

"Insightful, practical, and full of wisdom . . ."

—Shawn Achor, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Happiness Advantage*

# ELEVATE



AN ESSENTIAL



GUIDE TO LIFE



JOSEPH DEITCH

Foreword by Lisa Genova, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Still Alice*

## Praise for *ELEVATE*

"Insightful, practical, and full of wisdom . . . *Elevate* is for those who know they have so much more potential but struggle with things holding them back. Deitch transforms decades of experience and thought into a clear path to better awareness about the obstacles and practical action."

—Shawn Achor, *New York Times*  
best-selling author of *The Happiness Advantage*

"As I approach my 80th year, I firmly believe that if you stop learning, you should lie down and let them throw dirt on you, because you are already dead. Read *Elevate*, and you'll learn some new ways of not only thinking about life but, more important, doing life."

—Ken Blanchard, coauthor of *The New One Minute Manager*<sup>®</sup>  
and coeditor of *Servant Leadership in Action*

"*Elevate* offers the clues to do just what the title suggests. If you want strategies for keeping your life on a continuous upward path, this book is for you. Success in life is multi-dimensional, and Joe Deitch touches on all dimensions. This book is a great read for everyone at any point in life."

—Luke Campbell, Olympic gold medalist and professional boxer

"*Elevate* is a treasure trove of Joe's discoveries as to why and how we make the choices in life that have led us to where we are today . . . *Elevate* is his gift to the world and his quest to share his 'journey of increased awareness and enhanced performance.'"

—Leanda Cave, world triathlon champion and first woman in history to win  
both the Ironman Triathlon and Half Ironman in the same year (2012)

"I told Joe Deitch months ago after I read the draft of *Elevate* that I could not wait for it to be published. Read it, study it, think about it, and implement it. Real happiness and success is not about what you know, what you do, or how much money you make. It is about who you are."

—Lee Cockerell, former executive vice president,  
Walt Disney World Resort and best-selling author of *Creating Magic*

"*Elevate* draws upon science, literature, religion, and our bodies to create a rational blueprint for self-discovery and improvement. It describes ways to change our lives today that help us rise to our potential. Don't just read it—use it!"

—**David Dodson, Professor, Stanford Graduate School of Business specializing in entrepreneurship, and philanthropist**

"With *Elevate*, Joe Deitch has achieved something remarkable: adding something distinctive and valuable to an oversaturated self-help market. By integrating Awareness and Action, the book links inner and outer, East and West, ancient and modern, spiritual and scientific into one eminently practical volume that will elevate every life to higher achievement and fulfillment."

—**Philip Goldberg, author of *American Veda***

"From a pioneer in the financial planning industry, I expect practical advice. From a Tony Award-winning Broadway producer, I expect entertainment. Joe Deitch is both of those people, and this book delivers on both of those expectations."

—**Adam Grant, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Give and Take*, *Originals*, and *Option B* with Sheryl Sandberg**

"I've known Joe as a successful entrepreneur, a solid and trusted leader, an innovator, a friend, and now as an author. Joe's humility has enabled him to listen to everyone, to question everything, and to then reflect and derive wisdom from his life's experiences. *Elevate* will help us all improve the quality of our lives."

—**Steven E. Karol, former YPO International President**

"Joe has written an inspiring primer filled with wisdom. He is a master of brief, bite size, streetwise nuggets and takes you on an easy ride to success in business and in life."

—**Stephen P. Kaufman, Professor, Harvard Business School and retired chairman and CEO of Arrow Electronics, Inc.**

"Joe Deitch lives and breathes continuous self-challenge, and through that, self-improvement. In *Elevate*, he delivers what most great teachers do: He makes you believe you are capable of more than you realize—and pushes you to grow. This book can help you enter a new phase of your life with more insights leading to more fulfillment and more happiness."

—**Dr. Ed Mascioli, MD, physician, venture capitalist, biotech CEO**

“Joe is one of those rare people who has achieved much success in many different businesses. But what I also admire in him is his ability to truly savor his life and relationships. In *Elevate*, he distills the principles and practices that have worked for him and so many others. It is an insightful and eminently actionable book. I only wish I had read it many years ago, and I will send copies to my daughters.”

—**Sanjiv Mirchandani, President, Fidelity Clearing and Custody Solutions**

“Reading this book is like accepting an invitation to an inspiring, enlightening conversation with a good friend. Joe’s reflective questioning woven throughout nudges us toward greater understanding of ourselves and how to reach our potential in any field or endeavor. The insights are timeless and will provide guidance throughout life’s stages. This book is perfect for a recent graduate or anyone navigating a life transition.”

—**Lynne Mooney Teta, Headmaster Emerita, Boston Latin School**

“This wonderful book is full of life-changing wisdom from a man who has lived its insights. Joe Deitch digs deep and shares what we all need to know for greater adventures in life and work. I will enthusiastically recommend this illuminating treatise from the heart and mind to everyone I know.”

—**Tom Morris, former professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and author of *If Aristotle Ran General Motors, True Success, and The Oasis Within***

“I’ve known Joe Deitch, professionally and personally, for many years. Evident in every conversation we have had is that Joe is a thoughtful, fascinating man, with great insights on life and business.”

—**Jack Nicklaus, *Sports Illustrated’s* Individual Male Athlete of the 20th Century and winner of a record eighteen major professional golf championship titles**

“Destined to be a modern classic, *Elevate* tackles perceptions about life and common sense, gives them bones, and shares actionable direction. It left me knowing more about what makes me tick and gave me the tools to make impactful and lasting changes to my life.”

—**Les Otten, *Inc. magazine* Turnaround Entrepreneur of the Year and former vice chairman of the Boston Red Sox**

"This is a large-hearted and graciously written handbook for existing. No crystals, nothing 'funny,' just a followable, easy-to-digest guide up the mountain of life, where Deitch proffers up a better view and clearer air. There's a treasure house of consciousness-expanding stories, quotes, and insights threaded together with practical how-to approaches to the business of work, health, and love. Deitch doesn't preach or promise so much as share his own life's aha moments with a self-deprecating wink, as if you were sharing a profound laugh with a new pal over a nice fireside beer. In short: reading this book will make you a better person."

**—Amanda Palmer, rock star, crowdfunding pioneer,  
TED speaker, and author of *The Art of Asking***

"Joe Deitch has accomplished a miracle—a self-help book that really helps. Do yourself an enormous favor: If you buy only one self-help book, make it this one."

**—Martin Sandler, award-winning author of more than seventy books,  
two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee, and five-time Emmy Award winner**

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GUIDE TO LIFE

—

JOSEPH DEITCH



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First Edition

*To my mother and father,  
who gave me the gift of life.*



"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world.  
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

**—Rumi**

"If you are not willing to learn, no one can help you.  
If you are determined to learn, no one can stop you."

**—Anonymous**

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# Foreword

As a writer, I am regularly asked, “So, what do you read?” My vague answer is a little of everything. If pressed to be more specific, I say that I read contemporary fiction to keep refining my craft and because I love a great story. I read nonfiction texts on neuroscience, psychology, and medicine to keep learning and because these subjects will forever fascinate me. And my favorite genre is self-help. I love reading these books because I’m committed to continually growing, and the tools, frameworks, and reminders offered in these books teach me to live and love bigger.

I met Joe Deitch on Cape Cod in the summer of 2015. Soon after, he mentioned that he was writing a book. I braced myself. Everyone and their uncle’s neighbor’s daughter’s dance teacher are writing books. Very few people are writing great books.

He said his book was about the wisdom he had discovered in his quest to understand how to live the best life possible. Self-help—my favorite! I was intrigued but still skeptical. And although I wanted to read it, I hesitated. Joe and I had just started dating. What if his book was terrible? I’d probably have to break up with him.

I already knew Joe to be a brilliant businessman; highly educated; intellectually curious about everything from physics to fashion; adored by friends, colleagues, and family; and living a life that appeared remarkably balanced in mind, body, and spirit. But he was tackling such a BIG subject. I’ve read books with a similar objective

by Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle, Jen Sincero and Gabrielle Bernstein, titles that illuminate how to live mindful, fearless, loving, badass lives; books that have transformed the way I live. The standard here was formidable.

Pushing past my reservations, I asked if I could read it. From the first page, I was captivated, fascinated, and impressed. And best of all, I was thrilled—we could continue dating.

*Elevate* explores the questions that seem to baffle us all. How do we overcome fear and ingrained habits to live more fully and authentically? How do we live and love without limitations? How do we become more consciously aware of ourselves, of what we say and do and how we react, of the ongoing chatter in our heads, of the world around us? How can we live the biggest, most successful, happiest life possible?

The answers to these questions in *Elevate* are enlightening, powerful, simple to absorb, and transformational. They are a set of elegant tools that I now carry with me. I use them every day and with ease. They are lessons I share with family and friends. They've given me a lens to recognize habits, beliefs, and ways of being that don't work, and so I can let these go. Obstacles are now possibilities. Frustration can be turned into fascination. Insights and skills for realizing the fullest potential in every relationship and endeavor are clear and inviting.

I am forever changed by the words on these pages.

You will be, too.

—Lisa Genova

*New York Times* best-selling author of *Still Alice*

# Suggestions for How to Use this Book

“I went to a bookstore and asked the saleswoman, ‘Where’s the self-help section?’ She said if she told me, it would defeat the purpose.”

—George Carlin

The information in this book is drawn from a multitude of sources and was organized according to the perceptions and priorities of its author. But we are all different people, in singular situations. Therefore, I encourage you to approach the book in whatever manner benefits you the most. Toward that end, here are a few comments and suggestions that have proven helpful for others:

*Take your time, and go at your own pace.* While generations' worth of insights and understanding can be summarized in one volume, it's not realistic to assume that one can digest it all in a few days, or even a few weeks. It took decades to integrate and organize, and I'm still learning more every day.

*Pushing our boundaries can be exhausting.* When we grow and evolve, we become different people at every stage. This can be challenging, since growth means seeing and appreciating things that have eluded us in the past, or that we have historically avoided. But since you've picked up this book, you're probably ready to confront some barriers, look under rocks, open doors, and venture forward. Even so, be prepared for a few internal hurdles and surprising roadblocks. Just take them in stride. Safety and comfort can be the enemy of learning and growth. Discomfort is a doorway; don't run from it. When in doubt, adopt an attitude of curiosity.

*Appreciate the interplay between awareness and action.* One of the primary reasons *Elevate* is different from other guides to an optimal life is that it connects both our internal and external journeys; it integrates our improvement in fundamental skills with a greater awareness of ourselves and others. Once you embrace this connection, life will never be the same.

*Read the material in the order presented . . . or not.* While this book is organized with a particular flow in mind, if you're drawn to a specific topic, by all means go there. But if you do skip ahead, please keep in mind that some of the underlying concepts may have been explained earlier. This is especially true of the chapter on Awareness and of Insight 1, which are central to much of the book. You may choose to read the book in order from the beginning, but also

jump around periodically as your needs and moods dictate. Whatever works best for you.

*Create a Stairway of Success.* In terms of implementing the advice in *Elevate*, start with the low-hanging fruit. If you're looking to change and improve, make it easier by focusing on the simple stuff first. One of the benefits of this approach is that your self-image and confidence will grow with each new accomplishment. And so will your energy.

*Use Elevate as a reference manual.* This isn't intended to be a read-it-and-move-on kind of book. Consider it a resource. Keep it handy.

*Take the best and disregard the rest.* There's a wealth of powerful information and insights to benefit from here, but if you doubt or disagree with a particular idea, feel free to set it aside for the moment. One reader may be greatly helped by certain sections and less so by others, while another person will have the exact opposite reaction. It all depends on where you are in life, what you need now, and what you're open to at the moment. Focus on what works best for you rather than getting bogged down with what might not feel right yet.

*Find out for yourself.* Play with the concepts. Don't take my word for everything. Consult with others. Do some research on the Web. Experiment. Give it a try, and see what happens.

*Learn more about how you're wired and what's really important.* While every journey should serve its primary objective, most people have multiple objectives. To further complicate matters, our goals are not always consistent, complementary, or even conscious. Take note of how things affect you. Every interaction provides insights



into your psyche and your past conditioning. Everything is a learning opportunity. How we react to stimuli and what we choose to move toward and away from provide valuable clues about what we really care about, what makes us tick, and why.

*Learn from what he and she said.* In addition to organized information and personal examples, this book also contains many quotes from others that cut through the clutter and convey ideas and perspectives in a helpful way. Some quotes brilliantly condense a concept. Some are entertaining or memorable. And often the person quoted possesses substantial credibility and represents an important part of our shared heritage.

*Be prepared for fundamental changes.* As we change, so does our world. The more we learn and grow, the more our world improves. And as we grasp the insights and adopt the universal skills in *Elevate*, something miraculous happens: We transition away from dividing activities and opportunities into what we have and have not learned (*I can do this, but I can't do that; or, I am this, but I'm not that*). Little by little, we realize that we have the tools to do virtually *anything*—and that changes *everything*.

So what are you waiting for? Turn the page!

# I Was Half Right

As a boy, I often thought the world was crazy. I constantly saw grownups doing dumb and self-defeating things—like smoking cigarettes, eating horribly unhealthy food, and drinking alcohol to excess. None of the consequences (whether heartburn, hangovers, heart disease, or cancer) seemed to provide sufficient motivation for them to change. I also watched them endure dead-end jobs and miserable relationships. Why couldn't they see how restrictive and destructive their habits and choices were? And, if they could see, why did they persist? They were clearly unhappy and unhealthy, so why didn't they choose the seemingly obvious, more intelligent alternatives? Why didn't they practice what they preached?

I saw adults cling stubbornly to their beliefs and argue passionately for the superiority of their politics, religions, sports teams, and everything else they identified with. They didn't seem to realize that their worldviews were primarily inherited and heavily influenced by other people and outside circumstances.

Later in life, as I grew into an adult and became more experienced and self-reflective, I gradually understood that I had been right. More

accurately, I'd been half right: People *are* easily influenced, short-sighted, self-destructive, and frequently wrong. But I also discovered something much more important and powerful: I was essentially just as blind and biased as everyone else! *How could that be?*

This revelation, as fascinating as it was humbling, led to profound personal transformations as my mind continued to open. My late wife, Robbie, a gifted psychologist, often said, "People change when they're ready." Evidently, I was ready. My interest in psychology, growth, success, and happiness kicked into high gear. I started exploring voraciously, learning everything I could from anyone who might have something to teach me. I turned to both Eastern and Western philosophies, as well as to modern science. I essentially became my own lab rat, learning from my successes, and even more from my failures.

But oh, what I would have given for a great road map! Time and time again, I found myself yearning for answers. How could I speed up my learning curve? *What was I missing . . . and why?* And it wasn't just about me: How could I help the other people in my life, those I lived and worked with and cared so much about? How could we avoid the myriad unnecessary mistakes and missed opportunities that cause us so much pain and frustration? Surely there must be a better way.

My experience is hardly unique. That's why most of us share the same fantasy: *I wish I could go back in time knowing what I know now.* Such a delicious idea! The heartbreak and humiliation we could have avoided. The fighting and frustration we could have side stepped. The now-obvious solutions we could have implemented.

As parents, we try to spare our children the struggles we suffered. My wife and I sure tried our best to pass along what we believed to be valuable lessons to our son at every opportunity. And yet, he often had to find his own truths, just as we had to when we were young. While we could take some credit for making his journey easier, I constantly wondered how we could have done better. There

was a wealth of wisdom available to us—filling up massive libraries and a vast Internet—*but how did it all fit together?* Where was that practical and reliable road map I yearned for?



In many respects, my desire for such knowledge has become my life's work. However, while it has always been satisfying to help and entertain others with an insight here and a nugget of information there, the decision to craft a book and to combine what I had learned into a cohesive whole forced me to search for a deeper understanding of what works and why; to discern the underlying truths of the insights and practices I acquired and to figure out how they all fit together.

It has been an exhilarating process. Every step of the way has been a learning experience, and this journey of increased awareness and enhanced performance has been rewarding at every turn.

In addition to my basic concerns about happiness and success and how to achieve them, I was especially fascinated by why we often avoid sensible solutions and proven pathways. Also, why do we thrive and excel in some aspects of our lives and totally miss the mark in others? How can we be so clear here and so clueless there? What's going on—or *not* going on, as the case may be? Fortunately, as we probe deeper and open up further, we understand more and more. Sincere curiosity—an open heart and an open mind—is the path to enduring growth.

This manual you are about to read provides the kind of integrated system of powerful insights and practical answers I had always searched for—an approach to life that explores what really works, and why . . . and what we can do about it. By using this framework, we can better understand, implement, reference, and continuously refine the best of the best practices in every area of our lives.

*Elevate* contains what I consider to be the most profound insights and transformative practices I have discovered on my ongoing quest to elevate my awareness as well as my success and happiness. Over time, these discoveries radically transformed my life, both professionally and personally, and I have verified their efficacy while training, coaching, and teaching thousands of people in my businesses and personal encounters.

This book is divided into two parts: “Awareness” and “Action.” Like the ancient symbol for yin and yang, these two halves of our lives (our internal and external journeys) are perfectly complementary, and the essence of each resides in the heart of the other. Together they form a dynamic and continuous spiral of growth that reinforces itself—creating, in the process, a veritable Stairway of Success.



I realize this book can never be complete since the universe is infinite and our knowledge is limited. And yet we must try. Consider it an attempt to organize much of the wisdom that has been handed down to us by those who have already traveled this path, as well as a platform to build upon. This wisdom is not mine. It is ours. May it serve us well.

—Joseph Deitch

PART ONE

—

# Awareness

# Awareness: The Portal to Knowledge and Growth

“When you really pay attention, everything is your teacher.”

—Ezra Bayda

*I have a pair of beige, stonewashed jeans that I love. A friend of mine once made the mistake of calling them gray, so I corrected her. A spirited disagreement ensued, and I enlisted the help of various passersby to prove my point. Bizarrely, they all agreed that the jeans were gray, not beige. How could this be? Clearly, I'll have to ask more people until I get the answer I want . . .*

—

Awareness is the ability to perceive what is going on—or *not* going on—in the world around us and within us. Awareness is about paying attention, and it pertains to both the conscious and subconscious realms.

Paying attention is proactive. *It is a conscious act that expands our*

*consciousness*. Attention fosters awareness, and expanded awareness is our springboard to elevated understanding and growth. True attention entails looking, listening, and learning without prejudice. Conversely, restricted awareness translates to limited information and diminished understanding, which leads to unnecessary mistakes, stagnation, or worse.

Increased awareness is a journey of self-discovery. It is not just an intellectual exercise. Our essence resides in our body and in our soul, not just in our mind. Therefore, we must go and listen and feel wherever and however we can. We must sense and confront our blockages and biases if we are to be open and grow. And if we allow ourselves to be fascinated, learning comes more easily.

The appreciation of awareness and the enormous role it plays in our lives could certainly qualify it as being a major insight in its own right. However, I present it here as the primary theme of part one. It also permeates all of the ten skills in part two. Awareness influences and enables all that we are and all that we strive for.

But growth and fulfillment don't just depend on increasing how much information we take in. We also have to consider the validity and reliability of that information. And we need to understand how and why everything fits together.

Paradoxically, too much information can contribute to our becoming less aware, especially if that information is narrow and biased. This is problematic in today's world, as our options for data, news, and commentary expand exponentially, while our viewpoints become increasingly segmented and subjective. As a result, people tend to seek out and value perspectives that are consistent with their own self-interest, self-image, and worldview. Without open-minded discourse and discovery, this self-selection adds to the long list of cultural and political issues that divide us. We take sides, and those sides become more and more polarized and politicized. This is the antithesis of elevated awareness, understanding, and growth.



## The Potential and the Path

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

—Attributed to various sources

The magnitude of our potential becomes apparent if you consider the huge leaps forward humanity has made each time we expanded and enhanced our awareness. Think about eyeglasses, the microscope, the telescope, the photograph, hearing aids, radio and television, recording devices, and the Internet. The truly big personal breakthroughs are like acquiring a new sense. When someone who is born deaf can suddenly hear, or a blind person is miraculously gifted with sight, it's *Aha! Eureka!* Nothing will ever be the same.

Most of us have experienced such transformations. Falling in love is celebrated in song and story because it utterly changes our world. Likewise, going through puberty is akin to being reborn, as we become profoundly different, and, as a result, so does the world we inhabit. Then of course, there's the combination of love and rebirth we experience when we have our first child. All of a sudden, we understand and appreciate things we never did before. *We know* that which had previously been hidden from us.

The list goes on, but the point is the same: *We understand more, because we become more.* Conversely, we become more by understanding more. There is so much more to life than we can possibly comprehend and experience; and when our awareness expands, so does our world . . . and it becomes increasingly wondrous.

The big question is *How do we expand our awareness?* How can we elevate awareness, and thereby grow in wisdom, love, and fulfillment? There is no correct box to check, no simple one-size-fits-all answer. Awareness is not a school quiz that can be passed by reading and memorizing some facts. It's a journey that is fueled by our intent to be open, honest, and free. It begins when we realize that our

comprehension is in fact limited, it continues when we follow that realization with a desire to break free of artificial constraints, and it unfolds when we move forward toward knowing our vast potential. From those precious moments on, a new course can be charted as we discover worlds that had been previously hidden or obscured.

Looking back at my younger self, I can now appreciate how shortsighted I often was, not to mention stubborn and argumentative, as I strove to show people why *they* were wrong. My ego, my emotions, and my inexperience regularly caused me to defend my beliefs and actions instead of opening up and listening to others—and to my inner self, my intuition. Sound familiar?

One of the points that all wise men and women agree on is this: *If we want our world to improve, we should work on ourselves first.* That's where the significant gains are to be found. Focusing on the inadequacies of others, or the unfairness in the world, is often just a trap of our own making as we resist looking in the mirror.

There is certainly no shortage of techniques available to increase awareness and gain clarity—from yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises to psychotherapy and cognitive skills, changing habits, and more. While this book identifies a number of such methods throughout, part one focuses on five transformational insights with enormous implications for our daily life.

In many respects, these insights are disruptive—even revolutionary—in that they can radically change the way we see the world and ourselves. This can be challenging in the best sense of the word. Like most healthy challenges, the insights stretch us and enlarge our capacities. Above all, they are liberating. When properly understood and absorbed, they help free the mind from past conditioning and unveil a new realm of possibilities.

Many so-called problems only arise in the first place because we're stuck in our perception of the world, and that limited awareness defines our reality. We see it often with teenagers who may

be filled with angst over some social concern like how they look or dress, or being out of sync with their peers, or feeling inadequate, or experiencing romantic confusion. Granted, these are common issues for adults as well, but the interesting thing about teenagers is that often nothing their parents or any other adult can say makes a difference. Then one day, the problem is somehow resolved and just goes away—not necessarily because a logical solution appeared, but because the teenager literally grew up a bit—both physically and psychologically. The prefrontal cortex continues to develop during the teenage years, and what was once a major concern in the teenager’s life is now perceived from a higher vantage point.

Granted, adults can get stuck too. There are innumerable opportunities for frustration in life, but also for breakthroughs and consequent advancement to elevated perspectives. A common example is how we often repeat deep-rooted behavioral patterns without even realizing it. We think we’re making a cogent decision about specific circumstances when we’re really just having a pre-programmed reflexive response.

Another typical trap is being unrealistic and unreasonable. For example, people are forever seeking a fulfilling and “balanced” life. They want to be passionately engaged but not stressed. They want to please everyone and also gratify themselves. They want to be 100% into their careers, 100% into their families, and 100% supportive of their personal needs and desires, including the desire to serve others and improve the world. They want, they want, they want. But time and energy are real constraints. You simply can’t fit a gallon of desires into a quart container. And yet we continually try to do just that. What we need is a different approach. A bigger bottle would also help. So how do we grow our capacity for awareness and nurture our ability to continually become more aware?

The “answer” doesn’t come in a formula or a one-sentence

aphorism. Rather, the path to ongoing enlightenment begins by loosening our death grip on our opinions, beliefs, and ingrained behaviors. When we let go, we create space to let in new insights and observations. As we explore we expand, and we become more aware. Letting go and opening up allows us to confront repressed feelings and fears, and allows love and compassion to flourish. That's why one person's "answer" might offer little insight to someone else. If two blind men are traveling down a path and one of them suddenly gains sight, does his description of the view allow the other person to attain vision? The common reality for most people seems to be that awakening comes bit by bit with every elevation of attitude, awareness, and understanding.

## Everything Provides Insights

While the road to greater awareness begins with the deceptively simple decision to be more open and openly curious, there is one particular practice that I highly recommend as you proceed with this book and go through your daily life. *Pay attention to how you react to the various stimuli you encounter.*

Every idea, every person, and every interaction provides an opportunity to observe how we react to life in its infinite expressions. When we pay close attention, we may notice that our reactions are expressions of our fears, desires, and predispositions. Like a Geiger counter or a divining rod, our reactions provide critical clues at every step. If certain concepts, beliefs, situations, or people rub us the wrong way—more than might reasonably be expected, or more than they affect others—we should see it as an opportunity to wonder why. What's going on in our subconscious that we're not fully aware of? What in our background might explain such a reaction?

While it's hard to see what we can't see, we can be sensitive to the responses and associations those ideas and experiences trigger.

We can also ask our friends and family what they think about how we interact with the world, since they observe us from unique vantage points.

Don't limit this practice to adverse reactions. It also pays to ask why we're extremely fond of someone or why we crave something. And if the reaction, whether good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, is especially strong, there is probably even more gold to be discovered on that trail.

As you embark on this journey of discovery, feel free to experiment. Consider trying things you might not normally do, and watch how you respond. For example, give up TV or other electronic obsessions for a week; take different routes to work; try out various exercise routines; compliment people more often; tell the important people in your life how much they mean to you; learn to speak a new language; take up a musical instrument; travel to exotic places. And exotic places need not be far away; you can start by spending time with people who are nearby but seem to be very different from you. Visit diverse restaurants, churches, and neighborhoods. The list is endless, and so are the lessons you stand to learn.

*Play detective.* You may notice that the very contemplation of change initiates a reaction, and not necessarily a comfortable one. What does that mean? What are you afraid of? What does it feel like? What does it remind you of? Where did it come from?

If you approach each of the insights, implications, and applications that follow with curiosity, you'll observe that there are many veils to part and doors to open. And still more behind those. If you're ready to let the light in, there's no adventure more exciting . . . or rewarding.

## INSIGHT

# 1

# Our Perspective Is De Facto Limited and Distorted

“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

—William James

*I grew up in Boston, in a poor, working-class neighborhood. On one side of my street were triple-deckers (multifamily apartment buildings), and on the other side was the public housing we called “the projects.” I lived in one of the triple-deckers, but most of the kids were in the projects, so that’s where we played. It was a melting pot of white and black, mostly Christian, plus a few Jews like me. But that’s not how I categorized the other kids. I divided everyone up based on whether or not they were fun and friendly.*

*When I was twelve, we moved to another blue-collar neighborhood. This one was all white, and I was the only Jewish kid. For the first time in*

*my life, I experienced anti-Semitism. I no longer felt welcome. It was weird and uncomfortable, and I looked for friends elsewhere. Prejudice was a new experience for me, and it didn't make any sense. It certainly didn't seem fair.*

*Years later I realized that anti-Semitism is just one example of people being fearful of others whom they perceive to be different, whether because of religion, nationality, age, education, political preferences, or other factors. The irony is that Jews have a word for "the others." It's goyim. I had always heard that word, but it wasn't until I was on the receiving end of prejudice that I saw it for what it really was.*

—

We are all somewhat blocked, biased, and blind. For starters, we are residents of a single point in time and space, able to sense only what is available at that location, that time, and that vantage point. We can't see what's happening across town or even behind our backs—let alone everywhere else in the vast expanse of existence. Plus, we see only a limited portion of the electromagnetic spectrum (only about 0.0035% is visible to the human eye) and hear only a limited range of sound waves. There are entire realms of reality we don't even know we're missing.

Listen to astrophysicists talk about the universe, and you will be awestruck by how much we know about the cosmos. Likewise, listen to neuroscientists talk about the brain, and you will be amazed by how much we've learned about our gray matter. On the other hand, you will also be humbled when you contemplate how much we still *don't* understand about our external and internal universes.

To complicate this further, we tend to generalize about what little we do know. As we grow up, we encounter limits to how many facts we can memorize and how many individual skills we can acquire. We begin to utilize guidelines, rules of thumb, and conceptual frameworks to understand the world; and we group our myriad choices into

right and wrong, practical and impractical, desirable and problematic, friend and foe, pleasurable and painful, and many other categories.

Unfortunately, our tendency to oversimplify and generalize in order to navigate the complexities of life also distorts our perceptions. Together with our various prejudices and predispositions, this natural inclination can cause us to exclude uncomfortable or contradictory information, discount people who disagree with us, and even marginalize entire segments of the population. When we do this, we often end up ignoring relevant information, rejecting sound advice, and ultimately making poor choices.

*A key to dramatic growth is to recognize an amazing paradox: By accepting and actually embracing our limitations, we allow ourselves to open up to the knowledge, experience, and insights of others.*

We can best connect with those we come in contact with, as well as with the collective consciousness of all beings, only when we let down our defenses and adopt a more open attitude. As we become more open and accepting of others and appreciative of what they have to offer, they open up more to us in return. This approach not only improves our relationships with others, it also reveals more about everything else in our world.

## Cognitive Science and Psychological Constraints

“Real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance.”

—Confucius

Not only are we limited by physics and biology, we are further influenced and constricted by psychological factors such as fears and desires; cultural factors like personal histories, religious traditions,



and educational training; and by all the complexities of our diverse environments. We are intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally molded as soon as we emerge from the womb, if not earlier, and the conditioning continues with every interaction from then on. We are not just blocked and blind; we are also decidedly *biased*. We all like to think we're open-minded and objective when it comes to evaluating situations and people. But are we? A huge body of research in physics, biochemistry, and psychology says we're not.

Generally, people like people who are like themselves. We prefer to watch news reports and read opinion pieces that bolster our preconceived ideas rather than seek out alternative viewpoints. We also tend to remember information that conforms to our views and forget evidence that contradicts them. We even decide where to live, who to associate with, and who to vote for based primarily on the desire to foster a community of people like ourselves.

We are also very good at rationalizing. The phenomenon of *cognitive dissonance* describes the tension we feel when confronted with two conflicting thoughts or feelings, and our compulsion to resolve that tension. We modify our views of people and situations to support our self-image and life choices. Suppose you want to join a club (or team, company, or organization), and the club makes it really hard to get accepted. If you finally get in, you're likely to express a very high opinion of that group, even if you're somewhat disappointed in it, so you don't have to admit that it wasn't worth all the trouble. And if you're *denied* membership, you're likely to be very critical of the organization so you don't have to accept that you're "not good enough." Similarly, people who are spurned by someone they're attracted to might come to think that same person is less appealing after all, and they're really glad it didn't work out.

Another well-known phenomenon is the *false consensus* effect, whereby people tend to overestimate the extent to which their own opinions, beliefs, values, and preferences are normal and

representative of how others supposedly think and act. This mindset leads to conclusions that do not necessarily exist, i.e., a “false consensus.” It also applies to groups where people assume that many or most others think as their faction does. And because these people and groups rarely interact or acknowledge those who disagree, their belief is bolstered. One of the important and unfortunate byproducts of this perspective is that we generally disrespect or devalue those who disagree, assuming that something is wrong with them.

A related cognitive bias is called *illusory superiority* (also “the above-average effect”). This occurs when people—usually 75% or more—overestimate their own qualities and abilities, and consider themselves to be better than their peer group on various measures such as intelligence, awareness, appearance, work ethic, and so on. While you too may consider yourself to be smarter, better looking, more charitable, and more conscientious than average, this is generally a statistical falsehood. Interestingly, while illusory superiority is common in the United States, some other cultures err significantly in the other direction in accordance with their social mores.

Don’t assume that because you’re worldly, well educated, and well intentioned you’re free of bias. Research consistently reveals how much our unconscious preconceptions influence our judgments. For example, college students have been shown to rate an academic article higher if the author has a male name as opposed to a female name. In a 2012 study, Yale researchers asked 127 subjects to evaluate job applicants based on their resumes. The resumes were exactly the same, but half were assigned male names and half female names. You guessed it. The subjects gave the men higher ratings and said they were more likely to hire them based on their qualifications. It didn’t matter whether the evaluators were male or female. And get this—the subjects were all scientists, who are trained to think objectively. Like all forms of prejudice, gender bias is more prevalent in some

communities today than in others, but the larger point is that we're all subject to unconscious biases; these are merely some of them.

## From Limited to Liberated

“He who knows nothing is closer to the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.”

—Thomas Jefferson

What we perceive and know is necessarily incomplete. But that is *not necessarily* bad news, because when we recognize and embrace our limitations, something magical begins to happen: We automatically position ourselves to rise above those very limitations. That is the paradox of the human condition. If we humbly accept that our experience of reality is constrained, we immediately loosen the chains that bind us, and we begin to expand.

Suppose you've spent your whole life inside the walls of a building. Maybe it's a perfectly comfortable building—a mansion, or a palace even—and it seems to have almost everything you need and want. Then you learn there's a great big world outside those walls, and you've actually been restricted and constrained all along. You've essentially been living in a prison. What if you then discover a set of keys that unlocks the doors? Would your feeling of imprisonment turn to one of liberation?

Perhaps. Some people would still feel more comfortable staying in that building, because venturing out can be scary, or at least uncomfortable. As Abraham Maslow, one of the first psychologists to study happiness, said, “In any given moment we have two options: to step forward into growth or to step back into safety.” When it comes to the limitations of consciousness and perception, we have access to myriad windows, doors, and keys. And *that* is liberating—or at least it can be.

The more I understood and embraced this notion, the more I was able to value the experience and viewpoints of others. Like most people, I used to have a knee-jerk reaction when people disagreed with me, especially when I was heavily invested in an idea—whether psychologically, operationally, or financially. I wanted them to be wrong, because then I wouldn't have to change anything or lose any momentum. But I learned that my life improved dramatically when I *truly* wanted to listen to people, to learn what they knew, and what they thought, and how they experienced life from their vantage points. I found that this attitude gave new meaning to the old saying “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Acknowledging my own limitations pried me loose from many of the delusions, fears, misconceptions, and conditioned responses that were standing in my way. It was the starting point of an ongoing process of small and large advances, punctuated by new information, sudden insights, and the occasional big *Aha!* moment. That process will assuredly continue as long as I remain attentive and open to learning, and the same is true of everyone.

Deluged by myriad bits and bytes of data, we make choices at every moment of our lives. If our perceptions are clouded or constrained, then our decisions will be suboptimal. They may not even be conscious; instead, our decisions may amount to nothing more than automatic responses to stimuli based on our current desires and past conditioning. But when we begin to remove these obstacles, we find we have heightened sensitivity, greater cognitive clarity, and more astute discernment—all of which lead to more creative analyses, wiser choices, and far more satisfying outcomes. It all begins with awareness—and a decision to open those doors and windows.

An enormous sense of calm and well-being can result from letting go and opening up. If you are really motivated to grow and lead a more fulfilling life, you will turn the realization of your own limitations into your greatest asset. You can expand your capacity for

perceiving, learning, and knowing, and start to take greater advantage of the incredible resources we all have access to.

## We're Blind Men Bluffing

"It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled."

—Mark Twain

Did you ever play the poker game Blind Man's Bluff? I remember sitting with my friends in a circle as the dealer passed one card to each of us, face down. Simultaneously, we would pick up our card without looking at it and hold it face out on our forehead, so we could see everyone else's card, but not our own. Then the betting and bluffing began. As with any poker game, the winner was the person with the highest score (best card) who stayed in the game by matching or exceeding all the bets. If you've never played, the actual experience is fun and illuminating.

What a perfect metaphor for how we see the world. And how we don't. Just as we can see aspects of other people's realities that they can't seem to see themselves, our own perceptions are likewise limited. We have to bet, bluff, and blunder our way through much of life, because we're not fully aware of all the cards we're holding or showing to others.

Imagine how different Blind Man's Bluff would be if you knew what card you were holding! That's how different life can be when you make a genuine effort to become more self-aware. Knowledge is power. And what knowledge could be more powerful than self-knowledge?

Unfortunately, most people find it just as difficult to change how they perceive themselves as they do the world around them. This is totally understandable. Why should we doubt what we can see (or

think we see)? On the other hand, if everything is clear and obvious, why do so many people disagree about so many things? What's *really* going on?

In addition to having limited perspectives and psychological biases, we block certain things from our conscious minds for functional reasons—and the power of self-preservation can be remarkably strong. Starting as children, we use defense mechanisms to build walls in our psyches that keep troublesome or overwhelming thoughts and feelings at bay. As we grow, many of those childhood defenses stay with us, even though we no longer need their protection. By the time we're adults, they're deeply rooted and unrecognizable. Unrecognizable to *us* that is. Our friends can often see our “issues”—the playing cards on our foreheads—just as we can see many of theirs. The trick is to better see, and understand, our own machinations. Therein lies the advantage—there is no true bliss in ignorance.

Making the choice to begin seeing ourselves accurately, warts and all, is a powerful step in our growth. Only when we recognize our shortcomings can we begin to remedy them. Only when we perceive our true strengths can we leverage their power. And only when we seek what we don't know can we really start to learn.

Consider the following:

- Do you think you delude yourself in any way? If so, why?
- Are you prepared to see it all—the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the feared? If not, why not?
- Are you willing to ask your friends what cards you're holding and to truly listen to what they have to say?

## Know Thyself

“Knowledge of the self is the mother of all knowledge.”

—Khalil Gibran

Legend has it that the wisest men in ancient Greece traveled to Delphi and inscribed the words *gnōthi sauton* (“know thyself”) at the entrance to the famous oracle for every truth-seeking pilgrim to see. Fortunately, since ancient times, we have had teachers, coaches, and counselors to help guide us to better understand ourselves. In my own experience, the talent of the teacher can be much more important than the particular discipline they practice.

When you marry a shrink, as I did, it’s understood that therapy is going to be in your future, and that it can be a valuable process of discovery and healing. One day, after a few contentious discussions, Robbie “suggested” that I meet with a particular psychiatrist, whom she described as both talented and well suited to men like me. Apparently, I was a bit headstrong and wedded to my own ways and my particular views of the world.

Therapy was fascinating. It was also fun at the beginning, because I got to talk about myself all the time—my favorite subject back then. At one point though, my therapist mentioned that I seemed to have issues around intimacy, and they were exerting a big influence in my psyche. He said I would do well to take a serious look at what he was noticing. That’s when we had our first argument.

After thanking the dear doctor for his observation and recommendation, I explained that the particular fear he said was in my head simply wasn’t there. He listened, then once again suggested that the issue seemed to be quite prominent and was negatively affecting my relationships. I calmly and firmly let him know that I was inside my head all day, every day, and had been so for my entire life. Furthermore, I took pride in being both intellectually curious

and honest. *He* on the other hand was *outside* my head and had been there for only a few hours altogether. Therefore, in any discussion of what was actually in my head, I was the only true authority. I was right and he was wrong. But he didn't back down, and I became increasingly annoyed. He simply ended the discussion by saying, "I guess we'll find out."

Two weeks later, I saw it! The therapist was right. It was as if he had told me there was an elephant in the room; but since I couldn't see it, I fervently believed it wasn't there. Then I saw the elephant! How could this be? How could something so big, so important, so obvious to someone (and possibly many others) on the outside be hidden from me, the guy on the inside? Apparently, I had never looked closely with eyes wide open before. Maybe I could finally see it because the doctor provided helpful clues and I respected his expertise. Then again, maybe I was simply ready. After all, I hadn't been forced to go into therapy; I chose to go on that inward odyssey.

When my next session rolled around, I ran into my therapist's office and excitedly told him he was right. But this was just the beginning, because I realized something vital: If there was one thing in my head I couldn't see, it stood to reason there were others as well.

I had always considered myself intelligent, perceptive, and honest. Now an important door had been opened, and I found myself thinking, *What else is hiding within? What other issues and obstacles am I missing? There have to be a lot of them. And I can't wait to find out what they are!*

Because we're human, there will probably always be corners of our psyches that we're unable or unwilling to peer into because of deep-seated fears, conflicting emotions, and other limitations. But recognizing those restrictions and working to overcome them is a big part of self-knowledge and personal growth. It's part of the ongoing process of opening doors and parting veils—an incredible



journey of continuous discovery and delight. It can also translate to increased energy and ability, as we no longer deploy resources to maintain unnecessary defense mechanisms and justify conflicting perceptions. It creates more space for learning and feeling, for expanding both the head and the heart.

As long as we think we have it all figured out, we shut the door on further growth. Acknowledging our limitations is often just what we need to shake us out of our mental stupor. And here's an added bonus: Other people really appreciate it when we openly and easily acknowledge our own limitations and therefore demonstrate that we value what they have to say. It has certainly made me a lot more enjoyable to work with than when I was a bit of a know-it-all.

## There Is Always More to Learn

“The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.”

—Jiddu Krishnamurti

You may be thinking, *What you've said may apply to most people but not to me. I know exactly who I am. I'm brutally honest with myself.* If so, I would urge you to think again. No one knows himself or herself as well as they think they do, or as well as they can.

Consider this experiment conducted by Dr. Gerald Bell, the founder of the Bell Leadership Institute and a professor at the University of North Carolina. Dr. Bell asked a large sampling of sixteen-year-olds this question: “On a scale of one to ten, how well do you think you know yourself?” Like most teenagers, the subjects thought they knew themselves quite well. Their answers clustered in the eight and nine range.

Next, Dr. Bell gathered a group of forty-year-olds. “Think back to when you were sixteen,” he told them. “In retrospect, how well

did you actually know yourself at that time, on a scale of one to ten?" The average answer was *four*! Looking back, those test subjects knew perfectly well that their self-awareness as teenagers had been severely limited. I'm sure you can relate. Personally, I might give my sixteen-year-old self an even lower grade.

But there's more. Dr. Bell went on to ask the same forty-year-olds, "How well do you think you know yourself now?" Like most people, they felt they had learned a lot over the years and had become much more introspective in midlife. Their scores were in the eight to nine range.

You can probably guess what happened next. Dr. Bell asked a group of seventy-year-olds to think back to when they were sixteen. "How well did you know yourself then?" he asked. Many of them gave their sixteen-year-old selves a score of one to two. Then he asked, "How well did you know yourself when you were forty?" The scores were in the four to five range. Apparently, they continued to learn a lot between forty and seventy! And so can we. In fact, as I approach seventy myself and look back on my forty-year-old self, the study mirrors my own experience.

This has served as a useful reminder to me: Don't get complacent. Don't fool yourself into believing you have no more blind spots or that your view of the world is uniquely accurate. Don't ever think there is nothing left to learn about yourself and the people around you. Nothing is more important than self-knowledge and self-awareness. And every event, every person, and every situation we encounter is a teacher.

## Go Deeper

“The learning and knowledge that we have, is, at the most, but little compared with that of which we are ignorant.”

—Plato

A major turning point in my professional life occurred when I enrolled in a program for business owners and company presidents at Harvard Business School. It was an extraordinary learning experience that helped me turn around my company and my life. One of the many compelling takeaways was an expression that our marketing professor frequently repeated: “Look at the fish.”

The saying derived from a story about the legendary zoologist and natural history professor, Louis Agassiz. Dr. Agassiz would begin the education of his new students by having them look at a preserved fish specimen and describe what they saw. After that, Dr. Agassiz would ask them to take a pencil and draw a detailed picture of the fish. Drawing the fish forced the students to look closer.

Then he asked them to redraw the same specimen, this time in color. He asked his students to look at the fish more carefully, to see it from different angles, and to consider basic questions, such as “How did the fish swim?” “How did it eat?” “How did it breathe?” and “How did it procreate?” Sure enough, the students saw something new each time, and their renderings reflected their new perspectives and deeper understanding.

“Look at the fish” became the battle cry and guiding light for all our courses in that Harvard program. Look deeper, see more, and understand more. It’s been a personal mantra of mine ever since—a reminder that there is always something more to discover and something important to learn. We may be inherently blocked, biased, and blind, but we can be *less* blocked, *less* biased, and *less* blind. When we’re willing to accept the challenge of opening the

doors of perception wider and wider, we can take giant steps toward achieving everything we want in our personal and professional lives.

## Curiosity Leads to Clarity

“I think, at a child’s birth, if a mother could ask a fairy godmother to endow it with the most useful gift, that gift should be curiosity.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

It’s not always obvious how much we should listen to our own inner voice as opposed to the voices of others, or how much weight we should assign to our own analysis versus the calculations of others when we’re making decisions. Being obstinate about our convictions can lead to trouble. But so can giving in when we have a strong belief about something. Some of the greatest innovators in science, statecraft, industry, and religion persevered with single-minded devotion despite being told they were wrong, or even crazy. But those seemingly stubborn mavericks were also insatiably curious people, explorers who sought answers to burning questions and put their beliefs to the test: Buddha, Plato, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, Madame Curie, Albert Einstein, Walt Disney, Steve Jobs, the Dalai Lama, Oprah Winfrey, J. K. Rowling, Angela Merkel—the list goes on and on.

Instinct and intellect are powerful resources and both need to be listened to and respected. They need to live and work together. We have to take our intuition seriously while we examine the evidence. We have to be as expansive and open-minded as possible without being gullible or indiscriminate. We have to have the courage of our convictions without becoming so inflexible or fanatical that we shut ourselves off from the truth and push others away. The truth tends to reveal itself little by little as we go deeper. We need as many vantage points as we can get until we have clarity.

I personally strive to be open-minded enough to sincerely listen equally to my own analysis and inner voice and to those of others. I do my best to carefully consider all ideas and advice until the right path becomes clear. But when is that? When is the searching over?

In discussing this specific question with a diverse group of intelligent, experienced, and introspective people, the most common answer is: “When you know.” While that may sound a bit nebulous, most people will agree that the sense of knowing that occurs when a person has reached that point is actually quite distinct. And when I’m still not sure which way to go, I do know this: I need to keep looking further and deeper until I *do* know. This doesn’t necessarily mean that I stand still until I’m 100% certain, but rather that at some point, the scales tip, and it feels right to go one way or another. Only then, when reason and intuition align, do I take action with clarity, comfort, and conviction.

## Turn Frustration into Fascination

“You don’t drown by falling in the water; you drown by staying there.”

—Edwin Louis Cole

Expanding our awareness is serious business, but it can also be a lot of fun. That’s why Zen masters are often depicted as both stern and jolly. They appreciate this key paradox: While mindfulness (the state of being conscious and aware of what arises in the moment) requires our full attention, we also have to let go to let in. And while finding the truth may require rigor and discipline, the path to greater awareness and openness is often to lighten up and enjoy the journey.

Rather than torture ourselves and others about our shortcomings, we can approach life with an attitude of curious delight. And the delight part is just as important as the curious. Both work to

open and elevate. One of my favorite pieces of advice to myself and to others is “Turn frustration into fascination!”

People always ask me for an example of this concept in real life. The list is theoretically endless, because throughout each day we all experience people and situations that bother us. It could be the frustration of being late because a cab driver went the wrong way, the disappointment of someone letting us down, a meal being overcooked in a restaurant, or people not listening to our advice or ignoring our requests. Like I said, it’s theoretically a long list.

But in all of these examples, who is suffering? *Me*. And what am I learning? *Nothing*—other than perhaps not to depend on others. But that attitude leads to isolation and extra work as I end up micromanaging people or doing everything myself. Plus, I too make plenty of mistakes, and I still end up with that frustration. So where’s the growth in this approach? Where’s the joy in life if we’re constantly getting upset?

Fascination is much more enjoyable than frustration, and it’s far more productive. By attempting to sincerely understand something, we become open and curious, which is a great starting point for learning and growth. And asking questions is a wonderful point of entry to a state of fascination. For example, these are some of the questions I ask myself when I get unsettled:

- Why would someone do this, or act this way?
- Would I ever do this? Why?
- Why does this bother me so much?
- What does this type of situation relate to or remind me of?
- What’s the real reason I (or they) haven’t changed?
- What could I do differently next time?

- How can I make this journey of discovery into an enjoyable game?
- Who can I ask to join me in this exploration?
- How will other people respond if I treat them with love and appreciation instead of anger and contempt? Why don't I do that?
- And ultimately: *If this situation helps me learn something valuable about myself and others, is it a problem or a gift?*

This orientation toward fascination, and the questions we can ask to explore it, can be incredibly powerful and productive. And usually, the more upset and frustrated we are, the more we have to learn and gain. Give it a try and decide for yourself.