

...unfinished business...

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One Man's Extraordinary Year of Trying to Do
The Right Things



PROLOGUE

Compiling the List

Ten Things That Truly Matter

For over a year, things had been going downhill at work. A growing rift had opened up between me and my boss. It was hard to pinpoint what had gone wrong, but the affection and trust we once shared had steadily diminished. Unless things changed, either he would fire me or I would need to quit.

It was a tough admission to make, because I loved my job and I had assumed that I would be working there the rest of my life.

As the months wore on, my boss shunned me and I felt increasingly marginalized. I made attempts to change our dynamic, but nothing seemed to work. I kept my game face on around my colleagues and got done what needed to be done. At home, however, I sulked and felt sorry for myself and was irritable around the kids. On the last Sunday in September, Elizabeth and I were looking out across the lake, watching a flock of Canada geese lift from the water and set their sights south.

"I wouldn't mind joining them," I said.

"You'd take your computer along and spend the whole flight working," she said.

"I wouldn't," I said. "I'm dreading going to work tomorrow."

"I know," she said, putting her hand over mine. "Maybe it's time to leave."

I felt ready to move on, something I had never seen myself doing before.

The next morning, when I arrived at the office, an executive of the company told me that I no longer had a job. Because the conversation lasted less than a minute and took place in a hallway, I thought he was joking. But it wasn't a joke; I had been fired.

I called Elizabeth. In the few minutes it took for her to call me back, I went through a gamut of emotions: I was numb, then angry. I felt manipulated and betrayed. I had been tried, sentenced, and banished from the kingdom without a trial. Part of me expected my boss's boss to overturn the decision – a fantasy of course. But mostly I felt humiliated. My father had lost his job when I was a teenager and nothing good ever came of it. No one in our family got any closer, wiser, or more giving as a result of his being unemployed. Instead, the loss of his job ushered in years of worry and fear. Now I was the one who had failed my family. How could I explain to my three young children that their father who worked all the time didn't work anymore? How could I protect them from everything that had confused and scared me when my own dad lost his job?

By the time Elizabeth reached me, I was too exhausted to talk. "I know how badly you're feeling," she said. "But in a few days you'll realize that this is the best thing that could have happened to you." I hoped she was right.

At first I tried to make up for lost time. I took the kids to school, saw all of their ball games, and helped them with their homework. I made plans to work out, lose weight,

and lower my blood pressure. It was fun to go to museums with Elizabeth again; we hadn't done that in years.

Within weeks, though, I began feeling nervous and self-conscious about not working. Instead of seeing friends again, I stopped taking their phone calls. Instead of playing with the kids, I took naps. Instead of going on dates with Elizabeth, I stayed home to watch episodes of *Law & Order* I had already seen.

I'd stay in bed until ten or eleven in the morning, thinking about the moment I was fired and the people who had been responsible for firing me. I'd make a pot of coffee and drink cup after cup, until I was so wired that I couldn't stay focused on reading the paper or watching the news. Not having work preoccupied me as much as work had, and I thought about it constantly: when I took out the garbage, waved to a neighbor, or walked Pip, our dog. Because I had never anticipated being in this position, I had given no thought to what I might do next in my life. The realization unnerved me, to the point that I avoided the possibility of any conversation that might lead to another person asking me about my plans.

Elizabeth suggested that I spend a few days at Kripalu, a yoga retreat in the Berkshires. She said that I might be able to relax there and gather my thoughts. When I shrugged her off, she handed me the phone.

On a rainy afternoon in late October, I set off from our home in upstate New York and drove north on the Taconic and east on Interstate 90 into western Massachusetts. Most of the leaves had changed color and fallen by then, and I

strained through the rain and my windshield wipers to make out Exit 2, which would take me to Routes 7 and 20 and the winding road to the town of Lenox. Somehow I got there and a little beyond – to the huge building that had once housed a Roman Catholic monastery.

Most of the people wandering through Kripalu's lobby were in their early-to mid-fifties and looked a lot like I suppose I did – stressed out and clueless. I registered at the desk and dropped my duff bag off at the room I was sharing with three other middle-aged men.

After a dinner of lentil soup, kale and sweet potatoes, I had a choice of attending a movement class or a lecture on the Bhagavad Gita. Along with a dozen or so other people, I decided to spend my evening moving free-form to the rhythms of two drummers from the Caribbean.

At first I felt silly, flailing my arms back and forth like the Hindu goddess Durga. I felt even sillier when a man with a graying ponytail pulled me into a circle of other mainly middle-aged men and women. But gradually I started to relax and enjoy myself, moving faster and faster over the hardwood floor in my bare feet. When our circle broke in two, we slithered around the room like a giant undulating snake. As the drumming reached its climax, we shed each other one by one and collapsed into a pile of sweat-soaked gigglers.

Proud of the progress I was making toward becoming the chilled-out father my kids wanted me to be, I retired to my dorm room and fell fast asleep.

The next morning I went to a six a.m. yoga class and had a breakfast of rolled

oats, pumpkin seeds and green tea. When I returned to the dorm room to shower, there was a note on my bed summoning me to the front office. An attractive young woman confided to me that two of my dorm mates had complained about my snoring, Kripalu's cardinal sin. She directed me to the snorers-only floor, Kripalu's Siberia.

The rejection by my dorm mates felt as piercing and punitive as losing my job. Less than a month earlier, I had been an important man, with an office and a secretary. Now, I was just another snorer.

I wasn't your typical, garden-variety, nine-to-five, you-can-invite-him-over-for-a-drink snorer. I was a workaholic snorer. And it had taken a huge toll on my family.

For years Elizabeth had been telling me, "You're never there for me," and I wasn't. Even when I was home, I was thinking about work. Did I appreciate the fact that Elizabeth did 80 percent of the childrearing and even more of the chores? Of course not. I had too much work to do. Did I make even the smallest effort to lessen her load? Sometimes, but mainly because I wanted to get ahead of the curve so she would let me work in peace.

The worst part of being so focused on my work was the relationship it kept me from having with my children. Benjamin said he was afraid to approach me, and his twin sister Caroline told the babysitter, "Daddy never smiles." They were almost eleven and beginning to pull away. Noah, who was nearing eight, still liked to crawl into bed with Elizabeth and me and cuddle. But to enjoy his affection, I needed to be in our bed and not in my study, working on my computer.

Easier said than done.

Being a workaholic was in my genes. My father was a workaholic, and so were my grandfather and great-grandfather, a Lithuanian peasant who got up at three a.m. to plow his fields.

In a world that valued hard work, no one worked harder than a Kravitz. Of course most of the Kravitz men died of heart attacks in their early sixties, and most of them had only a handful of friends, but you could never accuse a Kravitz of slacking off: We lived to work and worked until it killed us.

And society fed our disease. In my twenty years in corporate America, I was seldom told to work less, and when I was, the boss saying it didn't mean it, unless he was under strict orders from his own boss to cut overtime. You did not get promoted for being a good husband, father, or friend, or for volunteering for the local school board, or for taking time off, even when you had earned it. You got ahead by being perceived as an employee who worked day and night and put your job first. You didn't get a raise by attending your child's teacher conferences or by leaving your BlackBerry off. You got it by beating your boss to the office each morning and working through lunch. By working weekends and holidays and on vacations. And by always being in touch.

All of these thoughts came to me during my week at Kripalu. I didn't reach nirvana there, but I did gain perspective on what my dedication to work had cost me, and it made me less eager to find another job. Not that I could have found one: I was a fifty-four-year-old magazine editor in an industry that was hemorrhaging jobs and

going through a period of fundamental change. With Elizabeth's income and my severance pay, we could get by for maybe a year. I could spend that year learning new skills with which to reenter the job market. Or I could spend it making myself a happier and more appreciative person, with richer friendships and a far better sense of who I was and what genuinely mattered to me. That's what I really wanted to do, but how and where would I begin?

The answer came by accident in the form of ten cardboard boxes that had been sent to our country house from my old workplace. The boxes had spent the last thirteen years in a closet there, and they contained everything I had saved from the previous four decades of my life.

Why had I kept the boxes at work? Because there was no room for them in our tiny Manhattan apartment. Why hadn't I moved them to our country house before? Because I was always working and didn't have time to think about them or the distracting memories they might contain.

But now I did. I gave myself a week in the country to sort through the boxes and organize the accumulated stuff of my life. Elizabeth and the kids were in the city, so I had the run of the house and room to spread things out. It would be one of those big, messy projects that I both loved and hated to do. I would need to make piles of what to keep in the country, what to keep in the city, and what to throw away. I would need to make decisions I dreaded and create a lot more chaos before I saw even a semblance of order.

It would be a considerable undertaking but not without its own pleasures. So I poured myself a glass of wine and raised it in a toast to the project ahead. Because I wanted anything I did to help me become a better father to my kids, I queued up one of my son Noah's favorite songs, the Beatles' "Eight Days a Week." Then I went to work.

After opening the first few boxes, I realized how impatient I must have been when I packed them: Files of notes and essays from college shared the same box as a giant map of Central America and my bronzed baby shoes. My letter jacket from high school covered memorabilia I had collected at the 1992 Republican and Democratic Conventions.

One box contained my report cards since kindergarten, carefully stapled by my mother into two piles, the good and the bad. There was a list of friends and later girlfriends at ages seven, eleven, nineteen, and twenty-six, and eulogies I had written for family pets, my maternal grandmother, and a friend who died of cancer.

In another box there were more than a thousand letters from my father, one per week since college, featuring his distinctive use of brackets, quotation marks and red type for emphasis. My roommates and I had spent hours trying to decode my father's letters for secret messages. We never found any. But we did find plenty of Knute Rockne-type advice and coaching. My father's letters baffled but also compelled me, and so I kept them all. There was a collection of my old baseball caps in the box, along with an Indonesian shadow puppet I had purchased in Bali.

The boxes were full of strange and wonderful juxtapositions, but what struck me

most was how the different objects reflected parts of myself I had suppressed or forgotten. The machete I used when I harvested bananas on a kibbutz in Israel reminded me of the thirst I once had for adventure. A barely decipherable dream journal brought back a year when I was so poor and scared for my future that I couldn't sleep at night but got by with a little help from my friends.

There was a box containing the notebooks and memorabilia that my grandfather gave me two weeks before he died. He spent the last two decades of his life creating businesses that gave jobs and dignity to the survivors of the Holocaust. He was my biggest hero at a time when I still believed in them.

That same box contained a copy of my high school yearbook. Flipping through it, I experienced dozens of where-is-he-now, why-didn't-I-keep-up-with-him feelings of curiosity and regret. I noticed, for example, that the photo of my childhood bully was directly across from mine, reinforcing my sense that he had been born to torment me. There was also a photo of my favorite teacher, a young Episcopal priest who inspired me to think and write and believe in my obligation to do good in the world. I had fallen out of touch with him, just as I had with my soul mate in high school, a boy who had opened my eyes to the possibility of experiencing God and who later became a monk.

Life goes fast. Click. You are fifteen. Click, click. You are fifty-five. Click, click. You are gone. And so are the people who loved and nurtured you.

In one box there was a doctor's report confirming that my mother's mother, my beloved Nana Bertie, could no longer live on her own. When I was six, she taught me

how to play Fish. When I was eight, she accused me of cheating. When I was twelve, fifteen, seventeen, and twenty-one, she came to my graduations and told everyone how proud she was of me, even though I cheated at Fish.

I found a photo of one of the few times in twenty-five years that my brothers and I gathered in the same place at the same time with our wives and children. One of those times was at my wedding, when Elizabeth was six months pregnant with our twins. Why didn't we get together more often? Busy working, the family disease.

How quickly it all goes: There were photos of me with and without a beard and in various stages of baldness over thirty years, a jar that contained the ashes of our poodle Buster, a letter from a friend in London who had been waiting for me to travel to Paris with him to visit the grave of Jim Morrison of the Doors, photos of Joyce and me at my high school prom. She was my first love and we were still friends fifteen years later when she was killed in an automobile accident as she was driving home from her wedding shower. She was buried two days later, on the same afternoon that she was supposed to get married. Joyce and I had always said that we'd be friends until we were eighty. That dreary September day she died was one of the saddest of my life.

I poured myself a second glass of wine and looked quickly through another box. Tucked into a folder of postage stamps from around the world, I found a torn copy of the prayer I said each night until I was ten years old. I still knew the words by heart: "Before in sleep I close my eyes, to thee O God my thoughts arise; I thank thee for thy blessings all that come to us thy children small; O keep me safe throughout the

night, so I shall see the morning light.” Nearly fifty years had passed since I had first said that prayer, yet in so many ways I still felt like the child who had said it.

I did not fall asleep easily that blustery night. Encountering the past this way – all at once and out of chronology and context – disrupted my everyday sense of things and even of my self. When I closed my eyes, I found myself reexperiencing a footrace I’d almost won, my Bar Mitzvah speech, and the summer of 1969, when I lost my virginity and helped pitch my sandlot team to the State Championship.

That game had taken place on a hot summer day before a crowd that included major league scouts, small-time gamblers, and sun-tanned teenage girls. As I lay awake, I thought about Andre, our right fielder, who was a superb athlete and an even better human being. Although I hadn’t seen him since that long-ago summer, I had recently seen a photo of his daughter in the New York Times. She had been ambushed and killed on a peace mission to Iraq. Putting myself in Andre’s place, I had cried and cried. Somehow, I still hadn’t written my old teammate to tell him how sorry I was for his loss.

Other realizations of what I should have done, but didn’t, came to mind and kept me from finding sleep.

Earlier that evening, I had listened to an interview with my nana Shirley in the late 1970s. Hearing my grandmother tell her old stories in her familiar Yiddish made me smile and miss her terribly. But now I remembered that I had skipped her funeral

because I had so much work to do the week she died.

The moonlight streamed through the curtains and lit up my bedroom. I remembered a trip I had once made to a refugee camp in northern Kenya. The camp was hot and dusty and housed more than thirty-two thousand children who had been uprooted from their homes by the tribal wars in neighboring Somali. Most of those children would never see their parents again, and yet they clung to the idea of a better life. I met one boy who wanted me to tell him everything I could about America because he dreamed of going there someday. He showed me a musty textbook he'd been reading to improve his English. It was from the days when Kenya was still a colony of the British Empire. I told him that I would fill the camp's library with new books, ones he would like.

"That's what everyone says," he said, shrugging his shoulders as if to indicate that I probably wouldn't.

I hadn't, and I hadn't let it trouble me for years.

I must have nodded off for a while because when I opened my eyes the shadows had shifted in the room. But again my thoughts returned to the boxes. Their contents attested to the rich human connections I had forged earlier in my life. But they also contained evidence of my unfinished business: tasks like paying a condolence call to Andre that I had either put off or failed to follow through on. For a variety of reasons – my self-involvement, my hurry to get ahead, a sense that I would

get to them later – I had neglected matters of great consequence. In the process, I had hurt the people closest to me and fed the fear and compulsion that had kept me chained to my job.

There were signs in these boxes that there had been a better me: a more curious, adventurous and compassionate individual who had taken risks to do the right thing. Too often, though, my fears had taken over, creating the unfinished business that kept holding me back.

If I had committed a bank robbery or traffic violation, I would have gone to jail, paid a fine, or been sentenced to community service. Yet no one could prosecute me for missing my grandmother's funeral or failing to keep a promise to a child – no one, except me.

There are acts and nonacts that prosecute you from within. They trouble your soul and cast aspersion on your character. They tell you that you are callous, small-minded, less than you want to be. Isn't it strange how small these things can seem on paper, yet how large they loom in your head? Before I finally fell asleep, I concluded that I would condemn myself to piling up even more unfinished business unless I attended to some of it now.

By the time I woke up the next morning, I was ready to make a plan. Instead of rushing out to find a job, I would devote an entire year to tying up my loose emotional ends.

Over the next few days, I spent a good deal of time meditating on how I wanted to proceed. One of the biggest urges I felt was to make amends. It was the most human of impulses and one that most religions put at the center of their promises of forgiveness and heaven.

When a person died in ancient Egypt, their heart would be weighed to determine if his soul would make it into the afterlife. If the person's heart weighed less than a feather and was judged pure, the soul got in. If the heart, burdened by sin, weighed more than a feather, the soul lost its spot.

Buddhism says that we accumulate good karma from our right actions and bad karma from our wrong ones, as does Hinduism. Picture walking around with a big bag of bad karma over your shoulder; it weighs you down and holds you back. How do you lessen the load so that you can move ahead in this life and the next? Through right actions, Buddhist lamas say.

In confessing their sins to a priest, Catholics acknowledge their flawed nature before God and express their willingness to make up for it.

On Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, we fast and pray. I used to love Yom Kippur when I was a kid. At temple I would stand next to my father, lightly beating my chest as we recited the sins we had committed.

We would elbow each other when we thought a sin was particularly applicable. *For the sin which we have committed before Thee by spurning parents and teachers.* (I got elbowed.) *For the sin we have committed before Thee by hardening our hearts.* (I elbowed him.) *For the sin we have committed before Thee by denying and lying.* (I got elbowed.) *For the sin we have committed before Thee by stretching the neck in pride.* (I got elbowed, then him.) It would go on and on for another dozen sins until we

would say, in unison, *For all these, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.*

On Yom Kippur, God forgave us for all the vows we wouldn't fulfill in the coming year. But he only gave us absolution for the vows that involved him. It was much harder to atone for the sins we committed against other people. We had to ask the person to forgive us. If he chose not to, the wrong would persist. So you had to be precise – and persuasive – in your amends.

In Judaism, as in the other religious traditions, sincerity is what counts most. You must cease to commit a sin, really regret it, and resolve not to do it again. I have never participated in a twelve-step program but I do know that making amends is an important part of the recovery process. In Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, you are instructed to make a list of everyone you have harmed and express a sincere willingness to repair the hurt. It is not enough to just apologize. You must endeavor to make direct amends, and put your money (or whatever is appropriate recompense) where your mouth is.

Addicts are more likely than other people to lie, steal, cheat, and commit adultery. Imagine how much bad karma an addict carries around in his bag. Imagine how much hard work and willpower it takes for him to lessen his load.

Did I have that much courage and discipline? That was what I wondered as I compiled my list of unfinished business.

I should have made that condolence call to Andre and gone to my grandmother's funeral and kept my promise to the boy in Kenya and done a thousand other things that I failed to do. As I compiled my list, I knew why each of these items was

important to me. But it took months for me to understand the underlying patterns that had made each of them so difficult for me to address. It isn't the easy tasks that become our unfinished business; it's the hard ones, the ones we are most afraid to face.

If I had gone to my grandmother's funeral, I would have had to face the reality of my messed-up family. Writing the condolence card to Andre brought fears of my own daughter's death. The boy in the refugee camp represented the suffering of all the world's children to me, and my limited ability to help.

The items on my list of unfinished business were linked to my deepest feelings of helplessness, disappointment, and fear. It's ironic: We consign our most essential business to the bottom of our to-do-list because we lack the time and energy to do the things that matter most in our lives well. It makes sense: The most important things take the most time and energy and we have only so much time and energy in a day. You let things slide. But I would also discover the corollary to this in the coming months: that, if one can attend to these things, great rewards will follow.

My year of taking care of my unfinished business would take the form of ten separate journeys. Three of those journeys involved my family, including my parents and grandparents, my uncles and aunts, and the near and distant relatives who shared in my family's good times and savaged each other when things went bad. Family, the core of who we are, was the source of my most intimate and anxiety-producing unfinished business.

My other seven journeys focused on four old friends, a former rival, my first mentor, and a boy I barely knew. In reaching out to them, I sought to either close a

circle or right a wrong.

Some type of fear played a role in creating all of the unfinished business I needed to complete. Simply taking the time to do the right thing often seemed impossible. On top of this anxiety, I was also afraid of doing something stupid or insensitive. Or I was afraid of letting someone down. To deal with these fears, even to identify them, took time – something I seldom had or gave to myself. But, as I would learn, when I did take the time and reached out in the right spirit and with compassion, and persevered, something remarkable would happen. I wouldn't only right a wrong, I would reconnect with parts of myself that I had forgotten. And having jumped in, I would find myself in a place of rich, exuberant humanity.

I didn't know any of that in the beginning, or even if my project was doable. All I really knew at the time was that I needed to find my aunt Fern. When I was a child, Fern babysat me. When I was older, she confided in me and we shared our dreams. Fern was the only person in my family who always seemed to be there for me. And then fifteen years ago, she was institutionalized after a fight with my grandmother. They had been living together in my grandmother's apartment, and in their frustration – Fern was schizophrenic, my grandmother had Alzheimer's – they screamed and tore at each other until the authorities took Fern away.

Whenever I asked, no one in my family would claim to know where Fern was – not even my father, who was her brother. And no one seemed to care. I found their lack of concern – and my own over the years – unconscionable. That's why I needed to find Fern – to show both her and myself that I cared.