

**Stop.**  
**Think.**  
**Live!**

**Srikumar Rao** believes that many people are working so hard they have lost sight of what they want to get out of life. Could you be one of those people?

**S**top right now and evaluate your life. Is it filled with effortless pleasure or drudgery? Why? Probably, many answers come to mind – work, financial obligations, family responsibilities. If you are like many of the people I have observed and the thousands of students I have taught, you feel somewhat trapped – in your job, in a relationship that is unsatisfying, in responsibilities, in suffocating surroundings.

Do you sense that there is much that you would like to do but are unsure of what, and how to go about doing whatever it is? When was the last time you forged a deep connection with another human being? Are most of your relationships a series of meaningless interactions?

If you want more out of your relationships in life, in love and in work, I have some ideas that will help you fashion deep connections with the people around you. Even some of your interactions with perfect strangers will become nourishing and sustaining.

Life is short and uncertain. It is like a drop of water skittering around on a leaf: you never know when it will drop off the edge and disappear. Each day is far too precious to waste, and each day that you are not radiantly alive is a day wasted.

My ideas will help you stop wasting your days. They will help you get started in discovering your purpose in life, the grand design that gives meaning to all of your activities, the endeavour to which you can enthusiastically devote the rest of your life. Note that I said “get started” not “arrive at”. There is a non-linear relationship between the “work” you do and the “results” you get. Immense exertion can produce little outcome and, at other times, a little effort can yield a huge pay-off. But if you have an open mind, you can learn to create serendipitous opportunities. When you are truly moved by deep inner conviction, you become a leader, one who

I take it for granted that you would like to do your bit, and perhaps a little extra, to leave the world a better place than when you entered it. Change will have to happen at three levels before the new era, whatever it is, arrives:

- **Individual attitudinal change** We do not function in isolation; we have an impact on society and it, in turn, has an impact on us. Personal aggrandizement at the expense of everyone else is counterproductive. Greed is neither good for you nor good for society.
- **Organizational structural change** Although the world has altered greatly in the last few decades, our institutions of business, government, religion and society have remained antiquated. Their traditional hierarchies are totally unsuited to the present era of instant multilevel communication. Our current structures and practices are grossly inadequate, mere Band-Aids incapable of coping with severed arteries. Many smaller firms and local governments are experimenting with innovative internal organization. Out of the existing chaos, the butterfly will emerge. The form and colour are, as yet, unknown.
- **Societal value change** As long as material wealth remains the index of success, happiness will remain elusive. Too many of our role models in business, entertainment, and government seem interested only in power and wealth, but we as a society are fascinated by them. Better leaders will emerge only when we change what we honour, when, for example, a teacher who builds a championship chess team from given-up-for-lost ghetto kids is celebrated more than a drug-ingesting pugilist. There are indeed signs that a backlash has begun, but they are inchoate and diffuse.

I want you to start thinking about all three types of change. Individual attitudinal transformation is, to some extent, under your control and can begin when

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cares for a greater cause than your personal well-being. Then you will find joy creeping, and then rushing, into your life.

You may have achieved conventional success, but you know there is more and can't quite put your finger on it. Is this discomfort strong enough that you are willing to make the effort to “know thyself”?

### Change has to happen

You can create internal changes that will have effects far beyond your individual pleasure. Indeed, we can never truly live an ideal life unless we recognize that we are inseparable from others.

you start to examine your life. When you reach a position of authority, you can experiment with structural change. If you reach a position of great prominence, you may well contribute to a change in societal values that will also affect the actions of all of the persons you influence. Think of it as spreading ripples from a stone tossed in a pond, with the ripples growing stronger instead of attenuating.

### Ripple #1: Individual Change

A life of happiness is your birthright. You have to reach out and claim it. Will you succeed? I do →

→ not know. I do know that the first step toward getting there is recognizing that you want to get there. All change begins here, and no change is possible until you have a deep desire for it. While it is extremely important that you desperately want to live a life as described above, it is equally important that you not particularly care whether you do or not. If this sounds like a paradox to you, you are

find a rescuing army showing up every time you are beleaguered.

### Ripple #3: Societal Change

Leadership is the new fad in our global economy. Innumerable “experts” pontificate on the character of leaders and how to become one. Best-selling books identify corporate titans as worthy of

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absolutely correct. It is. All paradoxes are resolved as you reach higher levels of understanding, even the ultimate paradox of all, that which we call *life*.

Think of a desperate seeker who wanted enlightenment from the Master only to be told that working twice as hard would mean the process of change would take twice as long. That parable contains the secret of personal mastery. You should be steadfast in your pursuit of that goal but not fixated on it or consumed by it. Your ideal life does not yet exist. You will have to construct it in bits and pieces – somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle.

### Ripple #2: Organizational Change

Every upwardly mobile professional knows that contacts are important. How we relate to others in the organizations that surround us determines much of our lives. Politicians know this better than anyone else. There are books, courses, and seminars on how to network better. But there is a vast difference between a networking contact and a true contact. When we recognize that difference and act accordingly, organizational transformation can begin.

Suppose it were possible to set up a system whereby you did not have to build a network? Whenever you needed help, a person would appear who had the knowledge and/or resources you required. You can learn to function in this way. There are two major prerequisites, the most important being a change in your intentions. Instead of relating to others solely to fulfil a personal agenda, it is critical that whatever you are trying to accomplish bring material and spiritual good to a larger community.

Another condition for change and transformation is learning how to let go. You must relinquish the ego-driven need to be in control, the feeling that you are the orchestrator of events. When you have the right mixture of passion for what you want to accomplish, detachment, and acceptance of whatever actually happens, you will be amazed by how locked doors mysteriously swing open. You will

emulation and reveal their secret techniques. Military figures, from Attila the Hun through Napoleon to Colin Powell, are being scrutinized for the same reason. It is a burgeoning cottage industry that is rapidly outgrowing its cottage.

The reality is that we have very few leaders in any of our major institutions: education, government, business, unions, or not-for-profit organizations. We have a large number of people in positions of hierarchical authority, however. They wield great financial and social power, often unwisely, and can certainly impact your life for good or ill. But they are not leaders. They do not care if you achieve your potential, and you matter little to them except as a means of helping them achieve their objectives. They have neither overarching vision nor the intuitive knowledge of how to win dedicated converts. What they do have is a small coterie of followers who have hitched their stars to them in a calculated bet that this is a route to personal advancement.

There are many reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs. Our competitive system rewards naked aggression. Our consumption-oriented society equates success with the accumulation of material wealth. Our fragmented worldview perceives leadership as something that can be learned, as a technique that can be deployed.

Leadership is a state of being, not a skill. This is why great leaders come in all stripes. Their styles have been autocratic and democratic, gentle and brusque, unhurried or frenetically active. Studying these styles will profit you nothing. What will help you is reflection on their deeper qualities. If this reflection produces changes in how you think and act, then you may be able to use some of their methods with success.

I have little sympathy for managers who lament that it is impossible to motivate workers and who primarily tinker with various forms of incentives and punishments. Such motivation techniques may be okay if we are talking about animals in a behavioural psychology laboratory, but they are

demeaning when applied to human beings. If you are a manager, your function is to figure out what is de motivating your employees and how to get rid of it. This is a completely different philosophical approach with some startling implications.

The way you command the soul of people is by working on yourself. By “being” a beacon.

## Two major obstacles

**It's good for business** My desk is piled high with books that tout various types of good behaviour. Treat customers right so they will come back. Look after your employees so they will treat customers right and keep them coming back. Behave with integrity because if you do so, your stock price will surely go up.

Every one of these tomes finds it necessary to justify behaviour on the basis that the company will benefit in terms of revenues, profits, share appreciation, or some similar metric.

What a sorry pass we have come to when simple decent behaviour has to be “justified” in terms of some other benefit. What happens if behaving *without* integrity can get you growth and profit? This is frequently the case in many countries with weak legal structures. Do you then jettison integrity?

In my view, you treat the customer well because that is how you would like to be treated. You treat your employees well because that is the proper thing to do. You behave with integrity because that

**The quest for “more”** One of the most pervasive myths of our society is that having *more* will make us happier. Too few even recognize that this is a myth. Our entire economy is geared to fostering consumption. Our measures of societal well-being – such as per capita consumption – enshrine this notion. In fact, for most of us, our entire lives are a treadmill of effort to acquire more money, a bigger house, a more attractive spouse, more power, more fame, more control, more cars and more luxurious cars, more vacation homes and more expensive trinkets.

Sometimes the “more” is subtle. So intricately complex is our ability to play this game that some of us even want “more” simplicity, “more” renunciation. A few of us go to the hilarious end of wanting “more” asceticism. It is this quest for more that drives us into the unfortunate predicaments in which we find ourselves.

Recognize that there is no problem in seeking more or wanting more or enjoying more. The problem lies in believing that any of this will bring us more happiness. The causative link is spurious but, oh, how firmly we believe in it.

## More than a course

I realize that not everyone can take the course I teach. Whether you have or not, I have three points of advice.

First, I would ask you to recognize that we all define our reality and then proceed to experience it.

You treat the customer well because that is how you would like to be treated. You treat your employees well because that is the proper thing to do. You behave with integrity because that is an expression of who and what you are.

is an expression of who and what you are. These are the givens. You do not have to justify or explain or rationalize any of it.

We have turned over our commercial enterprises to people of overweening greed who use untested economic and behavioural models to justify actions that would otherwise be considered rapacious. It is high time we called a halt to this.

The good news is that there are many enterprises started by individuals who are profoundly dissatisfied with exploitative business tactics. They are linking with each other and with social entrepreneurs to create new, more humane business paradigms. I encourage you to join the revolt by starting such a venture or joining one that has already been started. You can also seed change in the company with which you are already associated.

But most of us don't realize we're doing it. We think that reality is given to us, as opposed to something we had a hand in creating. Once we understand this, we can define and live in a different reality that's far better.

Let me make this point more real: You're driving on a highway and get rudely – even dangerously – cut off by someone who weaves in and out. Your natural reaction is to give him the finger and stew in anger. See how this makes you feel. Now imagine that the erratic driver is rushing to get to the hospital because he has received news that his son has been in an accident and is critically ill. Now, inside you, see how the waves of sympathy gush out.

It's true that you don't know if that other driver was being inconsiderate or responding to an →

→ emergency, but you need to know that you have the choice of living in one of those spaces created in your mind. You can feel rage or sympathy. Why not pick one that leaves you feeling uplifted and compassionate rather than angry and frustrated?

Second, I'd urge you to fill your mind with positive emotions toward everyone with whom you have a close relationship, be that a good one or a difficult one. Here's how to bring this point to life. Think of an altercation you had with your boss or spouse or any person in your life with whom you have an ongoing relationship. What were you thinking about this person in the 24- to 48-hour period immediately preceding the argument? Odds are pretty good that you were thinking quite negatively. It's unlikely that you were a completely innocent, aggrieved party. You had a hidden hand in creating that unpleasantness.

If you have an ongoing relationship with a person, think of everything positive about that person that you possibly can and enter your interaction from that space. Ignore all the crap that used to drive you up the wall before. You will be amazed at what a change this attitude shift brings about. And I say this even if you are working closely with someone who bothers you, which leads to my third piece of advice.

*Be grateful all the time.* Be grateful for everything. Do you have a toxic person in your life? Be grateful to him or her. Even a bad boss can be a blessing in this sense – even though I usually receive a strong pushback when I say this. Most people I encounter do not want to feel grateful to their toxic boss. They want to get an effigy and stick pins in it. But the gratitude I urge you to seek is not for the boss; it is for you. When you think negatively about your boss and note the anger, frustration, feelings of helplessness and bitterness that emerge, you start to gauge the problem that only you can correct. Is this the mental room in which you want to live? So, I repeat: even with a bad boss, be grateful for having that person in your life. Think of that boss as a challenge to help train you on how best to deal with difficult persons. Think of how perfecting such self-mastery can perhaps help you to move to higher management positions. When the focus is on learning and dealing with the situation, much of the toxicity simply drains away.

And, needless to say, when you think positively about someone whom you like or love, you will find yourself steering away from quarrels over petty annoyances. A life built on gratefulness pays its own rewards. It's wonderful to be grateful. Let it well up from deep within you and pour out into the world in waves. ■

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