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# IDEAL ME

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**Discovering your call in a cluttered world**



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Definition of **CALL**:

**A summons to a particular course of action,  
influenced by the divine.**

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# IDEAL ME

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Discovering your call in a cluttered world



**GLEN ALEXANDER GUYTON**

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A CULTURAL GUIDEBOOK  
FOR YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS  
AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM

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IDEAL ME

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# Table of Contents

*Preface*

Introduction

## **Part 1: I AM**

1. The ENVY Me .....	19
2. The Hidden Me.....	26
3. Who Am I Right Now? .....	31
Exercise 1: Create Your “Who Am I?” lists .....	35
4. I Am Not .....	37
Exercise 2: The Assessment.....	43

## **Part 2: I DECIDE**

5. Understanding the Call.....	51
Exercise 3: Discerning the Call.....	56
6. Understanding the Costs .....	59

## **Part 3: I EVOLVE**

7. Time for Change .....	67
8. Knowing When to Change .....	71

## **Part 4: I ADVANCE**

9. Honing Your Edge .....	77
---------------------------	----

## **Part 5: I LET GO**

10. Our Past Betrays Us .....	83
Exercise 4: Steps for Letting Go .....	86
11. Supportive Community .....	92

Conclusion: Enjoy the Journey .....	95
-------------------------------------	----

<i>Helpful Resources</i> .....	100
--------------------------------	-----

<i>Notes</i> .....	102
--------------------	-----

<i>The Author</i> .....	104
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## Preface

No book, no author can change your life. No magic formula or fairy dust will appear to make that happen. Only you can do that. This book is not for everyone, but it may be for you. Welcome to the adventure of discovering your IDEAL me. Following your divine call will not guarantee happiness, but that call to your IDEAL life is like a song that you can't get out of your head. Once the call has been heard, there is no satisfaction for those who choose not to answer.

This book is a curated collection of my thoughts and experiences. I have worked with young people from a variety of backgrounds. After spending more than half my life leading people in my roles as an Air Force officer, business person, teacher, pastor, and father, I have picked up a little wisdom here and there. I have seen people fail miserably and succeed greatly. I have mentored hundreds of students and young adults.

So how should you read this book? The best way is to pick one or two pieces of information and take action. Skim it, scan it, or read it word for word; it doesn't really matter. Sure, I think everything I wrote here is important, but it may not be important for you. As you read, from time to time lay the book aside; then immediately apply what you have learned. After a period of time, come back, pick up one or two pieces of information relevant to your journey; then apply those. Repeat as needed. Life is a series of ups and downs. We go through different phases of need as we mature or as our circumstances change. Pick whatever chapter or guidance that you need at the time. There are no rules to reading this book, just like there are not set rules defining what your version of the IDEAL life is. This book is just one tool to help you improve your life. Ultimately, you will be the champion of your own success and I am happy to be along for the ride.

—Glen Guyton



## Introduction

*Alex: You do what you are, Jezzie.*

*Jezzie: You mean you are what you do.*

*Alex: No, I mean you do what you are. You're born with a gift.*

*If not that, then you get good at something along the way.*

*And what you're good at, you don't take for granted. You don't betray it.*

*Jezzie: What if you do betray your gift?*

*Alex: Then you betray yourself. That's a sad thing.*

—James Patterson and Marc Moss, *Along Came a Spider*<sup>1</sup>

What is the IDEAL me? This book's purpose is not to tell you who you should be. It is not to help you become more like me or more like some iconic figure that is the epitome of success in popular culture. What we do proves who we are, even in how we express our giftedness. The things we do and choose in life reflect who we are, not the other way around. What we choose and what we do doesn't shape us; on the contrary we are a reflection of our choices. Our actions are the fruit we bear. With this book you will learn how to discover and cultivate your gifts in such a way that you don't betray who you truly are. You betray your gifts by not producing or by producing far below your potential.

If you are seeking to be the next Bill Gates, the next Stephen Curry, or the next Gigi Hadid, this book is not for you. You are not them and you are probably not equipped to live their lives. We often envy the lives of other people and deep inside we wish that we could be them. We are drawn to the posts of family and friends and covet their exciting lives. Yet, we see them only at a single moment in time. We want to be fabulous like the Instagram and reality TV stars, yet we fail to realize their lives are well-scripted. They have personal designers and professional marketers helping them to look perfect when they step into the public eye. We have no clue what it took for them to become the persons that they are, the personas we see.

Sometimes we can be fooled. For many years Bill Cosby was an iconic figure in the African-American community because of his clean comedy and because of the all-American father character he played on television. Well, that image of Bill Cosby has been shattered by multiple allegations of sexual assault: the true man behind the mask has allegedly been revealed to be quite different from that of Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, Cosby's TV character. Each week the paparazzi and TMZ expose the flaws of our reality TV stars and media darlings, and we see that they are not as perfect as we had imagined them to be.

Much of our identity is related to what we do in life. For many of us this means our chosen career, but this is not always the case. (We will discuss that later in the book as we examine “calling” in chapter five.) Our calling can be quite distinct from where we work or how we make a living. Some of us find work to simply be a means to an end, a necessary inconvenience that funds our true passions. Others, like me, have been blessed to have job and calling linked closely together. My calling, in fact, has paid the bills. I left the military to pursue ministry, a higher calling for me. I took a \$20,000 a year pay cut and I haven’t looked back. Yes, maybe I missed out on that military retirement check, but I gained so much more.

Do you ever discover yourself in situations where you feel like you don’t belong? I am often the only person of color in many settings where I live and work. This is mainly because of the choices that my parents and I made when I was growing up. This is not to say that black or brown people are not educated or can’t achieve. Rather, the communities where we live often direct us into certain paradigms. Public schools are zoned by neighborhoods, so they are often economically and racially segregated. I chose schools and programs that fit my educational goals. I was not satisfied going to the school in the suburban working-class neighborhood where we lived. I took a risk to leave my friends and ride an hour and a half on the bus to other schools. I also chose to go to a Presbyterian Church camp while nearly all of my friends were Baptist or Catholic. Sometimes it felt like I was the weird one in my neighborhood.

Plus, I was interested in things many of my friends weren’t. I was a nerd, a bookworm, but I still enjoyed sports, BMX bikes, and rough-housing with the fellas. Yet, when I ventured outside my assigned school zone, in many situations I was the only black kid. I decided that if everyone were going to know me, then they were going to know me for more than just being the black kid. I was going to be the funny kid. I was going to be the smart kid. I was going to be the kid with a ton of ideas, so that is what I became. It was my first step towards becoming “me,” and finding my IDEAL healthy identity. At the time, I did not even realize it.

We have to become comfortable being the best “me” we can be. My IDEAL is not your IDEAL and I am okay with that. Sure, being Bill Gates has certain perks that I may never have. Funny as it may seem, there are certain perks to being Glen that Bill Gates may never experience. Just think—I get to take Uber to the airport and he is forced to fly in his private jet. I have an anonymity and freedom that one of the world’s most famous billionaires can never recapture. Okay, maybe I would trade my Uber ride for a G6 private jet, but I cannot spend my life measuring my gifts and life against those of others. It’s just not productive.

I remember watching the 2016 Rio Olympics with my family as the great Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps competed in a finals event against a Brazilian swimmer, Marcelo Chierighini. That’s a name that you probably don’t even remember. Chierighini was expected to challenge Phelps for the gold, but throughout warm-

ups and even during the race, Chierghini was more focused on Phelps than on winning his race. Repeated camera shots showed the Brazilian staring constantly at Phelps. Not only did Chierghini not win, the Brazilian failed to medal. He turned his head several times during the 200-meter butterfly to see what Phelps was doing. Phelps, on the other hand, remained focused on being the first to touch the wall, and he did.

While we can't be blind to the world around us, we can't swim someone else's race or live out someone else's dream. It may cost us more than we could ever hope to gain.

To reach my goals, I have had to learn how to wade through all of my life experiences, all of the bits and pieces of wisdom that I have been given, and figure out the best path for my life.

The path to your IDEAL life involves answering five questions:

- ✓ Who am I?
- ✓ Where do I want to go in life?
- ✓ How do I stay relevant in an ever-changing world?
- ✓ How can I stay sharp and honed in on my IDEAL path?
- ✓ How do I release the baggage of my past and continue to move forward in life?

Using those five questions, I have developed the IDEAL framework for helping people just like you to discover your calling in life. Determining your call will help you develop your healthy identity in our cluttered and dynamic world.

1. I A M
2. I D E C I D E
3. I E V O L V E
4. I A D V A N C E
5. I L E T G O

**I AM.** Finding your "I AM" can be a powerful, yet humbling journey. You will feel so at peace when you finally come to grips with who you are and you can comfortably share that with the world. It seems pretty simple at first glance but many people—both young and old—wrestle with that "Who am I?" question. The pressure starts as soon as you graduate from high school. Person after person asks you, "What are your plans?" The truth is few of us, even at 40 years of age, can say with confidence, "This is what I am going to do with the rest of my life"—and many fewer of us have it all figured out at the ages of 17 or 18. For many teens and young adults, you find it hard to determine what you are going to do two weeks from now, but people want you to have a 20-year career plan and a solid retirement plan the moment the principal hands you a diploma.

**I DECIDE.** Knowing and doing are two separate acts. Even if you have a good grasp of your gifts, are you putting in the necessary work to pursue your dreams? Will you be able to overcome whatever obstacles keep you from deciding to follow your IDEAL path? To be honest, some people choose not to live their IDEAL lives. They choose the easy path. They choose the path that gets them the most money or the most prestige. The IDEAL process is not about fame, fortune, or convenience. It is about deciding to maximize the gifts and talents you have been given and living a life with very few regrets. Our life is about the choices we make and no self-help book or process is going to get you to any place, except for the place that you choose to go. Your determination, your hard work, and a little wisdom will carry you far in life. You have to decide.

**I EVOLVE.** One constant in life is change. The IDEAL life is not about stagnation. We need to recognize that situations and circumstances as well as we ourselves change over time. It would be foolish for me to say that the IDEAL life you are living now will be the same one you should be living 15 years from now. Just as the jobs you have may change over time, so does our call. Evolving is also about managing expectations. As we grow and mature, our expectations change—as well as our capacity to fulfill the expectations that both we and the outside world place upon us. How we take on the world today may not be how we face it tomorrow. The decisions you make today will affect your future. So will the decisions you make tomorrow. Life changes and you must grow/change along with it.

**I ADVANCE.** While evolving is more about us changing over time and adapting to new situations, advancement is about staying sharp along the way. Even the best knife gets dull (with repeated use). Good chefs will not only regularly sharpen their knives, but they use a steel to hone that edge each time the knife is used. The honing steel makes the sharpened edge of the knife true. A knife that is honed consistently, needs to be sharpened less often. As we live out our IDEAL lives, we should constantly and consistently seek out knowledge and people that will keep us sharp. If we don't, we can get stuck and become unfulfilled.

**I LET GO.** The last part of living out our IDEAL lives is letting go of our negative past. A wise friend once told me, "Don't cling to a mistake just because you spent a lot of time making it. Release it and move forward."

Past baggage can be the most significant obstacle to stepping into the life we are created to live. Unfortunately, some of the baggage and hurt we carry was imposed on us by outside forces. The inflicted hurt, damage, and pain were beyond our control, but it is our responsibility to examine the baggage we carry and seek out healthy responses to the pain of our past. Not to oversimplify this journey that we call life, but I believe that most of us can regulate how much we let those negative things affect our future. After reading this book and going through the exercises, I hope that you will leave everything negative from your past outside the door, buried away. Carry with you into the future only what you are called to be.

That IDEAL life is typically just at our fingertips, just one choice or decision away. But we can get distracted by the shiny lives of others, the overload of information, and the constant input from those around us.

Again, we have to realize that what is the IDEAL for someone else may not be our IDEAL. Many well-meaning people will tell us what they think we should do, what they would do, and what works for them. The advice they give might be very good and has actually worked for them. The advice may be sound and solid advice, but it may not be the advice that will lead you to the place you need to go.

We are given our own lives to live. We have our own set of gifts. We have our own set of talents. The way we interpret and touch the world is unique to who we are. It is our IDEAL.

#### **Glen's Guidance**

- Go after your "I AM" even if it is a powerfully, humbling journey.
- Be determined. Work hard. Carry wisdom with you as you decide.
- Change and grow as you journey through life.
- Keep your edge sharp.
- Don't cling too tightly to the past.
- Don't get distracted. The IDEAL life is at your fingertips, just one choice or one decision away.



## Part 1

**I AM...**

...the sum total of my choices, my experiences, and my environment.

# Chapter 1

## The ENVY Me

*Queen: Slave in the magic mirror, come from the farthest space,  
through wind and darkness I summon thee. Speak! Let me see thy face.  
Magic Mirror: What wouldst thou know, my Queen?  
Queen: Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?  
Magic Mirror: Famed is thy beauty, Majesty. But hold, a lovely maid I see.  
Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is more fair than thee.  
—Grimm Brothers, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs"<sup>3</sup>*

Before we go any further, you need to learn my golden rule and apply it to every lesson and example that you read in this book. Glen's Golden Rule is:

**My IDEAL is not your IDEAL.**

That is the most significant piece of information that a person can ever take to heart when beginning the journey of life.

*Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else, for we are each responsible for our own conduct. —Galatians 6:4-5 NLT*

To be successful, you have to accept both your *gifts* and, contrary to popular belief, your *limitations* (more on that later). All of us at some point may ask ourselves questions like: *Who am I? Why was I created? What am I called to do?* Maybe you have asked yourself these questions more than once. I know I have. Our minds and our lives are cluttered with ideas, images, and possessions that distract us and constantly divide our attention.

In preparation for writing this book, I looked at a bunch of similar books. I looked at books written by famous gurus, top speakers, and various doctors. I talked to my former bosses who had written books. One has a PhD and has written a number of research and historical fiction books. His books have hundreds of pages and he seems to spit out a book every couple of years. Here I was trying to finish just one book. Even a couple of my former students were pumping out books. I was ready to trash this book and give up on the dream of being an author. Why? Because I could not write like they wrote. I was comparing my gifts to their gifts. I was a tad jealous. I was a tad envious. Those two emotions combined are always a recipe for disaster

manifesting themselves in the forms of inaction and self-defeat. So I decided to stop focusing on what everyone else was doing and proceeded to hammer out this book, line by line in a way that fit *my* gifts.

With the internet and social media, we have a wealth of information at our fingertips. We can be overwhelmed with global options and a universe of fantastic possibilities, so we begin to ask those “Who am I?” questions while comparing ourselves to the media darlings we watch on television or on our connected devices. Through the World Wide Web, smart devices and various social media platforms, we can get information and connect with just about anyone in the world in an instant. Every waking minute of the day we feel compelled to check our text messages, emails, and social media accounts to see what is happening in the lives of our friends, neighbors, and even strangers. Even presidents and other people in power are known for their Twitter and social media posts.

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**I believe we fail to focus on our dreams and our life goals because we are too busy online, glaring at cat pictures or checking to see which megastars are divorcing each other.**

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According to dscout, a web and mobile service company that helps its clients engage audiences, “*The heaviest smartphone users click, tap or swipe on their phones 5,427 times a day.* That’s the top 10 percent of phone users, so one would expect it to be excessive. However, the rest of us still touch the addictive things 2,617 times a day on average.

That is no small number.”<sup>4</sup> Often this comes at the cost of us ignoring the real, live, breathing people in close proximity to us who are trying to communicate with us. We can become distant from our family, friends, and classmates even when we are sitting in the same room. During our family gatherings I try to get my teenage nieces and nephews off the phones and engaged in family games, sometimes without much success. While everyone else is laughing and talking, too often the teens are isolated in the corner with headphones and glassy eyes. That is not the way to foster relationships with the extended family.

A study by Common Sense Media says, “Half of all teens admit they are addicted to their smartphones and other mobile devices, and nearly 60 percent of parents say they think their teens are too tech-addled.”<sup>5</sup> Why is it so difficult for many of us to discover our true calling in life? I believe we fail to focus on our dreams and our life goals because we are too busy online, glaring at cat pictures or checking to see which megastars are divorcing each other.

We give in to the clutter. We begin to think that unless we are on a reality show, our lives are without meaning. We measure our lives by followers, likes, and hits. These false measures are unrealistic and unobtainable for the vast majority of us. Yet, we keep consuming these media-driven standards of success, confusing “idol-istic” lives with idealistic lives. Living in the information age, we have become victims of information overload. It is like we have our own little magic mirrors and we constantly are seeking information about who is the fairest of them all. This massive

mountain of information leads to envy and even a sense of hopelessness. We either resent the accomplishments of others or feel we cannot measure up.

Karol Markowicz wrote in her New York Post opinion piece, "There's nothing new about jealousy and envy. ... What's new is our cultural acceptance of it."<sup>6</sup> In a world where we talk about inequality as the greatest problem we face, keeping up with the Joneses becomes a way of life. We enable the sickness of consumerism, overextending ourselves to acquire as much stuff as our friends and neighbors.

No one posts when they are sitting at home staring at the walls or in the midst of an emotional tragedy.

Do we post our true doubts and fears online? No, we post and boast about happy times. We take 20 selfies to get the one perfect "natural" shot. Sometimes I take a break from social media when I notice what some call "the envy effect" creeping into my sphere of emotion. I see my professional speaker friends traveling all over the world. I see pictures of my younger friends having babies. I read the posts of married friends who seem to love every single moment with their spouse and catch myself not being happy for them. I sometimes say to myself, "Why are they so lucky? How can they afford all of that?" We see the social media posts of our friends and wonder why our lives aren't filled with exotic trips, gourmet meals, and excitement 24/7. We overlook that most folks post only the best of what is going on in their lives.

But then, like many of you, when I go on a trip with my family, I post a flurry of happy pictures and cute comments. I'm that guy posting pictures of every meal and showing the great places I am touring. But you know what I leave out? I am leaving out the part when my daughter got sick or we had to cut out some experiences to stay within budget. I leave out the photos when we are hot, tired, and sweaty. I leave out the part when we are in line, waiting for the fun to happen. No, I post only the four fun hours of my vacation day and I leave out the other 20 hours when we are doing nothing. My son rarely lets me post pics of him. I get a lot of back-of-the-head shots. So when I ultimately get a picture of his face, it is usually after hours of negotiation. Social media creates this snapshot of perpetual joy and happiness that is reality for exactly zero percent of the human population.

The funny thing is that the only time I get hit with the envy effect is when I am bored out of my mind. When I am busy on a project or sharing real life experiences with the people I love, I am not even checking social media that much. Social media gets checked during the routine, uneventful periods of my life, like when I sit at the mechanic waiting on my car. When I am speaking in front of 3,000 people or cooking barbecue on my deck, looking at someone else's social media feed is the last thing on my mind. The online forum does not share the totality of who we are; it just shares a sliver of our lives—the part of ourselves that we *want* the world to see. Instead of wishing that our lives could be some clone of our friends' lives, we need to discover who we are called to be. We have to figure out our IDEAL life.

The IDEAL life is a journey through life that involves reflecting on those five very important questions I mentioned in the introduction. Consider these as you learn to accept your strengths and limitations:

- ✓ Who am I?
- ✓ Where do I want to go in life?
- ✓ How do I stay relevant in an ever-changing world?
- ✓ How can I stay sharp and honed in on my IDEAL path?
- ✓ How do I release the baggage of my past and continue to move forward in life?

Hopefully you have gotten the picture, that most of us will never be the next famous idol, Instagram model, Top Chef or sports MVP. Each and every one of us has a gift. Some gifts may be more visible than others, but we all have something to share with the world. We need to develop a realistic understanding of our life's call. We have to acquire the tools necessary to wade through the false images we consume daily. Such images will lead only to the development of a false sense of self. They will clutter our lives.

Many of us take these false images and create a mask. The mask protects us from pain—pain that we felt when we were young or when we felt too weak, inadequate, or overwhelmed to function as our authentic selves. But this pain may lead us to construct an inauthentic version of ourselves, making us only *appear* to be better, stronger, and more able to cope with the world around us.

Instead of trying to measure up to the lies in print and social media, we need to become the best versions of ourselves that we can possibly be. Instead of envying others or feeling inadequate, we must find our IDEAL “me” and ignore the clutter and noise that surrounds us daily. We have to understand how to answer our life's call. We have to understand, after careful discernment, how to grab onto something positive, some cause we truly believe in, and commit to it. “Who you are” involves finding something: a cause or a reason to exist *that is greater than yourself*. Here is a formula for you to remember:

### **My IDEAL Life > My Selfish Ambition**

*If we don't understand our life's purpose when answering that divine call and if we lose our sense of self, we wind up like the walking dead (pun intended). We are in a zombie-like state of being, wandering aimlessly, no destination in mind, and no vision. Maybe zombies eat brains because they have no minds of their own. They have no hopes, no dreams so they feed off what others have to offer. When we don't have a sense of self, like those zombies, we just move in the direction that someone else points us. That someone else might be on social media, the regular media, or some random person we hook up with at a party. We wander and wander and we do this*

until we eventually die—experiencing both a metaphorical and literal death. Then we just quit, we give up.

My older half-brother, Brian, was a very gifted electrician and carpenter. He was an absolute genius with his hands and people really loved him, but he had this void in his life that nothing could ever fill. He walked away from a successful career with an oil company and eventually became a drugged-out zombie. Alcohol was his poison of choice. For years he wandered around without purpose—in and out of our lives and in and out of rehab. He lived on and off the streets until eventually his wanderings took him to the bottom of a river. My brother was never able to figure out how to cope with the ups and downs of life. Although the bottle and the river eventually claimed his physical life, my brother died over and over again each time the challenges of life came upon him. He was not able to live into the rich calling of life. The demon of alcohol and past hurts cluttered his mind.

For many of you reading this book, retirement is a long way off. You may not have even taken your first job yet, but consider this: studies suggest that people who retire early have an increased risk of death as opposed to people who retire later in life.<sup>6</sup> Why is that? I suppose some early retirees think they have no reason to get up in the morning, which is sad. They fail to adapt to the next phase of their life. Maybe they confused their occupation with their calling. This is not just a cautionary tale for senior citizens, but for teens and young adults as well. Whether we are young or old, we must understand the gifts we possess and how we contribute to this world. If we don't understand our calling, our very existence is at risk.

We all need to learn how to cope with this gift of life we have been given. This is not to discount mental illness and significant traumatic life experiences. I am not a psychiatrist and this book does not address serious psychological or medical conditions, but, according to Natasha Tracy in the website Healthy Place, “Most teens who have been interviewed after a suicide attempt say that what causes teen suicide are feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Suicidal teens often feel like they are in situations that have no solutions. The teens can see no way out but death. The teens feel like they have no control to change their situations.”<sup>7</sup> *Suicidal people are not able to see how their gifts fit into this world, why they are valuable, why they too have to answer their divine call.*

It is important for teens and adults contemplating suicide to talk to a professional to determine what type of support they need to live life here. I say this with caution, but I know from experience—we can control how we react to the challenges and waves of life. Knowing where to get help and understanding that you are in trouble is a positive step in taking control of your life. We all need help from time to time. The amazing thing is that through asking for help you are not only reclaiming your own healthy self-control, but you are giving someone else the opportunity to use their gifts in service to you.

I want you to find and live your IDEAL life. But more than that, I want you to *love the life you live*.

*Heartbreak Ridge* is a movie from 1986 about Gunny Highway, an old Marine gunnery sergeant portrayed by Clint Eastwood, on his last tour of duty trying to whip a bunch of young, misfit, undisciplined recruits into shape. Eastwood's character ultimately guides the slacking soldiers to become heroes. "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome," Highway orders as he teaches them to handle everything life throws their way.

As we go through the seasons of our lives, we need to improvise (to), adapt (to), and overcome the challenges that encompass life. We have to figure out what it means to be ourselves. We have to learn how to sort through all the information and clutter to understand what it means to be our best selves.

At the same time, we have to understand our strengths and weaknesses. I know that I am not Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps, or Michael Bublé. I can't be them. I am not equipped emotionally, physically, or genetically to live the lives these gentlemen lived. I also have to be aware of my passions and what really motivates me.

Deep down I believe we all have a sense of God's call for us, but time and circumstance corrupt the creation that we are. Even with a wealth of information at our fingertips, we often cannot discern our own gifts and passions—we are too consumed with what everyone else is doing. As we receive more and more information from others about who they think we are, we pay less and less attention to who we think we are. We discount our gifts because we envy others. We have to pay attention to our IDEAL path. Attention is the psychological tool we use to tune out irrelevant information (clutter) so we can focus on what is important to us or what gifts we naturally have.

Through the processes outlined in this book, you will learn valuable tools to help you stop paying attention to everyone and everything else. You will get a framework for how to stop ignoring your personal dreams and how to stop being envious of other people. Why? Because the "me" inside of you is definitely worth paying attention to.



## Chapter 2

### The Hidden Me

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror  
I'm asking him to change his ways  
And no message could have been any clearer  
If you wanna make the world a better place  
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.  
—Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror"<sup>9</sup>*

Famed performer Michael Jackson once sang a song called, "Man in the Mirror." It was all about making changes. The clear message was that if you wanted to change the world, you first had to change the person looking back at you in the mirror every morning. We all wear some sort of mask to hide our true selves. To some degree, we are all keenly aware of our differences, especially after adolescence. Prior to adolescence, we have a limited capacity for abstract reasoning; our thinking is oriented in the here and now.

According to one study, "The process of developing self-esteem is life-long and a key role in it is played by interpersonal relationships. It begins in early childhood, where a secure attachment to parents forms a basis for a healthy self-esteem, but continues in adolescence, first to include peer relations, and in adulthood to comprise the interpersonal relationships of our different social contexts and roles."<sup>10</sup>

As children, we are just who we are, and then one day we wake up and look in the mirror on the wall and see judgment looking back at us and we don our masks. As one researcher writes, kids don't think about the possibilities; maybe I should say children don't put limits on what is possible. Children are less likely to analyze their relationships with others or speculate on how relationships could be improved.

Judgment comes in many forms, but the pressure of it results in what we consider "normal." In our traditional society, little boys put on the mask of masculinity. Little girls learn to love dolls and pink. Those from another culture learn to put on the mask of the dominant culture. We want to fit in. We want to be seen as strong or sexy. Some of us even dumb ourselves down so our gifts don't give us away. We want to be accepted by those who may be intimidated by the brightness of our gifts. In school we learn the proper way to carry ourselves. We learn to fit into the box of society that we are expected to fit into—race, gender, sexuality, culture. Even during our religious services many of us wear masks and hide our true selves in the one setting that we should be allowed to be ourselves.

I remember one of the first times I became aware of the mask of masculinity. I was walking with some heavy hymnbooks after church. I was holding the books high to the side of my chest, cradled in my arms, much like one would hold a baby. It was a perfectly stable and comfortable way to carry books, or so I thought. Then someone called me a “sissy,” and I was chided for carrying the books “like a girl.” I soon realized that in this society, men carry their books in one hand, at their side, no matter how clumsy or unstable that is. I learned also that men are supposed to be interested in having sex with as many girls as possible, to be rough and tough, to play ball and cuss. No matter how I felt about those things personally, if I was to be a proper man, then I was expected to do things a certain way. I began to construct my mask to show the world that I was 100 percent, USDA Grade A male. Even if that may not have been healthy or respectful to females I encountered, I was supposed to live into someone else’s image of manliness.

So what are you masking? Most often we mask our imperfections, our weaknesses, and our moral failures. We mask our differences to connect with certain groups, but we also mask our gifts and talents in settings where we believe it is not safe to expose them. In the first chapter I mentioned the false image of social media.

What we post online often reinforces the mask, like a filter on SnapChat. Through our posted images, we pretend to have perfect families, eat perfect food, and have perfect vacations. We wake up with the mask of flawlessness. Very rarely do we present our lives unfiltered. Even the recent flow of unfiltered celebrity photos are carefully crafted, or, in other words, masked. “Supermodel Coco Rocha took to Twitter to show fans that her ‘no-makeup’ look actually does include the use of makeup. She also insinuates that she’s not the only one to do it, saying, ‘That “no makeup, effortless” look took about 2 hours and 5 people (including a makeup artist!) to set up.’”<sup>12</sup>

So much time and energy goes into building the mask and comparing ourselves to others that we lose that sense of our true selves we enjoyed as little children. Like the Evil Queen in the story of Snow White, we no longer appreciate our own beauty; it has to exceed the beauty of some societal rival. *There is an ugliness to this, an ugliness that says our true self can only rise at the expense of another.* This attitude tells us, “There can only be one,” which is quite impossible in a world of 7 billion people.

Does this mean that your gifts are not special? No, I am just saying that there is plenty of room for us to carve out that IDEAL life. You will drive yourself crazy comparing yourself to others. We will discuss this in detail later in the book. But as a side note for those of you that are being bullied for one thing or another, remember that societal paradigms are really location specific. We live in a big country and a big world. In African countries people carry items on their heads. I have seen women and small children carrying enormous loads for great distances. Carrying stuff on your head is really quite efficient it seems. A number of the people I met in Ghana and Zimbabwe were so skilled that they could balance the load on their heads

while doing other tasks because their hands were free. I often wondered why folk in America do not carry stuff on their heads. I think I know the answer: in America people would call you a fool and uncivilized. In Ghana folks would call you, well, nothing, because it is the norm. Take all the criticisms with a grain of salt. The boots that make me look country-dumb in New York City or Chicago are perfectly chic footwear here in Texas or in Oklahoma or Kansas. As you grow and mature, you will have the opportunity to become part of communities that fit who you are.

In a blog post titled *5 Masks We Wear and Why We Should Take Them Off*, Tina Williamson eloquently writes, “Becoming authentic is a process to begin knowing ourselves. To understand our own personality traits, behaviors, values, beliefs, needs, goals and motives. It’s having the courage to acknowledge our limitations, and embrace our own vulnerability.”<sup>13</sup> We have to face the world without our masks and ponder the reflection that stares back at us.

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**Work on your limitations enough so that they don’t hinder your forward progress, but focus most of your energy on developing your strengths.**

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Somewhere deep in the annals of history someone came up with the cliché, “Work on your weaknesses.” I say that is poppycock. You definitely should *understand* your weaknesses and limitations. But *work* on your strengths and talents. Never hide the things you are great at—let them shine. I spend very little time working on my areas of limitations.

I identify what they are and I find ways to address them so they don’t get in the way of me becoming who I am called to be. This is not to say you don’t try to improve yourself, but work on the areas that make your good *great* and make your great *greater*.

Here is an example: I am not the best grammarian or proofreader in the world, so should I spend hours and hours enrolled in a class to perfect my English skills? (Some of you reading the book may say, “Yes, you should.”) I say no. I would rather write and create, and then hire someone or solicit a friend to help me proofread my work. Better yet, today the phrase that pays is, “There’s an app for that.” Yes, I need a certain level of competency, but I realize my limitations in that area. What if you simply have very little talent for music, but you are gifted in baking? Well, if you were seriously pondering which path to follow, I would advise you that your time would be better off taking culinary arts classes rather than advanced music theory.

Let’s look at this by using an example from sports. What if you are a gifted basketball player and you can only dribble with your right hand. Should you work to strengthen your left-hand dribble? Certainly you should spend time to overcome that limitation that relates directly to your strength. What if, when game time comes and you have been working on that left-hand dribble, *but* you have an unstoppable, behind-the-back, through-the-legs dribble using your right hand, wouldn’t you dribble with your right hand most of the time? Of course, that’s what I would tell you makes the most sense. If you could only go right you would be predictable

and the other team would know your one move. Work on your limitations enough so that they don't hinder your forward progress, but focus most of your energy on developing your strengths.

We must first understand ourselves in order to bring about the change to accomplish our goals. Masks obscure our vision, masks slow us down and limit our potential. We gaze in the mirror and reject our limitations and weaknesses as separate from ourselves, instead of acknowledging that they shape who we are.



## Chapter 3

### Who Am I Right Now?

*What am I, who am I, what will I be?  
Where am I going and what will I see?  
—Glen A. Larson, “Suspension”<sup>14</sup>*

This world can quickly become meaningless and empty if we don't understand where we fit in. One of my absolute favorite TV shows of all time is *Buck Rodgers in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century* with its great theme song “Suspension,” performed by Kipp Lennon. The series centers on Captain William Anthony “Buck” Rogers, an astronaut who commands a spacecraft that is launched in May 1987. Due to a life-support malfunction, Buck is accidentally frozen for 504 years before his spacecraft is discovered adrift in the year 2491. The twenty-fifth century scientists are able to revive him. He learns that civilization on Earth was rebuilt following a catastrophic nuclear war that occurred shortly after he was lost in space, and Earth is now under the protection of the Earth Defense Directorate.

The series follows him as he tries (not always successfully) to fit into twenty-fifth century's culture. You can imagine how hard it would be for someone from the 1980s to fit into the twenty-first century iPhone era; imagine how hard it would be to fit into the twenty-fifth century. But Buck is uniquely placed, due to his pilot and combat skills and personal ingenuity, to help the Earth Defense foil assorted evil plots to conquer the planet. Though he is in a different time, Captain Buck Rodgers quickly learns how to take his past skills and transfer them to the future. Sure it is fantasy, but people transfer skills every day in our world as technology changes and new skills are needed in the workforce.

The question we started with was, “Who am I?” Yes, figuring out who you really are can be a challenge. Often we let (or maybe parents and society tell us) our jobs or careers define who we are. But not all people select professions based on their passions.

My dad was somewhat of a jack-of-all-trades, a country Renaissance man. As a child, I was baffled when my father would talk about all the jobs he had held at various times in his life. He'd been a short-order cook, owned a gas station, was a mechanic and a janitor, and even a mortician for a time. He had worn so many hats in his lifetime, and I couldn't figure out why. Why didn't he pick one thing and stick to it?

When I was six years old, I was pretty sure I was going to be a dolphin trainer. If you were kid in the seventies and watched the show *Flipper*, that might have been your dream too. Ask your parents about the show or catch it on YouTube. The main kid in the show, Bud, somehow never had any adult supervision and was always swimming by himself in the ocean with Flipper, his domesticated dolphin. Yes, that was my dream, to be free like Bud chasing dolphins on my surfboard and I was determined to stick with that dream the rest of my life. Now that I am older, I get it. I finally understand my father's career choices. I too have been a number of things in my life and in some ways I am just beginning to embrace my healthy identity and passion. Like my father, I have worn a number of different hats. I am sure you have also.

Who we are in life is as complex and multifaceted as a brilliant diamond. As we think about discovering our call and developing a healthy identity, let's consider our roles. Most of us take on many roles as we encounter others. Our identity is composed of:

- Perceived roles (How we see ourselves)
- Our roles in our family
- Our roles at school and work
- Our roles in society
- How we are perceived by those around us
- Our calling

*We are fearfully and wonderfully made. —Psalm 139:14, author's adaptation*

*You can't look at your life's calling without looking at all of you.* In chapter 5 we will take a deeper look at calling. I want to stress, your calling may not necessarily mean your chosen career or what you do to pay the bills. Sometimes all the things that make up who we are line up very closely. Other times they seem very distinct from one another. We do want to make sure there is a healthy relationship between our call and the other aspects of our identity. We need to get rid of any clutter that prevents us from living out our call.

Many of us grow up thinking we are going to be presidents, princesses, nurses, and firefighters. But childhood dreams don't often line up with what we actually become, e.g. my Flipper story—although I still want to try surfing.

In life, the roles we play are sometimes chosen, sometimes thrust upon us without expectation, or sometimes forced upon us through a series of unfortunate events. Yes, sometimes we choose our roles willingly and other times we fall short of what we hope to be. Various people—our parents, bosses, loved ones, teachers, coaches, and faith leaders—place their expectations on us. Often these expectations are based on *their* dreams and desires and not *ours*. If we are tall, people suggest we play basketball or model, but we may personally desire to be artists or accountants. They suggest we become doctors and lawyers, but we want to work construction or

stay home and raise a family. We may seek to work with our hands while their hopes are pinned to our going to college. We long to change the world; others worry about how much change is in our pockets.

Even as a parent I have other parents telling me what my own children's career path should be. It really never ends. My daughter is creative and at this point in her life, she wants to move into a field that utilizes that creativity. Good for her I say. She has a plan, she has done the research and I give her advice as needed, but my friends really want her to be the stereotypical, corporate professional and focus on making money. Well, that is not where she is being called at this point in her life and that is okay. In high school she was involved in theater production. At our local church she helped organize events and helped with the technical aspects of a number of productions. Why would it surprise me now that she would be interested in radio, TV, and film?

Who are you right now? Depending on your age, you might not have had a bunch of jobs, but I am sure you have taken classes and perhaps been a part of extracurricular activities. When examining who we are, sometimes we try to look too far down the road. We want to skip steps and consider only *what we want to be* without looking at *who we are*. The future can be pretty fuzzy and it helps if we have some clarity about our present, not that our current situation should be a limiting factor. One thing to note is that as we grow and mature, our motivation changes. What is relevant today, when you are 15 or 25 years old, might not be relevant when you are 35 or 45. This does not mean that we shouldn't dream, but to successfully map out your journey—any journey—you have to know where you are starting. *Remember—your journey will evolve as time goes on.*

When I was 19 years old and at the United States Air Force Academy, I had to go through a program called SERE, (Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape). The training was to prepare us to survive if our plane ever got shot down behind enemy lines. Part of the training involved reading a map and getting from one checkpoint to the next. If we missed a checkpoint, we risked failing the program or getting lost in the woods. Neither option was acceptable, so my partners and I made certain we got to *where* we needed to be *when* we needed to be there.

In order to get from checkpoint A to checkpoint B, I had to accurately map out the best route by comparing the map details to the landscape surrounding me. I located my starting position based on an assessment of all the clues around me and with a detailed map in hand. My team of three survived the challenges, and we did so even though one of my partners caused a rotten tree to fall upon my other partner's head—twice! Thank God there was no blood, but there was a lot of cussing. I will blame that on the concussion I am sure he had.

Such is life—the unexpected happens. Yes, sometimes in life it takes a tree or two falling on your head to get you back on the right track.

Assessing who you are simply starts off by making a list. This list helps you see what is going on in your life. It is like that map they handed me in the woods during survival training.

I started my own list one day when I sat down and asked myself, "Who am I right now?" The light bulb finally clicked for me that day. To understanding my calling, I had to ask myself, "Who am I right now?" What are the things I am doing in my life that I love and what are the things that I hate?

Once I examined all my past and present roles and all the things I was involved in, I decided that I was tired of doing what everyone else expected of me. I was going to embrace all my gifts, talents, choices, and flaws to become the best me that I could become. I was going to live my IDEAL life.

What do you love? What fills up your spare time? List everything you love to do, write down your hobbies, take note of the areas in which people seek your counsel. What roles do you fill in your life? I truly believe in the saying, "You do what you are."

Make a chart based on the categories I gave you earlier:

- Your perceived roles: How do you see yourself? What roles do you place yourself in that might not fit other categories? Are you an organizer, the fun person in the group, or maybe the sensible one? What do people ask your advice about?
- Your family roles: What is your role in the family? Are you son, daughter, parent, grandchild, sibling?
- Your work/school roles: List past and present jobs and school activities.
- Your roles in society: List clubs, organizations, and faith groups you are a part of. You can even add hobbies.

My lists looked something like this:

**Perceived Roles (How I see myself)**

- Leader
- Spiritual advisor
- Organizer
- Amateur chef

**Family roles**

- Husband
- Father
- Financial provider
- Youngest son
- Brother

**Work roles (past and present)**

- Military officer
- Chief operating officer
- Pastor
- Restaurant server
- Starbucks barista
- Event planner/Project manager

**Roles in society**

- Church member
- Volunteer youth worker
- Blogger
- Runner
- Foodie

Ultimately, we are the sum of our choices, our environment, and our opportunities. We have to blend all of that together to become our IDEAL selves. We can't be anything but who we are. Greatness thrives in all of us. An important first step is understanding who you are and growing from there.

**Exercise 1: Create your "Who Am I?" lists****Reflection questions**

1. What sticks out from the lists that you created?
2. What do items you listed have in common?
3. Do your perceived roles match up with what you are actually doing?
4. How do your work or school roles match other aspects of your life?

