

DIDN'T SEE IT COMING



Overcoming the 7 Greatest Challenges
That No One Expects
and Everyone Experiences



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CAREY NIEUWHOF

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To my wife, Toni

I knew there was something amazing in you from the first time I laid eyes on you. I just had no idea it could be this deep, this rich, or this profound for this long. Not to mention this much fun. And to think we're just getting started.

And to my parents, Marten and Marja

Your constant encouragement, support, faith, and love never cease to encourage me and inspire me. You always point the way toward hope and toward Jesus.

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Introduction

SURPRISE

No one in his or her twenties sets out to end up feeling empty or cynical. At least I didn't. I don't know of any college graduates who want to become irrelevant and morally compromised before their fortieth birthday. I can't imagine men and women at any age who want their personal relationships to collapse under the weight of pride or the lack of basic emotional intelligence.

Yet each of those things happens every day to people we know. People we care about. People we love. Actually, it might be happening to you right now, though you remain completely unaware. Because that's exactly how it happens.

The implosions often come as a surprise. That's what happened to me. And I've seen the unexpected issues we deal with in this book flatten many good people.

They simply didn't see it coming.

They didn't see the edge of burnout before they hit it.

They didn't see their marriage becoming distant and desperately disconnected.

They didn't see the compromise they made at work coming until they knew they had crossed a line of no return.

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They didn't see that their once cutting-edge style and insight had become insufferably stale.

They didn't imagine the emptiness they would feel after all their dreams came true.

They just didn't see it coming. Few of us do.

The question I want to tackle in this book is, Could they have seen it coming? Can you?

SHOW ME A SIGN

Let's ask a difficult and personal set of questions: Are there signs? Do you have to be blindsided again and again? Are there clues along the way you can detect to save yourself from heartache, loss, and pain?

If you're heading into a challenging season, is there any way to know you're moving in that direction before it's too late? Are there signs you can watch for that will help you avoid the problems so many well-meaning people stumble into? Could you know if you're the top candidate for Most Cynical Person on the Planet? Are there clues that you're going to become the forty-five-year-old leader no one listens to anymore? Are there signs that you're en route to becoming incredibly successful and desperately empty at the same time?

The way most people get into these unintended places is simple: They miss the warning signs. They don't see it coming. The good news is that you *can* see it coming. This book is for people who want to see the signs that there's a major life challenge ahead before it's too late.

When I first started sharing at conferences some of the ideas that became this book, I thought I was addressing people forty and over. The first time I gave a talk on cynicism in front of a thousand leaders in Atlanta, I told the audience that anyone in their twenties and thirties would just need

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to squirrel this away for another day. Needless to say, I was shocked (and saddened) when, after my talk, a very long line of twentysomethings, many with tears in their eyes, said this was already their story. It broke my heart and made me realize that so many of the things that have now made their way into this book have become the epidemics of our age.

So I began to rethink the essence of my message. I now believe the signs we explore in this book exist for all of us, whatever stage of the journey we might be on. These warning signs, if recognized and heeded, are gifts from God to spare us from the self-inflicted sadness and heartbreak that mark too many lives these days.

Some chapters might sound like they're narrating your life. Scary as that might be, I pray they feel like hope to you. I want to be like a friend who comes into your living room and shines a light into the darkness, who points you in a direction that leads to fulfillment and meaning, who helps you anticipate storms ahead and provides strategies to weather them. Even if the crisis is not in full swing yet, the steps outlined here will save you significant heartache and trouble.

WHAT IF YOU'RE NOT THE RELIGIOUS TYPE?

It won't take you long to figure out this book was written from a Christian perspective. There's a good reason for that: I am a pastor, and more important, I try my best to live according to Jesus's teachings. Through many ups and downs in my own life, I have become convinced that he provides the fullest answer to our deepest longings and that he's the hope for this world. You might agree or disagree, but hear me out. There is more help here than you think, regardless of where you stand on matters of spirituality.

Before I became a pastor, I worked as a lawyer (more on that to come), so it's not exactly like I've lived in a religious bubble my whole life. If you

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don't consider yourself a religious person, I'm glad you're reading this. If you consider yourself *spiritual* but not specifically Christian, I'm glad you're reading this. What I saw in my brief time in law gave me a permanent affection for people who aren't that into church or Christianity, even for those who consider themselves atheists.

In fact, as a pastor I've spent more than two decades trying to build a church that people who don't go to church love to attend. I've been privileged over the years to see thousands of people who never thought they would end up in church end up in church. And to their utter surprise, many of them liked it. Many of them even discovered a relationship with Jesus.

I hope this book is an extension of that spirit. Maybe a friend gave you the book as a gift, or you heard a friend talk about it and you grabbed a copy. All I can say is welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

I believe you'll find that we all struggle with the same issues because, well, we're human. Christians can grow cynical. So can people who don't consider themselves Christians.

I've tried to strike a tone in this book that works for those who are skeptical of Christianity and for those who passionately follow Jesus. As a result, this book may end up not feeling Christian enough for those who are Christians and too Christian for those who aren't. If that's the case, I may have hit the mark.

I hope what you discover is a resource that is thoroughly biblical in its teachings without being preachy, thoroughly Christian in its framework while still being immensely practical and true to life. That's what authentic Christianity is anyway. So you'll encounter some chapters that have a bit of Bible. Others will have less. Either way, I hope what you read will help you dive into the meaning of life at its most profound level. Rather than pushing you away from a dialogue with God, I hope it moves you into one.

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SOME HOPE

However you end up navigating this book, I pray it leaves you in the place where you realize you have a God and some friends who haven't given up on you. I hope you will be assured that you have people who believe in you, even if you've given up on them. Because that's what often happens when you find yourself in the places described in this book. You stop believing. And you need to recognize that there are people who know the kind of person you really are yet still decide to stay. Yep, they know you, and they love you anyway.

If any of that happens, just know it points to a bigger reality: there is a God who believes in you and sent his Son not just to die but also to live so that you might experience real life. That's what I hope this book does: points you toward the life that escapes so many. The Scriptures narrate a way of wisdom, a path God has set for us, that I have missed as often as I have hit. But if you take good notes and pay attention, both to how God works and to how life works, you can find a better path.

Cynicism, compromise, disconnection, irrelevance, pride, burnout, emptiness—none of these need to be your final story. You can see them coming. You can identify them when they arrive. And when you name them, when you see them, they lose some of their allure as well as their power.

If you do see the seven greatest challenges coming, you may end up living the life you've always hoped to live, which is the life that eludes too many.

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PART I



CYNICISM

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FIND ME A HAPPY LAWYER

How Cynicism Snuffs Out Hope

You never thought you'd be a cynic, did you? It's not like in your sophomore year of high school beside your yearbook photo you wrote, "I hope to grow jaded and distrustful of humanity by the time I hit forty. I'm also hoping my cynicism will damage my family and make me impossible to work with. *Go Ravens!*"

Had you written that in high school, somebody would have insisted you go to counseling . . . immediately. But that wasn't your headspace. You were optimistic, even hopeful. And by the time you hit your early twenties and shed the yoke of your parents, you were downright *idealistic*. You knew how to make the world a better place, and you were intent on doing it.

That's my story too. As a young law student working in downtown Toronto, I oozed optimism about setting the world right. I wanted to practice constitutional law and argue my first case before the Supreme Court of Canada prior to my thirtieth birthday. I even discovered that someone with a positive attitude and a healthy work ethic could make a difference in a downtown firm. I was a newlywed, and halfway through

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my first year at the law firm, I became a new dad. I wanted to be successful yet *not* work the slavishly long hours young lawyers were famous for, working every night and most weekends. Some firms in the downtown core even had cots in the office and hired in-house chefs so their employees didn't have to go home or leave the office. I didn't want that to be me.

So I hustled hard. I arrived at the office at seven o'clock, worked through lunch, and by five o'clock managed to sneak out of the office when no one was looking so I could get home to my wife, Toni, and our newborn son. Throughout the day, I focused on being massively productive and getting outcomes our clients (and my bosses) would love.

Strangely enough, I managed to succeed. My idealism smashed through some barriers quickly. Not only did I avoid working the impossible hours lawyers typically put in, but I also actually earned the firm money—something students weren't expected to do. The partners even offered me a job after my year of apprenticeship was over.

But I found my idealism as a budding lawyer challenged by something I noticed all around me: I was surrounded by lawyers who weren't happy. In fact, many who hadn't even hit age forty had become downright miserable. I remember one particular Friday when a lawyer in his thirties came into the firm waving a lottery ticket. "See this ticket?" he said. "If I win this thing, you'll never see my face again."

The strange part is that he owned the firm (and made a big income every year, may I add). It's never a good sign when the owner of a thriving firm buys a lottery ticket, hoping to cash out and leave it all behind.

I used to tell my fellow law school graduates, "If you can find a happy lawyer in this city, I'll pay you a million dollars." I knew it was a safe bet since none of us could find a happy lawyer.

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A GNAWING NEGATIVITY

How do people who seemingly have everything end up jaded and disillusioned so quickly? The juxtaposition of sleek office towers, luxury cars, tailored suits, and expensive lunches coupled with chronic dissatisfaction still surprises me. But it shouldn't.

Jesus told us it was very possible, even *probable*, that we could gain the world and lose our soul.¹ I get that. But in the trenches of success, I saw more than a happiness deficit in the people around me. I saw a much deeper and more pervasive condition: cynicism. I often wondered, *How do you go from idealistic to cynical in just a few short years?*

It's a troubling question, and over the years I've asked it again and again. Chances are you've seen it happen around you too . . .

- Your friend who has had her heart broken many times now thinks no man can be trusted.
- Your optimistic college roommate who went into investment banking is convinced all his colleagues are simply in it for themselves, which is exactly why he is now too.
- Your brother-in-law cop has seen too much too many times to believe the best about anybody anymore.
- Even your teammate at work shoots down every idea you bring to the table, instantly listing the many reasons your strategy is doomed to fail.

The people around you can be depressing. But almost as disturbing as what we see *around* us is what we feel *within* us. Cynicism isn't just something other people experience; it's something you sense growing within you. While the time line may vary given your life experience, here's what many people discover: the optimism of your teens and twenties gives way to the

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realism of your thirties. By the time you hit thirty, many of your once-in-love friends have split up, many of your once-enthusiastic coworkers hate their jobs, and many once-solid friendships have dissolved.

So where does the realism of your thirties lead? That depends. Unchecked, it could lead you into the abyss that is cynicism.

SINKHOLE AHEAD

I remember the first time I saw cynicism begin to grow within me. I was in my early thirties. Paradoxically, it was in pastoral ministry and not the practice of law that I felt cynicism begin to take root in my heart. Halfway through law school, I sensed God calling me into full-time ministry of some kind. I had grown up in a Christian home, and after drifting in my late teen years, I recommitted my life to Christ in my early twenties. Despite my renewed Christianity, though, law was my main focus. I never imagined leaving law to pursue preaching or congregational ministry. But that's the amazing thing about feeling called to something: we're taken in a new direction on an unexpected adventure.

After sensing God calling me into ministry, I took a few years to figure out exactly what that meant. In the meantime, I finished law school and completed the grueling bar admissions course. After passing the bar exam and earning my license to practice law, I shocked everyone (including myself) by heading off to seminary, purely out of obedience.

Confused about what to do next, I decided to dip my toe into congregational ministry for the first time when I was halfway through seminary. I moved with my wife and young son an hour north of Toronto to a rural community, Oro-Medonte, to begin ministry in the community in which I still live today. My assignment was to serve three small churches that hadn't hired a full-time pastor or grown at all in more than forty years. They

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called me their “student pastor.” That didn’t mean I served students; it meant I served the churches as the senior pastor while still a student. It also meant the pay was half what they would pay a “real” minister. But it sounded like a call to me.

The churches were tiny. One had an average attendance of six on Sunday mornings. That included slow-moving vehicles and low-flying aircraft. When my wife, son, and I arrived, we grew the church by 50 percent overnight. It was sensational. The second of the three churches had fourteen people in church most Sundays. And the “megachurch” among the three congregations had an average attendance of twenty-three.

Naturally, when you’re in congregations that small, ministry is inherently relational. You visit people and invest in them, all the while trying to unite them around a bigger vision and better strategy that will move the mission forward. Even as our churches grew into the hundreds, I did my best to stay relationally connected. In the first decade of ministry, I was in people’s homes almost every day. It was tremendously exciting as more and more new people began to show up.

I still remember the first time a couple I’ll call Roger and Mary walked in the door one Sunday morning. It didn’t take long to figure out that Roger and Mary had very real needs. They didn’t have much money. Their subcompact car constantly broke down. They seemed to go from crisis to crisis in every area of their lives: financial, relational, emotional, and spiritual.

Despite being busy now leading hundreds of people, I decided I would help in every way I could. Even though our church had a small budget, we managed to buy Roger and Mary groceries and gift cards. We gave them gas money and made sure their car stayed on the road. I went to their apartment in the south end of town (a twenty-minute drive each way) to regularly pray with them, encourage them, and help them as much as I could.

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Roger and Mary kept asking for more assistance. Their phone calls became more frequent, and I often headed over in the evenings to help them navigate whatever crisis they were facing. I poured my heart and soul into praying for their family and trying to assist them in any way possible. It's not an exaggeration to say I spent more time with their family than I spent with any other family in my first ten years of leadership.

Meanwhile, the little churches grew quickly. More and more people began showing up, and that meant it was difficult to visit people as often as I had previously. There were just too many people. Even as the churches grew, Roger and Mary demanded my personal attention. They were poor, and I knew of God's particular emphasis on caring for the poor. In the midst of it all, I noticed a growing ingratitude and increasing neediness from this couple. At times, helping them felt like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon, but I was determined to serve and demonstrate God's grace.

Before long, Roger and Mary started to bring their two-year-old niece to church with them. She was a great kid, but discipline wasn't a strong skill in the family. Their niece spent time one Sunday running up and down the aisles during church, angering some older members.

The issue came up at one of our elder board meetings. Some members insisted we had to do something about this child who was disrupting the service. I stood up for Roger and Mary's family, telling the board I'd rather have a church full of unruly kids than a church full of well-behaved senior citizens. Fortunately for everyone, that settled the matter. And I told Roger and Mary that it wouldn't be a problem anymore.

Even with that controversy put to rest, this couple seemed to become less and less comfortable as the church continued to grow. Finally one Sunday morning, Roger grabbed his niece and ran out of the church, announcing, "This place isn't for us anymore. You don't care about us! We're leaving!"

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I was stunned. Naturally, I followed up with him and asked what on earth had happened.

“You haven’t done enough for us,” he said.

I had no idea what to say. *Seriously? We haven’t done enough? Are you kidding me?*

His comments cut directly and deeply into my small but growing pastoral heart.

“Roger,” I mustered, “that breaks my heart. It’s not an exaggeration to say that in my time in leadership, I have never spent more one-on-one time with anyone than you and your family. And it’s not just me. This community has sacrificed to be here for you again and again.”

My words made zero difference. He kept insisting our efforts weren’t enough and that we didn’t—that *I* didn’t—really care about them. He said our church had let him down, that we’d abandoned his family at their lowest point.

I didn’t know how to make the situation better. They didn’t want to make it better. Then they left the church for good.

THE SLIDE INTO CYNICISM BEGINS

I was shocked. And angry. And heartbroken. I honestly didn’t have a category for what happened.

It was in that moment that I felt cynicism welling up inside me. It’s like a voice inside me was saying, *Useless. Everything you invested was a total waste of time and energy. And you know what? If he did that to you, others will too. So don’t care like you used to. Don’t invest in people like you used to. Don’t give of yourself like you used to. People will just use you and reject you in the end anyway. There’s no point.*

At the time, I hadn’t even heard of writers like John Townsend or Henry

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Cloud, who have helped scores of people understand what boundaries are. Nor was I good at spotting potential mental health issues. I genuinely tried to help, and in the end I got genuinely burned.

That's how cynicism starts.

Cynicism begins not because you *don't* care but because you *do* care.

It starts because you poured your heart into something and got little in return. Or maybe you got something in return, but it was the opposite of what you desired. You fell in love, only to have that relationship dissolve. You threw your heart into your job, only to be told you were being let go. You were completely there for your mom, only to have her tell you you're such a disappointment.

And you can't help but think to yourself, *What gives?*

Most cynics are former optimists. You'd never know it now, but there was a time when they were hopeful, enthusiastic, and even cheerful. There's something inside the human spirit that wants to hope, wants to think things will get better. Nearly everyone starts life with a positive outlook.

So what happens? How do you go from being so positive to so negative? At least three things happen to the human heart as it grows cynical.

1. You Know Too Much

You would think knowledge is always a good thing. But strangely, knowledge will often sadden you. Solomon, whom we'll meet again later, was world renowned for his wisdom. He put it this way: "The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow."² Not exactly the most inspirational thing you've ever read. It's like Eeyore wrote that part of the Bible. While that verse may make for a terrible social media post, the insight itself is quite helpful.

In some ways, ignorance is bliss. Had I never known that some people,

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like Roger and Mary, would end up being disappointed even after a massive investment by a community of people, it would have been easy—even automatic—to keep investing in people. But having been burned, I found that over the months and years that followed, I began to view needy people more suspiciously. Would they treat me the same way? Would they simply walk away too?

Chances are you've had a Roger and Mary in your life. Or four. Or six. So trust becomes harder because you know too much. If your heart hadn't been broken a dozen times by different people, you would have found it easy to keep dating. If your business partner hadn't sold you out and gutted the company, you might still be an entrepreneur. If your neighbors hadn't been so difficult, you might never have wanted to build a fence.

But now you know too much. You've experienced the heartbreak, betrayals, and backstabbing. You understand that people let you down. You've seen that some people can't be trusted. You know love hurts. You realize that people are fickle and selfish. You recognize that not everyone succeeds, despite good intentions and best efforts. The longer you live, the more you know. Which is why cynicism and age are frequent companions.

Why would Solomon link more knowledge with more grief? Because that's the way life works. Knowledge often brings sorrow because the more you know, the more you see life for what it *really* is.

I don't intend to depress you, but let's be honest: life isn't easy; it's a struggle, filled with disappointments and setbacks. Look around long enough and you'll see heartbreak everywhere. You'll see fallibility and frailty. You'll see scheming and manipulation. You'll recognize the power plays and the selfish pursuits that make up so much of human existence.

In fact, the more successful you become, the more pain you're likely to experience. Just ask the lawyers in Toronto or most people who are

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successful. Just ask Solomon. Ecclesiastes is a cynic's guide to the universe. There's a gnawing hollowness that comes with success. And there's a desperate brokenness that comes from doing life with flawed people.

Don't worry. Hope is coming. But just linger here a little longer to understand why so many cynics struggle with life. Knowledge does bring sorrow. You see life for what it truly is, and it's . . . lacking.

2. You Project the Past onto the Future

Cynicism grows beyond its infancy when you start to protect yourself from future hurt. Having been burned once or twice, you tell yourself only fools get burned three times. So you start to guard your heart. You shelter your soul.

But what starts as self-preservation soon morphs into something more insidious. You become a bit jaded. You're a little wiser, you tell yourself, but look closer and you'll see a different reality. What you have is not wisdom as much as hurt and fear forming calluses around your heart.

In fact, sharp as you are, you begin to look for patterns. And to your surprise, you spot them. Many people are untrustworthy. Maybe the answer isn't joining another company, because no one seems happy at that place either. And you realize the pain of disappointment runs through many of your friends' marriages as deeply as it runs through yours.

With age and experience, you become skilled at seeing patterns. You start to do what cynics do by instinct: you project past failures onto new situations. You meet a new couple and suspect they'll take advantage of you like Roger and Mary did. Better not get too close. You get a new boss and assume she's probably as unfair and arrogant as your old boss. A guy transfers to your team at work, and you're sure it's just a matter of time until he screws up. Your cousin gets married, and you wonder how long it will be before the newlyweds run into serious problems.

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You no longer see people for who they are. You no longer see situations for what they could be. You just see potential hurt. Past pain will become future hurt if you let it. So you don't let it.

That became my reality. Because it wasn't just Roger and Mary who caused me pain. There were others, including friends. In fact, what gave birth to my most cynical phase of life (in my thirties) was a series of events that came within a few years of one another.

Roger and Mary weren't the only ones who left. As we implemented a radical set of changes at the churches, more people walked away. Men and women I thought were on board with us for life, in fact, weren't. Even though our churches were adding people faster than we were losing them, it didn't make up for the disappointment I felt.

Within the first few years of our ministry, a set of close friendships also imploded on us. These were the kind of friends you do life with: concerts, dinners, holidays. I was their pastor and they attended our church, but we were still incredible friends. But for some strange reason, within the span of a year, these friends stopped going to our church, and before long, they weren't our friends anymore.

It hurt. Deeply. And I'm still a little confused as to how it all went down. Attempts to make things right didn't work. I know I had a role in the painful situation, but it's all a bit mysterious and murky. And it led me to decide (for a season) to go down the road every cynic travels.

I'm pretty sure you can relate because something similar has happened to you. Eventually, the wariness makes you weary. Your guardedness and suspicion evolve into anger and bitterness.

3. You Decide to Stop Trusting, Hoping, and Believing

After those friendships dissolved, I told Toni, "I don't need friends. Really. Friends were a bad idea. I'm fine on my own." Dumb, I know. But that was

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my pain speaking. And at the time, it made perfect sense. In fact, it was far safer than the risks new friendships would involve. It's rarely the first round of anguish that breaks your heart permanently. For me, a few previous friendships had also faded over the years, and eventually I questioned whether people were worth the bother. At times I even wondered if I had some fatal flaw embedded in my personality that doomed friendship.

The problem with generalizing—applying one particular situation to *all* situations—is that the death of trust, hope, and belief is like a virus, infecting everything. You think you're protecting yourself from the future when, in reality, your new stance infects your present. The people you care about most in the here and now suffer. That's because as a cynic, you project your newfound suspicion on everyone and everything. Your current relationships stall out or dial back a few notches. The withdrawal isn't just from the future; you retreat from the present as well.

So you become numb to the people you claim to love most, even your spouse and kids. You find yourself predicting cynical endings to moments that used to fill you with joy. You might also find yourself becoming jaded at work. You don't really want to get to know the new guy because, well, you already know what he's like. And the projects and goals that used to motivate and excite you? They just don't anymore.

Perhaps most disturbingly, cynicism begins to infect your relationship with God. When you close your heart to people, you close your heart to God. That shouldn't surprise us, but it does. It only makes sense that the very act of hardening your heart to people simply hardens your heart. And that's the danger—when you close yourself off to people, you close yourself off to God. You find yourself trusting less and doubting more. When you read through Scripture, you want to put an asterisk beside all the promises you read, convincing yourself they don't apply to you. Even your prayer life

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becomes stunted. What's the point of it anyway? You feel like you're praying for things that won't happen, so why bother?

It's a stifling progression: from knowing too much, to projecting the past onto the future, to snuffing out trust, hope, and belief. But when this process occurs, you have the unmistakable ingredients for cynicism. And whether you're twenty-three or sixty-three, it's a sad—and unnecessary—way to live.

WHY DOES ANY OF THIS MATTER?

Have you ever noticed there are very few “balanced” elderly people? You know how when you're in your twenties or thirties, you still have good days and bad days? You have your ups and downs, but things tend to even out over the long haul. Well, I've noticed that this pattern seems to go away when people reach a certain age.

Most of the older people I know have landed on one side or the other of the balance line. They have grown to be either happy and grateful or bitter and crotchety. It's like you reach an age when a magnet pulls you off the centerline and lands you on the happiness side or the misery side of life. The “I'm having a bad day” feeling we sometimes experience early in life morphs into an “I'm having a bad life” feeling by age seventy. Why is that?

My theory goes like this: As you grow older, you become more of who you already are. Just like your body stiffens a bit, your personality becomes less flexible. It's like there's this war inside you that's battling for hope—and cynicism will win, or it will lose. But you won't just be a little cynical or a little hopeful. The die is cast, and the concrete hardens.

I felt this dynamic intensely throughout my forties. It was like a battle for my soul was going on. I finally began to understand how people grow

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cynical, jaded, and coldhearted. I had all of that lodged within me. Hope hadn't died, but cynicism was threatening to snuff it out. I realized it would be easy to let despair win. Actually, I realized that left unchecked, cynicism *would* win.

What I needed to understand is what you need to understand: cynicism is actually a choice. Cynics aren't born; they're made. Life doesn't make you a cynic; *you* make you a cynic.

Cynicism is not always a *conscious* decision, but it's a decision nonetheless. It's the decision you make to stop hoping, trusting, and believing. But think about what's at stake. Cynics never change the world. They just tell you why the world can't change. Ask them; they know all about it. And that's where I knew I would end up unless I changed course.

If you've grown cynical, please understand that cynicism happens not because your heart is closed but because it was once open. It happens because the idealist in you was idealistic. And then life happened. All the hurt happened. Now you're left with a choice. So what do you do?

Of course, the cynic might say there's nothing to be done. This is just a natural state of affairs after having been burned in life. It's not difficult to agree with the philosophers who conclude that life is nasty, brutish, and short³ and with others who insist that hell is other people.⁴

Sadly, that's where too many people leave the conversation. Cynicism is not inevitable. And even once you become a cynic, you don't have to stay a cynic. There is a path back. It's a path for those who are brave and those who long to hope again. Cynicism has an antidote. The question is, are you willing to embrace it?

KICKING CYNICISM IN THE TEETH

Practical Ways to Defeat Your Inner Cynic

One afternoon a few years ago, I was surfing through TV channels when I saw a professor being interviewed on PBS. To me, it was an amazing interview. This man was a legit prof: tweed jacket, bow tie, and spectacles (spectacles, not glasses, because he was that kind of professor). He sat up straight in his chair, his eyes sparkling. There was even a lilt in his voice. He said things like “What we’re discovering is . . .” and “Current theories suggest. . .” The part that struck me most was his age; he was about eighty years old. *Eighty*. I remember thinking, *Whatever it takes to be that fresh and alive at eighty, I’ll do it*. I could feel the battle with cynicism waging inside me, and it was clear that cynicism hadn’t won in the life of that elderly professor. However that happened, I wanted it.

Cynicism is so cruel. When I was at my most cynical, the thing that died within me was hope—hope that the future would be better than the past, hope that the next time could be different, hope that my heart would feel again. And that leads us to the ultimate antidote for cynicism, which happens to be the foundation for the Christian faith: hope. Cynics find

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hope hard because hope is one of cynicism's first casualties. The concept of hope is a thread that runs through the scriptural narrative and is at the epicenter of what people call the gospel (literally, “good news”).

Sometimes people struggle with the Bible and Christianity because it's so *real*. How can Christianity be founded on hope when so much of the story is violent, oppressive, and bleak? I mean, have you ever read the Bible? It contains plenty of tragedy, trauma, and treachery. You might think that flipping through biblical stories would make you *more* cynical, not less cynical.

When one of my boys was little, his favorite Bible story featured Samson and Delilah. I started to get nervous when he asked me to read it night after night. After all, the story has almost no redeeming qualities. God gives a man a gift of strength, and the man falls madly in love, stupidly squanders his gift, and gives the secret away . . . lying through his teeth all the while. Then he goes out with a bang, killing thousands of people and himself in one spectacular feat of brute strength as he demolishes a temple. And nobody lived happily ever after. Amen.

For years, it bothered me that Scripture has so many violent accounts. In some instances, it still bothers me. But it also made me realize something far more profound than I would normally see through my sanitized, twenty-first-century, middle-class, Western mind-set: God understands our world. He understands how brutal we often are and how awful human nature can be. God sees how violent we can be toward one another and toward ourselves. He sees our cruelty. Without God's intervention in the narrative of the human story, life would be nasty, brutish, and short.

Instead of letting our inhumanity be the final word, God entered the mess in human form through Jesus and conquered hate with love. We threw the worst of humanity directly at Jesus: hatred, abuse, ridicule, rejection,

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and death. And God turned it into life. And not just life for himself but also life for *us*, for humanity, for the very people who killed his Son.

The cynics thought they were winning on the last Thursday of Jesus's life. They were certain they had the final word on Friday. They were in control. Despair had won. Even the disciples thought so. They went home, back to fishing. But nobody saw Sunday coming. Nobody saw hope rising. No one saw love breaking out from the ashes of hate. Nobody saw Jesus coming back.

The remarkable part of Christianity is not that we have a Savior who came to deliver us but that we have a Savior who sees us for who we really are and loves us anyway. Jesus stared hate in the face and met it with love. He confronted despair and made it abundantly clear it wouldn't win.

The thrust of the gospel is that Jesus sees *your* hate and meets it with love. He sees *your* despair and counters it with hope. He sees *your* doubt and lobs belief back at you again and again. Cynicism melts under the relentless hope of the gospel.

Your past isn't your future. Not if you get Jesus involved.

Bitterness can't linger under the relentless assault of love.

Hope cannot die if an empty tomb empowers it.

Of all people on earth, Christians should be the least cynical. After all, the gospel gives us the greatest reasons to hope. We don't just cling to an intellectual claim or proposition. Our hope isn't based on an emotion or a feeling. It lives in a person who beat death itself and who loves us deeply enough to literally go through hell to rescue us. So what were you discouraged about again?

Because hope is anchored in resurrection, it is resilient. It can withstand a thousand Rogers and Marys. It can outlast a dozen or a hundred frustrating jobs. It can outmaneuver ten thousand broken hearts. If you

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want to kick cynicism in the teeth, trust again. Hope again. Believe again. That's the hope found in Jesus Christ. And that, in the end, is what defeats cynicism.

AND NOW A LITTLE TRICK

As true as the hope of Christ is, remembering it can be difficult in the grind of everyday life. At least it can be for me when my eyes start to roll and my heart starts to harden . . . again. And if the answer to the rise of cynicism is the gospel, isn't that kind of like saying Jesus is the answer to every question? Hey, ultimately, I think Jesus is the answer, but still, sometimes it's good to get more granular. So *how* is Jesus the answer? *How* do you battle cynicism on the days when discouragement and despair are once again knocking at your door? That brings me to the little hack I've picked up to help me in the times I struggle to battle my creeping cynicism. An incredibly effective antidote to cynicism is *curiosity*. Yes, simple curiosity.

One thing I've noticed again and again is this reality: curious people are never cynical, and cynical people are never curious. That's what amazed me about the professor on PBS that afternoon. He may have been eighty, but he was *curious*. He was still exploring, still thinking, still open, still wondering. He was still fully alive.

Think for a minute about the wonderfully curious people you know: a friend, a former teacher, a neighbor, or an uncle. You'll quickly realize that the curious are always interested, always hopeful, and always open to new possibilities. Some grandparents are infinitely interested in their children and grandchildren, asking questions, discovering new things together, embracing the changing possibilities of a new world. Some have more joy for

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tomorrow than they did decades earlier and become cheerleaders for hope in their communities, families, and congregations.

HOW TO CULTIVATE CURIOSITY

If curiosity is the discipline that kills cynicism and keeps hope alive, how do you become more curious? Like most things, curiosity is a habit that can be nurtured and developed. Feed your curiosity, and it grows. Starve it, and it withers.

Here are five keys I've discovered to help anyone become more curious and stay curious throughout life.

1. Schedule Thinking Time

Busyness is the enemy of wonder, and many people feel frantically busy these days. Think about it: When was the last time you felt curious while you were in a hurry? Curiosity needs time to breathe and explore. Hurry, in contrast, looks for shortcuts. Worse, it cuts people off. It asks for a summary or synopsis, not a fully developed story or explanation.

So schedule time to ponder and process. Write it in your calendar. Then pick up a book on a subject you know nothing about and start reading. Or go for coffee with a friend and ask a dozen really good questions. Or Google something until your brain fires up a whole new sequence of neurons.

Take it even further. Go for a hike, a long walk, a run, or a bike ride. So many people discover their best thinking time happens when they're doing something physical, whether that's a five-mile run or something as simple as raking leaves. Schedule some wide-open space in your calendar and let your mind take you to new places. You can't wonder and discover when you're in a hurry.

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2. Ask Open-Ended Questions

Later on, we'll talk about the death of conversation in our culture and how it's making us more disconnected than ever. At the heart of conversation's demise is a lack of question asking.

The discipline of asking questions is healthy and helpful for many reasons, one being that questions spark curiosity. The curious go into the deep end of question asking by asking a particular kind: they ask *open-ended* questions.

Too often in our culture, questions serve as a way of getting to a predetermined point. As a lawyer, I was trained in question asking and cross-examination. Too much conversation these days is designed to extract information and move on, just like a lawyer would. Narrow question asking is a sign you're not genuinely interested in the answer or the person.

If I'm not careful, I formulate my next question or comment as the other person is speaking. As soon as it seems as if the response is wrapping up, I feel like I need to jump in. Ever done that? Yeah, that's a bad move.

The curious ask broad, probing questions—and then sit back and listen. Next time, when it sounds like the other person is finishing an answer, just wait. You'll be surprised at where that leads. Many people will offer more. I can't tell you how often that's led to pure-gold insight and conversation. If you listen longer than most people listen, you'll hear things most people never hear.

3. Give Fewer Answers

In addition to being skilled at asking broad questions, the curious also try to refrain from always giving an answer. If you need to be the authority on everything, you'll kill conversation. Even when curious people have an answer or a response to a question, they'll often volley back with a question

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that goes something like “Those are my thoughts, but what do *you* think?” And like a good game of tennis, the rally continues.

Giving fewer answers not only affects the person you’re talking to, but it also has an impact on you. Do it long enough, and you’ll find that the restraint makes you challenge your own thinking, causes you to ask yourself more questions, and encourages you to dig deeper.

If you’re worried that people won’t find you as convincing as you used to be, relax. Most people will find you *more* persuasive and compelling. Openness attracts people and draws them in. Increasingly in our culture, certainty is off-putting.

4. *Dream More*

Remember when you used to dream? What happened to that? Most adults want more control over their lives. Control is about certainty; it’s about the known. When your life becomes focused on what you know and what you can control, dreams die.

You start to settle for the probable, not the possible. Curious people dream. They wonder. They imagine. If you spend more time dreaming, you’ll find your cynicism fades.

5. *Ask Two Pivotal Questions*

Finally, the curious come back to two questions again and again: “Why?” and “Why not?”

“Why?” is at the heart of curiosity. Asking “Why?” consistently is the reason you were so annoying to your mother when you were six, incessantly repeating the question until you were shushed into silence. You were trying to figure out the world and carried so few assumptions into it. What a magical time.

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Maybe it's time to resurrect "Why?" Why is the sky blue? Why does gravity make people stick to the planet? Why do birds fly? Why is your best friend feeling discouraged? Why do politicians behave the way they do? Why do people feel the emotions they do?

To foster curiosity, also ask, "Why not?" Why not do it differently? Why not say yes? Why not try it? Why not try a new way? Widen your universe when other people seem to be narrowing theirs.

The curious ask, "Why?" And they ask, "Why not?" Try it.

CYNICISM DOESN'T STAND A CHANCE

That list is hardly exhaustive. You can expand it, but you see its potential, don't you?

Curiosity is a discipline, and it's a viewpoint. If you can adopt a curious outlook day after day, you will discover that cynicism never gets a toehold. Remember, the cynics are never curious, and the curious are never cynical.

You will also discover that the full power of the gospel gets a firm foothold in the lives of the curious. You won't automatically discount the promises of Scripture. You'll lose the asterisk that says none of this applies to you. You'll pray and actually begin to believe there's a God in heaven who hears you. You'll realize that tomorrow can be different from today, and you'll affirm the promise that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.

Imagine yourself at eighty. What's happened to you in the decades between today and then? Has your heart grown? Has it hardened? Is your mind flourishing, or have you shut it down? Are you alive and filled with wonder? Or did your passion die decades ago? That's what's at stake.

So hope again. Believe again. Trust again. And be curious. Cultivate curiosity long enough, and hope will flourish. And when hope flourishes, cynicism doesn't stand a chance.

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PART II



COMPROMISE

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SUCCESSFUL (ON THE OUTSIDE)

Why Character Determines Your True Capacity

I can't say I experience supernatural occurrences very often. I can count on two hands the number of times I'm *pretty sure* I heard from God directly. I don't need my toes for that equation yet, even though I'm a pastor. For the most part, I sense that I hear from God when I read the Bible and get specific advice from godly people.

A handful of times, however, I've felt like God directly intervened in my life. I realize some people don't believe God ever speaks to us. I respect that. I know other people view divine intervention as a sign of spiritual maturity ("Wow, you heard from *God*? You must be *so up there* spiritually."). Personally, I think hearing directly from God can be a sign of spiritual *immaturity* more than maturity, meaning God had to intervene in my life supernaturally because I was too dumb or insensitive to get the message any other way.

Regardless of what you believe about supernatural events, it's about the only way I know how to explain what happened to me in my first summer as a law intern. I had one of those surreal moments the summer after my first year of law school. I was working at my first job in a law firm in my

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hometown. I had known the senior partner since I was a kid. I wanted to work at his firm because I knew he shared the same faith I did, and I wanted to make sure I could practice law in an ethical setting. Ethics were important both to me and to him.

As far as I was concerned, the firm was passing the test. By the time August rolled around, I had been there three months, and they had already indicated they would invite me back to practice there when I graduated. Things were going great.

But one afternoon in late summer, I had an experience the likes of which I'd never had before. It changed my life. I was in the office of one of the partners, standing behind his desk, working on a file. He was gone for the day and had given me permission to use his office, which beat the space I usually occupied. As I was looking up from the desk to think through my strategy on a particular case, I had a vision. I call it a vision because I don't know how else to describe it. I was wide awake, but I saw a clear picture of myself twenty years in the future. In that vision, I was forty-four years old and enjoyed a thriving law practice. I was extremely successful . . . but also morally bankrupt. My marriage and family had fallen apart. My values were compromised. And I wasn't anything like the person I thought I was going to be, despite my outward success.

I knew in an instant that the vision meant I wasn't going to practice law. I don't know why I knew that, but sometimes you're just certain about things. And in that moment, I felt certain.

The vision was disarming to say the least, and other than sensing that law was not for me, it left me more confused than anything. After all, I had wanted to be a lawyer since I was eight years old, and by every indication, I was good at it. Now my whole life plan had been blown to bits in an instant.

I left the partner's office and headed down the hallway to the boardroom to put some books away. The boardroom had a big bay window, which I stared out, wondering what all of this might mean. I started praying about it because I wanted to find and follow God's plan for my life. I then felt a prompting that told me to look down the street.

ARE YOU KIDDING ME?

As I looked down First Street, I saw the church I grew up in, but the only part of the building I could see from the law office was the window of the pastor's office. The next thing I heard inside my spirit was *You should be in there*.

That was the beginning of two things. It was the first time I ever sensed a call to ministry. To say it left me stunned would be an understatement. I had *never* entertained the thought of ministry before. There were a thousand reasons it made no sense. I don't have the gift set pastors typically have, plus I had always felt sorry for pastors (couldn't they get a real job somewhere?). But what I experienced that day was unmistakable in my mind.

Things became even clearer when I picked up my soon-to-be fiancée after work. With my head still spinning as I drove her to my parents' house for dinner, Toni asked, "Have you ever thought about going into ministry?" We had never once talked about that before. My response: "You'll never guess what happened to me at the office today." That started a conversation that changed our lives forever.

That's probably enough meaning to pull from one experience. But there was more. Much more. The second thing that vision did was alert me to a tension almost every person feels at some point: the potential disconnect between who you are and who you know you should be. That pull has been constant in my life, even in ministry. You would think that being in

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ministry would inoculate me from moral compromise. It doesn't. All of us can cheat our values anywhere.

I now believe that vision was as much about life as it was about law, giving me a deep glimpse into the battle over character that every one of us fights. Far too many of us end up compromised: who we are no longer lines up with who we had hoped to be. And it happens so subtly that most of the time we don't even know it's going on.

THE SUBTLE ART OF SELLING YOUR SOUL

Most of us know people who have sold out, who've given in to the dark forces of greed, self-absorption, blind ambition, moral trade-offs, or ruthlessness. In the process, they threw integrity out the window. And even if you don't personally know someone who's done this, a quick scan of the headlines on any given day will usually yield an athlete, a politician, or a business leader who has.

So how does a person get there? How does one end up like my vision of myself at forty-four, successful on the outside but corroded on the inside? Even if your family hasn't forsaken you and it hasn't cost you your job, you may sometimes look in the mirror with the sinking feeling that you didn't do what you should have done and you're not who you thought you'd be.

There was that time when you weren't 100 percent honest with a client, or maybe many clients. You could have kept the promise, but you didn't. You haven't told your wife about your porn problem, but you tell yourself it's no big deal when you know deep down it's ruining your intimacy with her. You know you should be more present for your kids, but you hide behind your laptop because you just can't handle the chaos of bedtime and don't want yet another fight with your wife. Work is just easier. At least people respect you there.

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You flirted with someone when your husband wasn't looking—not a lot, but just enough to get a glance back that told you he found you attractive and desirable. And it made you feel better than it should have. You used to look down on women who took a third glass of wine, but now the pressure you feel juggling all the demands on you makes three drinks seem like no big deal. And sure, you talk about your friend behind her back in a way you never would to her face, but doesn't everyone?

The subtle compromises we make day after day—the half truths, the rationalizations, the excuses—create a gap between who we are and who we want to be. You're not a terrible person, but you're certainly not at your best either. And if you got dead honest with yourself, you'd say that although you haven't sold your soul to the devil, you've rented it.

A thousand little compromises have left you . . . compromised.

COMPETENCY ISN'T EVERYTHING IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE

As a young leader, I was convinced that competency was the key to success in life. My formula went like this: Competency determines capacity. The more competent you are, the greater your potential. The greater your potential, the greater your capacity. As a driven kind of person, I was motivated by that. Keep learning, hone your craft, sharpen your mind, find a great mentor, and spend hundreds—maybe thousands—of hours developing yourself, and you will realize your potential. The only real limit to your capacity is your competency.

So I read books. I got my education. I went to conferences. I networked. I enlisted mentors and hired coaches. I just wanted to be the best. I took a deep dive into the assumption that competency was the key to advancement. Be the smartest person in the room, sharpen your skill set, and all will be well.

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But a few years into my adult life, I began to notice highly competent people who became disqualified from leadership. These were smart, skilled people with great educations, incredible minds, and finely tuned skill sets who were at the top of their fields. One after another, they resigned or were forced out.

These people usually left their esteemed positions because of an addiction, an affair, abuse, embezzlement, greed, internal fighting, ego, or sometimes just being a jerk. Athletes, politicians, business leaders, actors, industry moguls, and pastors alike fall to issues like these month after month, year after year, decade after decade. And those are only the ones we hear about. Start looking for the stories that never make the news, and the onslaught seems endless.

Seeing all this around me, I began to rethink my theory. What if competency doesn't determine capacity? If it's true that your capacity functions as your ability to contribute to life—to make a difference—then clearly, competency is not the lid, as demonstrated in case after case, story after story. Highly competent people get taken out day after day. And even if they don't get taken out, their potential is still capped.

So if competency doesn't determine capacity, what does?

Character does. All the competency in the world can't compensate for a lack of character. Ultimately, your character is your lid. Even in a workplace that wouldn't espouse any religious affiliation at all, character is the great leveler. You may be smart, but if people don't like you, they won't want to work with you. You may be the best software developer in your field, but if you lie, people won't trust you. You may be able to bring reams of cash into the company, but if you mistreat the people who work with you, they'll leave or they'll make sure you do.

Lack of character kills careers, shatters families, ruins friendships, and destroys influence. And even if you never get fired or divorced over the

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compromises you make, your lack of character will limit the intimacy, joy, and depth you experience with God and with people.

Like it or not, *character*, not competency, determines capacity.

SO CHARACTER IS EVERYTHING . . . REALLY?

Character determines so much more than you think. Ultimately, it not only dictates your capacity in work and in life but also becomes your legacy. Your competency leaves the first impression, but your character leaves the lasting one. The crowd is intrigued by your competency, but your family and close friends are influenced by your character.

Still not convinced? Years ago, Stephen Covey encouraged all of us to think about our funerals.¹ I'd like to encourage you to do the same thing. Think about who will attend your funeral; at the very center of the gathering will be your spouse, your kids, your remaining siblings and other family members, and a few close friends.

As a pastor, I've done my share of funerals over the years. In over two decades of helping families after a death, I've never seen a son pull out his dad's résumé at the funeral. I've never heard the kids discuss a parent's net worth while they stood around the casket or urn. I promise you, nobody close to you will be reciting the stats from your final quarter at your celebration of life.

When I meet with families after a death, the legacy of the person who died becomes apparent within minutes. Sadly, it's not always great. I've seen some very hurt spouses and kids try to find nice things to say but come up with only a few awkward phrases that mask years of pain. I've also seen hearts that over time have grown dull and even indifferent to the deceased. Sure, nobody's *glad* she's dead, but they're not necessarily sad either.

It may be sobering to know that this actually happens, but it does. Any

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eulogy you hear is a “best of” litany or a “highlight reel” from the life story, but sometimes the speech is short for a reason. When you’re no longer breathing, the legacy you’ll leave will center on your character. People will remember if you loved well, if you forgave easily, if you cared enough to be there for them. They’ll remember if you served or preferred to be served. They’ll know whether you thought life revolved around you or whether you really tried to honor God and others. They’ll remember whether you were generous or miserly, arrogant or humble, compassionate or indifferent. They’ll remember your temper or whether you learned the rhythms of grace.

To be honest, I’m a little nervous about what people would say if I died right now. I think I’m more of a mixed bag than I am anything else. Thankfully, this is not yet the end of my story or your story. If you think it’s too late, it’s not. The final chapter in your life isn’t written. Before you grow too despondent over your past, remember that your family will also remember your *progress*. Which means you should never give up.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard adult children say things like “When I was younger, Dad had a terrible temper. But he changed a lot. He’s been so much kinder over the last few years.” Or “Mom and Dad used to fight every day. But it’s so great to see how they’ve learned to honor and respect each other over the last few decades.” I’ve also heard variations on “Dad used to work all the time [or drink all the time or ignore us all the time], but as we’ve gotten older, he’s changed. And you should have seen him with the grandkids. They adored him.”

Perhaps the hardest part is that eventually your life and mine will get reduced to a single sentence. Not in the first weeks or months after our passing. But give it a year or so, and all of us will be described by a single sentence: “My mom? She was such a kind person. We miss her. Hey, what’s for dinner?” Or “My dad worked a lot, and he sure loved his Corvette. What time’s the game on?”

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Sobering, isn't it?

This book alone is over fifty thousand words long, and it's not my only book. I will have lived at least five decades by the time I die (hopefully many more), had thousands of conversations, met thousands of people, and spoken to thousands of leaders. But in the end, everyone who knew me well, including my family, will condense my contributions to something like "Oh, Carey, he was _____. Can you pass the salsa?"

It's what might fill in the blank that gets me. Not because I care what my reputation will be but because I care about the impact I will have had on the people closest to me. As some leaders have said, "I want the people who know me the best to love me the most." Sadly, often the opposite is true. If you don't nurture your character daily, you can be most admired by the people who know you least, while the people who know you best struggle with you the most.

Fortunately for all of us, it's not over yet. Keep honing your heart. Keep nurturing your soul. You may not be who you want to be, but you're not done yet.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

Developing your character is never easy, which is why so many people abandon the pursuit. But it's so worth it. Character matters more than anything because you bring who you are into everything you do. Your character determines the kind of spouse, parent, friend, employee, and leader you are. No matter how hard you try, you can't escape *you*.

So why don't we all have stellar character? Why is it so difficult to be who we had hoped to be? Few people describe the human struggle as honestly or as clearly as a writer did almost two millennia ago. By all accounts, he was an exceptional leader. He helped early Christianity grow from a local

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gathering of people who believed that Jesus rose from the dead to a global movement, all within a few decades. To say God used Paul is an understatement. No one other than Jesus had greater influence or impact in the first century of Christianity than Paul did.

You would think that Paul had a fantastic interior life, that his prayer life was stellar, that he was rarely tempted to do wrong. Since God used him so powerfully, you would expect that Paul never struggled to be the person God called him to be or to reflect the grace and character of the Savior he worshipped.

Apparently that wasn't the case, and amazingly we have a record of his internal battle:

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. . . .

I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. . . .

I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am!²

Ever felt like that? It's why your family life isn't quite what you pictured it to be when you were dating, and you know a big part of that problem is you. Ditto with your friendships, which are sometimes so complicated, and you know you're part of the reason why. It's why you struggle at work, where so much of your battle is internal and relational.

If you're still breathing oxygen, then Paul pretty much described the struggle you feel, didn't he? You have ideals, but you live in the real world

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with real challenges. Despite your best intentions, you compromise enough to leave you compromised.

SIGNS YOU'RE LOSING THE BATTLE

How does compromise start? Sometimes it begins intentionally. You know you're cheating. You know you're lying. You took the bait. But often, compromise doesn't begin that way. It happens more subtly.

As Paul admitted, the struggle has an innate quality to it. Compromise is *in* you, and life brings it out of you. You're surrounded by people who compromise, who have made a hundred little concessions. It's not hard to drift. It's not difficult to give in. Go with the flow, and before you know it, you've crossed the line.

So what are some telltale signs you're drifting, that you're not becoming who you intend to be? Here are five.

1. There's a Growing Gap Between Your Public Life and Private Life

Your character is compromised when you can no longer tell the world the truth. You project an image of yourself that isn't accurate. You do a simple and innocent version of this when you have guests to your home for dinner. You mow the lawn, clear the crumbs off the kitchen counter, tell the kids to clean their rooms, pick up the towels off the bathroom floor, and put out fresh flowers. Then you pretend you live like this all the time.

Sprucing up your home for guests is pretty benign, but more serious is when you project to the world an exterior image of who you are that doesn't truly reflect your interior life. Watch for any gap you see between your words and your deeds. When you talk grace, but you snap at your spouse, kids, and staff, that's a gap. When you talk financial responsibility with your colleagues, but your personal finances are a mess, that's a gap.

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When you say people matter, but you make zero time for anyone in need, that's a gap.

You hate this kind of gap when you see it in others. You call it hypocrisy, and that's exactly what it is. The English word *hypocrisy* stems from the Greek word for "actor." A hypocrite was an actor who donned a mask to portray a character. That's what hypocrites do: they pretend to be someone they're not.

While it's easy to spot hypocrisy in others, it's much harder to see it in ourselves. That's because we judge ourselves by our *intentions* and other people by their *actions*. It's completely unfair but exceptionally common. You know what you *intended* to do or how you *wish* you had responded. So you cut yourself some slack. Then you put a thin veneer over the action that masks it and makes it look a little more like the intention. And that's the beginning of the disconnect between who you are and who you want to be.

2. You're Hiding Things

As the gap grows between your real self and the projection of your false self, you won't want anyone to discover the truth about you. Compromise eventually leads to cover-up.

Because you realize (even on the subconscious level) that you're not who you should be, you're ashamed to admit what you're doing. You tell the accountant to make some changes in case you get audited. You delete your browser history. You change the password on your phone and tell your spouse that work required it. You fabricate stories to conceal the facts.

Cover-up is almost daily fodder for newspapers because it's so common in business and politics. It's typical in those fields because it's so common everywhere. We all start misleading and misinforming others whenever we feel ashamed of what we've done or who we've become. It's just that most of us never make the news.

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3. You Fail to Follow Through on What You've Said

Another sign of compromise is when you commit to things that you never end up doing. That may be a common human condition, but it intensifies as you compromise more and more.

Sure, you say you want to get together with your parents and siblings, but your real priorities have shifted. You promise to meet up soon because that's what decent people say, but you just don't deliver. Similarly, you told your team the report would be done by a certain deadline, but it wasn't. You were just too preoccupied with other things. You promised your spouse a date night, but it never happened because, once again, you got slammed with more urgent matters.

No big deal, you say? If you think your lack of follow-through involves only little things not worthy of a second thought, just know that this is exactly how compromise begins.

4. You Justify Your Bad Actions and Decisions

There's a certain point when you compromise regularly enough that you decide to stop apologizing and instead start justifying. There's a reason you are the way you are.

Everyone in your field behaves the way you do; to change would mean you'd lose. You can't help it that your marriage has grown cold; it happens to all couples. Your irritability is because of the overwhelming pressure you're under; there's nothing you can do about it. And your greed, well, you deserve something good after how hard you've worked; who could fault you for that?

When you start justifying your bad behavior and decisions, you begin to believe your condition is inevitable. You shift blame to circumstances "beyond your control." You convince yourself that if others were in your

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shoes, they would be just as cynical, unhappy, and compromised as you are. They just don't get it.

5. Your Life Has Become All About You

When you keep compromising, eventually you craft a life that is almost entirely self-centered. And that's the opposite of who you know you should be. Any value system worth having is focused on others, not self. The problem, of course, is that people take time, attention, and love. And you don't have time or energy for that. Not anymore.

If it's all about you, you've done more than rent your soul. Perhaps you've moved into a long-term lease.

NOBODY WILL EVER PAY YOU TO FIX THIS

When you think about how behavioral dynamics work, it's no surprise that compromise is so easy.

First, as Paul so brilliantly chronicled, compromise is a staple of the human condition. We have a natural inclination toward it. Second, pretty much nobody is ever going to ask you to develop your character. Maybe your spouse will, but that's about it. Will other people address it? Maybe, but not from the perspective of encouragement. Instead, they'll just penalize you if you don't. They'll fire you, drop you as a friend, or divorce you. Rarely will anyone encourage you to work on your character proactively.

Contrast that with your competency. People will push you to develop your competency. Your parents likely pushed you to get an education. Competency is so highly valued in our culture that people will often pay you to improve your skill set. Your employer will cover the costs for you to go to a conference or take the training courses you need, or perhaps even fund the tuition for your next degree.

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Plus, competency is fun. Who doesn't want to learn a new skill or develop a talent? Devouring a book, listening to a podcast, or taking an online class can be really stimulating. You tend to see tangible results. That skill you picked up is something you can implement this month. That hack you learned has an immediate payoff.

But who's pushing you to be a better *you*? Who's speaking into your life to point out those deep-seated character issues that need to be worked on? Right, cue the silence.

Often, there are only a few people. Worse, maybe there's nobody.

And let's be honest: character development is far more painful than skill development. Working on your character forces you to go into the crags and crevices of your heart. It encourages you to look at your past to forge a better future. It makes you look in the mirror.

When you tackle your character, though, things get uncomfortable. The blaming stops. The excuses get pushed to the side. And honesty—painful honesty—is required. You finally have to deal with you. Which explains why it's so much easier to keep focusing on your competency and keep compromising your character. Character is one of those ethereal concepts that doesn't feel actionable because it seems so airy. But actually that's not true. You can develop your character in the same way you develop a muscle: by exercising it. There are practical disciplines, habits, and patterns that grow character. And that's what we'll look at next.

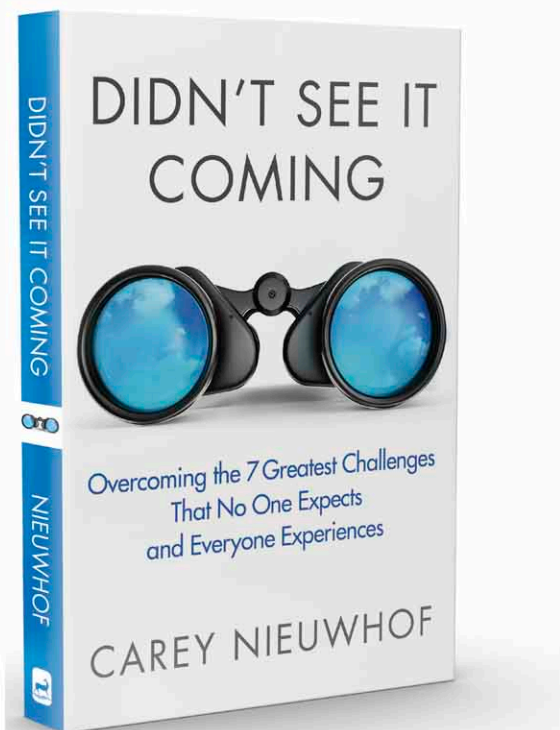
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