

FOREWORD

In a world that seems to go faster, get noisier, and exist in a state of constant motion, finding your own peace in the chaos is hard. Only when you understand that the world isn't set up to optimize you can you begin your journey of discovery—to uncover what your “best” looks like.

It's a lifelong journey of discovery that some never take frankly because doing so is too difficult, they don't believe it will matter, or they think they can fool the process and find shortcuts. Still, others stop short of the true discovery that unleashes their power, passion, and purpose.

“We can do anything we want to if we stick to it long enough.”

—Helen Keller

Your life is too important to leave it to chance. I wrote this book to encourage you to lead your life with intention, grounded in what matters to you. If you start with intention and the curiosity to understand yourself, you're able to find the best version of yourself because leadership is first a personal endeavor that starts from the inside out. You simply can't lead others unless you lead yourself first. Bottom line: life is the ultimate experience model. You don't come with an operating manual that tells you how to be your best. You just have to figure it out to find the things that work.

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And the discovery is never done. You always have something else to learn. Dedicating yourself to the lifelong discipline of practice allows you to see what works. By committing to remain engaged in your journey, you can stay in tune with what grounds you at every turn. This understanding will allow you to master what is possible for you, and ultimately, others. The questions change as people move through their lives. In their twenties, people wonder where to begin. In their thirties, they wonder if they're headed in the right direction. In their forties, they may begin to wonder if this is all there is. And in their fifties and beyond, they wonder what should happen in the next chapter.

The power of understanding your personal foundation grounds you in what matters. It allows you to understand how you really work. Furthermore, it keeps you from being confused by the chaos in your world that can cause you to believe something else about you. Instead, your grounded perspective *and* your commitment to stay curious in your life make you unstoppable, even in rough waters. They make leading others possible. Without first knowing yourself, you have nothing to give.

Your life *will* have an impact. And you shouldn't leave it up to someone else to decide what that should be. Your life is too important. The choice is yours, unless you opt out—then someone else will decide.

That's why I wrote this book. Everyone thinks that he or she is in it alone. And everyone is, unless he or she reaches out to others to compare notes. It's only then that you can realize that you're more alike than different. You must be willing to share your own stories and be open to conversation to receive the same from others.

In fact, I wouldn't have written this book without the many conversations I've had with others. Ultimately, my friends and colleagues urged me to commit these conversations to a book to share the lessons with others. This book is the culmination of years of conversations over a glass of wine, during a walk, on a trip, or wherever I could find time to connect with others. The endless notes on scraps of paper and cocktail napkins and in the margins of articles were piling up in a folder until, one day, I couldn't ignore the work I'd done and the resounding support I had to write a book.

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I love working in this zone, one focused on understanding my personal foundation so I can be intentional in my life. In fact, my personal mission statement is to bring relevance and high performance toward a future goal. Yet writing this book proved to be one of the hardest and most terrifying things I have ever done. If it weren't for the support of my friends, especially Tammie Lynn, this book would have remained a pile of notes in my folder to be considered someday.

Writing a book is something that many say they'll do because it's a sexy thing to talk about, but few actually make it happen. Because the work is real, it's hard, and it's not very sexy. Just as in your life journey, sometimes it takes others to believe in you before you do. I'm thankful for the support I had to bring this idea to reality and, most important, in a form that I can share with people I know and people I have yet to meet.

I dedicate this book to those individuals who wish to make their life journey intentional and those who wish to make the news in their life rather than just report it. And the work of grounding yourself first is essential if you wish to lead others and ultimately inspire others to be better than they dreamed possible.

This book requires you to do the work that grounds you in what matters most. It's about building a strong foundation that will guide you and your leadership regardless of your age or life experience. This book is really about the work.

This notion of being grounded isn't about age. It's a state of understanding more about you and what matters most to you and how finding your optimal state makes optimizing others possible. And finally, it's about making the world a better place, one person at a time, starting with you.

In the end, I hope the book impacts your life and inspires you to live your life to your full potential and to lead others so that $1 + 1 = 3$. The questions raised are designed to "haunt" you—in a good way. They're simple questions to ask yourself, but they're hard to answer, and only you can do the work. So, like many things in life, you get to choose: If not now, then when?

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I hope that the questions raised will play in your head like a song as a reminder that your life needs to be awesome—designed for you, by you, in a constant state of refinement. You're far too smart to be the only thing standing in your way. With focus and a commitment to practice, anything is possible. The important thing is that you start from wherever you are. The rest of your journey ahead is worth it, because it's for *you*.

Your best chapter is yet to come, and I look forward to hearing from you. You can share your feedback at www.nancymdahl.com or in person as I travel the world speaking to organizations that have started their journey to be their best. Comparing notes will help both of us be better. And isn't that the only true dimension of how you and I can impact this world in a way that matters?

SECTION I: TAKING OWNERSHIP

The Journey Begins . . .

The notion of leading your life requires you to discover who you are so you're grounded and understand what really matters. And it isn't a one-and-done exercise, because things change. It's a lifelong journey to build discovery skills focused on you. Funny, how you spend 24/7 with yourself, but you're often the hardest to get to know. Doing so takes both intention and tenacity to master this mind-set.

“No person is free who is not a master of himself.”

—*Epictetus*

Mastery means you intellectually understand and have command of your emotional makeup and your physical actions. Mastery means you can live in alignment and exercise your intention to optimize your life. What screws many people up is the picture they have of them in their head. But the picture isn't reality—it's your interpretation of reality. Ironically, the thing that often stops you from making significant progress in your life isn't somebody else's ideas, but your own self-limiting perceptions and beliefs. Letting go of the picture can be hard. You need to learn to trust your gut. The gut knows what the head hasn't figured out. I dedicate this section of this book to learning how to get out of your own way so you can be *awesome*. Being awesome won't happen by chance and can only happen with focus and willingness to change.

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I'll share my process and why I continue to do what I do. I'll use examples and break the phases down into smaller parts to help you get started. This process may feel awkward at first, and potentially uncomfortable, but over time the behaviors become second nature. And you'll learn to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, because that's what is required to make true change.

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I've heard it said that to truly master anything you have to spend ten thousand hours practicing your craft—a tall order for sure, and that's why many people fall short.

Here's the deal: skills are built through repetition, or practice. Think about something you learned. Whether it was riding a bike, mastering a school subject, excelling in a sport, or being an effective public speaker, all required practice. Sometimes you fell, or made a mistake. Welcome to the club. Other times you learned to push it further and go faster, showing yourself and others what is possible. Sometimes you win, and sometimes you learn.

This is how you develop the muscle to be intentional in your life every day. But learning to be intentional is unlike the skills you learned to ride a bike, where once you learned it, you were done. This muscle is built over a lifetime, because as the context of your life changes, you need to know how to unlearn, relearn, and learn again. Or in some cases, discover and learn it for the first time. Bottom line, you need to forever be a student of you in order to optimize both your quality and joy in life. Your focus needs to be on building the muscle and the process, not just the answers.

“And at the end of the day, your feet should be dirty, your hair messy, and your eyes sparkling.”

—*Shanti*

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How many times in your life have you run into a situation that didn't go well, leading you to think, "Well that's how I've done it before. Why didn't it work this time?" What likely happened is you had learned a skill previously, tried to apply the skill in a new situation, and it didn't perform the same. Your skill at the task was likely there, but your skill as a student of you wasn't. You weren't engaged in learning more—only in doing it just as you'd done before—so you weren't able to optimize your skill in the new situation. This, in turn, likely caused others to pick up the slack and you to wonder why you hadn't been more effective.

When others know more about you than you do, the advantage flips against you—people will use their knowledge of you to make choices for your life. I've seen it happen over and over again. It's your life, and you need to learn to control the aspects of life that are in your control. Helping people achieve this is a big part of my motivation for writing this book. The skill of being a student of you keeps you in the driver's seat of your own bus, which is the only seat you should ever occupy.

To clarify, when I say "control" your life, I don't mean you can control every detail; however, you can control the direction, which is an important distinction that helps you focus on the right things. If you've done your homework, and truly understand yourself, you're in a better position to optimize the moves that come at you and accelerate the pace of your decision-making.

Think about it.

Like most people, you have probably had a road trip that didn't go your way. But because you knew where you were going, you maneuvered around the road construction, figured out where the gas station was, fixed a flat tire, and still arrived to your destination. You didn't control every move, but you did control the direction. In some cases, those back roads showed you something extra that wasn't part of the original journey. That's true in life too. You just have to stay open to being the student so you don't get focused on your frustration of controlling every move and miss the key lessons that are there if you're willing to stay engaged and intentional in your life.

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The commitment to studying yourself has always been important—not always understood, but always important. It was a difficult concept for me to embrace initially, and I know that’s true of others as well. Why is this? Because being a student of oneself requires a curiosity about you that you may not be willing to commit to. Lack of curiosity seems to happen for three reasons:

- You get lazy because it’s easier to do things the same way than to learn new things.
- A traumatic life event has “frozen” you in place.
- You simply don’t believe that you can be intentional because life just happens to you.

For me, this notion of being intentional started in my hometown, a small community with only eight hundred people, many of whose families had lived there for generations. I had forty-two people in my graduation class and because everyone’s family history was well known, a person’s last name often became a life sentence, defining what others thought that person would or should do with his or her life—good or bad. I saw these prejudged life sentences lived out every day, and frankly I didn’t like it. Why shouldn’t I have some say in how and what I would do with my life? My journey began.

Finding Your Own Path

Years later, I saw this same scenario lived out with my own sons in the Twin Cities, a much bigger city. My older son, Erik, was two feet when he was born and grew to be six eight. People had expectations of what he should do, what positions he should play in sports, and how he should live his life. When his younger brother, Jorgen, came along, he followed in Erik’s shadow—literally and figuratively. They played the same sports in school with many of the same coaches. Jorgen fought to find his own place and not be pushed to play where Erik played. They were different

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people with different talents and gifts, not mirror images of each other just because they shared a last name.

I'm happy that one of the forty-two coaches my sons had over their school careers took the time to get to know them as individuals. Their lacrosse coach was a college student who grew up in our community and had played lacrosse. Neither of the boys knew him nor did I, but he clearly loved lacrosse, which was new to our area, and he wanted to help grow the sport by working with the youth program.

Making the practice schedule work wasn't always easy, but we found a way, because my boys really wanted to play. I could see the desire in their faces. They couldn't wait to get to the field to see their coach and the guys.

The coach arrived to every practice in his big black truck, always on time and always focused on the disciplines of practice. He pushed the boys, and when the players resisted, he responded with more running and drills. These extra drills weren't a favorite part of practice for the players, but they brought focus and built the physical capabilities of each player and the collective team. He had the same no-nonsense approach with the parents. He was there to build a winning team, one player at a time. He expected players and parents to make the same commitment.

The coach helped Erik understand that comparing his performance to guys half his size wasn't an apples-to-apples comparison. In fact, it didn't leverage the gifts that he had because he was trying to be like someone else. Although lacrosse often favors smaller, speedier players, the coach was able to show Erik how his larger size could be an advantage in his position, and that comparing his running times wasn't the right way to look at his ability to contribute to the team.

This insight made it possible for Erik to begin a journey of learning to practice and build the skills that were uniquely his own. The coach took extra steps to work with him during the season to help him practice his skills. Then the coach drafted Erik for a tournament weekend, which was considered quite an honor. He told my son that he likely wouldn't have a

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lot of playing time, but that Erik's size would be an advantage in his attack position and Erik's ability to block opposing players would be critical to the success of certain plays. This helped recalibrate Erik's expectations for his role on the team.

Just as the coach predicted, Erik didn't play much, but he did perform to the coach's expectations. Erik's performance mattered to the team, and he finally felt for the first time that his contributions were important. He realized that he could do things the other guys weren't designed to do. This coach led his team in a way that optimized and inspired greatness in each player. As a sophomore in college, this coach was already living what many leaders never understand: being a leader isn't about you; it's about how you inspire others to get results.

This awareness, which allowed my son to see his power for the first time, had a profound effect on his perspective and his life. He could now begin to play the game on his terms.

When my younger son came along, the coach's insight helped Jorgen gain a new perspective too. Jorgen learned getting feedback wasn't a sign of weakness but rather a sign of strength and a key to improve. The coach helped Jorgen see how conditioning could build his speed, agility, and confidence.

The coach's approach, the words he used, and his body language were entirely different with my two sons. The oldest one needed the coach to work right alongside him and provide real-time feedback. The coach knew that patient demonstration, practice, and words of encouragement were what Erik craved. The coach allowed my son to build momentum, mastery, and ultimately, the confidence in his own ability.

Jorgen required the opposite. The coach had to challenge him, get in his face, and hold him accountable to do the hard work. The coach's challenges frustrated and angered Jorgen, which in turn led to more running and more workouts. The coach didn't let my son's frustration wear him down. Instead, the coach continued with the same consistent approach. In time, my son's response changed. He learned a new way to play the game and approach life.

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The understanding that both of my sons gained from the coach's insight was magical. To sum up their learning from the coach: my oldest son was meant to stop things, and my youngest son was meant to chase things.

Not everyone is lucky enough to have a coach who understands that the objective of leadership is to optimize each player. If you don't, you need to study yourself, discover your gifts, and make sure that you're optimizing them throughout your life.

“Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice.”

—Steve Jobs

Anticipating Impact of Another Perspective

I remember the first time I had to deal with being judged differently because I'm female. I had always been able to compete in academics, sports, and outdoor activities, including hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and skiing. I had never realized that women should have a different standard, that is, until a professor during my master's program asked the class to stand in line based on our survey score from highest to lowest. She then revealed the score was based on how we ranked against male and female traits. She explained that masculine behavior was at one end of the spectrum and more feminine behavior was at the other end. I stood in the number one position, demonstrating the most masculine traits. Mostly men and then a few women followed me in the line. A mix of men and women were in the middle and almost all females were at the other end. Even though I was in the number one position, I could clearly see that based on our order, that male traits were more valuable than female traits.

Outside of class and throughout my career, this attitude has been demonstrated again and again. Like the time when I was asked, right after earning my MBA, whether I was going to quit work and stay home

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and raise a family. Like when I was asked as an executive to help another buy a gift because “girls” are better at that. Like when I heard an executive say, “Women don’t make hard choices; that’s why we need to choose a man.” Like when I heard a man ask my husband if I could be effective at my new leadership position in a woman-owned company, because the man was worried that two women wouldn’t be able to work together.

Really, I was tempted to add a chapter called “You can’t make this up.” The number of real-life experiences that I’ve collected about how gender defines what someone thinks are a person’s capabilities is mind blowing. For now, the stories sit in my folder to be pondered on a different day.

The lesson to be shared today is that no one deserves to be put in the same bucket based on gender or any other common trait. Others will always have opinions of what you should do. Ultimately, you get to choose.

Choosing may start by doing what you know, such as following in a parent’s footsteps. You may feel most comfortable starting there, but I recommend moving from that space and exploring what else is out there. In the end, you may come back to what you know, but by following your own journey, you return with a broader perspective and many more possibilities.

I referred to this process earlier as “driving your own bus.” The bus provides a powerful image for your own journey in life. You sit in the driver’s seat, and the direction you choose is yours alone. When you are uncertain about the direction, my advice is to drive around the parking lot until the path becomes clear rather than parking the bus. Staying in drive makes finding the right path easier.

Furthermore, you’ll never succeed with people who devalue you. When a person doesn’t appreciate you, he or she doesn’t deserve you. For me, I surround myself with people who truly value my intentioned direction and me. Thomas Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author, said it best, “If you are self-motivated, WOW, this world is tailored for you. The boundaries are gone. But if you’re not

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self-motivated, this world will be a challenge because the walls, ceilings, and floors that protected people are disappearing . . . There will be fewer limits, but also fewer guarantees. Your specific contribution will define your specific benefits much more. Just showing up won't cut it.”

The bus I've driven in my life's journey has taught me to be intentional in my path and direction. My strong intentions have allowed me to be ready to optimize the amazing opportunities that present themselves to me. I've worked at living an intentional life, and so it's become one of my strongest life skills. My dedication to practice has made living an intentional journey second nature for me. In the pages ahead, I'm excited to share with you some of the intentional practice strategies I've learned.