

Dedication

How great is your life when there's so many people to thank that you know you'll forget at least a few? I'll keep it short: First, foremost, and always, everything I do is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Brigitte. I am forever grateful to the writing support and friendship of Keith Young, Chuck McKay, Sheila Leighton, and Lizz Cousins. I am endlessly appreciative of my staff at Higher Ground. Incredibly, I get to employ some of the most talented people in the world. Finally, a huge thank you to every client and supervisee I have ever had the joy of serving. You have provided me countless lessons and allowed me to walk in the most sacred parts of your lives. I am honored beyond what words can convey. I love you all. Jim

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Intro

By day I'm a mental health therapist. I specialize in supporting people who are seeking recovery from trauma and substance use disorder. My job is to help people transform their lives in pursuit of who they most want to be, but I'm not a touchy-feely therapist. I'm way more likely to tell you to stop being an asshole to yourself and to have some fucking self-respect than I am to tell you to love yourself.

That's because self-love is only an ideal. It's a life-long pursuit. Self-loathing, though, *is* real and it destroys people like me. I used to hate myself because of lies. I needed a lot of help to discover the truth. Whether you're at the extremes or simply lost somewhere in between, you don't have to stay there.

It's hard to be yourself when you don't know who that is. George Bernard Shaw said it best, "Life is not about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself." It's ok if you're unsure of who you are. Many of us have far greater clarity about who we *don't* want to be. We live with the fear of becoming what we hate: our families, our abusers, childhood bullies, and everyone else who hurt or failed us.

We often feel compelled to hide so much of ourselves. We conceal our quirks and eccentricities, although these qualities are usually the most interesting parts of a person. We try to blend into groups to achieve a sense of belonging. Societal misfits like me are the very best kind of people. My greatest wish for you is that you get to connect to kindred spirits and get better together.

Let's change your life.

Who the Fuck Are You?

"The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself." — Thales

I'm not much for philosophy. I made it through one undergrad class of it. From what little I recall, it was a bunch of old, dead, white men saying that God is dead or never existed and that I ought to do the right thing anyway. Still, a handful of pearls stuck with me, like Aristotle saying that the key to wisdom is to know yourself.

My Philosophy professor was young and cool. He wanted to inspire us to be far more aware of ourselves and the world we lived in. He told me that if I got a PhD in philosophy, I could make bank in any city. That seemed really fucked up to me. He explained that rich people looking for purpose and meaning in their lives get bored with therapy and hire philosophers.

That made sense. Everyone wants the "answers" to life, but very few of us are even sure what the right questions are. Relatively few of us truly accept the personal responsibility of choosing our own identity and our own beliefs. After nearly twenty years as a therapist, I'm convinced that most of us are asking the wrong questions. We seek to understand human nature and the meaning of life, but not our own identities. To paraphrase my favorite author, Tom Robbins, I'm not interested in the meaning of life. It's the feeling of being alive that I'm after.

Getting to know yourself requires what therapists call "peeling away the layers of the onion." To therapists, everything is a fucking metaphor. I'm not sure if the analogy is that both make you cry or that both require stripping away the surface shit to get to the core.

I thought I knew myself back in that philosophy class. In retrospect, all I knew was who I was to others and the things that I did. My experience is that the only people who seriously undertake knowing and changing themselves are those who believe they must. Occasionally, I meet someone who makes the investment because they want the most out of their lives. The truth is, it's a lot of work and it's pretty damned uncomfortable.

It's also worth it in spades.

Everything is Shit

I listen to people for a living. They tell me secrets. We explore their trust issues, life struggles, hopes, fears, and dreams. When folks get really comfortable in relating to their therapist, they become more and more candid. They start thinking out loud and revealing the unhealthy and self-limiting ways in which their brains have been conditioned to work. These most often manifest as black and white thinking, being overly critical of themselves, being preoccupied with social norms and values, and a whole lot of other half-baked, well-intended, but ultimately, bad ideas.

I'm fascinated by the ways in which our minds use language, especially the ways in which we unwittingly manipulate ourselves and others with words. We do this through dichotomies – giving ourselves only two choices that are opposite extremes. We do it through passive-aggressive speech, noncommittal statements, and gas-lighting. Most of all, we do it through self-deception.

There are countless ways in which we lie to ourselves. The most common way appears benign. We tell ourselves, “I’m not angry” or “It’s not a big deal” or “They did the best they could.” These are white lies. We use them to avoid conflict or to maintain appearances, yet they erode our trust in ourselves.

Denial and settling are two of the most debilitating forms of self-deception. What’s often missed about these is that we lie to ourselves about lying to ourselves. No one has ever said to themselves in the full light of day: “I’m going to talk myself into the idea that trying for more would be selfish or too risky,” but we do it all the time.

When we become lost in hiding from the truth, we rely on the use of slang terms and euphemisms. The biggest euphemism in therapy is “shit.”

It usually sounds like this: “You know, I just need to get my shit together. I need to sort through my shit, figure my shit out, and do something with my shit.”

People pay me a lot of money to listen to them say things like that. Here’s what I know — as long as we’re calling it “shit” absolutely nothing changes in your life.

What the fuck is your “shit”? If you got your shit together, wouldn’t that mean you now have a big pile of shit? Let’s start calling it by what it is or recognize that we’re just engaging in some mental masturbation that is yet another lie — the idea that you’re doing something to get better.

Is “shit” your life? Your mental health? Your addictions? Is “shit” the issues in your marriage? Is it depression? Is it the anxiety of every memory you’re trying to keep locked away? The first step in healing is to bring your shit out into the open.

Here’s the challenge: Saying it out loud or writing it down makes it more real. Hiding it, doubting it, questioning whether it was all a bad dream, or wondering whether we made it all up are ways of trying not to feel it. They’re also ways in which we unwittingly absolve ourselves of the responsibilities of facing, fixing, and overcoming whatever our shit is.

Self-deception includes all the ways in which we detach from ourselves. Separating yourself from the truth means disconnecting your consciousness from important parts of who you are. We all want to feel whole, but we also want to throw away parts of ourselves. That's how easy it is to keep yourself fucked up.

One of the best healers I've ever worked with used to say: "Treat it like it's a big jigsaw puzzle. You're looking to put the pieces of yourself together. You hate some of the pieces. That's ok. You still have to heal them, so they fit into the person you're becoming."

I've helped a lot of people heal themselves. I've learned a lot about those puzzle pieces, and what's funny to me is that what people need in order to heal isn't some science I was taught. What we need to come to an acceptance of ourselves is a handful of powerful truths. Among them:

- You are more than what happened to you.
- Your past does not define you.
- What you choose going forward does.
- You can overcome your circumstances.
- You are free to choose whether you'll be your own worst enemy, or someone you empower.

What Defines You?

What do you see as the most defining thing about yourself? It might be a talent, an ability, or a personality trait. The thing that nobody tells you is that you get to choose nearly all of the most important aspects of your identity.

Of the literally thousands of potential answers to what defines you, what was the first thing you thought of? Would the people in your life who know you best agree with your assessment?

My experience is that we undervalue and overly criticize ourselves. That's not being hard on yourself. It's just mean. Get rid of that and your life will improve immediately.

Let's trace this back. Who taught you about you? Did you examine what your family, your life, and other people important to you have taught you about your worth, abilities, and potential? Is it possible that your self-image is a collection of other people's ideas that were simply internalized without being examined?

Imagine believing that the most defining thing about you is something that you're embarrassed or even ashamed to admit. Too often, that's what happens to kids like I once was, who are bullied, abused, and/or neglected. We grew up full of shame because we blamed ourselves for our circumstances and how others treated us. We redirected our anger to the only place that was safe — at ourselves. I often recommend Shane Koyczan's spoken word art because it centers around those themes and the aftermath that manifests in our mental health as adults. Check out his TED talk entitled "To This Day."

I have known *intellectually* for nearly all my life that what was taught to me about my worth and potential was not true. The problem is that it *felt true*. When I was in middle school I got nicknamed "Spaz." I was a geeky, uncoordinated kid with thick glasses and hand me down clothes. My family moved a lot, so I was always the new kid who never seemed to fit in anywhere.

Today I'm a very successful man of almost 54 years. I'm well loved and respected yet typing the word "spaz" just now brought up both my hatred of bullies and a pang of sadness for my younger self. While I have come lightyears from where I was, the child I was is part of the man I am. That kid got a really raw deal. I find that the more I accept and care for every part of myself, the more fulfilling my life becomes.

The notion of healing our "inner child" has become a cliché, and for much of my life, I avoided talking about my childhood. Worse, I avoided being connected to that part of myself at all. I found it too painful to acknowledge that the scars that kid endured led to my becoming an adult who didn't know himself and wasn't *trying* to know himself. In retrospect, I see how self-limiting that was.

Everyone talks about self-esteem yet almost nobody talks about security, stability, or even safety. The child I was didn't feel those things at home, at school, nor in the churches I was made to attend. I learned to be a chameleon to not only fit in as best as I could, but also to try to protect myself. There are many problems with this approach. The most obvious one

usually gets overlooked, and that is that it's impossible to be yourself when you're constantly adjusting to each new person, place, and situation.

Being bullied as a kid led to me doing drugs as an adolescent because it gave me a place to belong. Drinking and drugging is obviously a barrier to discovering who you are. I'm amazed that neither "alcoholic" nor "addict" became part of my identity. I'm blessed to have a body that hates alcohol, and a mind that doesn't want to be numbed.

I've lived with depression and attention deficit disorder all my life, though. I've survived a lot of traumatic situations, and these too are obstacles to knowing yourself. Having a brain that goes 100mph all day every day makes it hard to connect with neurotypical people. Feeling like you don't fit in leaves you feeling less than others. It's also really fucking lonely.

I married young at 20 years old because codependency was all I knew about how to relate. That too is a huge barrier to knowing yourself. You focus on the other person exclusively, believing that's what love is supposed to be.

It's hard to hold space effectively for others when you avoid yourself. I was always trying to unearth a problem and fix it. Just listening and caring never felt like I was doing enough. My world shifted completely when I became a dad at twenty-one and again at twenty-two. The love I felt for my children was beautiful but overwhelming. I was so afraid of screwing everything (and them) up.

I was working class poor for a long time, and the pressure to work insane amounts of hours, never sleeping, destroying my body, took a toll on my psyche. Living in a trailer park, the stress of living paycheck to paycheck, and the shame of what we couldn't afford reinforced a lot of bad ideas about what my worth was.

I am grateful that the Universe's plans are far greater than mine and that they unfolded in my face with all the subtlety of a freight train running through my living room. I was lifted out of blue-collar labor because a philanthropist sent me to college. I won't explain further except to note that I'm not a religious person, but I'm spiritual, because something more powerful than me keeps fucking with my life and making it better.

If you do college right, it shows you a lot about how much you don't know. The more you learn the more you see how much you don't know. The insanity of course was that I was a guy who didn't know himself learning about how to help other people heal themselves. It took my first employer in social services threatening to fire my well-meaning ass if I didn't go to therapy to get me to go.

My journey to knowing me began as a client and has continued through nearly twenty years of working as a therapist. I'm highly biased, but therapy changed my life. If you don't hold onto anything else from this book — do your research, find a good therapist, and tell them you want to know yourself.

Before You Go Further

Part of the mindset necessary to change yourself is accepting that you can't change others. I know you know that intellectually and I'm saying it to you anyway. What fucks us up rarely has much to do with what we know. It's about how we feel and what we accept. The problem with that is that acceptance is an emotional process.

One of the benefits to developing our identity is gaining emotional maturity, which in turn enhances all our relationships. Too often, I see people who are stuck because they're secretly waiting for others to change. I did that too. I kept waiting and hoping that those closest to me would get better. My therapist helped me a ton by pointing out that I didn't have to give up on them, I just had to stop waiting for them and invest in myself instead.

A favorite meme of mine says: "Acceptance is giving up all hope of a better past." Coming to terms with ourselves, with what our lives have been, and with what they can become is HUGE. Acceptance of self is often tied to acceptance of who people in our lives today reveal themselves to be.

Getting better is hard for lots of reasons, not the least of which is that gaining clarity often increases awareness of painful truths. One example is that quite often, the people we tend to gravitate toward are the type most familiar to us. Sadly, these folks are usually unhealthy for us. Other times, we find that the bonds we develop are the product of shared pain and not shared healing, beliefs, or values.

One of the conversations I have often in therapy is with people who are desperately hoping their partner or family members will change. When I'm asked about the likelihood of that occurring, I have to reply with things like, "Well, have you communicated directly what you'd like to be different to them?" This is most often met with some sheepishness and an admittance that they've been less than direct. It's hard to ask for what you need but it's vital. First, we have to be honest with ourselves. Do they have what we need? Do they see themselves as needing to change?

People tell me they're "confused" by their loved one's behavior. What that really means is, "I hate this, so I'm overthinking it." We come to every relationship with certain expectations. That is inevitable. The problems occur when we don't speak what it is we expect. This is another aspect of why knowing yourself is so important — you can't express what you feel, need, or want unless you know what that is.

The mythology of love is codependent as hell. Somehow the idea that, "If you really loved me, you'd know" endures. Obviously, none of us are mind readers, yet we expect our partners and even close friends and family to "figure it out" because we're afraid to be vulnerable and expressive. Becoming progressively comfortable with ourselves allows us to be introspective, trust our intuition, and seek fulfillment of what we cannot provide ourselves.

Throughout this book, I'll be posing questions to reflect on and write about. Journaling is uncomfortable but it reveals truths that thinking alone won't uncover.

Thoughts to consider/write about:

- The three hardest questions I ask my clients are: How are you, really? What do you need? What do you truly want?
- All of us have needs that rely on others to be met. Do you have people that want to help with that?
- Who are you waiting for to change and be better to you?

- What if it's you? What if the person you most need to be better to you is you?