When people reach a point where something, anything, has to happen, they decide to do something out of the ordinary, something so foolishly impractical that even your friends will swear it's crazy. But you're not crazy. Something inside of you is screaming, "Wake up! Take charge!" And the only way to silence the calling is to lunge forward in your pursuit of the impractical and do something outside the ordinary. That quixotic moment, the

charge, is the awakening. It is the pulling back of the curtain of the Wizard of Oz, it is the discovery that the matrix is an illusion and that you've been living a lie. And as in Neo's case, there's no going back. Once you're awake, there is no going back to sleep.

VICTOR: What then?

SIMON: What do you mean, "What then?"

VICTOR: Once you're awake, what do you do? Where do you start?

SIMON: What did Neo do?

VICTOR: What do you mean?

SIMON: When he awoke and discovered the matrix was an illusion, what did he do?

VICTOR: Well, in the movie he first had to accept this new reality. At first he didn't want to believe, but Morpheus eventually convinced him that he wasn't dreaming anymore; he was awake.

SIMON: Was he scared?

VICTOR: I think "terrified" was more like it.

SIMON: What did he do then?

VICTOR: He had to adjust to the new reality and figure out how he could help those still in the matrix.

SIMON: So he found a new purpose for his existence?

VICTOR: Yes. Yes. I didn't look at it that way, but yes.

SIMON: So, too, will the individual who is awakened. At first the fear of the unknown will beset his mind with visions of uncertainty. But after some time, he will adjust to the new reality and find a new career, hopefully doing something fulfilling, outside the

matrix. Blessed are those who are awakened. Woe to those who merely exist and respond without question to the puppet master's whims.

VICTOR: Simon, many of us want to break free, but it's scary. It's not easy to just walk away. It's not!

SIMON: I never claimed it was easy, I only claim that is necessary if you want to live a life out of the ordinary.

VICTOR: What's wrong with an ordinary life, anyway?

SIMON: I never claimed anything was wrong with that. I am only saying that to live an extraordinary life you have to do something that's not ordinary.

VICTOR: But how do you overcome the fear of change, the fear of the unknown?

SIMON: I don't think one ever overcomes their fear of change or the unknown. Successful people learn how to coexist or cope with those feelings. Those who can manage fear and uncertainty are the ones who will rise above the noise and be heard.

VICTOR: You seem to be avoiding my question. How?

SIMON: How what?

VICTOR: How do they manage or cope with fear? This is what I want to know. Once they've awakened, how do they cope?

SIMON: The answer you seek can't be put neatly into a box and packaged for verbal delivery. Let me try to answer the question to the best of my ability. I will apologize upfront if you find my answer wanting. A person goes through a sequence of emotional phases.

Allow me to explain them to you and in so doing we may mutually agree on how one can overcome the fear. When someone is awakened, there is a jolt of euphoria that stimulates the senses. You feel alive for the first time. You see things for what they are and not what someone else tells you they should be. The discovery that there is an alternative, and better, reality than the one they find themselves in. Much like Neo was glad to know that there was a matrix. The next phase is one of pure fear and disorientation. Now that you know what the deal is, so to speak, you are faced with the horrifying reality of trying to figure out your place in it and how to proceed. When a person makes a decision to change their job or follow a new career, the first phase is euphoric, and that is followed by the fear of having to accomplish it. The natural reaction to this fear is to flee from it, avoid it by retreating to the warm bosom of the known and the familiar.

VICTOR: I think I follow...

SIMON: In other words, when we're afraid to do something new, we go back to doing what we're familiar with. For example, maybe you hated your job, but going into a whole new field scares you, so much so that you stay in your comfort zone and find another job with a different company, but doing the same thing as before. This isn't coping with the fear; it's surrendering to it once more.

VICTOR: Okay. I get it.

SIMON: So the question behind your question is, "How do we resist the temptation or the fear to go back to doing what we've always done?" The answer lies in this intangible notion from within called *purpose*. Purpose is based on a set of beliefs that you have a higher calling. Each of us has a belief system,

something that guides us and tells us when we are out of synch with ourselves. Have you ever done something that was outside your belief system?

VICTOR: If you're asking me if I've ever compromised and done something I shouldn't have, the answer is yes.

SIMON: How did you feel afterwards?

VICTOR: Not good. In fact, it wasn't until I corrected what I had done, or least tried to make amends, that I could actually sleep well.

SIMON: What you experienced is something psychologists refer to as *cognitive dissonance*. That's where your actions are out of synch with your belief system, causing you to find a way to reduce or eliminate the dissonance by taking some sort of corrective action. In your case, you tried to make amends for whatever offense you may have committed.

VICTOR: You make it sound worse than what it really was.

SIMON: That is not my intention. I'm only trying to help you recapture that feeling of uneasiness you had when your actions weren't congruent with your belief system. That's the same feeling a person who has experienced an awakening moment feels when they think of going back to doing what they've always done. They don't feel in synch with themselves and like you, they will strive to resolve that dissonance, that uneasiness. This is the driving force, this uneasiness that helps people overcome their fear. Even when they start to doubt their decision, this uneasiness serves as a constant reminder that no matter the adversities and challenges, the alternative,

going back to the same old thing, is not an option. So I say to you again: people don't overcome their fear, they learn to cope and coexist with it. Yes, they are afraid of doing something new, but they should fear mediocrity more.

VICTOR: Simon, I notice you use the word "mediocrity" a lot. The word bothers you, doesn't it?

SIMON: I didn't realize I was being repetitive; very astute of you. But I guess you're right. I believe mediocrity is a state of mind where one accepts what life has to offer, never questioning "why not more?" or demanding more from it. Mediocrity is about acquiescence and surrender. It is where the human spirit is bound to inaction like the titan Prometheus to his rock. And only through a steadfast belief system and will, a will to defy even what the gods have ordained, can a person hope to escape the chains that bind the mind.

Each person has within him or her ability to be successful, but only by willing themselves into action can they ever hope to achieve this. Only by rejecting mediocrity, the norm, the average, the mundane, the usual, the expected, the trite, the obvious or the expected can one hope to discover their true calling or purpose in this lifetime. And that rejection takes courage founded on a deep-seated belief system that constantly reminds us there is more to life than what others would have us believe.

VICTOR: Would you call that the human spirit?

SIMON: Call it what you wish, but know that it exists in each and every individual. Consider yourself fortunate to be aware of it. Consider yourself blessed if you're able to manifest it in your personal life by going after your dream.

VICTOR: What if you do go after something and have a decent amount of success but then you discover that you really don't like it? For example, I thought I wanted to be an artist, started doing it, but realize after some time that I really didn't like it and didn't want to be an artist. What then? Is that failure?

SIMON: You asked the question with pain in your voice.

VICTOR: I don't know if it's pain; more like disappointment. I thought I knew what I wanted and when I got to it, it wasn't. How can I trust myself to know what I want when the very thing I went after turned out to be a major disappointment? I feel like my confidence has been sapped.

No sooner did I finish my statement than John, our waiter, arrived with a fresh pot of coffee. "I didn't mean to interrupt since you both seem deep into your conversation, but I was wondering if I could get you anything else?"

"John, I'm good. How about you, Simon?"

"Well, I think I'll have one more cup of coffee and then I'll be on my way. So, John, if you can give me a refill here that'd be great."

"Sure thing." John replied, cautiously pouring the coffee. As he turned to walk away he paused long enough to say, "And if you need anymore, just holler."

SIMON: What a nice young man.

VICTOR: Yes, he seems like it.

SIMON: Where were we?

VICTOR: I was telling you of my disappointment and lack of trust in myself...

SIMON: Oh, yes, yes. You seem to be a bit hard on yourself. You have reason to be disappointed when the thing you wanted turned out to be an illusion. But I wouldn't go as far as saying you shouldn't trust yourself. In fact, I would argue that you should trust yourself more now, to know what you *don't* want.

VICTOR: I guess that's another way of looking at it.

SIMON: It's the only way. If you don't trust yourself to make decisions, than surely inaction will follow. Every experience, again, carries with it the seed of knowledge and insight into what you want. Every step you take brings you closer to discovering that very thing you seek.

VICTOR: Yeah, I guess.

SIMON: Would you mind it terribly if I asked you to stop using the phrase "I guess"? It signals a sense of indifference and apathy.

VICTOR: No, that's not what I meant. My mind is tied in knots right now and saying "I guess" just gives me mental room to try to sort things out for myself.

SIMON: I understand. I used to do the same thing until one day as a young man my boss cured me of my "I guess" reflex. When he would ask me a question, I would typically respond by saying, "I guess that's right." He would be quick to reply, "Never guess. Either you know or you don't know. Which is it?" I tell you this because when you're in search of what you want, you will come across moments of uncertainty. Mentally train your brain to either admit you have the knowledge or you don't

have the knowledge. If the answer is the latter, your mind will then be oriented towards seeking out that knowledge. Earlier you mentioned that you tried something but didn't like it and then you felt disappointed.

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: Now ask yourself, and be honest, what about the experience didn't you like?

VICTOR: Well, I guess it was...

SIMON: Stop! Don't guess. Either you know or you don't know.

At that moment I didn't know what to say. My mind was racing to find reasons for why things turn out so poorly for me. Simon staring at me just made me more nervous.

VICTOR: Uh, uh...I don't know.

SIMON: That's fine. It's all right not to know. But what you do know is that you need to take some time and contemplate the reasons why. Only by forcing yourself to make a mental list of pros and cons will you be able to get closer to what it is you want. Then, once you have an idea of what it is you want, take action and try it again.

VICTOR: What if I'm disappointed again?

SIMON: Then sit down again and figure out the reasons why. Success is an iterative process of self-discovery. Each experience you have will, if you think it through, bring you one step closer to your goal. Remember it's okay to say, "I don't know." And it's okay to say, "I don't like this."

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VICTOR: I hear you. Just keep moving.

SIMON: Yes. Just like a shark that has to keep moving to keep water flowing through its gills or else it will die. So too will your dreams die if you don't keep moving.

VICTOR: As long as it's in the right direction, right?

SIMON: I would modify the statement to say that as long as it's in the general direction of what you want to accomplish. The right direction is the ideal. Finding a general direction is reality.

## Worthless Constructs

VICTOR: Simon, I have to get going in a bit, but I did want to ask you this question before I forget. Earlier you mentioned that you don't believe people should wait for divine intervention to make things happen. But don't you have to be a little lucky to make it? And isn't that divine intervention to some extent?

SIMON: Hmm...that's a "gotcha" question if I ever heard one.

VICTOR: That wasn't my intention.

SIMON: I know. Hmm...I guess I would say that there is no luck and divine intervention doesn't exist.

VICTOR: Ha! Don't guess. Either you know or you don't know!

SIMON: (a gentle smile emerges) Touché, young man, touché. You're correct. The answer is I don't know. It would be arrogant of me to presume otherwise and say that I know luck and divine intervention don't exist. I can say with a high degree of certainty that no one knows for sure. I can't prove or disprove that luck exists, but there is evidence, albeit anecdotal, to support that those who wait around for luck to happen will wait for a very long time. I believe luck is created through action and involvement in the pursuit of one's goal. I further believe that when you

move in a given direction, you will attract people and opportunity to your cause. If you want to label this "luck," so be it. I like to think of it as simply the Law of Attraction in action, the underpinning of all success.

VICTOR: How so?

SIMON: Well, too many people sit around thinking about what they want to do. They make plans, then rethink their plans and make new plans. It becomes a cycle of planning.

VICTOR: What's wrong with that? We often hear the saying "fail to plan, plan to fail."

SIMON: Let me step back a bit here and see if I can make my point in the context of what you've just stated. Have you ever known someone who said, "I have a great idea!"?

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: And a year or two later they're still thinking about the idea.

VICTOR: Yes, but maybe they're taking their time and thinking it through.

SIMON: Fair enough, but here's the reality of what is most likely to happen. No matter how well you plan things out, they never work out the way you intended. Things never go as you expected.

VICTOR: Okay.

SIMON: So if you know ahead of time that you can't predict every possible outcome, then sitting around and planning to some extent is useless.

VICTOR: Simon, I find it hard to believe that you are advising me to tell others that planning is a waste of time. I'm not sure I buy it.

SIMON: That's not what I said. One should always make plans, using the information and resources available to them. But beyond that, you have to take a blind leap of faith and go out there and try to make things happen. Only by doing that will you actually see if your plan has merit. And along the way, they'll uncover or discover new information or resources that will take them farther than any planning possibly could. Success is oftentimes the byproduct of unforeseen or unintended consequence.

VICTOR: I see where you're going with this, but it's hard for some to take that "leap of faith," as you put it.

SIMON: Yes, it is tough. But consider this: they say the richest places on Earth are not the oil fields of the Middle East or the diamond mines of South Africa. The richest places in the world are the cemeteries. There you will find buried books that were never written, songs that were never composed, ideas and plans that never made it off the desktop. The saddest thing in this world is to die without ever trying; without ever knowing if you could've succeeded under your own terms.

VICTOR: Wow. What a morbid way of seeing things. As you approach your golden years, what do you think about? Do you think about dying?

SIMON: As times rolls on I realize my days on this rotating sphere are coming to a close.

VICTOR: Are you afraid?

SIMON: No, I wouldn't say I am. I've made my peace with the fact that I will be departing soon.

VICTOR: What do you think about?

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SIMON: Every day I live I'm reminded of how blessed I am to have another day. In my quiet moments of contemplation I think back on my life and all the wonderful experiences I've had. It's funny how things that used to matter now seem frivolous. I wish I had this disposition towards society early on in my life.

VICTOR: What do you mean?

SIMON: Well, you start realizing that all the things you gave credence to were trivial constructs.

VICTOR: Constructs?

SIMON: Yes, you know, human beings have a tendency to give something value when instead we should be much more selective.

VICTOR: Help me out here.

SIMON: When I was young I worried about getting a promotion. But hindsight now being 20/20, I shouldn't have given it so much priority in my life. I remember working late hours and putting up with a lot of mess just so I could secure a promotion. But what is a promotion?

VICTOR: I don't know, I never gave it that much thought. Most people want a title for the money.

SIMON: I think you're right, to some extent. To me, a title is a construct or designation made up by corporate minions in Human Resources to determine how much we should get paid and how much power we should wield. When I was in corporate America, that's what I strived to attain, a better title. It seems so frivolous now when I think about how I coveted titles. I often get mad at myself when I think of all the time I wasted worrying about petty things.

VICTOR: Death or the nearness of it makes one take note of what you have.

SIMON: Yes, death has a way of focusing you on what's important and what isn't. As my days wind down, the specter of death forces me to stay focused on what's important. In the end, the only title you die with is "Rest In Peace." I'm sorry I'm sounding bitter.

VICTOR: If you died tomorrow, would you say you've lived a good life?

SIMON: I believe so.

VICTOR: Simon, I have to get going here. But let me ask you one final question. Would you consider yourself a rich man?

SIMON: It depends on what you mean by the word "rich."

VICTOR: You can define it as you wish.

SIMON: "Rich" can imply many things, but if you are asking me specifically do I have a lot of money, my answer would be no. I do have enough to live a comfortable life, as I have chosen to define comfortable. But as we've discussed, money isn't the key to success. I've lived a good life. In my lifetime I've made many mistakes, but I've also done a few things right. Death is easier to face when you have no regrets about how you lived your life.

VICTOR: So you have no regrets?

SIMON: We all have some regrets, but as long as the good things we've accomplished outweigh those regrets, on balance we should be fine when it comes to the final analysis. So if I use this metric as a measurement of whether or not I'm rich, I would say to you that I've lived a rich life.

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VICTOR: Any final words for those students I'll be speaking to?

SIMON: People don't want to be told about appreciating what they have. In fact, many of them are so stubborn that they may not even listen to you. But I am hoping that what you say finds its way to the ears of those who will listen, and that they can take comfort in the wisdom and knowledge your offer.

VICTOR: I hope so as well.

SIMON: So when you're speaking today, don't speak to convince the group, speak from the heart so that your words oscillate with sincerity and earnestness. It is my hope that you will touch some lives today, as I have no doubt you will. Young people have their whole lives in front of them and the thought of death has no role in their plans. They are full of hubris; embrace that hubris. Amplify their ego and let them know that anything is possible.

VICTOR: Isn't that setting them up for failure?

SIMON: Bad news is easy to find. Dream killers are a dime a dozen. But for this day, you are the harbinger of hope and the ghost of things yet to come.

VICTOR: I will do my best.

SIMON: I know you will. One last thing...

VICTOR: Yes.

SIMON: We've all made mistakes. We've all made choices we now know in hindsight weren't the wisest. We've all missed chances to take advantage of opportune moments or situations. We've all said *yes* when we should've said *no* and vice versa. We've all hesitated to ask that one question that would've saved us from heartache and failure. We've all

trusted and been betrayed, only to repeat the same mistake again.

And as the economy continues to struggle to recover and the financial pressures build, the tendency to blame and dwell on regret becomes all too tempting. Regret is fertile ground for negativity and pessimism to set in, which only begets more regret.

Remember, we are perfectly imperfect; we are only human. We make mistakes, but who doesn't?

Remind your students that the greatest gift they can give themselves, if they want to stand a chance and succeed in the world, is permission to erase their board and start fresh.

VICTOR: By forgiving themselves, right?

SIMON: Yes. Only by accepting one's own imperfections and moving past them can they ever hope to reach their true God-given potential. Will you tell them that?

VICTOR: I will, Simon, I promise.

SIMON: Thank you.

We both pushed our chairs back and stood simultaneously. Simon extended his hand to say goodbye.

SIMON: It's been a pleasure. I hope this foolish old man didn't waste your time.

VICTOR: On the contrary, I hope I didn't waste yours.

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SIMON: You did not; it was my pleasure.

VICTOR: Well, I'm off. Take care, Simon!

SIMON: You do the same. And may God bless you.