

SAVE THE
WORLD
AND STILL BE HOME FOR
DINNER



WILL MARRÉ

CHAPTER 4

BEING BOLD

Elevating ourselves high above our circumstances, as Abraham has done, or courageously creating opportunity for others, as Chris has done, or changing the policies or products of your employer as Mike did, is not as impossible or farfetched as it seems. In fact, it is right within our grasps. And it is how we *save the world*.

What's hard is seeing the opportunity. What's hard is giving ourselves permission to start. To act. It's hard to allow our most noble intentions to take wing. It's hard because our current society is preoccupied with superficial goals and because our fearful emotions are not wired to take bold steps no matter how obvious and practical they might be. The result is that many of us are living in ways that are neither sustainable nor abundant.

But every one of us can make our difference as Chris did. All we have to do is keep our Promise to act on our noble intentions. When we do, the ripple effects spread outward, multiplying themselves in incalculable ways.

Unfortunately, many of us never make our greatest impact. We allow too many crippling fears and limiting assumptions to get in our way. But when we have the courage to act *despite* those fears and assumptions, boldly fulfilling our Promise, great things start to happen.

NO FEAR

One of the most powerful examples of the magic of commitment to your Promise is an educator named Sarita. I honored Sarita at a San Diego town hall meeting for the American Dream Project. For years Sarita's

inner voice told her she was stuck. She denied herself opportunities, blamed her teenage misjudgments for her problems, and rationalized that change was totally unrealistic.

And she had a point. At the age of 16 Sarita had dropped out of school. At 26 she found herself with a GED, two children, and a low-paying job at a school. She was lucky enough to have a school principal who believed in her and said, “You are so much better than what you’re doing; you should be running this place. Make something of your life, the world needs you.” So at 30, Sarita went back to school. It took six years for her to get a bachelor’s and a master’s degree, all the while supporting and raising her children. She wanted to get through school so badly that she actually enrolled in two junior colleges at the same time so she could take 28 units simultaneously. Pretty amazing.

After graduating, Sarita worked her way up in a school district from teacher to dean to assistant principal to principal. She then became director of instructional support in a different district. It was everything she thought she wanted, everything she had worked so hard to achieve. She was working in a powerhouse district and held a prestigious title. But she was also commuting three hours, which kept her from being home for dinner. She was frustrated because she didn’t feel that she was really able to give 150 percent to her job or make the biggest difference she could.

So she did the unthinkable—she quit her job. People were shocked. They thought she had been fired! Then they thought she must be dying from a terrible disease. Why else would someone do something so crazy? But Sarita’s response was simply, “Why do we wait until we’re told that we’re dying to change our lives? I didn’t want to do that . . . I just knew that somehow I would find a place where I could do more. Where I could get home at the end of the day and feel good about what I was doing.”

So Sarita traveled to Brazil, the land of her family, to gain some perspective. She wanted time to reflect, to think, to listen. One day she found herself in an Internet café and decided to check on job possibilities back at home. Up popped a new posting for principal of Monarch School. Monarch is a school for homeless and at-risk students. These are not kids that are left behind; these are kids that have disappeared. Imagine not knowing if, when school gets out, you are going to return to where you slept the night before. Imagine not knowing if your parent

will still be there, or where you can find them. Those are the students of Monarch.

Sarita experienced a moment of clarity. Of blinding commitment. Her Promise stepped from the shadows. When she came back to the states and interviewed for the job she told the panel of interviewers, “It doesn’t matter if you hire me because if you don’t, I’ll still volunteer.” That’s a Promise. A big, fat bold one.

They made her principal. Today her school is open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. every week day, and every Saturday she runs programs that give these kids opportunities to go to San Diego Chargers games, the symphony, the opera, to play tennis, to go to the beach. Sarita also makes it possible for many of these kids to graduate and go to a university. Sarita is energized by her life. She says, “I’m living my dream right now. I know that I am privileged to be in an environment working with incredible educators and support staff that believe in students who are at risk of failing and slipping through the cracks, and I believe that if we can have an environment where each of us sees a potential in each and every student, we can change lives and we can make a difference.”

Sarita had plenty to fear—going back to school later in life with children to support, leaving a prestigious and secure job, the disapproving looks of others, entering an environment of “rough” kids—and she could have made plenty of excuses. But instead she took up the torch of her Promise, lit it with the brightest flame, and marched right into the darkness of a school for the forgotten. And she fulfills her Promise every day. She tells me she can’t wait to get up in the morning.

Imagine if more of us were like Sarita. Just imagine.

SARITA

This experience has taught me that there isn't really anything for me to be afraid of. Somehow things seem to work out for everyone if you just believe in yourself.

OUR UNIVERSAL EXCUSE

Very often the enemy of our Promise is the universal excuse, “I don’t have time.” We’re simply too busy to think about our Promise. Too busy to choose as Sarita chose.

Most business clients I counsel leave the house between 5:30 and 6:00 in the morning and return home between 7:00 and 9:30 in the evening. Then they work at home. And on weekends. In the car. On the boat. On the *toilet*. If they’re not working, they’re *thinking* about working. It’s what they believe is required. Today, social research reveals that nearly everyone feels time-bankrupt and constantly stressed with activity overload.

Why? With modern technology helping us accomplish tasks faster, communicate more easily and manage our lives more efficiently, we should have more leisure time than ever. But what’s causing us to feel this stress is that our free time is filled with other people’s urgencies, our own made-up deadlines, a barrage of trivial communications, and an ever-present media stream of anxiety-ridden news, entertainment, and advertising. Most of it is the equivalent of “empty calories,” just empty mental junk food pulling our attention 24/7.

THE ILLUSION OF URGENCY

The answer to our stress is supposed to be something called work-life balance. This is achieved, we are told, through time management. But it’s an illusion. We try to balance work, family, and play on a preset schedule. The problem is, nothing important ever happens on schedule. Great opportunities and painful crises usually show up inconveniently. Living by time management ensures that nothing ever gets our full attention. When we’re at work, we’re thinking about our child’s soccer game that we’re missing; when we’re at our child’s soccer game, we’re working on our “Crackberry.”

For three decades I fought this war with time. In fact, when I worked with Stephen Covey teaching the world *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, I helped to develop a Seven Habits time management system. The big idea of the system was to differentiate between what’s truly important from what’s only urgent. It was great for its time, but the tools of technology constantly assault its premise. By the late ‘90s most people had given up on time management because *everything* had become urgent. We had traded in our day planners for Blackberries and iPhones to keep us fully connected to our work lives via a digital leash.

This is supposed to improve productivity. And so more and more of us Information Age workers have surrendered to round-the-clock work availability. Like Denny's, we're always open. And as the abnormal has become normal, many of us have begun to tell ourselves that we actually *like* being tethered to our jobs. We tell ourselves it is simply necessary in the twenty-first century. After all, the competition is always working, so we'd better be.

This is a very goofy story that most of us now believe. It's called mal-adapting—adapting to something that we should not tolerate. This new story of normal life is missing something vital. Being busy, connected, and always “on” may make it seem like what we are doing is vital, important, and meaningful to us. But is it? Or is it the stress energy simply creating an illusion of importance?

DOES IT MATTER?

Important sounding job titles seduce us into thinking that what we're doing really matters. But it's not the job itself that's important; it's the quality of our Promise. Nearly two decades ago when I was conducting a retreat for a group of senior General Motors executives, I asked them, “Would the world truly suffer if G.M. ceased to exist? If it simply vanished from the planet? Wouldn't everyone just buy Toyotas, Fords, or Nissans?” The executives, of course, got very agitated. I continued, “Who was the biggest chariot maker in ancient Rome, and who cares? Why does your work matter? If you're not creating transportation that is sustainable, easy to build, easy to fix, with enduring quality and recyclable materials, why make it? The world doesn't need more of what it already has too much of.” The room thundered with silence.

The question was supposed to be outrageous. Unthinkable to stimulate new levels of thinking. Who knew it would actually become a valid question? The tragedy of General Motors is that it is full of bright, hard-working people who have spent their work lives creating less than what is possible. Less than what is needed. The problem is not in work ethic of the workforce or the brilliance of the engineers or designers. The problem is the goals of G.M.'s leaders.

The point is that most of us spend most of our time thrusting our creative energy into extremely demanding work whose value we never question. Others of us work frantically to support a lifestyle we don't intrinsically enjoy. We're just used to it and think it's what we're supposed to want.

Most of us have been programmed to pursue someone else's dreams. When we're pursuing such a false dream we often become "possessed" by a feeling of self-importance and indispensability. Or we become intoxicated by the high of using our minds to achieve other people's goals. Healthy motivation becomes so twisted that we work ceaselessly, ignore our higher aspirations, and lose our friends, our families, and finally our health.

And for what? Much of the time we are working at an unsustainable pace to live an unsustainable lifestyle. And we don't question it.

If we are working purely for someone else's agenda, we will never make our work "our own." We won't infuse our work with our unique Promise as Sarita did. We won't make our difference. We'll become like a 15-watt bulb lighting an emotional jail-cell we wish we could escape.

Somewhere deep inside, though, we all sense that our life has a purpose. In our rare moments of stillness we hear an inner voice asking us if we are doing *what we came to do*.

WHY WE CAN'T HEAR OUR OWN HEART

In today's world it is increasingly difficult to quiet down and listen to our inner voice. We are constantly bombarded by the Grid, the media-industrial matrix that permeates our lives. The Grid is our cell phones, our pagers, our laptops, our Blackberries. It's the fax machine, the television, the radio, the 24-hour news channel with the live updates crawling across the bottom of the screen, the OnStar system in the car, and the email that's piling up even as you read this. The Grid urgently beeps and buzzes and pings as it constantly insists that our attention is urgently needed. And once our attention is captured, we are simply too distracted to *have* a Promise, let alone act on it.

The Grid never sleeps. It hums away, seven days a week, demanding not just attention but allegiance. After all, if we miss that email at 9:30 on a Sunday evening, our world just might collapse. Someone else might *win*.

The Grid makes it easy for us to abdicate true leadership of our own lives because it tells us what to do. What to want. It gives us prefab priorities. It sets the goals for us —wealth, accomplishment, position, *winning*. Winning at *what*, we're never quite told, just winning. The Grid makes life easy, in a sense, because we don't have to think or feel for ourselves. We don't have *time* to. At least that's what we're programmed to think.

What's going on is nothing less than a battle for our independent thoughts. The Grid distracts us from our authentic desires and substitutes them with trivial or damaging ones. New brain research confirms that what we repeatedly think actually creates new brain circuits called neural pathways. They are like logic highways our thoughts travel on. Increasingly these highways are paved with the Grid's opinions and assumptions.

We all have the capacity to build our own logic roads to take us to our unique best life. Or we can travel the logic highways pre-paved by the bulldozers of the Grid. Every day the Grid sends thousands of dump trucks down our mental highways, filled with ideas of how we should live. These honking, smoking trucks are jamming every on-ramp to our brain's attention and taking over our choice-making powers.

To the Grid, only the superficial life counts. The Grid bombards us with images of the rich and famous and successful. It shows us what happens to losers. It catalogues our flaws and tells us what products we can buy to fix them. It shames us into accepting its standards. If we don't follow its urgings, we're bad parents, lousy lovers, weak employees, or failing leaders. Losers. The Grid unites us all in one big, generic, all-purpose dream. We don't *need* to come up with our own.

The Grid treats nothing more contemptuously than yesterday's stars, yesterday's successes. Yet it relentlessly sells us the idea that power, fame, and fortune are what really count. It insists that if we solve this problem or achieve that goal, it really *matters*. So we let the Grid drive us, motivate us and tell us what to care about. It fills our minds with discontent and keeps us obsessed with trivia. We hook up to it like an IV unit, mainlining mass-produced ideas about what's important.

The Grid doesn't care about your Promise. It doesn't care about sustainable abundance in your life. It doesn't care about your children. It only cares about "more now." That's what sells products; that's what fills our garage with stuff we don't use. When we're marching to the drumbeat of the Grid, we get up in the dark, come home in the dark, solve meaningless problems all day, and eat dinner at a drive-through.

And don't get what our souls want.

Maybe it's time to stop managing our time and start fulfilling our Promise.

WORK-LIFE HARMONY

So what's the answer? Well, for most of us, the solution isn't dropping out and moving to Costa Rica to play with the monkeys. Trying to "live simply" is not the real answer to our anxiety either. Going back to *Little House on the Prairie*, wearing Birkenstocks®, and having granola for dinner will not solve our problems any more than a raincoat will save us from a hurricane. No, the solution is something much deeper, richer and more interesting.

We need to change the model we use to look at our lives. Most of us unconsciously view life as teetering on a scale, with consumption on one end and work on the other. We attempt to achieve balance by placing some food, shopping, booze, or TV on one end of the scale to counterbalance each chunk of stressful work we put on the other side. An empty chunk of pleasure balancing an empty chunk of labor. Using this model we are able to push ourselves through another day, another week, another year. But this type of balancing act never leads to fulfillment and never eliminates anxiety. That can only occur when we are pursuing our Promise.

Our Promise is found in life-work harmony, not in a constant balancing act. The model is a tapestry, rather than a scale. Life, relationships, and work are woven together in a seamless fabric that creates sustainable abundance for us as well as others. In this model, our work serves our life and our relationships because it is in harmony with *who we are* and *what we came to do*.

Living this new model in the twenty-first century requires a conscious choice to become the "cause" of our lives instead of the "effect" of someone else's. It requires that we stop striving to fulfill someone else's agenda and start seeking to fulfill our own Promise.

CHANGE HOW YOU THINK ABOUT CHANGE



If you could work anywhere, for anyone, or do anything you wanted
and money wasn't an object, what/where would it be?