

Table of Contents

- 1 - The journey begins...
 - 2- Get out of your rut!
 - 3 – How do I know what I want? Obtain clarity.
 - 4 -What’s bugging you? Increase your energy
 - 5- What’s in your way?
 - 6- Progress...tools to take one step at a time.
 - 7- Identify your goals, define your purpose and make a friend
 - 8- Self esteem and your inner critic
 - 9- Are you sparkling?
 - 10- Putting it all together
- Epilogue

CHAPTER THREE

I purposefully arrived at the coffee shop a few minutes early wanting some time to look over my notes from the past week before everyone else arrived. Already believing that I was fairly self-aware, I wasn't expecting too many surprises in my homework answers to the 'Who am I?' questions. And I wasn't, but there was something to actually writing down what was in my head and being able to see my thoughts on paper. I liked Nicole's suggestion that we start a journal, along with our homework questions, to track our thoughts and feelings throughout this process. I was never very good at journaling, though. I guess I had visions of it falling into the wrong hands and read aloud at my funeral. Nevertheless, I had trouble being completely honest with my 'Dear Diary' and, therefore, with myself. But I decided to throw caution to the wind and write down exactly how I was feeling and what was going through my head—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Now, rereading what I had written over this past week, I began to feel quite unsettled. Everything I saw on the paper did not match up with the life I was living. I really wanted to be painting, to be showing my work, to have a studio, to be traveling, maybe teaching, to have more control over my schedule. Instead, I was working long, structured days in a completely uncreative environment that was governed by deadlines and bottom lines. This was not the life that I had imagined for myself. Wait a minute. Maybe that was part of the problem. I hadn't ever sat down and really imagined what I wanted my life to look like, maybe because it just seemed unattainable, unrealistic. Maybe I thought if I never dreamed it I would never have to pursue it, and if it never happened I wouldn't be disappointed. Maybe...

"You look deep in thought, Sam." Julie sat down beside me.

"Just thinking about what I want," I said, looking up.

"What you really, really want?" Julie said, pulling out her homework.

"Yes, and why I don't have it."

Julie sighed. "I'm not sure that I'm totally clear on what I want, but I'm crystal clear on what I don't want." She paused. "I love my kids, but I need a reason to get out of the house, to feel productive. I don't want to be wholly defined as a mother, and I'm no longer a wife. I need to start doing things that are just for me, that I'm good at, or that I enjoy," she began digging through her purse for money for coffee. "I want my life to be different, but I'm afraid of change. I have an out-of-date résumé, a closet full of pants with elastic waists, and I don't remember the last time I left the house without spit-up on my left shoulder."

"You just need to build your confidence up again. Please tell me that you haven't completely given up on the idea of going back to school this fall."

"I haven't given up on the idea, I just don't see how I can make it happen now." Julie

looked defeated. “Hey, did you talk to Bev yesterday?”

I nodded in the negative.

“She must have called me three or four times but never left a message. I saw her number on the call display.”

Just then the door opened, and Bev slipped in and over to the table. I noticed immediately that something was wrong.

“It happened,” she said with a sigh and then sat down.

“What?” I asked almost cautiously.

“What you both promised me never would,” Bev looked wide-eyed.

There was a moment of silence as Julie and I struggled to imagine what it could be.

Then Julie suddenly grabbed Bev’s arm. “No!”

“Yes,” Bev said calmly.

“When?” asked Julie.

“Yesterday,” Bev answered.

I finally realized what their monosyllabic conversation was about. “They laid you off?”

Bev nodded silently.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it,” Julie shook her head.

“How are you?” I leaned in and touched Bev’s hand.

“In shock, I guess,” Bev said sounding very tired.

We all sat there for a moment not knowing what to say next. I felt a small, hard lump forming in my stomach. How could this happen? First the heart attack and now this. I was stunned and more than a little sad for my friend.

“What next? Did they offer you something? A package?” Julie leaned back in her chair.

Bev lowered her chin onto one of her fists. “They really didn’t say too much yesterday. They just called me up to HR, thanked me for my years of service, said they were restructuring the department, told me I was officially being given my two weeks notice, and that I could enjoy those days at home.”

“That’s it?” said Julie incredulously.

“Oh, they said to expect an envelope to be delivered to my home in the next couple of days with more details,” Bev thought for a moment. “Remember Doris from the fifth floor? Well, she was let go last year and was six years shy of retirement and they gave her a payout of sorts. I don’t know all the details, but I think she got an okay bridge to retirement.”

“Well, that’s good,” I smiled. “I’m sure they’ll do that for you then.”

“I guess,” Bev half-smiled. “I suppose I’ll have to wait till I see what’s in the envelope.”

“Good morning, ladies. How is everyone this morning?” Nicole had slipped into the coffee shop without our noticing. “You look like you’re in an intense conversation.”

Everyone looked up at her, but no one spoke.

Finally Bev said, “I was laid off yesterday.”

“No! You’re kidding,” Nicole quickly sat down next to Bev.

Bev took a deep breath in. “I wish I was.”

Nicole looked genuinely surprised. “I’m all about life change, but this is a huge life change—a bit of a shocker. How are you doing?”

“I’m not really sure. I’m just numb,” Bev said.

“And I imagine you will be for some time,” Nicole set her bag down. “Well, this will definitely take our conversation in a new direction.”

“I don’t want today to revolve around me,” Bev piped up. “Really. Let’s just carry on, and I’ll just try to absorb whatever I can in my stupor. I think I just need some things to sink in, and then we’ll spend some time on me.”

“You’re sure?” asked Nicole.

Bev nodded affirmatively.

“Okay, fair enough,” Nicole pulled her binder out of her bag. “We’ll move forward and

then spend some time at the end letting you vent, if you feel like it.”

“I’m sure I will.” Bev smiled.

“Okay, so other than that bombshell, what else is new? How are you two feeling?” Nicole looked at Julie and me.

“Well, we were talking about how far apart our reality is from our dreams,” I said.

“To be perfectly honest, bombshell aside, we were already a little depressed this morning.” Julie said.

“Yeah, your homework is bringing us down,” I joined in.

“Hmmm, should prove for interesting conversation this morning.” Nicole stood up. “Does everyone already have coffee?”

“Nope, I’ll join you.” Julie popped up.

“Me, too,” followed Bev.

Deep down I knew this was good for me, to be asking the hard questions, to be shaking up my status quo, but right now I was just downright grumpy. On top of that, now I felt guilty for feeling grumpy. Bev’s life was going through a major shakeup, and I was worried about selling a painting and complaining about a job I didn’t like. At least I had a job.

“Well, it sounds like you’ve all had a *good* week of self-exploration. Or at least a week of self-exploration,” Nicole said setting down her mug and glancing at Bev.

“I’m sure all the homework you gave us is part of some bigger picture, but so far all it’s done for me is made me more depressed than before we started.” Julie nodded with me in agreement.

“How so?” said Nicole.

“Well, it’s just shown me again how far apart my ideal self is from my real self. So much of what I think is important or that I love doing is not incorporated into my daily life.” My frustration was showing through.

“What about you, Julie? Do you agree with Sam?”

“Definitely. I’m beginning to get a picture of how I’d like my life to look, but I just don’t know how to get there. There are just too many obstacles.”

“There’s just never a good time,” Bev said jokingly. “Man, those words are coming back to haunt me.”

“I know it’s too fresh now, but this really is an exciting thing, Bev. This adds a great new dimension to our group. We will actually have someone going through a radical life change right here in our midst a little sooner than expected,” Nicole said with cautious optimism. “Not that that let’s you other two off the hook. I’m expecting big things from all of you.”

“We’ll try not to let you down.” I leaned over and clinked Julie’s mug with my own.

“With that in mind, we should get right into it.” Nicole glanced down into her binder. “We’ll start today by talking about confidence. When you’ve had it in the past and why you may not have it in certain areas now. Each of you needs to ask the question why you are feeling how you are feeling now. Perhaps you are not confident enough to change careers or directions.”

“I’ve been asking myself that all week,” I said looking into my coffee.

“Great! Now you need to listen to your answers. Maybe there are other things you need to do in order to be ready for the change. What financial or emotion needs do you have? And how will you know when you do have confidence? Will you be able to recognize confidence when it appears in your life? What will it take for you to be confident and feel it?”

“I used to have more confidence than I do now. Not sure where it went,” said Julie.

“You have to remember that you’re still fresh out of a divorce, and that would wreck havoc on anyone’s confidence,” Bev was quick to add.

“Consider, that confidence is still inside you. Sometimes you just need to dust it off, so to speak. Shine it up. Think back to when you experienced confidence before. It came from inside of you. Before you can reactivate it within you, get a clear picture of how you felt the other times you experienced confidence. I want you all to do something right now. Close your eyes.”

“Here? At the table?” Julie became immediately self-conscious.

“Yes. Don’t worry. I won’t hypnotize you and make you cluck like a chicken in the middle of the café,” Nicole reassured us.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Nicole had us remember a time when we felt *really* confident. It didn’t matter where it was or what we were doing—maybe throwing an amazing dinner party, or doing a great presentation at work, or teaching something to a child. Then we went back to that time and relived the experience in the movie screen of our mind’s eye, as though we were watching a movie from memory. She told us to go back into our body and recreate it and really feel the feelings of being totally confident. As we were reliving these feelings, when they hit their peak, we were supposed to squeeze our thumb and fingertip together and hold it for five seconds.

I thought back to the times I had spent teaching my thirteen-year-old niece how to paint, first with watercolor and then with acrylic. Although she obviously had some innate talent, it was her enthusiasm that really struck me. She was like a sponge, ready to soak in everything I was saying. Her huge, attentive eyes and eagerness to try anything I suggested made me want to be a better teacher. As the memory became real in my body I squeezed together my thumb and fingertip.

“After you’ve done this exercise a few times you will be able to just squeeze your fingers together and your body will respond by giving you feelings of confidence,” Nicole said. “It’s a sort of physical memory recall.”

“Very cool,” Bev said looking down, squeezing and releasing her thumb and finger and enjoying her newfound power.

“This can be used for any positive emotion you’d like to recreate anytime,” Nicole said, sipping her coffee.

“I guess I’m a bit like Julie,” I said. “I don’t think I lost my confidence because of one event, but it seems to be slipping away nonetheless. I guess I’m confident in things I know I can do or that don’t have much risk of failure, but for the most part I am paralyzed by fear of trying anything new.”

“Fear of failure can be just that—paralyzing,” said Nicole, “and I don’t want to downplay that fear. I’ve heard it said that there is no failure, only feedback. We may fail, but we need to realize that we are guaranteed failure if we never try. Failure is never attempting anything. We need to look directly at the failure and ask ourselves what’s the worst that can happen if we do fail. If we look at the worse thing that could happen, ask yourself how could I *prevent* that from happening? And if for some reason I couldn’t, could I live with it? And if the best thing happened, how would that make me feel?”

I added, “I guess people can’t actually die of embarrassment.”

“I came awfully close that day I walked across the entire third floor from the washroom to the staff lounge with half a roll of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of one of my pumps and trailing behind me.” Bev covered her face with her hands.

“And we almost died of laughter!” Julie said remembering the day.

“Okay, so you may have *felt* like you were going to die, but you lived to tell and retell the story, much to our delight. Stemming from this fear of failure is often the fear of making the best choice,” Nicole said moving on. “In your case, Sam, you have a sea of choices in front of you.”

As I listened to Nicole I began to realize some of the choices I had. I could stay in my present career and continue to paint as a hobby. I could work part-time in my current job, or look for another one and pour more time and effort into my painting. I could decide to quit my job altogether and start showing my stuff at art galleries and maybe teaching a few classes. But were these realistic choices? I hesitated for a moment and then opened my mouth about to protest.

Nicole caught me and said, “I know you are about to say, ‘What about my mortgage payments? What if no gallery takes my work? What if I never sell a painting?’ Well, what if you *did* sell your paintings? How would that change the quality of your life?”

“Probably a lot,” I replied.

“Make a choice. Even if later on you need to choose another path, at least you will know that you have eliminated one option! Most of us live our lives by accident, which is simply not making decisions and letting life, others, whoever, make them for us by default.”

“I choose to think of this as fate.” Julie leaned into the conversation.

“This is not fate,” Nicole was quick to add. “This is avoiding making decisions, plans, or goals. When we don’t know what decision to make, we don’t make one!”

“Let me guess, you’re going to say that by not making one, we’re making one,” Bev said knowingly.

“Exactly. By not making one, we’ve actually made one, and that defeats us!” Nicole said with growing enthusiasm. “Choose something! Anything! Try something, and if it doesn’t work out, that’s okay; move on to something else. Most of us remain stuck by not making a decision because we don’t want to make a wrong decision. My question is, how will you ever know unless you choose?”

“Okay, I can understand this if you’re buying a new dress and can’t decide between the black one or the red one,” said Julie, “but when it comes to the bigger decisions of your life, don’t you think that’s a little simplistic? If I get the red dress home and decide I liked the black one better, I just take it back and exchange it. But if I enroll in school or change careers and then decide I’ve made a mistake, it’s a little more complicated. There’s money involved and time and maybe even other people to consider, like my kids.”

“I understand,” Nicole said reassuringly, “and I’m not suggesting that you hop from job to job or make rash decisions when it comes to these bigger issues. I’m simply saying that, by using some introspection in your homework exercises and with our dialogue, you’ll gain insights and knowledge of yourself—likes, dislikes, skills, etc. Then you are in a much better position to make a thoughtful, wise decision that works for you.

“Sometimes people spend more effort planning and researching their two-week holiday than they do their career and their lives! Give it careful planning and thought, and then *do it*. Let me give you an example from my own life. When I started college I was afraid of picking the wrong major. I knew it was a big decision, and I didn’t want to mess it up. So I didn’t make one because I thought it had to be perfect. And because I didn’t know what was the perfect choice, I didn’t make one at all. I sat down with a career counselor and he pointed out that not picking my major was just as imperfect a choice as making the *wrong* one. I gave myself permission to choose, realizing that there was no shame in the idea that I may choose something different down the road. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

“Well...” I started to answer.

“Rhetorical question.” Bev punched me on the arm.

Nicole smiled and continued. “The worst thing might be learning something and taking a job that you eventually move on from. You still take the knowledge, skills, and business experience with you to the next job. And because you are doing your homework and exploring who you are, you will likely be close to making a good decision. Who knows? You might really like it for a long time, and, if not, you’ll be in a better place to make another informed decision. If you don’t like the job, you’ll get another one. If you don’t like retirement, you can go back to work. We need to redefine our concept of failure. Also, we need to realize that having the same job for thirty-five years, or even ten years, is not going to happen. So choose for the next few years, not the rest of your life.”

“I like that idea,” I said. “When I watch kids paint, they paint with no fear. They aren’t thinking about whether or not their painting will be a success. They just pick every color that they think, in the moment, looks good and put it on the paper. If they don’t like the end product, they just throw it aside and grab a fresh sheet of paper. I know that my fear of failure has prevented me from being as free an artist as I could be. So I suppose I could start thinking that same way in the rest of my life. If I try something that doesn’t work out, just throw it aside and start a fresh sheet

WORKBOOK:

Pretend you have been guaranteed one wish from the magic genie. You can create your ideal workday. What would you be doing? With whom? A team? By yourself? Inside? Outside? Leading? Following? What tasks? What purpose, goal, outcome? Are you planning, organizing, completing a task, or using a skill? What type of people are you with? Where are you? Is your day planned or flexible? Spend a few minutes just imagining that day that everyone dreams of—a totally free day where you have the ability to do whatever you choose. Go crazy with this one and be very vivid, compelling, and clear! Sometimes it is easier to write the worst possible day. Do that, so that you can write the opposite to describe a great day. Choose the method that works for you.

Here are a few more exercises to gain insight into your skills and interests: What are the first three areas you would go to in a bookstore? What makes you special? What job would you buy? What past project that you completed are you most proud of? Describe a time you were in the 'zone'. What were you doing? Add these to your criteria list created earlier.

GIVE YOURSELF A BOOST!

When you eliminate what is bugging you, you will feel much better! Make a list of ten things that are irritating you right now. These are situations that you are putting up with, that are within your control, and that are constantly distracting you: the leaky tap, loose doorknob, messy closet, etc.

Create a plan to eliminate two items a week until your list is gone.

Let's create a snapshot of what you have learned so far. What have you discovered? Spend a few moments jotting down your insights and thoughts that you have about your next career or retirement plans.