



# Reclaim Your Life

## A Choice



Discovering what your values and priorities are is the first step to reclaiming your life. Very few of us take the time to explore what these values and priorities are. Creating balance in your life is a process of letting go of old beliefs and habits. When your life is out of balance you won't notice the signs or signals that let you know that something isn't right.



**R**eclaiming your life is a choice. It's a choice about priorities. It's a choice about being aligned with what really matters to you. It's a choice about saying "Yes" to life.

Discovering what your values and priorities are is the first step to reclaiming your life. Very few of us take the time to explore what these values and priorities are. That's what I do as a life coach. I help others discover what is important to them and live their life in harmony with these values. The exploration begins with taking a look at our lives and examining what some of the "defining moments" have been up to this point in our lives. Prior to becoming a life coach and author, I was a trial attorney for

30 years. We would all agree that our professional lives affect our personal lives and sometimes take a toll on our health and relationships. Let me take you back in time.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, those "defining moments" that I experienced in the 1970s enabled me to define what my values were and to begin to live a life in harmony with them. Part of my challenge, as it is with many of us, was to balance the demands of my professional life with the need to find meaning and purpose.

In stressful times it's more difficult to maintain that balance. When you're out of balance, your choices as to what's possible seem limited which creates more stress.





### Finding Time for What's Important

There is no question that we lead busy lives. We are consumed by our to do lists and responsibilities. Most people feel as if they don't have enough time. In their minds, time is like a commodity that is becoming scarce. The truth is, that not having enough time is a form of scarcity much like not having enough money.

If you are working most of the time you probably won't have enough time for yourself. You definitely won't have time for quality conversations. You might find yourself saying, "I don't have time to get together with you. Later in the month I'll have some breathing room." Or perhaps you're feeling overwhelmed at work and tired most of the time. The pattern of thinking "you don't have enough time" is familiar to you. It's what you know. Many people live in a constant state of anxiety because they believe that they can't get it all done. To compensate, they develop the habit of working longer and harder. This only intensifies the problem, because now they don't have enough time for the things that bring them joy and happiness.

The good news is that you can change this pattern, but it takes courage. Courage because making this change involves leaving what you know, to enter the world of the unknown. The fear of exploring the vast unknown keeps many of us trapped in unfulfilling careers or relationships, and keeps us from exploring new opportunities. We cling to what we know. In order to avoid conflict, we censor what we say and how we show up in the world. In a personal relationship, we fear that if we say what's on our mind things will become uncomfortable. In the workplace, we are afraid that if we say what's on our mind we'll end up being let go or making less money. So we say "Yes" to working late and "No"

to our deepest longings. It is this fear that keeps hidden some of our deepest needs, feelings and insights. It's only when we fully express ourselves that we are our most authentic. Being less than authentic deprives others of our gifts and contributions. It takes courage to live an authentic life and to be true to our core values.

### Finding Balance in Your Life

Creating balance in your life is a process of letting go of old beliefs and habits. When your life is out of balance you won't notice the signs or signals that let you know that something isn't right. That's the way it was with George when I first started working with him. He was overworked and stressed about his business, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. He blamed himself for not being able to see the trends sooner. Since so much of George's identity was wrapped up with being a successful business owner, he considered himself a failure. There were other telltale signs that George didn't notice. He ignored the fact that he and his wife were drifting apart and that he had constant back pain.

I encouraged George to begin meditating and exercising. When George was a younger man, he was an accomplished sculptor. At my urging George began sculpting again and soon his work became part of a group exhibit. Gradually, George became enthused about life again. As he felt better about himself his business began to turn around. He then had the courage to face the difficulties in his marriage.

### Saying "No" is the Key to Honoring Your Personal Boundaries

What George and many others, including myself, have discovered is that developing clear personal boundaries is the bridge to living a balanced life. It requires you to say "No,"

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which for many of us is difficult because it stirs up that big fear of confrontation. The truth is, you are always saying “No” in some way. If you say “Yes” to working late, you might be saying “No” to what really matters to you. Many busy clients I work with want to have a relationship, but forget to ask themselves if they are willing to devote the time necessary to have one. If they really want the relationship, then they have to say “No” to other things. It might be saying “No” to working late and possible career advancements. How many people do you know who are workaholics? I’ve known more than a few who have sacrificed their relationships and their health for their careers.

I remember Joe, one of my former clients, who worked late into the evenings and on weekends, even though his wife often complained about it. I suggested Joe that he has take his wife’s complaints more seriously. Joe wasn’t willing to change his tendencies. Finally, I asked Joe what he would do if his wife left him and he responded by telling me that it would never happen. Well, Joe was wrong. She left and Joe did everything he could think of to try to salvage the marriage, but it was too late.

Many people are fearful of the repercussions if they say “No” or are reluctant to disappoint another person. But think of the alternative: you end up agreeing to live someone else’s life and resenting it because you are saying “No” to yourself. Betty, a brilliant and dedicated social worker, is an example of someone who knows what her values and priorities are and lives her life in harmony with them. For Betty, leisure time and flexibility, so that she could spend more time with her family, were more important than career advancements and more money. She

honored what was most important to her by saying “No” to more responsibility at work.

### **Reclaiming Your Life and Your Power**

Your boundaries will continue to get tested and it’s easy to give in. Most of us are great at keeping agreements with other people, such as keeping an appointment or doing something we agreed to do, because we’re responsible people. Being accountable to someone else helps keep us “on purpose”. However, when it comes to keeping agreements with ourselves, such as exercising, eating healthy foods, or engaging in a spiritual practice, we don’t have the same commitment. There’s a simple reason why this is so. We have not made keeping agreements with ourselves as important as keeping agreements with others. What we don’t realize is that keeping agreements with ourselves is the key to staying on purpose and living a life in balance. When you keep your word to yourself, you seldom have a boundary problem.

Beginning your day with a morning practice, such as meditation or quiet time for reflection, reinforces the practice of keeping your agreements with yourself. Many people tell me that they don’t have time to meditate in the morning. They are the same people who find that their to do lists and responsibilities are running their lives. When they start sharing their to do lists with me, it’s very compelling. I almost believe them, except I know that it’s a matter of priorities. I was like them at one period of time. I had a busy law practice, a family with its inherent responsibilities (carpooling was a big part of this) and a quest for self-discovery. My priorities were clear. To make it all work, I had to honor them. Instead of having

coffee and reading the paper in the morning, I meditated. When I got to my office, I had a clear sense of purpose. When my kids had a game or an event, once I made the commitment to be there, I was there. It didn’t matter if there was a new client who wanted to see me. We were always able to work around it. When I had to be in court early in the morning, I got up earlier to meditate. When I had a musical event, I made time to practice. Reclaiming your life is a choice. It’s a choice about priorities. It’s a choice about being aligned with what really matters to you.

### **Expanding Your Personal Code of Ethics**

As we have just discussed, keeping agreements with yourself is more challenging than keeping agreements with other people. Most likely if you are reading this article you don’t have a problem keeping your appointments and agreements with other people because that would be a violation of your personal code of ethics. What if you made a paradigm shift? What if not keeping your word to yourself was also a violation of your personal code of ethics? Imagine how powerful a shift in perspective this would be. There would be a greater likelihood that whenever you said you were going to do something you would do it. If you said that you were going to exercise three times a week, there would be no question that you would exercise. If you said that you were going to eliminate pastries from your diet, they would be gone. If you made a vow to eliminate caffeine, you would keep that vow. It would be a rare occasion when you didn’t keep your word to yourself.

### **Reflections**

What could you accomplish both on a personal and professional level, if not keeping

your word to yourself was a breach of your personal code of ethics? Imagine how much better you would feel about yourself. Think about all of the ways that your life would be different if you kept your agreements with yourself. Reflect on your relationships and careers. Think about your inner confidence and sense of well-being.

### The Value of Commitment and Discipline

When you make a commitment to a practice or discipline, it is your commitment with yourself that keeps you going during those times when you feel like stopping or taking a break. When I was in college and in law school I developed the habit of smoking cigarettes. I didn't like myself whenever I picked up a cigarette, so I set up a personal challenge. I decided to quit smoking the night before I took the bar exam.

It was my agreement with myself that kept me going, even after I failed the exam the first time. It didn't matter what my mind was telling me, or what I felt like doing. It was the same with meditation. It was my agreement with myself that kept me going even when I was tired in the morning or felt that I didn't have enough time to meditate. Without discipline you can't really excel. You'll only scratch the surface of what is possible. You can reach levels of excellence occasionally without it, but it takes practice and commitment to be consistently good at something. Many persons who I work with, initially have an aversion to discipline and think of it as a form of rigidity. This is the furthest thing from the truth. It is the discipline that enables you to experience real freedom.

### The Deep Embrace of Mastery

I'm sure you have witnessed that magical moment when musicians and dancers are

in total sync with each other. It seems as if they have been playing and dancing together forever. In many ways they have. They have shared the same passion and dedication to their art—many years of practicing scales, techniques and movement that has given them that sense of freedom. It is the discipline that ultimately leads to that feeling of freedom. I'm sure that along the way, life presented them with many reasons not to practice, or to skip their workout. At some point they reached a plateau when their enthusiasm waned and they started to question their original commitment. When developing a personal practice or new habit, we have the same challenge. We are full of good intentions and enthusiasm, but we reach a plateau in the learning cycle when it's no longer fun. It's only a matter of time before we abandon our commitment to our endeavor. We repeat the cycle with the next new thing. The late George Leonard, the well-known author and teacher, in his book, *Mastery*, postulates that the key to mastery is learning to love the plateau. Once we embrace the concept that the plateau is just a phase in the learning cycle rather than the end, we can take the next step forward in achieving mastery. Achieving mastery in one area of our life has the potential to impact our entire life. Shortly after I finished reading *Mastery*, my girlfriend encouraged me to study the Bansuri, a form of bamboo flute, with the world-renowned master, GS Sachdev. Needless to say, I was excited. Playing music had been a life-long passion of mine and I had already been playing the silver flute. Sachdev was accepting new students. This opportunity, which lasted over a year, turned out to be one of the most transformative experiences of my life. I learned about the dedication

and passion that it took to truly become a master. Being around Sachdev inspired me the desire to become a better musician, which had an impact on my life that transcended music. I was given a gift. As I tuned into what was possible in music, I also tuned into what was possible in the rest of my life. The gift of listening that was given to me affects every aspect of my being and everything that I do. It's given me an expanded ability to hear what is being said when there is complete silence and an ability to feel the rhythm of life when everything is still.

### The Path of Impeccability

When you are true to your life purpose, and in alignment with your code of personal ethics, a shift in consciousness occurs. You are not afraid to embrace your truth and to let others know what that truth is. On the path of impeccability, you walk in freedom. You can no longer pretend. What you tell yourself and others has no change. You can no longer use as an excuse, "I don't have enough time." You take responsibility as to whether or not you want to do something, or if you want to get together with a particular person. You're no longer able to honestly say, "I can't afford it." Instead you have to decide whether the potential benefit is worth what you have to do, or give, to get it. In the process of embracing this new and expanded consciousness, you reclaim your power and honor yourself.

### There Is No Better Time Than Now

You've waited long enough to reclaim your life. The circumstances of your life very rarely are going to be in perfect alignment. Perhaps you're thinking that now isn't the right time. Too many of us suffer from

the ‘only if’ syndrome, which is the belief that if the circumstances of our life were different, we would be happier. I am sure you have suffered from this syndrome at times. I know I have. I remember how anxious I was to get out of high school, get away from home, and begin college. I believed college would be the answer to my problems. For a brief period of time it was, but soon my focus shifted to the future, which was getting into law school. Of course once in law school my new focus was graduating and passing the bar so that what I called real life could begin. And then it did. I was out of school, making my own money and involved in an intense love affair. But after awhile, I struggled with financial realities. I believed that when business picked up and I met the one, I could resume walking on the path and enjoying life again. I was repeating the familiar pattern of making an unknown future better than my life at the time. For many of us this is a never-ending pattern. It was for me until I had an experience that broke this pattern. I’m a firm believer in synchronicity – those chance encounters that change your life, those remarkable meetings. When I was a young lawyer a friend told me of a magical swimming hole along a river in Humboldt County. Off I went with my guitar, my dog, and sleeping bag and drove north, arriving at the river just as the sun was setting. In the morning I awoke at the crack of dawn in search of the swimming hole. I knew that if I hiked upstream I would get there. I continued on my way until a camper offered me some food and coffee. Although I found myself getting hungry and a little bit tired, I said, “No thanks” to the kind invitation, “It’s hot and I just want to get to the swimming hole.” After another twenty yards I

turned around and said, “That coffee sounds good.” I enjoyed the breakfast. As it turned out, the camper had a guitar and we played music for quite some time. I was full in more ways than one. After thanking the camper, I was ready to be on my way. It was what the camper said in the next few moments that has perhaps made the greatest impact in my life.

“Hey Mark, the journey you take is probably more important than your destination. Enjoy yourself. Enjoy the journey.” I enjoyed the rest of the hike and the swimming hole was fabulous. Since that meeting, I have taken his advice to heart. It has affected every aspect of my life. There’s no better time than now to enjoy your life and experience it as an exciting journey of discovery. Instead of waiting for that ideal relationship, enjoy life exactly as it is. Instead of feeling despair about finding meaning and purpose in your life, enjoy the inquiry. Instead of waiting for that big opportunity, enjoy what you’re doing.

### The Eight Daily Practices

You will be tested repeatedly in some manner. Each day you’ll have to renew your commitment, but eventually it becomes a way of life. There are eight daily practices and rituals, some of which you might already be aware of, that will support you on your journey to reclaim your life.

- ◆ Take time each day for quiet reflection in the morning including expressing gratitude. It sets the tone for the day. You may find journaling to be an effective practice.
- ◆ While driving in your car, listen to motivational CDs or conscious music, rather than listening to the news. It’s so easy to get caught up in the

busyness and negativity of the day. By listening in your car to inspirational messages that support you on your journey, driving actually becomes an opportunity for you to reduce the stress in your life.

- ◆ Make sure that on a daily basis you are in contact with people who inspire and support you. Most of us have friends who will be there for us, but we have to take the time to reach out. This might take effort initially, but it’s worth the investment. Don’t hesitate to take the first step.
- ◆ Take time to commune in nature. This is another practice that initially might take effort, but by being creative you can integrate spending time in nature into your day.
- ◆ Eat healthy; drink plenty of water and get exercise. This is a choice that you make over and over again that eventually becomes a healthy habit.
- ◆ Don’t forget to smile and make sure you make someone else smile. At first this might take a conscious effort. But it’s a worthwhile investment of time and energy. I love seeing another person, lost in his world of thoughts, crack a big smile.
- ◆ In the evening, take some time to read a personal growth or spiritual book, even if it’s just for a few minutes.
- ◆ Reflect upon the most special moment of the day as you are falling asleep. This was a practice that I shared with my kids as they were growing up. No matter what happened during the day, you have a choice as to how you think about it. Focusing on what was special as you are falling asleep is a great way to cultivate a peaceful sleep. ☺

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