

Introduction

WHAT KIND OF LIFE DO YOU WANT?

The End of the World as We Know It and the Amazing Opportunities That Follow

Climate-change-induced superstorms that have killed many thousands and put tens of thousands out of their homes. An economy that seems permanently too weak and stingy to offer dependable jobs. Social and racial inequality filling the news and making us feel we are going backwards. A world political system that is too broken, deadlocked and corrupted by money to deal with any of it.

Everything seems so suddenly unstable.

We can all choose to live in fear about that. Or, we can look to a new set of aspirations and life choices that many people are already finding exciting and inspiring.

I don't mean the problems and the suffering are exciting, of course. I mean the opportunities are. Because as things shift, you (and I and everyone else) have the opportunity to make new choices and build new lives where you not only get to feel secure and enjoy your life but also get the chance to contribute to solutions that help other people, and feel like your life really means something in the process.

That's what this book is about—the quest for a joyous and mean-

ingful life while living in a frightening, confusing world that needs our help. I know such a life is possible because, as I'll explain shortly, I've somewhat famously begun to experience it myself, and I've seen it in many thousands of others.

But first, listen:

It used to be that you had to follow a very specific path to get what you were supposed to want. Now, a college education no longer guarantees a corporate job, and a corporate job no longer guarantees health care. Even "securing" your retirement may seem like a pipe dream.

Meanwhile, a lot of us who do manage to "get ahead" can't stop feeling a sense of futility. We sit in our cubicles all day tapping at our keyboards while *not* using the talents we prize in ourselves. Not only do we not believe in the missions of the companies we work for, but we often find ourselves willfully ignoring the harm our employers cause. We can't escape the nagging feeling that our "success" comes at the expense of the rest of the world.

The standard approaches to life no longer lead where so many of us actually want to go—not when it comes to feeling as though we're helping with world problems and not when it comes to having secure and meaningful lives of our own.

Which leads us back to the exciting parts—the opportunities.

The first exciting part is this: since fitting into societal molds no longer pays off in the ways it traditionally did, we are freer to stop forcing ourselves into those molds. With fewer so-called rewards to supposedly miss out on, we have less to lose if we break away from the societal directions people traditionally follow and much to gain by experimenting with life choices that are actually truer to our values, our passions, and our world concerns.

The second exciting part is that in this time of numerous crises, how we choose to live can truly make a difference in the world. Back when the world was stable, it felt unchangeable. What impact could one person have? Now the world is a changing and fluid place.

Each of us is like a butterfly whose wing flaps could start a hurricane. A world with many ills needs many different kinds of doctors—many different kinds of people with many different kinds of talents and passions and personalities. We all have the chance to matter in an entirely new way.

The third exciting part is that we don't have to embark on this quest for the happy, impactful, values-based life alone, nor do we have to figure out the quest entirely for ourselves. It is true that our culture constantly nudges us toward the work-to-spend treadmill that so many of us want to escape. There is still no societal pathway to the authentic, meaningful, service- and passion-oriented life. But it is also true that there is already a growing national and international movement of people breaking away from those old broken paths and laying down new ones. They are questing for and finding new ways of making life choices—in careers, in what they do with their money, in their living situations and lifestyles, in how they eat and travel, and in all the many other ways we relate to each other.

As fate would have it, I became a well-known figure in this movement of seekers back in 2007, when I launched a one-year lifestyle experiment in environmental living. It was in many ways the climax of my lifelong quest to find a fulfilling, meaningful, happy life that helped others and was in line with my values. This year-long project became the subject of an autobiographical book and a documentary film, both titled *No Impact Man*.

The book has been translated into thirteen languages and is required reading on hundreds of college campuses. The Sundance-selected film has been screened in cinemas and broadcast by television networks around the world. Most important, this project, book, film, and the work that has evolved from my experience since have put me in touch with literally tens of thousands of seekers who are on the quest for a better way of life.

I've met and given talks to thousands of people who are creating

their own new ways of relating to the society we live in. They are making lives that are better for themselves, better for their communities, and better for the world. You'll find some of their stories and much of their wisdom in the pages of this book.

The world needs entrepreneurs who use business as a tool for increasing happiness. It needs activists who speak with love instead of fear and anger. It needs gardeners and local farmers who care for the land. It needs a whole different kind of bankers and politicians who care more about communities than corporations. It also needs more musicians on the subway platforms and artists on the streets to bring us joy in these difficult times. The world needs so much. It needs all of us.

Which is not to say this is a job or career book, because it's not. Thinking that careers and jobs are the only way to security and meaning and helping the world is another of those standard life approaches we need to move away from. How we work matters, yes, but so do how we make friends, have families, think about possessions, run our homes, live in our communities, engage as citizens, have sex, relate to children, and on and on.

In this book, we are going to discuss the choices that will help us build great lives—not just great careers—based on who each of us really is, what we really care about, and what we most want to help with in the world. It is a book about asking the questions that will nudge you along a path to your own personal version of the Good Life. A life where your happiness and safety come not at the expense of the world but as the result of doing good for the world.

That idea, by the way, is what distinguishes this book from most other self-help books and why, as we will discuss later, I actually think of it less as a self-help book and more as an each-other help book. There is a multitude of books about the world's problems. And there is a multitude of books about how to try to extract a happy life from that world. What's missing are the books about fixing our lives in ways that fix the world and fixing the world in ways that fix our lives. That's what this book is about.

More About How I Came to Write This Book and
How You Can Use It to Claim Your Own Version of a
Cool, Fun, Meaningful Twenty-First-Century Life

On the door to the dressing room is a big star with my name on it, something I thought only happened in movies. Inside, I'm sitting on a couch. Now standing up. Now sitting. Now standing. I'm so nervous. I've already been on *Good Morning America* and many other shows, but the host of this show is one of the fastest wits on television. Going on camera with him is like throwing yourself under a rhetorical bulldozer—in front of a few million people.

I've already been to hair and makeup, where they found a way to eliminate the circles under my eyes. Now a woman with a clipboard arrives. She suddenly freezes as she listens to something in her headset. "Yes . . . Yes . . . I'm with him." She looks at me. "Come this way please, Mr. Beavan."

We walk down a hallway and a door opens to the studio. We pass what look like bleachers, where the studio audience is sitting. A comedian is warming them up and they are all laughing. I step up onto the stage and suddenly I am seated across a desk from Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*.

This makes the first of what would ultimately be two appearances on the show. Apparently, despite Colbert's false conservative persona, he is a fan of *No Impact Man* and my work in lifestyle redesign.

I'm sitting up there onstage when, suddenly, the comedian who has been warming up Colbert's audience finishes and exits. The APPLAUSE sign is blinking over the audience. The little light above the camera lens has turned green. Colbert is introducing me. He jokes in his deadpan way, "By not poisoning the earth, he is poisoning our capitalist society."

God help me.

Before the *No Impact Man* project, I had tried so hard to get happiness in all the ways we are told will bring it: job searches, career

“hacks,” romantic relationships, following gurus, “attracting my vision,” living in this city, living in that city, traveling, working full-time, working part-time, and so on.

As innovatively as I tried to approach all this, I still clung, without realizing it, to an old-fashioned set of societal directions. These directions, the *standard life approaches*, as I call them, all go along these lines: work like crazy to get some better thing, person, house, or job, which will then make you feel better in some way.

But for me—and probably you, since you are reading this book—it doesn’t actually work. Many of us, though, have to hit some sort of bottom before we are willing to go against the cultural flow and try something new, which is what happened to me.

Back during the Iraq War, I happened to be writing my second history book, about a secret operation where Allied teams dropped behind enemy lines to work with the Resistance in Occupied France during World War II. While researching that book, I interviewed in depth more than seventy veterans of the operation and listened as they told their sometimes terrifying stories of what they had done and witnessed and what had been done to them. Some of them cried during their interviews. By the time I was done, having heard so much about the terrible things people can do to each other under desperate circumstances, I felt as if I had suffered some sort of psychological trauma of my own.

Meanwhile, every day, I watched TV and read print news reports of what was happening in Iraq and Afghanistan. I kept thinking about what my interview subjects had suffered and how the same terrible things were happening again, but this time to young American men and women of the armed forces as well as to civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. I kept asking myself: For what? We had been told there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which, of course, there were not. It became clear to people of all political complexions that this was a war for oil.

At the same time, that very oil, when burned to fuel our cars and make our electricity, caused massive destruction to our habi-

cat's ability to support us. I saw college students walking around in shorts and T-shirts in January in New York City when it should have been twenty degrees Fahrenheit—climate change. I read more and more about the cliff the human species marched toward as we burned the exact fossil fuels we fight wars to get access to.

Nor could I get out of my mind that despite all our so-called progress as a species—the reason for which, supposedly, we burned all that fuel—one billion people on the planet didn't even have access to clean drinking water. I kept hearing about that “progress”—seemingly measured by how many television shows we could store on our cell phones—and wondering, *Wouldn't a better measure of progress be the kindness and compassion with which we treated each other? Or how well we took care of people and societies who are struggling?*

At the same time, I looked around me and saw that even the people who were supposed to benefit from all this fossil-fueled “progress”—the Americans and northern Europeans—weren't truly happy. Even my well-off New York City friends worked twelve- or fourteen-hour days and talked about which psychiatrist could prescribe the best cocktail of first, antidepressants, and second, stimulants to restore the sex drive the antidepressants took away.

I was deeply troubled about the world, and I couldn't shake the feeling that the complacent, consumerist life I led contributed to the problems. Nor was I getting rich or socking away that retirement I felt I had been promised. I was doing okay—privileged, even—but I still felt as so many of my “successful” friends did: constantly stressed, anxious, empty, and, frankly, unhappy.

What was the point of continuing to try to fit into the societal mold if it neither helped the world nor made me happy? I kept wondering, *What if I stopped following societal directions and pressure and lived according to my passions, my values, and my world concerns? What if, instead of trying to get something on the outside to make me feel better on the inside, I actually listened to the clues on the inside about how to make my external world better?*

That was the process that led me to launch No Impact Man, the project where I would make a number of transformational adjustments to my lifestyle (some deliberately extreme) in order to live more in accord with my values.

Back then, when I first launched the No Impact Man year of living as environmentally as possible in New York City, I made the critical error of thinking that living a life that was good for the world meant sacrificing a life that was good for me. I didn't quite think, as Colbert joked, that by "not poisoning the earth" I would be "poisoning our capitalist society," but I did think I would be poisoning my own comfortable way of life.

After all, when I started getting around only by bike to prevent fossil fuel pollution, I had to "give up" cars and other forms of motorized transport. When I started eating only locally farmed food to avoid shipping-related climate emissions and habitat-destroying agriculture chemicals, I "gave up" all those tasty prepackaged, processed goodies.

Pretty quickly, though, people started saying that the whites of my eyes looked brighter, my skin seemed healthier, my hair was thicker. I had more energy, I felt better, and I lost the paunch the doctor had been warning me about for years. Apparently, that's what happens when exercise becomes part of your daily routine—without even having to go to the gym—and you start eating food that is actually good for you.

Meanwhile, buying less stuff—another adaptation—meant needing to earn less money and having more time to hang out with friends. Eating eggs produced by farmers I knew to be humane, I didn't munch my way through breakfast worrying about the chickens. Making less trash, I didn't have those micro-twinges of guilt every time I threw something away. Visiting my congressional representative to encourage action on climate change meant I felt less like a victim of circumstance.

I had begun the No Impact Man project thinking that to live in

line with my values meant to “sacrifice.” But by a process of continual experimentation and adjustment—by actually being awake to my life, by being truly alive to my options—the list of better-for-the-world-and-better-for-me adaptations grew and grew. I finally realized that to *not* live in line with my values is the real sacrifice.

I’m not saying everyone should live the way I did during that year (I don’t, though I maintain a fair number of the practices I developed). But what has become clear to me, from both my own experience and those of the thousands of seekers I have since been in conversation with, is this: even small efforts to live in line with our values, passions, and concerns offer a path toward a life that can be not only better for the world but also better for us. As so much ancient and modern wisdom teaches us, there is an unbreakable connection between being True to your Self and True to the world.

Learning to trust and apply the principle of being guided by values, passions, and concerns in all manner of life decisions is the central theme of this book. As you read, you will encounter and hopefully be inspired by the many examples of how other people have made authentic, passionate, service-minded life choices that made them happier and helped the world in every realm, from finance to friendship. You’ll also find guidance, wisdom, and practical exercises to help you find your way to choices that are True for you.

As I’ve said, I’m not just talking about environmental lifestyle adaptations. If so many of the standard life approaches I’d challenged during No Impact Man weren’t right, what about all the others? Say, in the realms of relationships, housing, home ownership, sex, childbearing, shopping, banking, retirement, friendship, education, spending, investing, citizenship, and the many other ways we relate to the world?

How do you live your calling? What career should you pursue? And how important is “career” these days? How much money do you actually need to live a good life? How do you make friends,

and what really counts as community and family? Should you get married? Should you have kids, and if so, how many? How can you influence the policies of the society you live in? Should you really put yourself hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt for college? What does retirement planning mean in today's world?

So many of us have struggled to squeeze ourselves into our parents' and grandparents' generations' prepackaged answers to these questions. So many of us try so hard to follow standard approaches to life that were laid down back in the days before the Internet or even cell phones; in a time of Cold War, rapid industrialization, a predictable economy, and a planet with seemingly unlimited resources; and amid an array of repressive gender, race, sexuality, and other social norms.

But now, we all have a chance to join the quiet movement of freethinkers who are waking up to alternatives. When it comes to economic systems, for example, revolutionary thinkers have broken away from the false choice between capitalism and socialism by pioneering sharing and bartering networks. When it comes to the child-rearing dilemma, groups of people are starting to raise kids together through extended families, made families, mentoring, and other means. Still others are making strides in everything from farming to finance.

What are the benchmarks by which we can decide what is making us happier? What are the benchmarks by which we can decide what is helping our communities and the world? Is there a set of principles that can be applied in all situations? Are there shortcuts to navigating these decisions?

This book is among the first to mine and make public the tactics of the growing subculture of people who are finding new answers to these questions. Here is what they all say about the great unraveling: the amazing part is putting it all back together exactly the way you want to with the knowledge that all of us can take steps toward a happier life that also help build a much happier world.

The Truth About “Success” and Why This Is Not So Much a Self-Help Book as an Each-Other Help Book

Think back for a moment to my story about being on *The Colbert Report*. If this was your standard self-help book, and if I were sticking to the form, I would have told that story very much the way I did: with a vignette that establishes my wonderful so-called success. Because in the introduction of a typical self-help book, one of the things you have to do is convince your reader that you have mastered the standard life approaches in order to achieve the standard definitions of success—like being on TV.

The thing is, for so many of us, the time of “self-help” has passed. Think for a minute of the apocryphal story of the man who keeps trying to get the best deck chair spot while cruising on the *Titanic*. Getting the best chair spot on a sinking ship is, metaphorically speaking, like chasing after conventional success in a world that seems to be falling apart.

The reason the *Titanic* deck chair story is both so funny and so instructive is that when the ship is going down, having the best deck chair—winning conventional success—isn’t going to do you much good. When the ship is sinking isn’t the time to be thinking of deck chairs—or houses or careers or romance. The question is, how do you work with everyone else to keep the boat afloat? When the ship is sinking isn’t the time for self-help. It is the time for each-other help.

When you think that way—of each-other help instead of self-help—your definition of success naturally changes. All of a sudden, making a big splash and getting semifamous on TV doesn’t seem so successful anymore. In fact, it almost seems a little vapid and shallow. When you think in terms of each-other help, you have much deeper and wider and more satisfying ideas of what success means.

The truth is, I told you the story of my being on *The Colbert Report* as an attention-grabber. Not because I think TV appearances define me as successful. What credibility I have comes not from TV

or other external circumstances, but from having finally learned that there are so many much easier and more important paths to real and actual success.

Here are some of the types of statements authors of self-help books sometimes use to establish their “success” and their credentials. Just to be clear, I am almost uniformly *unqualified* in those standard ways, and this each-other help book will *not* help you to achieve these goals, though it may help you achieve much better ones.

So-Called Self-Help Success: I have a \$4 million house, and you can, too!

For the record, I most certainly don’t have a \$4 million house. In fact, I don’t own a house at all. I rent an apartment. On a charming street in an edgy neighborhood that I love on the border of Clinton Hill and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. It’s ethnically diverse and filled with students, queers, artists, writers, and, well, people.

My most recent downstairs neighbors, a straight couple, work in book publishing. The woman is British and the man is American. An old Jamaican man owns the house next door. He gets drunk sometimes and talks about the daughter he so sadly lost many years ago. There is a lovely woman named Anna who rents the first-floor apartment from him. She is a photographer. Two doors down are a hip-hop DJ and his family. Across the street lives a little girl named Emma who is kind enough to play with my daughter, Bella, even though Bella is three years younger.

My point here is, I don’t have a \$4 million house, and I don’t think it is worth what it would take to try to get one.

Real each-other help success: *By knowing and liking my neighbors, I participate in a community that makes life better for both me and them.*

So-Called Self-Help Success: I've outsourced everything and reduced the time I spend working to almost zero, and you can, too!

Um, well, no. I haven't done that, either. I mean, here I am writing this book, which takes a lot of time, right? Earlier this week, I had to take time out to write an op-ed for the New York *Daily News* about how beneficial I think New York City's bike-share program is. Before that, I spent two weeks in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic giving talks and running workshops on the quest for a better life.

On the other hand, after lunch today, I'll ride my bike over to Park Slope to have coffee with a friend. Yesterday, I took the morning off to attend my daughter's last-day-of-school assembly (she came with me on that trip to Central Europe, by the way).

What am I saying? I do have lots of work and other obligations that claim my time. I am not completely free. But the things I am obliged to do are things I *want* to do.

Real each-other help success: *I spend my time doing what matters to me, and I live my life in line with my values, which means I'm part of building a better world.*

So-Called Self-Help Success: I socialize with CEOs of major corporations and many Hollywood stars, and you can, too!

I won't pretend I don't know and correspond with and, yes, sometimes hang out with people who are well-known in my field. A couple of famous environmentalists. Sometimes a documentary filmmaker who works on social issues. Some writers. Some artists.

But when, in my past, I made the mistake of hanging out with such people because of their status instead of because of true bonds of affection, it was never very comfortable. Some sort of fame or standard-type success comparison would be triggered and everyone seemed to feel a little insecure.

Want to know some hanging out that is more important to me?

The night before last, I had dinner with a new friend named Kathleen whom I bonded with after her father suddenly died of a heart attack. Dinner started at seven and ended at ten thirty. We laughed and told secrets. I showed her my gold tooth. Tonight I'm going to hang out with another friend who has two kids and, like me, lives separately from his co-parent. We'll shoot the shit. Maybe order pizza. He certainly doesn't own a private jet.

So, no, I don't really hang with the rich and famous—at least not for that reason—but I have found something more important. I get to spend time with people whom I love and who enrich my life with friendship and trust

Real each-other help success: *I love many people, they love me, and we make time for each other to the benefit of all of our lives.*

As long as we have started this sort of inventory of what I think makes my life successful and what qualifies me to write an each-other help book, we might as well complete the list. Over the course of many years of questing, I've discovered that the life I'd rather strive for and often achieve is one that:

Lets me spend my time doing what really matters to me. (I don't have to work less because I care deeply about my work.)

Is successful according to my own definition. (It reflects who I really am, what I'm really good at, and what I really want—and a \$4 million house ain't it.)

Keeps me safe. (Without being rich, I am taken care of, often in ways that have nothing to do with money.)

Contains a lot of love. (I have ample time for friends and those I think of as my family.)

Allows me to feel that I am contributing. (I never worry that I'm ignoring or am callous to the world's problems.)

Is full of fun and adventure. (New things happen all the time).

Integrates taking care of my body and my soul. (So I don't have to fit this in between other things I'm supposed to do.)

Includes taking time and space to explore my place in the universe. (Call that spirituality if you like.)

Allows me to do these things not by building large cash reserves but by building a life where what is important to me remains central so I don't need money to obtain it.

Helps me relate to the world—through my work, my relationships, my life choices, my living arrangements, my purchases, my civic participation—in ways that contribute to solving our global crises.

That's my list of what defines real success. It's not everybody's list, but it's mine.

Now here are the two big questions this book is going to help answer for you:

What is your definition of real success?

How can you make it a reality?

How This Book Works and Why You Don't Have to Change Your Whole Life to Make It Better for You

Maybe you want to be a vegetarian in a family of meat-eaters. Or maybe you want to do something more radical, such as move to Africa to volunteer in developing communities. Whether your goals are large or small, you can use this book to help find the way. It can be your launching pad if you are just starting, or your companion guide if you've already begun to build the life you want.

And remember, whatever our life circumstances, whatever our constraints, we all have a role to play in the world.

The peaceful revolution is composed both of people doing no more than growing tomatoes on their windowsills or tithing part

of their salaries and of people doing no less than protesting in the street or upending their entire careers. The most important thing to remember is that you don't have to be a radical—though, of course, you can be—to apply the principles in this book.

The world doesn't just need local farmers; it needs the farmers' customers. It doesn't just need urban environmentalists; it needs the people who take food scraps to their compost piles. It doesn't just need the people starting bike-share programs; it needs the people riding the bikes. It doesn't just need race activists marching on the streets; it needs people retweeting the videos they send out.

One thing I realized, and you should, too, is that no one else's path will fit your life. As much as I've yearned for straightforward directions, there is no one person who has it right in every way so that I can just follow her lead. There are as many approaches to the new life as there are people in the world. What makes an extrovert happy makes an introvert miserable. How a city dweller can help the world is different from how a suburbanite can.

Following directions just means we end up where other people think we should go. Besides, how many of the world's problems have been caused by people abandoning their wisdom and assuming other people know better?

This book will help you to reexamine your life and truly take charge of it, not turn it over to another expert. It's about being awake to our moment-to-moment decisions, not about developing a new list of standard life approaches. It's not about how to become more like anyone else. It's about how to become more like you, and how to trust that being truly like you will be better for your life and better for the world.

For all these reasons, this book will not give you answers but instead will lead you through questions that will help you find answers of your own. Most important, it will help you find the compass points of your life—your passions, your concerns, and your values. Then it will help you decide for yourself how you want to manifest them in the range of relationships you have with the world.

To support that process, in addition to the questers we will meet, I will present you with both some surprising new science and some comforting but forgotten old principles that can help keep us on our paths, like guardrails by the side of the highway. Emerson's principle of self-reliance, Gandhi's thoughts on doing things for yourself, Tolstoy's thoughts on "resist not evil"—these are among the many principles we will examine as potential routes to the Good Life.

How you apply those facts and principles is an individual matter. So in addition to the real-life examples, the science, and the principles, I have included lots of exercises to help you understand yourself, your situation, your concerns in the world, what you know you need in life, and how you want to help the world.

In short, this book will:

- Unpack the standard life approaches to ask if they are good for the world or good for you.
- Look at scientific research and wise principles that might point to alternative choices that can make both you and the world happier.
- Examine personal stories of people who have made new choices to see how new thinking can be applied in real life.
- Provide exercises that help you see who you are in relation to these ideas and whether and how you want to apply them to your life.
- Apply this approach to all the many relationships to the world that make up your life, from eating to parenting to investing to citizenship to forming friendships.
- Help you make this process your own.

Whether you want to make any changes or not, this book will help you know who you are and what you believe. It's not a book to simply read. It's a work in progress. *Your* work in progress. It's

meant to be thrown in your bag. Left on your bedside table. Set on top of the papers on your desk. Always within easy reach.

How should you live? How to be alive? There is so much to think about. In the end, this book should be more about what you've underlined, what you've written in the margins, and what you've starred than what has been printed in its pages. You'll want to work through it again and again in different ways.

Who are you? What, in general, makes you feel happy, satisfied, and safe? What makes you feel as though you matter and make a difference? The answer changes according to your situation. What is the situation? What is your relationship to the situation? Life is a series of small and large decisions. How should you make them?

The world is changing so fast, and as we have said, this is great news. You are going to get to rethink all the old decisions and find your own True Path. You get to make up your own rules. Decide what a successful life means to you. And then beat a path toward that life in a way that helps the world.

Frequently Asked Questions to Help You Decide if You Are Ready for the Ideas in This Book

Are the lessons of this movement of trailblazers right for me?

If you are looking for a life where you feel you are helping with instead of ignoring the problems of the world that get you down, then yes, these lessons will help you. Everything in this book points to life choices at the intersection of what makes you happy and safe and what helps the world. It is about being true to your own values, not someone else's.

Are you going to tell me there's something wrong with my chosen career and that I have to change it?

Actually, I'm not going to tell you that you *should* do anything. Change your career if you want to, or don't. But stop following other people's directions. It's time to put an end to a way of life

based on what we *should* do. Look where it's getting us. Besides, adjusting your life does not necessarily mean changing your career. Career can't be everything anymore. There is so much more to all of our lives than just our jobs.

Does caring about the world and working to have a happy relationship to it mean I'm going to feel guilty all the time and be endlessly wringing my hands?

This book isn't about complaining. It's about fixing. Fixing your life. Fixing the planet. Work toward the good; don't focus on the bad. True fact: studies show that people who are actively working to make their lives and the world better have way more positive attitudes and are, yes, happier.

Do I have to be a hippie or a liberal or a conservative or a back-to-the-lander or have a particular life philosophy to make this kind of change?

No. All you have to believe—or at least *want* to believe—is that you matter to the world and the world matters to you.

Are you going to tell me I have to make sacrifices?

Fact of life: unhappy people don't make other people happy or help the world. They tend to be more self-centered. We're going to assume that the best life is one where making yourself happy makes other people happy and making other people happy makes you happy. So no, it is not about sacrifices. You may wind up making *changes* in your life, but if they bring you happiness, you're not likely to see them as sacrifices.

What if I'm already helping the world and I'm sick of being poor as a result?

See previous answer. If you want to *keep* helping the world, you are going to have to focus on your financial situation before you run out of steam.

Are you saying I can't have or want to have money in order to be happy?

No. But you might want to ask how much you are paying in life energy—time, relationship loss, stress, fatigue—to get your money. Because in some areas of life, there are much more effective and less costly ways to get the things you want than to buy them. So this book will help you figure out how much money is enough, for you.

I'm confused. Is personal happiness the end goal or not?

As I've said, this is more an each-other help book than a self-help book. This is partly because it will be a tremendous challenge to maximize your personal happiness if you have to keep living with the fact that the world is in a tailspin. After all, doesn't "self-help" feel a bit like trying to run up an escalator that's going down?

The world crises have blessed us with a deeper understanding of the fact that we are all connected. Our own happiness depends on the world's happiness and vice versa. The question is, how do we work with that fact in the many decisions we make in our own lives? The promise is that, though it might take work, finding the answer will bring you a much safer, happier, and more fulfilling life.

How I Failed at All the Standard Life Approaches and (Kind Of) Figured Out the Purpose of (My) Life as a Result

GOING FOR THE MONEY

Born in New York City, I move at age eight with my mother and sister to a little coastal town called Westport, Massachusetts. Self-conscious about being one of the few kids there living in a single-parent home, and the hand-me-down clothes I wore as a result, I set out when summer comes to make my fortune going door to door doing odd jobs—mostly garden work. My main customer—because people don't hire eight-year-olds—is my maternal grandfather, who

points out bits of grass that I have missed when I mow the lawn around his house. I get “lessons” about responsibility and hard work. The takeaway: I hate gardening.

In hopes of avoiding it, I turn to comic books and fall for one of those “make a fortune in your spare time” ads. I receive a crate of greeting cards to sell, learn the preprinted sales pitch, bang door-knockers and ring doorbells for an afternoon, get bored, and leave my mother to ship back the largely unsold inventory. Over the coming months, I try selling my catch off the town dock (turns out there is no market for eels), shining shoes (hard sell in a town full of farmers and fishermen), washing windows (tough with no car when houses are a quarter mile apart), and selling eggs (neighborhood dogs eat my chickens).

I’m a bust at both Standard Life Approach #1: Work Hard and Knuckle Down—and Standard Life Approach #2: Get Rich Quick. Am I already a flop?

CRYSTALS AND ALL THAT OTHER NEW AGE STUFF

Conveniently, I decide money is not the goal of life since there is no taking it with you. A favorite uncle’s suicide makes this terribly poignant when I am twelve. I grow my hair long and suddenly get into hippie-style spirituality. Richard Bach’s *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* has got me lying on my back trying to make clouds magically disappear. I read Carlos Castaneda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan* and want to go on a shaman’s vision quest.

I’m on to Standard Life Approach #3: Look for Spiritual Shortcuts to Get What You Want (what some people call spiritual materialism). Lacking access to Don Juan’s hallucinogenic peyote cactus, I experiment with the consciousness-altering (not to mention addictive) properties of Bacardi rum.

THE IVY LEAGUE ROUTE

I spout the philosophy behind my so-called alternative path to advance my conventional path—an application essay entitled “Why

I Don't Want a Rolls-Royce" wins me a place at a fancy prep school. The idea is to get good grades, get into an Ivy League college, win a place in the right social circles, and set yourself up for life. This is Standard Life Approach #4: Go to the Right Schools.

The price for Approach #4 is that student debt and the credit card debt you accumulate while paying your student debt keep you tied to your "career path," whether you like it or not, until you graduate to old-age heart attacks, cruise ship vacations, or both. I'm spared this fate when the consciousness-altering properties of Bacardi become too fascinating. I get suspended and then kicked out of prep school. Also, I have a couple of minor but alarming brushes with the police. Sorry, Mom and Dad.

KNUCKLE DOWN, WORK HARD REDUX

Trouble scares me onto the straight and narrow—with help and support. I come away from the Bacardi predilection strongly aware that it wouldn't have taken too much bad luck for my life to have totally gone down the drain. I think of others not lucky enough to get help. I think of the accidents of birth and skin color—privilege—that meant my brushes with the police didn't destroy my future. Does my good fortune in getting the help and support I need belong to me alone? No. Even back then I realize—and am taught by good adults—that it is something I'm supposed to pass on.

Meanwhile, I back away from all pretenses of alternativism, cut my hair short, and wear button-down oxford shirts. Along with attending Westport's public high school, I'm back to odd jobs. I land a gig scraping and painting the front of a clapboard house, even though I hate painting nearly as much as yard work. But going back to my grandfather's lessons, hard work and responsibility are the key, right?

Somehow, I become a distributor for a type of cardboard toy airplane that does a loop-the-loop and lands back in your hand—the Dip-er-do—and travel to occasional fairs to sell them. The rest of that summer, I mow lawns in the morning—which, strangely, I

enjoy this time around—and visit an old lady who pretends to need yard work done but really just pays me to chat. In the afternoon, I go to the beach. I earn enough to buy my first car.

I procrastinate and procrastinate painting the house. Finally, I feel guilty and get up really early one morning and wake the neighborhood applying the belt sander. The lady who owns the house comes out in her bathrobe, tells me I'm nuts, and fires me.

I am scared that I'm no good. I don't seem to be able to knuckle down. I believe that I'm a loser, while entirely missing the point that, contrary to my grandfather's lessons about working hard at what we *don't* want to do in order to thrive, I'm thriving at what I *do* want to do—the airplane sales, the lawn mowing, the conversations with the lady—and getting fired from what I *don't* want to do. This is an important lesson I'm not yet old enough to understand. Also, where has my intrigue with the get-rich-quick approach gone? Turns out it disappears in people when they have a good life that they enjoy.

FITTING MYSELF LIKE A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

Finishing up high school, I am so excited by all the things I could study at college that I can't make a choice. Crazy societal idea: pressuring eighteen-year-olds to decide what they want to do in the world before they even enter that world (like forcing someone to buy shoes without letting him try them on).

I'm thinking of astronomy. Stars! Where do they come from? Where do they go? What is the universe? How big is it? What made it? My grandfather listens to these existential questions patiently over lunch, then says, "You need to study something practical that will get you a job. Being yourself is great. But that's for your spare time. This is the time when you have to grow up."

Actually, this is the time when so many of us stunt our own growth. Because we decide that we are too scared to go our own way. We force ourselves to forget that life is magical. We learn to override ourselves. What makes sense is to create your life in line with who you are, what you love doing, and how you'd like to help

the world. I don't yet trust myself to do that. I choose Standard Life Approach #5: Believe That Life Is Already Created and You Need to Fit Into It.

CONSOLATION PRIZES START FLOODING IN

Can't get more practical than electronic engineering, right? That's the major I choose. Having spent so many summers in the United Kingdom—Dad is British—I go to the University of Liverpool (also because it was then free—God love socialized education). Turns out I'm good at my field and graduate first in my specialty. Professors groom me for academia and offer me full pay to do a doctorate.

Part of “becoming a grown-up” is moving out of communal living in college dorms—probably the happiest part of my college experience (an important lesson for later)—and into my own apartment. I'm miserably lonely.

Some key information about myself I've overlooked because I'm still trying standard life approaches: I love beach and leisure time, am very social, believe my good fortune should be spread to the world, like variety and have an entrepreneurial bent, am a bit alternative by nature, and don't care that much about money.

Here is what fitting myself in gets me: good pay and a guaranteed life of office swivel chairs working alone in a lab. Not actually what I wanted. See what happens when you override yourself?

DEPRESSION

Life is feeling like a dead end. I end up in therapy. Visiting my father in Israel, where he is working, I watch the red glow of his cigarette on a dark late-night drive. *What is life for?* I ask him. I am wrestling with so much. Do I exist for myself or for others? Should I be a social worker or an entrepreneur, a monk or a merchant? What life will I feel best about having lived when I die? Can I make a sufficient contribution to the world to earn a happy place in it? What actually counts as a contribution?

My misery has thrown up all the existential questions. But people

keep telling me to ignore the big questions (Standard Life Approach #6). You'll never answer them, they say. Is that what we are really supposed to do? Put life's biggest questions out of our minds? Can I be sure that life isn't about the opposite—investigating them?

Besides, without fundamentally understanding my nature—what am I?—how do I know what my life is for? How are any of us supposed to live? Should we really follow the Standard Approaches to Life even if they seem to make us deathly depressed?

FROM BAD TO WORSE

My Ph.D. supervisor bursts into the lab all excited. There is an application for our work that can help ensure that NATO submarines carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles can't be detected. Think of the Department of Defense funding!

Nuclear bombs?! That's the last straw. Is that really my life path? Is that really anyone's life path? Depression and destruction? I quit. I'm now a Ph.D. in a field I've decided to leave forever. Lovely!

I buy a book called *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in the UK*, skip those companies' recruiting departments, and write directly to the CEOs. "I don't want to work for your company. I want to work for you!" I say. The CEO of Iceland Frozen Foods, a seven-hundred-store supermarket chain, hires me as his personal protégé.

Executive suite at twenty-six. I'm a life-hacker, right? Sadly, no. I'm still just career-hacking. Real life-hacking doesn't come to me until later, when I realize the wrongness of Standard Life Approach #7: Go All Out for an Amazing Career and You'll Get an Amazing Life. Jealously, I say good-bye to a bunch of friends who go off to live in Africa, basically for the hell of it.

BREAKTHROUGH #1

I spend a day with the company security chief learning to spot shoplifters and installing secret cameras to spy on managers suspected of stealing. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Two months in, I realize

I've taken another wrong turn. I'm not using the skills I want to use. I'm not finding meaning. I'm learning that I can't fit myself into the world the way my grandfather told me I should, or at least I don't want to. I quit, and the CEO calls me a twat.

I put in a miserable call for help to a headhunter I know. He puts me on hold, comes back a few minutes later, and tells me I have an interview the next day. By the end of the week, I am, crazily, the second-in-command of a boutique public relations firm. I'm suddenly writing and speaking and communicating and doing things I naturally enjoy—almost as fun as selling Dip-er-do airplanes and mowing lawns (though I don't get to go to the beach in the afternoon).

One problem: I don't care one iota about the missions of our clients—a bank, an electric hand-dryer maker, etc. On a trip to Ireland for an equipment manufacturer, I end up at a slaughterhouse that the company has kitted out. Pig carcasses hang from the overhead assembly line and then tumble in a huge clothes-dryer-like contraption that burns off their hair. My boss and I are vegetarians. What the hell are we doing?

BREAKTHROUGH #2

Economic domino effect: About a year after I start working there, my boss's company goes belly-up when three companies that owe it money go bankrupt themselves. The one client I like, a charity that provides low-income housing, says it will stay with me if I go out on my own.

Meredith Beavan Publicity is born (Meredith is my middle name). It provides public relations services exclusively to not-for-profit clients—social housing providers, HIV prevention groups, a free therapy clinic, a couple of nonprofit hospitals. I have a sense of meaning, collaborate with amazing people, am self-directed, use many of the skills I care about, and learn a huge amount.

Not only that, but I have the leisure time I need and many good

friends. For the first time, I am, as they say, doing well by doing good. Four great years pass.

MAYBE CAREER ISN'T EVERYTHING?

I keep having this daydream about riding around the United States on a motorcycle. I actually figure out a way that I can take a three-month sabbatical, but it scares me. I have this sense that if I do it, I will never come back. My life will unravel. Guess what? I'm right. But in a good way. After three months zooming around, I go back to England, close everything down, pack up my life, and move to the United States.

I have no plan. I am lost again. What do I want to do? I refuse to simply relocate my career based on my qualifications alone. Is that really the way to choose your work life? Do what you know how to do regardless of whether it makes you or the world happier? Another Standard Life Approach (#8) I am not interested in: Do Only What You Are Qualified to Do. I want to choose. I want to be proactive. I resolve to wait until an answer appears.

TRUST THE PROCESS?!

For two years, I split my time between waiting tables in Providence, Rhode Island, in the winter and driving taxis on Martha's Vineyard in the summer. I feel amazingly free and I am scared shitless. Meanwhile, I write countless short stories in my spare time. I submit them to magazines and paper my wall with rejection slips. Being a writer is a childhood dream.

I start thinking of moving to New York to really try the writing thing. Two questions plague me: First, *How do I know I can be a success?* Second, *What good would my being a writer be to the world?* I ask this question because being of service grew to be an important value for me during my years of PR.

I agonize. One day, I'm sitting and meditating and I literally hear a voice say, "It's okay to desire things for yourself if you point the

energy of that desire in a direction that will help others.” This is a hugely important principle, one that I would learn the Buddhists call “using your karma to help the world.” I decide to trust that my being a writer will one day help people, at least in some small way.

FOLLOWING MY PASSION AT LAST

I finally have found a path I *want* to follow rather than one I should or simply could. I know what I want to do with my life and throw myself in. I quickly get work writing self-help columns for *Esquire* and other magazines like *Men’s Health*. Before long, I break out of self-help and write articles for *Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and others.

I get a contract to write my first book, *Fingerprints*, about a nineteenth-century murder case that was the first solved using fingerprints. Then I get a mid-six-figure advance for a second book, *Operation Jedburgh*, about the Allied soldiers who dropped into occupied France during World War II, an operation my grandfather participated in (yes, the one with the fetish for hard work).

Following your passion. Expressing yourself. Being creative. The secret to life, right? I’m doing all that. I have, I guess, “arrived,” except I am nagged by a sense of meaninglessness. I keep hearing that voice that said I could pursue what I wanted as long as it helped people. *When am I going to help people?*, part of me keeps asking. *Isn’t there a path that isn’t just about money or meaning or self or other but about all?*

The price of a good life, people keeping telling me, is that I have to follow Standard Life Approach #9: Accept the Reality That You Have to Earn a Living and Let Go of Childhood Idealism. If you’re good at finance, you have to accept that the world of banking is corrupt and screws the little guy. If you’re good at politics, you have to accept that Big Money does the voting, not the people. If you’re a writer like me, you have to accept that most readers are really looking for a way to escape. It’s just like television, except with an upturned nose.

You can't buck the system. You are too small. You are too powerless. By the same logic, it does not matter if you drive gas-guzzling SUVs or buy clothes made by Bangladeshi child laborers. Because what difference do your tiny purchasing decisions make anyway? What difference does your whole life make? You might as well just do whatever makes you happy.

Except this approach doesn't make me happy. I have to willfully ignore the world's problems, and so many people I know do, too. One of my best friends loves going to Africa to practice simple dentistry on people who are losing their teeth. He loves that, but he gets to do that for only a week each year. He spends the other fifty-one weeks ignoring the world's real dental problems and trying to convince rich people to shell out for cosmetic dentistry to improve their "smiles."

I do what so many career-driven New Yorkers do: I try to do good at the margins. The "philanthropic" approach. Do whatever you need to do to earn the money and then try to ameliorate the harm by giving some away. Doing bad to do good. In my own version I tithe to charity and volunteer in my "free time" (whatever that means when so many of us are working fifty, sixty, or seventy hours a week).

You could say I've "matured." Sooner or later we all have to realize that the idealism of youth is just that—idealism. But is that true, or is it just a story we tell ourselves to justify choices we are not really happy with? Is rejecting the idealism of youth just a way of closing our eyes to the violence of adulthood?

THE WORLD GOES SOUTH

The Iraq War breaks out. More than four thousand young American soldiers ultimately die. I obsess over a web page called Iraq Body Count. It eventually documents more than one hundred thousand civilians killed.

On the one hand, there is what we do for oil—the war, the BP disaster in the Gulf, etc.—and on the other, there is what happens

when we burn it—climate change (not to mention the many other crises we now face in the Earth’s ability to support the way we live). Between those two things is our way of life, the thing we use the energy for. With 25 percent of Americans suffering from depression or major anxiety, I wonder, *Is it all even worth it?*

I can’t ignore that voice anymore. I can’t go on writing history books. Instead, I launch what I call the No Impact Man project.

At first I believe that the project is about the repudiation of desire. That what is making people so unhappy and destroying our habitat is the human desire for more. I am trying to be an ascetic and dragging my family along on a quest for less. It takes me some time to realize that the rejection of desire is yet another standard life approach, an automatic, simplistic reaction to the failure of the other ones.

Because of my project, though, I begin to meet other people who are investigating nonstandard life approaches and are far from ascetics. Instead, they are searching for happiness in nonstandard ways. From them I learn the value of reexamining not just career choices but all life choices.

I see that there are standard life approaches to everything: how we purchase, where we live, whom we have as friends, whether we have friends at all, how much we emphasize money and careers, whom we have sex with, what form romantic relationships should take, what we eat, when and how we retire, how we participate in the political process and on and on and on.

The truth is that many of these standard life approaches are failing, from both a planetary perspective and a simple human happiness perspective. Can we afford to buy everything ourselves? To own our own lawnmowers instead of sharing with our neighbors, to waste money and resources on a power drill that will get used for about nine minutes over the course of a lifetime?

The surprising result of No Impact Man is that I learn that we don’t have to deprive ourselves for the sake of the world. It is not about not wanting things. Instead, we simply have to learn to want

the things that actually make us happy. It's not about suppressing our desire but nurturing our wisdom.

Who am I? What are we? What do we understand about what really makes our lives worth living?

These are frightening questions, because to answer them we have to be awake—both to ourselves and to the world, to its dangers as well as to its opportunities. The nice thing about the standard life approaches is that they pretend to offer guaranteed success if you just suppress yourself and follow directions.

But with the joblessness and home repossessions of the world financial crisis, can any of us be sure the standard life approaches even work anymore? Not to mention that when we suppress ourselves we lose our inner guidance. To what extent have we sleepwalked into a crisis of ecology, economy, and existence? Good news: all we have to do is wake up to ourselves.

NOW THAT I'M LIKE YOU AGAIN

How do you become the person you want to be? How do you get to be happy in your work? How do you construct the rest of your life? How does one live a life doing more good than harm in the world? How do you live a happy life balancing your own needs with those of others? How do you follow your passion? How do you even figure out what your passion is so you can follow it?

How do you do all that while making yourself happy, taking care of your loved ones, and, somehow, addressing yourself to the world's problems? How do you do all that while recognizing that the world is rapidly changing? How do you figure out what is most important? How, in short, do you live?

These are the questions that have plagued me all my life. Here is the thing: There is no straightforward answer. There is no standard life approach that works for everyone. Many of the world's problems come from too many of us trying to follow directions, because many of the directions are not good for the world and not good for us. Which leads back to that great part: that there is an amazing

opportunity for each of us to wake up to our own paths that both make us happier and make the world happier.

As the No Impact year ends, I am back to facing the same questions and dilemmas and tug-of-wars between desire and altruism as everyone else. The No Impact year, in some ways, was like living in a monastery. Now the year is over, and I'm back in the marketplace.

I do a lot of public speaking. I run an international nonprofit that teaches people to find answers to their own life questions. My family has changed form and I am no longer married to the mother of my daughter. I am older and facing retirement. I may not have the kind of older years that my grandfather had. On the other hand, I'm not sure he had the life satisfaction that I have. He didn't experiment the way I do. He lived in a different world.

What I've found in this world is that you can live an amazing life if you tear up the standard life approaches (notwithstanding limitations like physical ability, extreme poverty, denied access to resources and others, of course). Not that you have to tear up all of them. I certainly haven't. There are realities to face. This isn't the No Impact year. This is my life. Living morally in the monastery is easy. The real question of our times is: How do you live a moral, balanced, happy, fun life when you're in the marketplace?

Finding that path is the purpose of this book. It doesn't start by concentrating on the problems. It starts by looking at the goals, the aspirations, the things we could be. It doesn't start by worrying about how much less harm we should be doing but how much more good.

What do you have to give to the world? Are you ready to insist on giving your gifts? For me, my gift is my voice. But it isn't that for everyone. Each of us must find our own path. Slowly, slowly, I've come to find my place in the world. Moment by moment my life mission reveals itself. I hope this book helps you find yours, too.

Thanks for reading *How To Be Alive!* Want more? You can buy the book [here](#).