



6 Universal Truths
for Being Happy Together

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Chapter 1

Give Up the Ego

David Durocher was on the run. He had been weighing drugs for sale at a friend's house when he noticed a helicopter hovering in the sky; he thought it was odd that it wasn't going anywhere. When he loaded the drugs in his car and drove away, he was immediately pursued by what "seemed like 100 cop cars." After four consecutive prison terms, he knew he could not go back, so he became a NASCAR driver leading the pack on a high-speed chase – racing through stop lights, hitting cars, showing no regard whatsoever for public safety. He was trying to get to a bridge in Huntington Beach, where he could throw the drugs out the window and into the water. Before he got there, he hit a police roadblock and made a quick decision: this would be "suicide by cop." He slammed his car into the roadblock believing they would shoot him. Death was a far better option than spending the rest of his life in a six-by-eight-foot prison cell.

David started getting into trouble when he was six years old. "I was like Dennis the Menace in my younger years." He stole mail from mailboxes, and broke into people's homes and rummaged through their cupboards and refrigerators. His frustrated father started telling him he was no good, and tried various forms of punishment to control his behavior. "I was literally on restriction at times for entire summers; I was a prisoner in my room. Mom and Dad had no idea how to deal with me."

When David was 12 years old, he started sneaking his father's alcohol and replacing it with water. At 13, he did his first line of cocaine and continued using through high school. During this time, he gravitated to a rougher crowd of friends and became their leader. "I learned that it was much easier to lead among losers than to lose among leaders. I started to feel like I had an identity, and my reputation meant the world to me."

When David graduated from high school, he started using methamphetamine – that's when the wheels of his life came off completely: addiction, drug dealing, gun running, violence, and assault. His first prison term was two years, and although it was a horrible experience, it didn't change him. He was out for 59 days, and then back for five more years. He made it 60 days after this release, and then served a six-year term. Next time around he was a bit smarter, but not much; he made it four months before receiving a ten-year sentence for multiple crimes.

David became the prison yard boss during his multiple sentences. He was the leader of the "white guys" and had a reputation as the toughest, meanest, nastiest guy in the place. This reputation was extremely important to him. "I was willing to fight, I was willing to cut somebody, I was willing to stab somebody, I was willing to be on the front line of a riot, I was willing to do all of those things for what I thought was the cause in prison."

David was now on the run again! Unfortunately for him, or so he believed at the time, he was not killed at the roadblock in Huntington Beach. He was pulled from his car and "beaten senseless" by a group of police officers. The last thing he remembers before passing out was someone yelling, "Stop! You're going to kill him." David woke up in jail facing a 29-year prison term this time, which was plea bargained down to 22 years. How did his life come to this? What decisions put him on this miserable path? What attitudes and behaviors accelerated his wasted life? He was going to have a lot of time to contemplate these questions.

David Durocher is now the Executive Director of The Other Side Academy in Salt Lake City, one of the most successful life-changing programs in the world for convicted felons, drug addicts, and homeless individuals. He has lived in both heaven and hell, and heaven is far greater than anything he ever imagined. His new dream is to help thousands of people living desperate lives find genuine happiness and learn to live peacefully with others. How in the world did he go from years of crime and incarceration to one of the happiest people on the planet?

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Salsa Queen Zapata is now her legal name. It used to be Maharba Zapata. Maharba is Abraham spelled backwards, which was her father's name. Maharba grew up in Mexico with her parents and siblings. Early in life she decided she wasn't very smart. She did poorly in school because things didn't always make sense to her. Later in life she found out she has dyslexia and is color blind which explains her poor performance. She still remembers one embarrassing experience she had as a student.

Let me tell you what a dummy I was in school. One time I made the mistake of asking "Are we outside the world, not inside it? Then how do we not fall off"?

When Maharba was a teenager her father came to America illegally to earn money for the family. They were very poor at the time and often only had beans and tortillas for dinner. A year later, the rest of the family came to America on visitors' visas and never went back. All they brought with them was what would fit in a few suitcases because they couldn't look like they were staying long term.

Maharba's parents got a job cleaning a local grocery store and were allowed to take home food that had expired each day: milk, cheese, bread, meat, etc. "The cheese was green, so we cut the green off and ate the rest. We were in heaven; we were so thankful".

Maharba went to the local high school by herself to enroll that first year, but she didn't speak English and couldn't complete all the required forms, so she never went back. It wasn't long before she became pregnant and was a single mom. Her new baby was diagnosed with leukemia and spent 18 months in the hospital, which is where Maharba learned to speak English.

Eventually the child had a bone marrow transplant – Maharba was the donor – but it didn't take, and the child died. When people told Maharba how sorry they were about her loss, she replied, "It's just part of life" – at least it was part of the way her life had been going. She went on to have seven more kids and two divorces.

Since I didn't finish high school and was a stay-at-home mom, I always believed very strongly that I had no talents. Everybody had talent but me. Why was I born without a talent? I guess my talent was to bear kids, and I was OK with that.

After her second divorce she became severely depressed. She had no talents, no skills, no way to make a living, and no hope for a better future. At one point, she thought ending her life might be the best solution to her problems, but she continued to struggle to survive.

Today, Maharba is the owner and CEO of Salsa Queen, a highly successful company that makes gourmet salsas. "I always tell people we are the 'Chanel' of salsas." She has dozens of employees and her products are sold in hundreds of grocery stores around the country –

including the one her parents worked in when they came to America. She has an attractive home, is providing for her family, and is happier than she has ever been. When she received her US citizenship, she changed her legal name to “Salsa Queen.” So how does someone like Maharba with a crippling self-identity go from where she was to where she is now?

The Great Teachers on Ego

Hindu Sages

Hinduism teaches that we all have two selves: our false self and our true self. Our false self or “ego” is a composite of our mortal experiences - our interactions with others, our physical qualities, our worldly possessions, etc. Our true “Self” or “Atman” is our inner soul and the essence of our nature – it is eternal, imperishable, and unbounded in potential for growth and happiness. Numerous Hindu texts teach that these two selves exist in everyone:

Like two golden birds perched on the selfsame tree, intimate friends, the ego and the Self dwell in the same body.

The Self is hidden in the hearts of all, as butter lies hidden in cream.

There are two selves, the separate ego and the indivisible Atman. When one rises above I and Me and Mine, the Atman is revealed as one’s real Self.

The false self or ego is seen in Hinduism as an illusion, rather than who we really are or could become. Living life according to the dictates of our ego, rather than seeking our true Self, leads to a life of craving, attachment, and sorrow:

As long as we think we are the ego, we feel attached and fall into sorrow.

The ego gropes in darkness, while the Self lives in light.

An important goal in Hinduism is to liberate ourselves from the illusions of our ego and the material world. As we seek to discover our true Self, we slowly remove layers of misperceptions the world has imposed upon us. This process releases us from our illusionary prison and puts us on the path to ultimate joy and happiness.

They are forever free who renounce all selfish desires and break away from the ego-cage of “I,” “me,” and “mine.”

Buddha

Buddha also introduced two concepts of the self similar to Hinduism: the Atta and the Anatta. The Atta is the self or ego that develops and becomes fairly solid over time. It is based on our experiences, interactions, consequences, and attachment to things. According to Buddha, this self or ego is nothing more than a fabricated delusion – it is not who we are or could become in life. Clinging to this delusional self can be a source of great unhappiness. It puts us at the center of everything, makes us more important than other people, limits our personal growth, and hinders our happiness.

In contrast, the Anatta is a state of non-self, egolessness, or selflessness. According to Buddha, since the delusional self is only a set of perceptions, there is not a singular entity that we can actually define as the self. If we follow his path for alleviating suffering, we can extinguish our fabricated self and move into a far more rewarding state of non-self. In this state, the self is not the center of everything we do.

Buddha's concept of "impermanence" helps explain the "non-self." He taught that everything in the world is in constant flux; change is not just a part of life, but life itself. Our physical world is changing constantly and so are we as humans. Buddha would agree with Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher who lived at the time of Buddha, who said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

If we let our limiting self perceptions govern our lives, we continue to live as we have been, not as we could. As we transition from a state of self to non-self, we free ourselves from the claustrophobia of self-centeredness. We no longer fret about our past, obsess about ourselves, or worry about our future. It is like awaking from a deep sleep and discovering a much larger world. We become one with other people and enjoy a more authentic and lasting happiness.

Jesus Christ

Jesus taught that we all have an immortal soul or spirit that will live beyond this life. This is our true and eternal self. Our spirit resides within our mortal body here on the earth. While the body can be a great gift, it is susceptible to lust, greed, selfishness, envy, and strife. An important part of life is learning to harness the mortal self and live according to our spiritual self which is characterized by love, joy, and peace. Christ taught his followers to, "Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak."

An important part of controlling the flesh is to keep our ego or attitude of superiority in check. On numerous occasions Christ taught his followers to humble themselves and overcome their sense of self-importance.

For everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister. And whosoever will be chief among you let him be your servant.

If we constantly focus on ourself and our own interests, we live a very narrow and less fulfilling life. When we get outside of ourself and think more about others, we discover who we really are, our true potential, and what we have to contribute in the world. Perhaps this is what Christ meant when he said, "He that findeth his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Muhammad

The prophet Muhammad was a humble and tolerant man who lived a simple life. He regularly ate with the poor, played with the children, stitched his own clothing, repaired his own shoes, and milked his own sheep. He was very loving, forgiving, and unselfish with his time, teachings,

and means. He constantly taught his followers to shed any feelings of pride, superiority, or self-importance.

Do not strut arrogantly about the earth: you cannot break it open, nor match the mountains in height.

The servants of the Lord of Mercy are those who walk humbly on the earth, and who, when aggressive people address them, reply, with words of peace.

Do not turn your nose up at people, nor walk about the place arrogantly . . . and lower your voice, for the ugliest of all voices is the braying of asses.

Muhammad was also a huge proponent of equal treatment for everyone, regardless of position or status in life. This was an extremely controversial message during a time of widespread slavery, racism, and tribalism. He even asked his followers to free their slaves and make them full partners in their possessions, which many did.

Muhammad delivered his last sermon just prior to his death in 632 AD during his final pilgrimage to Mecca. In this speech, he emphasized the most salient parts of his teachings. It was a remarkable declaration of human rights for the 7th century, including references to racism, women's rights, and income inequality. Of particular interest is his strong conviction that no one is superior to anyone else in life, a message which is still needed today.

An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; a white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action.

The Philosophers

Many philosophers talked about the dual nature of the self - a lesser self and a loftier self. Most agree that happiness is a function of discovering who we really are, and then living in accordance with our true self. Plato, in particular, gave us a wonderful image of a chariot attached to two horses, one is dark and one is light. The dark horse represents our mortal self, our vices, and our unhealthy attitudes. In contrast, the white horse represents our nobler self and what we have the potential to become. In the story, the charioteer is driving the horses into the heavens. The white horse wants to rise up, but the dark horse keeps pulling the chariot back to earth. Plato concludes that letting the dark horse lead is a "ruthless enslavement" of our divine nature. Following the light horse has far more potential to lead us to "Eudemonia" or full human flourishing.

This analogy provides a great framework for analyzing our self perceptions. We can regularly ask ourselves this questions: Am I listening to the dark horse (my lesser self) which leads to limitations and stagnation, or am I listening to the light horse (my loftier self) which leads to growth and happiness.

The Science on Ego

Sigmund Freud introduced the idea of an "ego" early in the 20th century. He claimed there are three parts to our personality: the id, the superego, and the ego. The "id" is our primitive and impulsive nature that wants immediate pleasure and gratification. The "superego" is our

conscience or moral compass that tells us what is acceptable and unacceptable in society. The “ego” is our conscious mind that mediates between the id and superego and becomes our identity or concept of “self.” The word ego in Latin actually means “I.” While we tend to think of the “ego” as a cocky attitude of self-importance, it is actually the way we define ourselves throughout our life, either positive or negative.

Many scholars and social scientists have expanded the concept of the ego or self-identity since the time of Freud. Most agree our ego starts developing in early childhood, becomes stronger during adolescence, and is fairly well defined by adulthood. It is shaped by feedback we receive about ourselves from parents, teachers, siblings, peers, the media, and our culture. This myriad of messages teaches us who we are, what we are like, where we are strong, where we are weak, how valuable we are, and what we have to contribute. We might compare our mind to a computer and our ego is the sum of all the software and apps about ourselves that have been downloaded into our consciousness.

Numerous studies show that our perceived self-identity has a significant impact on our lives. It influences our communication, behavior, relationships, decision making, judgments of others, buying behavior, food choices, and on and on. As we act in accordance with our ego, the feedback we receive reinforces our self-identity; hence, our ego becomes a victim of itself and continues to influence our behavior in predictable ways. Although our self-identity can continue to develop throughout our lives, our self-perceptions remain fairly stable in adulthood.

The fact that we all have an ego is not all bad. It helps us control our impulses, gives us a reliable sense of self, and helps us navigate our world. Unfortunately, our ego can also foster a host of undesirable characteristics such as superiority, rigidity, jealousy, defensiveness, anxiety, and hopelessness. Many therapists believe our ego is the major source of our problems and miseries in life, and their therapies are aimed at helping people develop a healthier and more functional self-identity.

Another less desirable thing our ego does is make constant comparisons with other people. Some of us do this more than others, but we all tend to evaluate how we fit into our social environment. It is like we are climbing a ladder and people are either above us or below us on various aspects of our identity. When we move up a rung in our own mind, someone else moves down. It’s as though we are the main actor in our own internal movie. Social media has made this process worse as we post things about our “ideal” lives – relaxing on a beach, skiing in the mountains, welcoming a new baby, hugging loved ones, etc. While these experiences are awesome, they don’t represent the full picture of heartaches, challenges, and failures we all experience.

Recent studies show that we feel better about ourselves as we make comparisons to people who are below us on the social ladder. However, when we compare ourselves to people we believe are above us, we tend to ruminate more about ourselves and experience more depressing thoughts. This continual process of comparison can lead to two outcomes: a seriously inflated ego that says we are better than other people (David Durocher) or an overly deflated ego that says we are not as good as other people (Salsa Queen). Figure 1 shows some of the attitudes and behaviors that are associated with these two extremes.

Figure 1: Two Distorted Egos

Signs of Inflated Ego	Signs of Deflated Ego
Talks about self constantly	Afraid to express views and ideas
Strives to be in the spotlight	Doesn't want to be seen or heard
Knows more than other people	Not as smart as everyone else
Defensive in disagreements	Yields to others in differences
Threatened by people's successes	Everyone else is more successful
Belittles other people regularly	Not as good as other people
Won't admit mistakes or weakness	Blames self for most problems
Takes credit for group successes	Has little to contribute to others

Our egos can cause us to obsess more about ourselves than others. As soon as we get out of bed we worry about how our day will go, we wonder how others will perceive us, we ruminate about ourselves during conversations, we wonder if we have said the right things, we worry about mistakes we have made, and on and on and on. It's like being trapped on a claustrophobic treadmill of self-centeredness.

A group of scholars recently developed a method for assessing the strength of the ego on a scale from "noisy" to "quiet." The "noisy ego" is self-centered, defensive, and unaware of the needs and perspectives of others. In contrast, the "quiet ego" is humble, non-defensive, aware of the needs and perspectives of others, and interested in personal development. Numerous studies show that people with a quiet ego:

- Experience greater self compassion
- Positively manage their emotions
- Experience lower levels of stress
- Are able to persevere in adversity
- Report better overall well-being
- Experience greater life satisfaction

A similar line of research has been occurring in organizations for the past few decades. The concept of "servant leadership" is comparable to the "quiet ego." Servant leaders are other oriented, and focus on the needs, capabilities, and potential of their followers. They don't ignore performance, but the development of their people is their primary focus. Servant leadership can be applied by people in any type of organization: business, nonprofit, government, education, families, and communities.

By contrast, traditional authoritarian leaders have a strong self-interest. They operate from the top of a hierarchy, and use their position and power to achieve results that make them look good. They don't hesitate to sacrifice their people to the profits and performance of the organization, which sounds a lot like a "noisy ego." Hundreds of studies have shown that servant leadership, as opposed to autocratic leadership, produces a number of attractive outcomes in organizations.

- Collaboration is better
- Job satisfaction is higher
- Member turnover is lower
- Trust in the leader is higher
- Team performance is better
- Member well-being is higher

One of the best examples I have seen of a servant leader with a quiet ego is Mel Torrie, founder of Automated Solutions. Mel's company builds robots and unmanned vehicles for the mining, agriculture, military, and construction industries. Mel has more than a hundred well-educated team members working with him – most are engineers, and many have Master's degrees and Ph.Ds. They build everything from small bomb removing robots to massive trucks that operate without a driver.

Mel is a life-time student of leadership and is always searching for ways to improve his company. He became discouraged when he learned that Steve Jobs was an abrasive and autocratic leader – he was confrontational, controlling and ruthless when people didn't perform well. Mel knew he needed to push his people in order to become a world-class company, but he was not at all like Steve Jobs, and didn't want to be.

After a great deal of study and thought, Mel developed his "Humble" program. The idea is that team members need to check their egos at the door, freely share their ideas, willingly accept feedback, not become defensive, and collaborate to achieve their full ultimate potential. Mel believes that being humble is the overarching quality that helps us develop our other character traits. He feels it is absolutely essential for achieving the lofty goals he has for his company: to be a place people want to work even if they don't have to, and to provide financial independence for all team members

Mel has developed an assessment tool to measure "Humble" which he administers quarterly, and talks about constantly with his team members. So how well is his program working? Under Mel's leadership, Automated Solutions has grown to one of the largest privately held robotics-solutions companies in the world. Mel believes his "Humble" program has significantly shaped the culture of the company and plays a huge role in their success. He regularly hears comments like, "My leader really listens to me," "I have an impact in the organization," and "I love coming to work every day."

Although humility is one of the hardest qualities to develop, it is a key ingredient for achieving our potential, working cooperatively with others, and enjoying greater satisfaction in our lives and careers. So how do we lose our preconceived ego and cultivate a healthier and more functional self-identity? Let's return to Dave Durocher and Salsa Queen.

The Rest of the Story

David Durocher knew about a program for convicted felons called Delancey Street. It is an alternative to prison for criminals who are ready and capable of change. He applied to the program ten years earlier, but was not accepted. He was still too proud, cocky, and full of himself. “I wouldn’t have accepted myself either,” David recalls.

Now he was facing a 22-year sentence and feared he would die in prison. He was finally scared, depressed, and broken. He wrote another letter to Delancey Street, and this time he begged the interviewer to give him a chance. He was accepted into the program and the judge reluctantly agreed to let him go, although he was not optimistic that David would make it.

Delancey Street is a training school that operates a variety of enterprises. Each resident is assigned to work in one of the departments. David wanted to work in construction, ceramics, warehousing, the moving company or the woodshop. In fact, with his superb gang leadership skills, he thought he should be running the place. The only place he didn’t want to work was in landscaping. When he was young, his dad made him mow their lawn with a push mower and weed the entire perimeter of the yard, and he hated it! His first assignment was in landscaping. “I was beside myself. Who do you think you are calling me to landscaping? I am capable of so much more. All they told me was to shut up and go to work.”

Every morning David’s supervisor Jimmy, would let his little dog Baxter poop where David was working. He couldn’t believe this was happening to the former prison yard boss who was good enough to be running the facility.

I got so mad I wanted to drop kick that dog on to the 101 freeway and then smack Jimmy with the shovel. That is how bad I still was. I had just beaten a 22-year prison sentence yet I was too proud to pick up dog poop with a shovel. It turns out that steaming helping of humility was exactly what I needed. Today, I would pick it up that dog poop with my bare hands, who cares?

David started to feel real gratitude that he was at Delancey Street and not in prison. He decided to focus on other people rather than himself, which was a major mental shift after decades of putting himself first in everything he did. Soon he had the nickname “Dinner Date Dave” because every morning he would make a request to have dinner with a different person. He thrived on meeting with the newer residents and sharing things he was learning about becoming a decent, honest, accountable human being.

I started to influence people and make a difference in their lives. It started to feed my soul, and I loved how that made me feel. Pretty soon I needed more of that. As a drug addict, you always want more and more and more. I just made people my new drug and it became my new high – it’s also free and there is no “come down.” Impacting people for good is the best feeling in the world. I took off that black hat and put on the white one, and I have never looked back.

David Durocher has had a positive impact on thousands of lives, and is happier than he has ever been. It's all about learning humility, getting over our false self, and taking the actions required to create a more functional self-identity. David is a firm believer that anyone can do this.

Even the most broken people can reinvent themselves and become somebody they have never known. It doesn't matter if you have lived your life on the streets, been a lifelong drug addict, or spent your life in and out of jails and prisons. Guys like us change by doing; what that means is "acting as if." Act as if you are honest until you become honest; act as if you are accountable until you become accountable: do the next right thing every single day for hundreds of days until you have a paradigm shift in the way you think; and that becomes you. Anyone can change.

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Maharba met Jim during her darkest days, just after her second divorce. He asked her, "What would you like to do?" No one had ever asked her that question before. Since she loves food, Jim helped her explore several options for food businesses. She chose salsas because that is part of her heritage – it is what she knows and what she loves.

Maharba started making salsas in her small kitchen with her kids. They created six incredible recipes and started selling them on Facebook. When people ordered her salsas, she would meet them in a parking lot to deliver the products. "We were like salsa dealers in the parking lot, exchanging salsa for money."

Next, she took her salsas to the local Farmers' Market. A food expert she met told her to only take 50 products – he didn't want her to bring home unsold salsas and be discouraged. She took 100 products and sold them all in two hours. "I was so excited I had \$500 in my hand. It was the most money I had ever earned in my life."

With her growing confidence she approached several small grocery stores which agreed to carry her products. Then she decided to contact a larger chain – Smith's Food and Drug. When she called their office, the buyer said he wasn't interested in another salsa brand. But when she told him "These are fresh salsas made locally by me and my kids" he agreed to meet with her.

Maharba went to the meeting decked out in her Salsa Queen attire: bright colors, Salsa Queen apron, big Mexican flower in her hair. She carried her products into the meeting in a Costco bag. She had no idea that Smith's Food and Drug was owned by Kroger, the largest supermarket chain in the country.

The buyer took a few minutes to taste her salsas and said "You're in." He then invited 15 more people into the room to taste her products. Maharba was confused and didn't know what was happening. After a while, the buyer told her she needed to meet with his administrator to get things started. Before he left, he said, "You are going to have to hire more than your kids." The administrator set up the account and gave her some important advice.

Maharba, in the 17 years that I have been here, this has never happened. People die to be in your spot, so take care of your spot and take care of your product.

Maharba hired a few people and met all of her orders. "I was not going to fail them." This was her biggest success to date. She now employs dozens of people, has a large manufacturing

facility, and sells her products to hundreds of grocery stores across the country. She gives her friend Jim a great deal of the credit for her success. “He was the first person to really believe in me.” Jim eventually quit his job at the bank, started working at Salsa Queen full time, and married Maharba.

In addition to Jim’s influence, each small step Maharba took gave her the confidence to take another bigger step: from Facebook to the Farmers’ Market, to several small grocery stores, to a national chain, to a large production facility, to thousands of delighted customers across the country. This process has totally changed her limiting self-identity. She has shed her old ego, realized her potential, created a much healthier self – including her new name Salsa Queen – and is happier than she has ever been.

Never in my honest dreams did I think I would be where I am. I started Salsa Queen to provide for myself and my kids, and now I am providing for many more people and still growing. I feel confident; I feel like I have a voice; I feel strong and powerful; I see myself as beautiful now.

The Applications

1. Know that You are Not Your Ego

The first step in losing our constructed ego is to realize what it is – it is not who we really are, but who we perceive ourselves to be. It develops during our early years from numerous messages we receive about ourselves – some of these are fact and some of them are fiction. Our ego then functions to preserve itself in our later years; it’s like a voice telling us a story about who we are over and over again. Some of us develop inflated egos and some of us develop deflated egos; most of us end up with a mixed bundle of both positive and negative self perceptions. Realizing there are whole new possibilities for ourselves is a key to change.

Some psychologists suggest we give our ego a different name to remind us it is our perceived self talking, not our potential self. For example, if you ruminate on a negative perception of yourself, you might say, “That’s Mikey talking, not Michael.” Or if you doubt you can accomplish something based on your past experiences, you might say, “That’s little Sarah talking, not me.” This will help remind us that our ego is a separate entity from who we really are or can become. Learning to challenge our fictional self puts us on a path to greater happiness and better relationships.

2. Examine Your Habitual Self Perceptions

To help pay my tuition as a college student, I started teaching piano lessons at a local music store. I noticed that many of my young students had preconceived notions of how well they would do before they even started their lessons. I would hear things like, “My sister is really good at music but I’m not.” Or “I am really good at sports, but not very good at the piano.” When I asked them where these perceptions came from, they would mention one or more experiences they had with parents, teachers, siblings or peers: “You are really tone deaf.” “It drives me crazy when you bang on that piano.”

I tried to counteract these early perceptions by telling my students that anyone can learn to play the piano if they really want to and are willing to practice hard. I continued to reinforce this

message as my students made progress. While some did better than others, it was fun to see many of them overcome their original assessment of their ability and become talented piano players. Developing this skill seemed to make a difference in their lives.

Understanding where our self perceptions have come from is an important step in altering them. Socrates was a huge proponent of self-examination as a way to gain greater wisdom about ourselves and our lives. He made his famous statement, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” while he was on trial for corrupting the youth. He believed that examining who we are, what drives us, and why we respond the way we do is critical to our growth and happiness in life. If we get up and do the same things over and over again every day without much self-reflection, we are not adding value to our own life or to others.

As humans we are quick to attribute thoughts and motives to others – even though we are usually wrong – but not as likely to examine our own self-identity. Here is a process for self-reflection that can help. Sit in a comfortable chair for 10 minutes each day and select one of your personal attributes to examine. For example, do you feel superior or inferior to others? Are you attractive or unattractive? Are you friendly or unfriendly? Are you intelligent or challenged? Are you positive or pessimistic? Are you creative or unimaginative? Are you athletic or uncoordinated? Now ask yourself these questions:

- How do I describe my on this quality?
- When were my first thoughts that I am this way?
- What messages did I receive about this quality?
- What are the positive outcomes of this perception?
- What are the negative outcomes of this perception?
- How would I like to be in the future on this quality?
- How would I think if I had this new perception?
- How would I act if I had this new perception?

Understanding how our ego has evolved is an important step in dislodging our old identity and developing a healthier sense of self. The next essential step is to take action.

3. Stretch to Actions Beyond Your Ego

At the end of my Bachelor’s degree, I needed one more class to graduate. I had a job at the time and needed a course that would fit my schedule. The only class offered when I was available was a graduate level seminar. I approached the professor who said, “This class is for Masters and Ph.D. students so you would have a really hard time.” The class was clearly outside my confidence zone, but I convinced the professor to let me enroll.

The first day of class a gentleman stood up and said, “Hi, I’m Clark Gable and I’m legally blind. I need someone to read to me during the class.” I raised my hand immediately and said, “I am happy to do it.” I needed all the help I could get and Clark seemed like a bright guy. We met in his office in the library nearly every day; I would read the material to him and we would discuss it in detail. He helped me understand many concepts that were new to me.

We had one major research paper due in the class that would be our final grade. After grading the papers, the professor listed all the scores on the board – they ranged from 95 to 78. I nearly

jumped for joy knowing I had passed the class with at least a 78. When he handed back our papers, I actually had a 92, the second highest grade in the class.

I have referred to this experience over the years as the “Clark Gable Principle.” If other people can learn something, I can too, even though it may take more work and a mentor like Clark Gable. My success in this class led to a Master’s degree and then to a Ph.D. I called on the “Clark Gable Principle” many times while finishing these degrees. I am not sure what path my career would have taken without this propelling event in my life.

This is exactly what is required to shed our fictitious ego. We have to do things that are slightly outside our confidence level, and then take a slightly bigger step following each success. Some experts encourage us to set gigantic goals, even if we can’t obtain them, but my experience suggests that we achieve great things by taking a series of small steps, each building on the last, until we arrive at a place we never imagined. This is what Salsa Queen did on her road to a new identity. She started selling on Facebook, which was challenging but doable. Next, she went to the Farmers’ Market, then to several grocery stores, and then to a national chain. Going to Kroger first before taking the previous steps would not have worked. This process of change is illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2: Changing the Ego



Knowing that we are not our ego, and examining our habitual perceptions will not help much if we don’t take consistent action. This is what David Durocher meant when he said, “Guys like us change by doing; what that means is acting as if.” So, if you are ready to lose your old ego, select the perceptions you want to change, choose an attainable step outside your identity, plan a course of action, and do the work. Your increased confidence will lead you to the next step. For example, if you think, “I’m not into fitness,” but you would like to be, start walking, then jogging, then run a 5K, and maybe a 10K. Or if you think, “I wish I had finished college,” and you would really like to, start with one class, then several classes, then a semester, then graduate. The more of these ego-altering experiences we have, the more we create a new sense of self.

In summary, just as the great teachers taught thousands of years ago, and scholars now agree, we do have an ego or self-identity that develops from our experiences in the external world. Clinging to this fabricated ego sets bounds and limitations on what we do in life. Transcending our ego opens up a whole new world of experiences for us. It gives us a fresh view of ourselves, fosters personal growth, improves our relationships, and leads to a deeper level of joy. As we accept ourselves as “works in progress” we allow others the same privilege and become far less judgmental, which is the next principle in our Foundation for Joyful Living.