

LIVE HARD

Start living more fully – NOW!



TODD DEWETT PhD

LIVE HARD

Thoughts on living fearlessly,
creating success, and embracing the future.

TODD DEWETT, PH.D.

Copyright © 2020 TVA Inc.

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher.

Requests for permission should be addressed in writing to:

TVA, Inc.
1500 Hadley Street #2592
Houston, TX 77252

ISBN: 978-1-7344344-1-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020918975

Book editing and layout by Barbara Lindenberg, Bluebird Designs

Book cover by Chris Strain

The advice and strategies found within may not be suitable for every situation. This work is sold with the understanding that neither the author nor the publisher are held responsible for the results accrued from the advice in this book.

www.drdewett.com

DEDICATION

To those who have dreamed, worked tirelessly, failed, and tried again. To the brave people in all walks of life who push back and demand more of themselves and others. To the geeks and rebels who forge their own paths. To the friends, family members, and others who support us when we strive to be more. To the entrepreneurs who create new things and inspire. To the educators and thinkers who give us the tools. To anyone who believes that more is possible.

This is for you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIVING FEARLESSLY 11

Live Hard 13

Original Fear..... 24

Dance Anyway..... 32

Sacred Cows Make Great Barbeque 43

Put Up, Or Shut Up 51

Battling Bureaucracy 63

The Comedians' Contribution 74

The Price of Deviance 83

Hell Gigs and Haters..... 94

CREATING SUCCESS.....103

Mirror, Mirror..... 105

Purpose and Passion..... 122

Sacrifice and Perspective..... 137

Free Your Brain 147

Leave a Mark, Not a Stain 162

The Poet and the Meathead 171

EMBRACING THE FUTURE181

The Truth About Diversity 183

Thank You, Ferris..... 196

The Gender Evolution..... 202

Safety, Superstar, or Rebel 210

A License to Lead 223

A CALL TO ACTION.....241

INTRODUCTION

To live hard is to live fully. That might mean different things at different times. Sometimes it means throwing caution to the wind. Other times it means clinging to discipline to ensure focus and achievement. Sometimes it's about the necessity of sacrifice or having the courage to do the right thing. It's often about upending the status quo. It's always about dreaming big and living bigger.

The idea for this book began while I was a young professor and was asked to teach an elective MBA course focused on creativity, innovation, and change. I loved teaching that course. We had fun, we took risks, and people learned a lot. Some of those lessons are noted in the pages that follow.

I told the students I intended to write a book encompassing the principles we covered. Originally, it was going to be more traditional, similar to a textbook, or maybe streamlined like *The Little Black Book of Leadership*. That would be very useful, but these topics are emotional and deserve a format that allows the emotions to breathe. Thus, the stories, essays, and rants you'll find here.

Many people deserve credit for these ideas. Mostly, however, I'm thankful for the kids in high school who followed their own path: the skaters, outcasts, misfits, and nerds. I was friends with a few of them. Others I admired from a distance. Most kids dreamed of joining the cliques of cool kids in school. Not me. I wanted to be a confident outsider, a punk, an honest original for better or for worse. It took me nearly thirty years to achieve that level of honesty, but I made it. So, thanks.

For me, live hard means to zealously chase meaning and success on your own terms. You have to do this in the face of too many people in your life who preach caution. This comes from love, but only serves up safety disguised as wisdom. Live hard is a paradigm that suggests it's righteous to try, fail, learn, and try again. Life is about reaching for what is possible while happily accepting the inherent challenges associated with striving.

My assumption is that if you're reading this, you want to accelerate the progress in your life. There are so many specific tools I wish to discuss, but in the end, you just need to know how to do three things: live fearlessly, create success, and embrace the future. Each of these inter-related topics receives about one third of the book. Every chapter will motivate, inspire, and add perspective to your journey. I'll also give you various targets for action – things that need to

be shaken up – whether some of your behaviors or beliefs or aspects of your professional life.

Remember, this is “live hard,” not “live easy.” Improving your current situation will take a lot of work, and it’s not risk-free. To make your team better is even harder. Improving your entire department or division, even harder. Changing your entire organization, immensely harder. Changing your community, changing the world – infinitely harder. No need to fret! It all starts with you improving yourself, one small change at a time.

Read the book. Work on you. Start to think bigger. Choose one meaningful target for change. Make progress. Repeat. Have fun!

LIVING FEARLESSLY

LIVE HARD

We need guiding ideas and beliefs in life. Sometimes we find them in very unexpected places. They guide us in ways we can't predict. In my case, I imagined a career in business: marketing, consulting, executive roles. Somehow, I instead became an educator, a writer, and a professional speaker. It only took one specific idea to change my fate.

Most days I arrived at work in my blue jeans, motorcycle boots, and a t-shirt – standard gear for my quick commute to work. Dressing however you wish was the norm at Hyperglot Software. It was a classic small startup. They created cool software that helped people learn to speak new languages. They made me employee 32, even though I was only an intern.

Jeans and a t-shirt were the norm, but when I showed up for my interview, things were a bit different. My Brooks Brothers suit, a starchy white business shirt, and a simple red tie completed my interview attire. I proudly reeked of “business student.” I didn't know what to expect, though I

had read about many software startups and was excited to gain first-hand knowledge.

A man opened the door of the small office building after I knocked once. He was a young man with a long goatee, a tank top, camo shorts, and no shoes. I thought I was in the wrong place.

“Can I help you?” He inquired as he looked at me with a worried face.

“I’m here for an interview,” I said. I asked if I was in the right place and explained that I was there to interview with Phil, the president of the company.

A look of clear understanding washed over his face. “Oh!” He grimaced. “You’re the MBA.” It wasn’t a question. It was just a condescending acknowledgement.

I got the job that day but not before meeting a host of Camo Short’s wonderfully eccentric colleagues. I met the COO, Scott, who politely suggested that I should remove my tie and never wear one again, lest I harm all things creative. Next was the firm’s lead programmer, Sam – a delightful young man who loved wearing his multi-colored beanie cap with a propeller on the top. He was followed by a fascinating Russian programmer named Nadia. She looked unapproachable, but was actually kind,

with a deadpan humor that was excellent. This was a supremely colorful group.

The two main owners of the company were Phil and Martin. The former was the business guy who focused mostly on finance, accounting, and sales and marketing. He was literally the only person who ever dressed up at work. The latter was a Ph.D. in languages, a university professor, and the company's chief language and technical officer.

I was working at my desk one morning when I walked Martin, aka Dr. Rice. I'd been an employee for about one month, and at the office that day for maybe three hours. I was focused on work and beginning to think about lunch, but Dr. Rice had other plans.

"Let's go." He said. "We're going to get a tattoo." He smiled and raised his eyebrows, as if to say, "Are you in?"

He didn't actually ask if I was interested or inquire if I had plans for another tattoo. He only knew that I already had a couple, likely wanted more, and most importantly, that he was in the mood to get his next piece.

Normally, I try to be thoughtful and plan things out. This amount of spontaneity would usually frazzle me. However, I said yes without much hesitation.

It was hard to say no to this odd and congenial fellow. His intelligence and status were a beautiful mismatch with his worn jeans and sleeveless t-shirt.

Moments later, Martin hopped on his Harley. I jumped on my Honda, and off we rode, ready to play hooky. We arrived at our destination some thirty minutes later. It was a small, old tattoo shop in the hills outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. Two grizzled looking old biker types were manning the shop. Martin spoke to one, and I worked with the other.

On the fly I decided to share a fragment of an idea I had with the artist. I told him I had a motto of sorts floating around my head: the phrase, “Live Hard.” I told him it was a reminder to live fully, to live in the moment, to be bold, etc. The idea was half formed to say the least, but somehow, I didn’t care.

“Nice,” the artist responded. “What kind of images are you thinking about?”

“Maybe a shield and a banner, or something?” I suggested.

I wasn’t quite sure, so I looked at Martin. He sensed my hesitation, then spoke up. “Look man, sometimes you have to think deeply, and sometimes you just need to let go and roll with it.”

“How about I put a dragon on the shield?” my grizzled artist asked.

“Do it,” I replied – and then I let go. Two hours later the motto was seared onto my left upper arm, complete with shield and dragon. That day changed me.

I was already in a growth state of mind. My graduate program at the University of Tennessee was fun and challenging, and my interest in business was ever-widening. Working in such a progressive, fun environment at Hyperglot pushed me to open up even more.

My new motto was always on my mind. It sounded too silly to share with others, but I thought about it nonetheless. I wondered if others had used that phrase. I wondered if it meshed well with any teachings from religion, philosophy, the world of self-help, or elsewhere – so I started to read.

After I graduated, I did become a consultant as I had planned. I kept reading in my off hours. It became something of a hobby. The more I read, and the more I thought about it, the more I started to believe I’d stumbled upon an important phrase. I’ve always tried to be a person who lives by some set of principles, and though I sampled various religions and philosophies, I’d never really found what I was looking for.

Unsatisfied, I turned to one of my favorite sources of wisdom – my mother. I showed her the tattoo. She was unimpressed, but was interested in the motto and my quest. Her advice: read the Bible.

So, I did. It was my second reading. There is a great deal of wisdom in those pages. Thoughts about family, hard work, justice, kindness – you name it. There's a lot to like: the gospels are interesting, the trippy sci-fi writing is interesting, the poetic beauty of Psalms is interesting too. Of course, there is also a lot of difficult violence and mayhem, and endless amounts of begging. It was interesting, but I still wasn't satisfied.

I dove into philosophy and psychology as well, both of which I had enjoyed as an undergraduate student. I felt energized and emboldened to learn that Vogel said discovery is the primary driver in life. Of course, I was also moved by Freud who suggested the real driver was pleasure. I was heartened to realize that Confucius, Jesus, and many others suggested that helping people was among the highest of callings.

A few of the legends in the self-help world made an impact too. The great Zig Ziglar reminded me that your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude. Campy, but the more you think about it, the more you realize it's true.

Thankfully, Wayne Dyer reminded me that you can be miserable, or you can motivate yourself. Either way, it's your choice.

I was very interested in the idea of improving myself, maxing out my potential – call it what you'd like. I had no idea I would eventually turn this interest into a career.

As I began to look for patterns or themes among all of these ideas, something obvious stood out. There was plenty of talk about things to think, say, or do in order to be good. There were rules and suggestions about things to avoid and how to stay out of trouble. That's useful, but it still felt very incomplete.

In my reading, I noticed that the ideas about becoming more, taking risks as a principled choice, chasing goals, and being successful all seemed to be missing. Face your fears. Dream. Imagine. Be creative. Embrace change. It seemed like such an obvious topical omission.

For a while, I felt like I had said something useful when I coined the phrase “live hard.” Of course, as the years rolled on, I realized a couple things.

First, the world of psychology and the social sciences, and a lot of the self-help world, did indeed address these topics – at great length.

There was everything from studies of entrepreneurial personalities, discussions of fears and risks, and a vibrant stream of research around goal theory – not to mention one of my all-time favorites – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in the motivation literature. Sure, it turned out his theory wasn’t exactly correct, but boy was it useful and popular. Many people still remember the pyramid and what’s at the top: self-actualization!

Not too many years later, I was a young Management professor. I kept reading. There were many ideas about failure being great and necessary, a true catalyst for learning, a beautiful requirement for success. Scholars were studying these issues in several disciplines. Business leaders espoused many related platitudes. Self-help gurus all had their own version of these ideas. Try, grow, learn, achieve!

However, nobody had crystalized this group of related ideas in a manner that was easy to remember and share. I caught a glimpse of my arm in a mirror one day and realized that I already had the answer: live hard. By now, the tattoo was a decade old, but the idea seemed fresher than ever.

It became a part of me the day I skipped work to get some ink with Dr. Rice. Way back then it just seemed like a fun indulgence, a light-hearted idea. Years later, I realized it’s so much more. It’s a motto, a calling. It’s a profoundly important

reminder that life is short and needs to be lived to the fullest. The implied lessons also became clear.

First, question everything. This will serve you in life and in your career. Question, search, and listen. Don't be like so many alphas who sometimes talk too much – think! I don't care about which specific paradigm, religion, or system works for you. The point is that they're only worth following if there is legitimate room to question, disagree, and apply your own perspective. Any philosophy centered on ideas like try, fail, learn, and grow isn't possible without room to make it your own. The more you question the wisdom that is presented to you, the more you'll eventually find wisdom that works for you.

Second, take action. Sure, thinking and questioning are sacred, but there is something even more sacred: action. Nothing stimulates thought like trying something. When you try things you know how they feel, based on experience. On an individual level this should remind you to get off of the sideline and get into the game. Life is not a spectator sport. Try! Win or lose, succeed or fail, so what. Learn something, try again, and improve. Over time, this is always the best strategy for gaining knowledge and success.

Finally, realize that success is a journey, not a destination. The dream is to enjoy the time you

spend working because you love yourself, you enjoy those with whom you work, and you see purpose in your work. If you live hard, you'll end up winning more than losing, but trying and learning and seeing progress is the real thrill. Taking your thoughts, abilities, and accomplishments forward to new levels – that's joy.

I felt emboldened by my time at Hyperglot. Dr. Rice showed me that you can be professional and still be you without a ton of compromise. We're still connected online all these years later. He's now in his 80s. Recently, he saw one of my posts on LinkedIn, a draft of what became a chapter in *Live Hard* about how businesses today have to get serious about embracing young talent (i.e., *Thank You, Ferris*). He dropped a comment and suggested to me that we better also pay attention to how older people add value. He was right again.

Isn't it interesting how change begins in your life? It's about taking one small risk, one small action. Sure, you need to think and use good judgment, but sometimes you just have to let go. That gets the ball rolling. In my case, it led to a new tattoo, a phrase on the license plate of my first Harley, and the book and story you're reading. I honestly try to live by this idea, and now I'm reminding you to do the same.

It all started with a scratchy tattoo that probably needs to be touched up. However, the truth is that

no tattoo is ever as strong as the idea for which it stands.

Life is short – live hard.

ORIGINAL FEAR

Have you ever wondered what it is you're really scared of? We all have moments of hesitation, moments when we question ourselves and feel unsure. But what is it we really fear?

The usual suspects are failure, rejection, and criticism. These are secondary fears. Typically, we feel these fears when we think about doing something. Fear is a short-term response designed to keep us safe when we think about acting. On a much deeper level, our primary drive is to live: explore, try, do! To take action. It's how we're wired. Stated differently, the original fear is fear of not doing – fear of not living. This drives a desire to act and the predictable secondary fears that follow.

Too many people crumble over time when faced with these secondary concerns. They forget the original fear – that amazing reminder of why we're here. They slowly cease seriously considering interesting actions, and they make only the safest moves. Their life is safe, but unfulfilling. I think I've always known this, but it was a great speech that really brought it to life.

In my career as a professor, I used videos in class as a complement to the mix of lectures, stories, and activities I was using. I bet most of those students will always remember what Sir Ken Robinson taught us about creativity in his immensely well-received TED talk. I know it's impossible to forget the emotional speech shared by coach Jimmy Valvano at the 1993 ESPY Awards show.

One of my all-time favorites used in class was provided by Steve Jobs, the Apple co-founder. It was the famous Stanford University commencement address. He had recently, at least for a while, won his battle with cancer, and he used the speech as an opportunity to reflect on life. It was a truly a great talk about the fragility of life and the need to live fearlessly. He helped many of us shift our perspective. He reminded us to not pay attention too closely to those protective secondary fears.

His first main point was to be sure to connect the dots. Your experiences in life often reveal very useful insights, but only if we look backwards and try to connect them. After getting bored, Steve dropped out of college and chose to drop in on a few classes he liked, including a calligraphy course. Later, this heavily influenced the beautiful typography on the Mac, and, eventually, how words looked on screens throughout the world. The lessons: follow your interests, take time to reflect and look for patterns, don't live passively, and allow life to inform you.

Next, he reminded us that life is full of love and loss. Few things were as powerful as the joy he would experience as Apple thrived in the early years, except maybe the pain he felt when he was later forced out of the company he had started. You will feel highs and lows, wins and losses. This is normal and to be expected. You can't avoid the hard parts and there is no need to dwell on them. It's part of the process.

Finally, he talked about the universal nature of death and what that suggests for life. During his fight with cancer, he recalled looking in the mirror every day to ask himself, "If this were my last day, would I want to do the thing I'm going to do today?" It made him focus on adding value and chasing passion. That's a brutal but useful test we should all consider.

He was addressing what I think of as the original fear, and realized that all the rest were mostly unfounded secondary fears. There is no reason not to follow your heart, chase the dream, and seriously try to live fully. He understood that death is universal and predictable, thus not worth fearing. Instead, we should fear not really living. That's the original fear.

Not too many years later, when Jobs eventually passed, it made me think not only about his contributions, but also about the three times I too had faced death.

The first time I almost died I was in the third grade. I saved a kid named Trevor who fell through the ice on a partially frozen pond as we walked to school. We should have both died, but somehow, we didn't. The second time I was a freshman in high school. I woke up one morning in immense pain. My appendix decided it needed to explode. Thanks to one seriously fast-driving mom, it was surgically removed before real damage could be done.

The third time was quite recently. One of my clients held a big event at the Texas Motor Speedway and they asked me to deliver a keynote. They also offered me a ride in a real NASCAR race car with a professional driver. I would just be a passenger and they assured me it would be safe. I was scared and thrilled at the same time.

When the time came, I put on the big protective suit and helmet and they helped me climb through the small open window of a very mean looking machine. Five other people who were attending the event were also helped into cars lined up in front of mine. They strapped me in and off we went. It felt like we were in a rocket. It was far more frightening than fun at first.

As we hit the second turn, I remember thinking it just seemed impossible to control these monsters while turning at well over 100 miles per hour.

I was starting to feel more exhilarated than frightened. Suddenly, the car only twenty feet in front of us began to spin out. Once, twice, and then it slammed into the wall. I thought, “I hope they don’t die!” Then I realized we might be in trouble too.

As smoke covered our windshield, my driver jerked the car hard to the left – an emergency maneuver that may have saved our lives. We missed ramming into the other car by about three feet. All of the cars pulled off the track as emergency personnel rushed towards the accident. The driver who crashed was fine. His civilian passenger was shaken up with a bloody gash on her chin, but was mostly okay.

I was shaking, reliving the whole thing in my mind over and over. I had a few minutes to just think. I felt lucky. I resolved never to do that again. Box checked. Thanks. I’m done.

It was right then that the lead driver walked up to our group, apologized for the mayhem, and offered to take us all out on the track one more time to finish what we started.

“Let’s go,” said the woman with the bloody chin. She approached the group, having been cleared by the medics. Her smile mesmerized us. I wanted to be done, but I also wanted to finish this simple task. I didn’t want to be controlled by those secondary protective fears. I wanted to

embrace the original fear. I smiled back. We all agreed to join her. It was a hell of a ride.

Slowly but surely, with the help of a few friends along the way, I've learned to use common fears as reminders of the original fear. It's a proactive way of positioning them in your mind as catalysts, not obstacles.

I've often wondered how others feel about these experiences. In particular, I've wondered many times how people who are much older think about these issues as they look back at life. With a little research, I found several studies that begin to address this question.

It turns out, when we are near the end and look back, we regret not being honest and not speaking up. We regret not lightening our load by burying the hatchet and letting go of certain things. We regret not taking chances in our careers and lives. We regret not traveling enough and not trying new things.

Stated differently, we're mad we didn't do certain things, not that we tried and did not like them or tried and somehow failed. Most of our short-term fears are just the things that stop us from conquering the one original fear – fear of not truly living.

To me, there are only two main groups of people at the end. On the one hand are people who increasingly sense their mortality. This makes them more and more conservative with their thoughts and behaviors. They fall prey to inactivity while getting lost in the predictable secondary fears. This is the bigger group of people, the one with more regrets. The only thing that scares them more than death, is life.

Then we have those who realize life is short and should be experienced fully, risks be damned. They try many things. Win or lose, they want to give things a shot. In the end, they know they did what they could and have very few serious regrets, and tons of great memories. They don't have to fear death, because they chose to fully live.

Sometimes it takes a near-death experience to really understand what it means to live. Cancer, for better or worse, is a common example. Thanks to a cancer story I've been sharing on stage for years, people share their stories with me. As a result, I met a man who lost a testicle, a woman who lost both breasts but replaced them with a rose tattoo, a salesman whose girlfriend was dying of cervical cancer, and a man in his late sixties with late stage prostate cancer who seemed more alive than nearly anyone else I'd ever met – among many others.

Of course, you don't have to have a brush with death to realize the truth. The truth is that when you're near the end, you want to feel like you truly lived. I suspect that the more we feel this is true, the easier it is for us to let go and accept what comes next.

So, actively check those secondary fears. Call them out as the imposters they are, as unworthy competitors in a contest you intend to win. You'll take some hits and experience rough waters along the way. It won't kill you. With the right perspective, it will make you stronger.

That's why I love NASCAR. Not because I care about cars or high speeds, but because what happened on that track gave me the gift of perspective. It was a moment I needed to experience in order to realize that Mr. Jobs was right when he reminded us to "stay hungry, stay foolish."

I certainly don't deny that fear plays an important role in helping us steer clear of trouble. However, they too easily derail our progress. Indulging them can too quickly become a habit. Remember, it's okay to have fears. The goal isn't to become fearless. It's to live fully in spite of them.

DANCE ANYWAY

Some people spend a lifetime trying to fit in. I understand. I tried for a while when I was young. What I eventually discovered is that trying to fit in prevents you from embracing the real you. Don't get me wrong, whether young or old, I understand the social benefits of fitting in. They include more friends, moments of affirmation, more status, and a feeling of being included. It makes you feel as if you matter. It does have value.

Of course, the price is heavy. Deep inside you know you're experiencing a false sense of self-worth predicated on adhering to group norms. It means you must look acceptable to them. You must speak in a manner they like. You must protect others in the group, even when you don't want to. Ongoing acceptance depends on maintaining behaviors which often run counter to your natural interests and beliefs.

Why do we feel so compelled to expend massive amounts of energy trying to be something we are not? Mostly, it's due to fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of being judged. Fear of being lonely. And, at certain ages or in certain cultures, we may even

fear the experience of violence. These are very understandable concerns that can represent a heavy burden.

However, big challenges aside, I want you to stop worrying about fitting in. I'm giving you permission. No, sorry, scratch that. I don't have that right. Give yourself permission. Just be you. It's a tough choice, but ultimately, it's the only choice. Life is fleeting, so why not experience it on your terms? I often feel that people live like caged animals, trapped inside others' expectations. It's time to open the cage door and run!

Think about what you stand to gain: less wasted energy, friends you can trust, a feeling of self-acceptance that is distinctly better than any sense of acceptance derived from fitting in, a sense of honestly owning your choices, feeling more comfortable in your own skin, and a sense of personal integrity. It takes time, but these are real benefits.

The key to happiness and success isn't fitting in, it's self-leadership. That's the process between following and being ready to lead. You have to spend considerable time building meaningful self-awareness to drive personal growth and development, thus positioning yourself to lead when you feel you're ready, or when the opportunity arrives and you need to be ready.

To be clear, following isn't all bad. However, if it's chronic in the face of questionable leadership, or if you wish to lead and fail to even try, it can be a problem. Whether talking about friends in your social life or people at work, you can start the process of more fully owning your life by correctly confronting the many difficult and uncomfortable moments we all encounter. Situation by situation, one decision at a time.

There were many pivotal moments like this for me. Times when you want to go in one direction but feel somehow compelled to move in another direction. In these moments, sometimes you cave and end up embarrassing yourself. Other times you stay true to your beliefs, even if there is social risk. Two moments in particular stand out in my memory.

The first involved what were known as parachute pants. In middle school, pants that looked as if they were fabricated from parachutes were all the rage. They were shiny and had zippers everywhere. They were beautiful and I coveted them anytime someone walked past me in the hallway. I imagined how great I would look. Finally, many months after the trend faded, I scraped together all of my pennies, added a few bucks from my parents, and bought a pair on clearance. When I wore them to school, I was the only one still wearing them. People stared. I felt stupid and decided to never wear them again. Fail.

The second moment came years later. I was in my twenties and was dating a woman named Allison. We were at a Christmas party hosted by one of her friends. The music was superb. The living room in this person's house was quite large, like a dance floor, yet no one danced. Then it happened. *Bizarre Love Triangle* by New Order started playing, and I wanted to dance. Allison was off talking to friends. I was standing by myself and imagined that dancing alone would be a spectacle. "Who cares," I thought, and danced anyway.

For the first few minutes, I was alone, gyrating and moving to the best of my ability. I closed my eyes and started to let go. I could feel the sweat on my brow and I didn't care. A minute or two later, I opened my eyes and saw Allison dancing next to me. Then another friend joined, and another. Later, someone said they couldn't believe I was dancing alone. They said it was cool. I told them that was ironic since I wasn't trying to be cool. I was just trying to not care how others felt for a few moments, so I could enjoy the song.

When we were young, we all desired to fit in and be cool. Acceptance was about doing what others do. It was often about self-aggrandizing. It was sometimes about denigrating the outgroup. Then a shift began. Sometime in the late 80s and early 90s dorks and nerds started to become cool. Some called it geek chic. It was interesting, but still

the cool kids dominated. At least the geeks created interesting subcultures, from the Dungeons and Dragons crowd (which I sometimes indulged), to the tech nerds, to the emo kids dressed in black. Later in the 90s and into the 2000s the real fun began. A far more interesting reality emerged.

Authenticity became a new form of cool. No parachute pants required. Just you. That movement has been building ever since. That's why today's youth gives me hope. They are growing the authenticity movement. It's reflected in the books they read, the movies they love, and the shows they watch. More slowly, it's happening for adults at work as well. Success requires that we embrace all colors, all genders, all shapes and sizes. And it's not just about success. It encompasses appreciation, well-being, and even love.

Being real is an all-together healthier mindset, a sure sign of human progress.

Just a few year ago something happened that reminded me of this issue. My oldest son, Paxton, had just attended his first school dance. He was in the eighth grade. The next day I was talking about it with his mother (Laura, my favorite ex-wife), and that lead to a conversation about what we remembered from school dances. We laughed as we recalled the clothes, the music, our youthful apprehensions, etc. I had the pleasure of reliving

that conversation with my wife Cheryl when I got home that night. Fun memories.

The next day, Cheryl and I were at Laura's house dropping off the boys after picking them up from school. Parker asked permission and then ran in the direction of a friend's house. Paxton grabbed his basketball and headed towards the park in the lot next to their house. I needed to chat with Laura when she got home from work, so Cheryl and I took a stroll in the neighborhood to kill time.

An hour later we stood by the short metal fence outlining the park watching Pax shoot hoops. Laura pulled up on her bicycle, small radio affixed to the handlebars blaring 80s tunes. She was wrapping up a quick after work ride. When she arrived, *Tainted Love* by Soft Cell was playing. I knew from a text exchange that she was about to tell Paxton to come home for dinner. She waved him over.

"I love that song," I said. "It reminds me of a club we used to go to in college in Memphis."

Cheryl chimed in, "Remember \$.25 cent beer nights?"

"I remember \$1 beer nights. How old are you?"

She did not like my remark and socked me hard on the arm.

Paxon walked up and rolled his eyes when he heard the music. He was fourteen years old. What did he know? He thought that Drake was the only thing that mattered that year.

“I was so broke,” Laura said. “I think it was ladies’ night that got me and my friends through college.”

Paxon quickly tired of the music, and our conversation. “Yell at me when you’re ready,” he said as he slipped back towards the basketball court.

“Stay here. We’re leaving in just a second,” his mother said.

Just then, *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* by Cyndi Lauper started playing on Laura’s speaker. We adults all started bobbing our heads with the song.

Pax looked perturbed and seemed to become aware of the presence of other people around us. Several adults were walking near us. Several more kids of different ages were playing in the park. Once again, he started to slowly step away from us, basketball in one hand, his own Bluetooth

speaker in the other. He was praying that no one he knew would see him standing with us.

Cheryl pulled out her sarcastic voice, “Where do you think you’re going?”

We all knew two things. One, he hated “our” music. Two, he wanted to keep playing basketball.

“Fine!” Pax said in an unpleasant tone. He pressed a button on his speaker and another on his phone. Drake’s song *Controlla* began playing at a high volume.

I took a few rapid steps and grabbed the speaker playfully out of his hand and turned it off. Using his fourteen year old lingo, I said, “That’s not fire. That’s garbage.”

I was trying to be funny, but he looked offended. Cheryl and Laura were happy – Cyndi Lauper was once again clearly audible.

“That’s not cool,” Pax replied. Again, the tone was a bit too full of teenage angst.

“Be nice kid,” I said.

He smiled a tiny bit, then asked in a low voice, “Or what?”

“Or we’ll dance, smartass!” I yelled.

“Y’all old people don’t need to be dancing,” my son had the guts to say.

Laura’s speaker went silent for just a moment as the song ended. Willing to do battle with her

son, she immediately turned up the volume on her speaker not knowing which song might play. That's when we heard the unmistakable introductory riff of *Jessie's Girl* by Rick Springfield. When Rick started saying, "Jessie is a friend...." I decided it was time for action.

I looked at Cheryl and nodded. She looked at Laura, raised her eyebrows and nodded. The three of us broke out in dance. It was awesome! Three out-of-shape middle aged white people shaking it like we had a clue. We did not, nor did we care.

There was a split second when Pax heard *Jessie's Girl* that he looked as if he'd be okay, no doubt capable of enduring yet another 80s song. Then we started shaking and gyrating.

I know I must have looked like a chubby Herman Munster in athletic shorts. The ladies seemed to be doing a really bad imitation of the famous Molly Ringwald dance from *The Breakfast Club*.

Pax froze in pure shock and embarrassment.

One lady jogging by us smiled and pumped her fist in support of our antics.

Pax's face honestly looked like he had just walked in on his grandparents having sex. He began power walking away from us towards home, ready

for dinner – ready for anything other than these three crazy adults.

We finally came to our senses, high-fived and laughed. It's not always the case that parents get to feel cool and in control with teens, but we certainly won the battle that day.

Sometimes being authentic and just doing your thing draws in people who like what you're up to. Other times, it repels them. Either way you win: you don't have to pander or beg or fake it at all. You just have to let people know where you stand.

I was texting with Pax later that night. He said the only way you can ruin a good song was to let us dance to it. However, he also said he thought we had guts. That's pretty cool.

Even though there is a normal age-based divide between me and my teenage son, I take pride knowing that, while imperfect, he's not one of the obsessed clique members at school that I so clearly recall from my time in middle school and high school. His Drake-fueled attitude aside, he's one of the laid back kids, very solidly a part of the love-everyone authenticity movement. That makes me happy.

I'm not naïve. I know that today we still have a version of the clique system at school and at

work, but the cliques no longer wield the power they once did. In fact, there is now sometimes a cost associated with trying too hard to fit in. We call those people fake or trendy or plastic. Even considering the never-ending trolls online, on average, we're making progress and trying to embrace a higher-level interpersonal ideal.

I'm also not suggesting that to be yourself you should shun all social norms or strive to be different just for the sake of being different. Nor am I suggesting we act in a manner that intentionally embarrasses others. I just think that it's good that we're seeing a shift away from traditional strict notions of "fitting in" and "cool." Inclusion is becoming much more than a good idea. Groups and cliques will always exist, but they're becoming kinder, slowly but surely.

So, what about you? Where are you in terms of authenticity?

My advice: don't worry about them. Do you. Start now, because it gets easier with time. To those of you leading the way – young or old – thanks and congratulations. To everyone else, give it a try: dance anyway. Sometimes they will love it. Other times they might run from you. Most of the time, I think you will find that when you march to beat of your own drummer, others usually want to join the band. If they don't, at least you'll enjoy the music.

SACRED COWS MAKE GREAT BARBEQUE

Innovation can happen when a select few individuals in an organization step up and try new things. However, it's much more likely to have impact and be sustainable when everyone believes in the organization's innovation culture. Over time, a culture that is serious about change is always stronger than one or two innovators.

One of the most enduring hallmarks of any effective innovation culture is the ability to deal with sacred cows. This refers to a custom, behavior, product, process, or rule that is known to all as unproductive and yet untouchable. Much respect to my Hindu friends and their reverence for cows, but the phrase is now so much bigger. It's a general reference to something that is above criticism – something that can't be touched, but should be.

Simply stated, most sacred cows are not sacred! They are simply choices that became long-standing routines. These routines become accepted as the way we do things, and, endorsed by enough people, they eventually become untouchable.

The concept is used most often at a macro level, addressing rules, processes, business models, and markets. The examples are plentiful. No one ever thought Microsoft Windows was the best we could do, but it has been accepted historically as the operating system standard by the majority of computer users and developers on the planet. Then Linux was created. Then computing went mobile, and Android sprung to life. Sacred cows don't last forever.

Consider cars. The internal combustion engine has been mostly obsolete for decades. Yet it has persisted very successfully. Similarly, the dealer network approach to sales has long persisted. This was the only buyer reality until recently. Tesla chose to upend two sacred cows, deciding to sell fully electric cars directly to consumers. They are now the most valuable car company in history.

Nothing lasts forever. Things are supposed to change, in business as in life. The more interesting issue is whether or not you benefit from change, or more to the point, whether or not you're helping to create the change. Do you over-indulge the routine, or slay the cow?

Let's take it down a level and focus on your workplace. Think about that executive perk that is unjustifiable. The fact that we're always expected to work weekends. That crazy dress code.

The vacation policy you loathe. The terrible system of accountability at work that allows low performers to always get by. Sound familiar? There are a million examples.

The same happens in your personal life. There are things that exist, that you respect and don't question, that are supposed to help you or guide you. Maybe they once did, but they don't any longer. It could be an old friend, a personal belief, or possibly a practice or a habit. Whatever it is, it stops you from growing, being more productive, and being happier. You're starting to realize that change is needed. Is it time to question one of your sacred cows?

Let's make some barbeque. What you target is up to you, but let's be honest, we all have multiple targets. It might have to do with your religious beliefs. It could have to do with your diet. Maybe it's your family traditions. How about the pronouns you prefer? Who knows? You can't hold on to any standard or tradition just because you always have.

Don't worry, I'm not telling you to upend everything you do! We only have a certain capacity for personal change. Target one or two things that matter to you, and make the decision to be brave. Choose to no longer step over the dead body in the room as if it were not there. Good news,

gaining comfort with making change slowly increases your capacity to make more change. With persistence, change might eventually become transformation.

Sure, it can be risky. Yes, it takes guts. Sometimes it might even be painful and cause problems between you and others in your life. It's your choice. You can play it safe by not rocking the boat, or you can roll the dice and attempt real change. I can promise you this much – great things are more likely to happen in your life when you address a few sacred cows. The possible fallout is worth it.

The benefits are undeniable. You stand a chance to change and improve the thing in question (the behavior, the policy, the belief, etc.). You elevate your level of consciousness, reducing the likelihood of future sacred cows becoming a problem, show others what you stand for and how strong you are, and you learn how to communicate about the need for change more effectively.

One of my favorite examples ever involved a former MBA student in a course I was teaching dedicated to creativity and innovation. One of the themes in the course was inspired by the Einstein quote, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

There is plenty of research in various areas of business and psychology that supports this idea. The practical application in the course was to encourage the students to go find new perspectives for the biggest problems they face at work. I specifically asked them to target a sacred cow and start making barbeque. I remember at least two students who voiced loudly that they thought this sounded fluffy, and wondered about the importance of the assignment.

Near the end of the term, everyone shared what they had learned from the assignment. One student who took the task seriously worked for a manufacturer of various pieces of equipment used in underwater applications. His company professed a strong belief in innovation, but one of their sacred cows was that you were not supposed to discuss your problems outside of your division. Each division chased similar top line metrics and to partner or share with other divisions was tantamount to helping the competition.

Thankfully, this student, an engineer by training, really liked barbeque.

He targeted a particular material that was prominent in several major products sold by his division. The goal was to find something cheaper and hopefully stronger, and it had to conduct electricity effectively under enormous underwater

pressure. Even though people openly questioned what he was doing, he spent time in three other divisions and even had meetings with two key suppliers. Eyebrows were raised.

He eventually found the new material he needed; a particular alloy he didn't even know existed. It was cheaper. It was stronger. It had all the qualities he was looking for. The costs savings were projected to be in the millions in the first year alone, not to mention the new revenues that were likely due to the fact that the material made the product more attractive in the market.

The student's boss, one of the company's senior engineers, initially questioned him, but decided to stay out of his way. In the end, he was so pleased that he sent me a very kind email encouraging me to continue my practical teaching methods. With the student's permission, I read the email to the class. As people clapped and high-fived him, I refrained from directly staring at the two students who so brazenly questioned the assignment weeks earlier. With any interesting endeavor, there are always doubters.

Or maybe you'll feel inspired by one the most famous sacred cow stories ever told – it's the story of Dick Fosbury. As a high school high jumper in the 1960s, Dick used the acceptable jumping method, called the straddle method.

It was the only acceptable method at the time. You go over the bar face down – first your torso, then one leg, then the other. Unfortunately, Dick just couldn't master the technique.

However, he was curious and began to experiment. Quickly one of his efforts started to dominate his attempts. He tried to jump over the bar face up, with his back facing the bar. Initially, he had a little success, but nothing major. It just looked bizarre to most observers, one of whom suggested he looked like he was having an airborne seizure. His coach was not initially supportive.

When he started, he couldn't complete jumps at five feet high with the standard technique. With the new technique, he began to make significant progress. They made fun of him, but he continued making progress. A local reporter derided his method and called it the Fosbury Flop. Dick was not deterred and continued to improve.

Soon enough, he set the school record for his high school. People started to take him seriously. Dick eventually won multiple NCAA championships, and Olympic Gold in 1968 in Mexico City by jumping over seven feet, three inches. Today, nearly all competitors around the world use the Fosbury Flop method.

Innovation isn't always beloved when it's first proposed or first attempted. Most people cringe

when someone attacks a sacred cow. So what. Persevere. They'll come around. If they don't, try again. Light the match and start the fire.

Or, you can join the chorus of voices claiming that there is no need for change, that's already been tried, or saying that it won't work. Those are all defeatist mottos. Instead, choose change. Don't ignore the dead body in the room, even if you're the only one who sees it.

To achieve a dream and find real success almost always requires some form of innovation. Innovation, in turn, almost always requires you to deal with a sacred cow or two – whether making personal change or leading an organization.

What are you waiting for? Start cooking. I want to smell some barbeque.

PUT UP OR SHUT UP

Organizations have long promoted their list of values and beliefs. These are espoused values. They go by many names: core beliefs, values, mottos, etc. What's more interesting, of course, is the extent to which these are merely espoused values versus enacted behaviors.

You've all seen these lists of ideas: honesty, integrity, innovation, empowerment, community, courage, accountability, love, etc. The list is endless. In fact, it seems quite impressive, doesn't it? Unfortunately, we all know that sometimes the list reflects the behaviors we see, and sometimes it does not.

It's time to call bullshit. Get real or go home. The more classic refrain is "put up or shut up."

To determine where your organization stands, begin by examining the congruence between what you say and what you do on a regular basis. As a firm, are you consistently walking the talk, or are you just attempting meaningless public relations? The former builds immensely valuable trust.

The latter is a problem, and if you do it consistently you can cause real damage.

Let's think about what it means to say that your group is lacking congruence between espoused and enacted values. There are several levels of bull between stating your values and living your values.

Level one is about neglect. You have a list of some sort that you can find on the website, but in truth, you and the team haven't talked about it for years. The list is old and you don't know if you're actually aligned with the ideas on the list or not. In essence, you really don't have a list. At this level, problems are likely in the near term as people with whom you do business realize the obvious – you're full of bull.

At the next level, you have a good list but you're not really living it. You say your employees are your biggest asset, but you're happy to downsize while throwing big paydays at top executives. You say you love the environment, yet your firm is spewing out unnecessary pollution. Eventually, the incongruence catches up to you. It impacts your ability to attract and retain talent, and it impacts how customers feel about you.

Then we have the level to which you really must aspire. Here, you have a thoughtfully prepared

and maintained list of values, and, mostly, your behaviors look like they were clearly informed by these values. This is a special place where the value you add to others (e.g., employees, customers, vendors, partners, the community) feels amplified. Showing congruence in this manner is a form of group or organizational integrity. It builds confidence, and makes you shine in the eyes of most observers.

However, even more is possible. Once you personally learn to embrace congruence and transparency, the conversation should spill over into your larger business ecosystem. For example, for world-class firms, it's natural to make joint decisions with partners that are openly influenced by shared values that matter. I firmly believe this idea should apply to us as individuals as well.

So, what level currently defines you?

I know from experience that many of us struggle with this topic. One piece of evidence is a values-related activity I've used for many years at certain live events. I ask people if they know what they really value most in life. Often indignantly, people say, "Yes!" Then I ask them to write down their top five values. Then I ask them to rank them. Eyes roll, headaches begin – the words don't easily flow. Point made. Too often there is

a gap between what we espouse and what we can articulate – let alone what our behaviors say.

Here's the rub – even if you know what you really value, you still have to figure out what to do when you have to interact with others who may not share your values. It's inevitable. We all face this struggle.

In my life, a great example concerns how I run my business. On occasion, I am asked to speak under conditions I can't accept. Sometimes this involves how I look while on stage for a client. Several times over the years I have had to turn down lucrative deals in order to be congruent with my values. My brand aligns my beliefs, the messages I share, and how I look and speak. So, when a client asks me to wear a suit and tie, I have to say no. Sorry AIG. Sorry ULINE. I believe in authenticity and honesty, so, no – I don't wear suits or ties.

That's just a tiny, easy to handle example. Many times, the situation is much more difficult. My favorite example that demonstrates this involves a story a man shared with me after a live event in San Diego. When I left the stage, he quickly made his way to me and introduced himself. His name was Noah.

“Have I got a story for you,” he said.

“I’d love to hear it,” I replied.

Noah told me where he lived (a small town near San Jose, California) and that he was his town’s newest and youngest city council member.

“The age issue is significant since the group is dominated by baby boomers, with no millennials like me.” He continued, “After I started it was just a few months of really boring meetings, until something exciting finally came up. It was a plan to revitalize our little downtown area.”

“That is exciting,” I said.

“I thought so too, at first,” he replied. “The members leading the effort began by suggesting a few items we could all support – things like repairing sidewalks, installing a needed traffic light, and tearing down two old condemned buildings.”

I could sense that he was about to drop a bomb on me.

“However,” Noah said, “At some point, they mentioned an item that surprised me. They suggested we needed to find a way to close the tattoo shop in the middle of downtown, or force them to move out of downtown.”

Like all members of my audience, he knew I was fond of ink. So I said, “Let me guess. You’re a tattoo person? Got a few tattoos?”

“At the time, no.” He continued, “But I was intrigued and asked why we would need to close or move the shop. One person, our senior member by age and tenure, spoke up and declared in a matter-of-fact tone that the shop attracts the wrong people and represents a barrier to improving downtown.”

He continued, “Not one person spoke up to challenge him. I wanted to, but I knew that there would be months of discussions and work before any big decisions could be made. Frankly, reading the faces of the other members, I didn’t think he would get the support he needed to actually go through with it. I was a little confused too since I’d never been in the shop and wasn’t sure how to feel about his comments. He just sounded, well, too judgmental. It made me think about what it is that we stand for. Our values.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I just waited and kept going to our regular meetings. Sure enough, he made sure to keep that item front and center in our plans. No one said a word in opposition. Finally, one night another member finally asked him why he felt this made sense. What he said bothered me. He told the group the

shop was attracting the wrong kind of people. He specifically referred to them as ‘bad clientele.’ Since he and the other members were all gray haired sixty-somethings, I think I knew what he meant – but I had to ask anyway.”

Noah said that when a break finally came up in the conversation, he decided to speak up. He asked his colleague, “I was wondering – can you help me understand what the problem is with the shop’s clientele?”

Silence engulfed their small meeting room. Everyone stopped what they were doing, turned to the senior member, and waited.

“Well,” his colleague began, “I just think it’s clear the business attracts the wrong type of people for our downtown.”

“Okay, what type of people do you feel they attract?” Noah asked.

The senior member was annoyed. “Look,” he said, “Tattoo shops attract people who want tattoos. I don’t think that is the crowd we want to invite downtown.”

Noah refused to let go. “What is it about people with tattoos that represents such a problem?”

Another member jumped in and changed the topic. Surprised, Noah decided to let it go for the moment. He sat quietly, feeling uncomfortable and unsatisfied.

Later that night, when the meeting was over, he headed straight downtown to the tattoo parlor. Sacred Heart Tattoos was a small shop in the middle of the main strip downtown. He simply planned to sit in his car and observe who was coming and going. An hour later, Noah had witnessed nearly twenty people enter the shop. He noticed nothing meaningfully different about these people compared to all of the other people entering nearby eateries and shops.

He decided to investigate further, got out, locked his car, and walked into the tattoo shop. At twenty-eight years of age, Noah had not been in a tattoo parlor for nearly a decade, and had never himself been inked.

Once inside, he heard that sound so familiar to those of us who enjoy the art – the buzzing of the tattoo machines. Two customers were getting work done. An additional two people he believed were employees were walking around.

One greeted him. “Hi, can I help you?” she said. He introduced himself, learned her name, and noted that she was heavily tattooed. When she learned he was on the city council and just

stopping in to say hello, she decided to sell the shop a little.

“Oh. Well, welcome. We’re in our eleventh year now. The shop strictly complies with all state of California rules for safety and health. We employ a team of ten, either full-time or part-time, and eight of us actually live here in town.”

She said as she reached for a tablet, “we’ve been pretty successful the last few years.” As she spoke, she flipped through a series of pictures on the tablet showing members of the team, various award-winning tattoos, trophies, and press articles. She locked eyes and plainly asked, “Are you sure you don’t want anything?”

Noah surprised himself. He laughed out loud, pulled out his wallet, and threw down two hundred dollars. “Give me something nice,” he said.

She laughed and then opened the gate separating the lobby from the main shop, allowing him to walk into that sacred area.

The following week Noah arrived at the city council meeting reinvigorated, ready.

Necessary yet boring municipal items packed the first hour.

He sat restlessly and wondered if he would have the guts to do it. He didn't want to lose his spot on the city council. On the other hand, he didn't want to be part of a group willing to so easily dismiss a harmless and productive group of people.

Finally, his senior colleague spoke up. "Can we address our options now for the Sacred Heart shop?" he said. "I think we can all agree the fastest way to make this happen is through zoning changes."

The group sat quietly. A few looked at Noah, seemingly encouraging him to say something now or let it go forever.

"Wait!" Noah said. "Before we talk about options, we still haven't addressed why we're talking about them in the first place. I'm not comfortable with this for a few different reasons. First, I think this means of expressing yourself is normal these days. It's mainstream. Second, I visited the shop and met the staff. They're nice people. I mean..."

Noah was interrupted by the loud voice of his senior colleague. "Maybe they are nice, but people looking for tattoos? Is that our target market?"

"So, they're just 'bad clientele'?" Noah replied.

"Not all of them, but many – yes!" the older man stated. "They are more likely to be deviant, un-

educated, and inappropriate. There – I said it.” He sat back in his chair and glared at Noah, as if to say, “Top that!”

Noah stood. They all assumed he was leaving in protest. Instead, he began unbuttoning his shirt. Moments later, standing there in his t-shirt, he showed the group his new tribal tattoo on the upper part of his left arm. “I graduated from UCLA. I’ve started two successful businesses and managed two others. I’m happily married. I’m a father. I’m on the city council. Do you want me to avoid going downtown?”

After a few silent moments passed, Noah said that others finally spoke up and agreed with him. The issue was tabled – permanently.

I grinned as he finished telling me the story and then lifted the sleeve of his golf shirt to show me his tattoo. It was a simple piece that felt anything but, after hearing the story.

Noah, now in his forties, grinned back at me. “I’m happy to report that Sacred Heart Tattoos has just celebrated their thirtieth year in business – and our little downtown is doing quite well,” he added.

It was truly a joy watching him light up as he shared his story.

Sometimes it's hard to live your values and do the right thing. It doesn't always mean that things will work out, but it does always mean you will feel a little better and sleep a bit more soundly.

I definitely believe in the power of organizations to move us forward on issues that matter. However, I believe in individuals like you even more. Maybe stating what matters at the top of our organizations and hoping these values will flow down the hierarchy isn't the best way to make change. Maybe it starts with you and me. Maybe the organization moves forward when a few key people – whatever their role might be – choose to do the right thing.

Maybe it's time for us to put up or shut up like Noah.