

# **Value Up**

**By Mike Donahue  
With Matt Hamilton**

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Edited by Michael Gum

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**I want to dedicate this book to all of those who have walked down the hallways of their schools, past and present, and never felt like they quite measured up. They looked around and compared themselves to a standard that wasn't real. They were judged on things that were totally out of their control. I think of people like my brother David, who is an incredible person. He is smart, funny, and very caring, but was misunderstood and socially diminished because of our family dynamic. You guys are my heroes!**

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## About the Author

**Mike Donahue** is the executive director and founder of R5 Productions, a nonprofit organization based in Monument, CO that is dedicated to enriching the lives of young people. In the last decade, Mike is one of the most sought after speakers in the country on the subjects of respect, bullying, and diversity. His candid style and authentic persona keep the students engaged right from the first words. Mike hails from Boston, MA and was a member of the United States Air Force. He began his career as a youth director and youth pastor in Rockford, IL; Denver, CO; and Bellevue, NE. He is the father of four children.



Mike Donahue has spoken to more than one million students. He has spent the last 25 years working hand-in-hand with young people all over the world, helping them find purpose and define themselves as they navigate the often-difficult transition from

childhood to adulthood. In addition to traveling the United States, Asia, South America, and Europe speaking to young people, Mike has authored four books: *Reinventing My Normal*, *Hidden Scars*, *Talking to Brick Walls*, and his newest book, *Value Up*.

Mike says his life mission is to help young people find the answer that is already inside of them, and to help them find the courage to face whatever it is that is holding them back from experiencing greatness.

# Foreword

I can honestly say that Mike Donahue has changed my life. When I was a teenager, both before and after the shooting at Columbine High School that took my sister's life and so dramatically affected mine, Mike impacted me. For me, as a young man, Mike has been a valuable mentor and friend.

When he shared with me his vision behind this project, to raise the value of a human life in the hearts and minds of teenagers, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. Like Mike, I have spent the last 14 years of my life speaking to millions of teenagers about their character and the condition of their heart. The message presented here in Value Up is exactly what teenagers in America need today.

Mike has a unique ability to connect with and speak to teenagers as an adult because he lives what the pages of this book teach: how to understand the intrinsic worth inside of others and oneself. Students have great power as they walk the halls of their schools. They have the ability to lift those around them up or attempt to tear them down.

I believe that America needs to experience a revolution of compassion and that it will begin in the hearts and lives of our youth. Value Up might be the spark to start that revolution inside of you. Men and women like Mike Donahue and Value Up partnering with other great organizations, teachers, and administrators can help fan it into flame.

Imagine if a generation of young people collectively chose to lift each other up. Imagine what that generation could do as it came into adulthood. Stop imagining, and begin to Value Up.

Craig Scott

## **Craig Scott Bio**

On April 20, 1999, Craig Scott was a freshman at Columbine High School. That day, two students killed 12 students and a teacher. One of the students killed was Craig's sister Rachel Joy Scott. Craig was in the library, where most of the violence took place. He was under a table with two friends who lost their lives before leading the remaining students in the library to safety.

Since that day, he has dedicated his life to speaking to teenagers about kindness and compassion. Craig has had numerous appearances on such shows and networks as The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Today Show, Good Morning America, Dateline, 20/20, MSNBC, CNN, and many others. He remains one of the most significant voices in America on school violence.



# Introduction

Back in 2008, R5 Productions did an assembly program in East Jordan, Michigan. It was there that I met Matt Hamilton. We were asked to do a program because that particular school had lost three students in just a few months, and the student body was devastated. We did the assembly and then stayed for the rest of the day, meeting with various student groups. The program that we do in schools is called “Walk a Mile.” We focus on promoting respect and diversity by explaining that everyone has a story, and unless you walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, you really don’t have a right to judge them. After the assembly, Matt Hamilton, who is a middle school teacher, was inundated with students who wanted to share their story and get things off their chest.

Matt didn’t know what to do with all of these students that were coming to him and sharing their problems. He decided to start what he called the “East Jordan Middle School Shoe Club.” He wanted to give his students a chance to see the value in their own lives and in the lives of others. He challenged his students to read two books: *Reinventing My Normal* by me, and *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey. They had to write an essay on why they wanted to be a part of something like this. If the students did the work, they were allowed to hang their shoe in his room. He expected five to ten students to actually do all that work and join the club the first year. He had twenty-six.

The next year, Matt took it a step further and began to write letters to famous people, asking them for their shoe to hang up in his room as role models of people who had to overcome obstacles to achieve great things. He has 95 shoes hanging in his room that include such famous people as Charlie Duke who walked on the moon, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Kobe

Bryant, Tony Hawk, Justin Bieber, and Miley Cyrus, just to name a few. The response from these famous people has been overwhelming.

Matt has the boot of Robert Swan, the first person to walk to both the North Pole and the South Pole. On a trip to Antarctica last year, they asked if they could display the Shoe Club banner on their trip because they believe in the mission of the Shoe Club so much. Robert Swan and his assistant, Shayna De Silva, are holding the banner.

There are now hundreds of students who have come and gone through the East Jordan Middle School Shoe Club, and it has absolutely changed the culture of the school.

Matt and I began talking last year about the possibility of starting a national Shoe Club. We want to take this same idea of challenging students to care about themselves and others and initiate it into hundreds of schools. As many of you know, there is usually a strong response after we are done presenting our Walk a Mile program in schools. Many students want to share their story. We get lots of emails saying that our program was an inspiration to them to do something great with their lives. I got this email from Candice in Florida this year:

*"I felt like I was stuck before you guys came to my school, but today a whole new world has been opened up to me. My past doesn't matter. What's in front of me matters, and I can do it. Thanks, you guys Rock."*



A lot of them feel like they now want to reach out to make other students feel better about themselves. This one came at the beginning of the year from Mark in Minnesota.

*“I judge people all the time, but today you opened my eyes. People go through so much and I have no clue. When they walk down the hall, that’s not them. They are wearing a mask to protect the real them. Who am I to judge that? Thanks for pointing it out to all of us. So many people in my school liked you.”*

I started writing this book with that in mind. I want to give students an opportunity to take a hard look at how they feel about themselves and how they feel about others. I believe the two are very related. I don’t think you can truly care about others if you don’t care about and value yourself. Matt Hamilton has been a huge help in developing some of the thoughts in this book.

# Chapter One

## The Coat Room

*"We are members one of another; so that you cannot injure or help your neighbor without injuring or helping yourself."*

*George Bernard Shaw*

I grew up in a town just south of Boston, MA. My parents were divorced when I was five. My dad moved to a different state, and we hardly saw him. I grew up with two sisters and one brother. There was a lot of stress in our family because of poverty and family dysfunction. I missed my dad, and my mom hated him because of what he did to her, so she and I had a problem right from the start. I was too young to understand the intensity of her feelings toward him. I just wanted my dad to be around. I was constantly fighting with my mom. This took quite a toll on me and affected the way I treated others and myself. I want to describe for you a day that basically defines what I'm talking about.

It was Monday morning, and I was in sixth grade. I left my house at 8:25am for school in a mess. I had just had a fight with my mom. Part of the way to my elementary school was a path through a wooded area, which was good because it provided a cover so I could cry on the way to school. This was not an unusual scenario for me. There were many mornings where I would walk to school in a lot of pain. Sometimes, it was just emotional pain because of the mean things she said to me. This particular morning was bad. I had scratch marks on my neck, and my head was still hurting from her yanking my hair really hard. I got to my class and went right over to the teacher and asked her if I could go to the men's room. She saw my red eyes

and knew something was up, so she said yes. When I got to the men's room, I found a stall, went in, and just buried my head in my hands for a while and cried.

**I had a lot of emotion, and I didn't know what to do with it!**

I would be willing to bet that some of you have been there. You had a surge of emotion because you witnessed domestic violence, or you were in the middle of it yourself. As for me, back in those days, there was an unspoken rule that whatever happened in your house stayed in your house, so I didn't feel like I could tell anyone what was happening. Even if I did tell someone, there wasn't a whole lot they were willing to do about it. I needed to talk to someone because I was very confused about why she was so cruel. I was not a perfect kid by any stretch of the imagination, but looking back now, it seemed like she had a lot of pain from her past that she took out on me. At the time, I was very frustrated because I thought it was my fault that she was so unhappy.

**Emotion is not satisfied until it is expressed.**

Emotion will be expressed. It will come out. There are ways to express emotion that are constructive and positive, but as you know, there are also ways to express emotion that are not so positive.

**I wish I could tell you that I took my pain and poured myself into a sport, academics, or something positive, but I didn't.**

As I look back on those days, I am not proud of some of the reactions I had to the pain I was feeling on the inside. That Monday after I stopped crying, I put water on my face, dried myself off, went down the hall, and acted like nothing was wrong. No one had a clue that I was messed up on the inside. The

person that I was frustrated with was obviously my mom, but she wasn't there. Later on that day, when the sadness was replaced by anger, I found someone on which I could take out my rage—it was Randy. He had a speech impediment, so I saw him as an easy target and made fun of him on a regular basis. He was no match for me physically, and he couldn't easily fight back socially. He was the obvious choice.

Most days it was just a little bit of teasing in line for the bathroom or out on the playground. This day was different. I was angry because of what happened with my mom. I still remember his face. We were in the coatroom, and I had him cornered. My friends, who were in abusive situations similar to mine, were all standing right behind me. My teasing was cruel and relentless. I made fun of the way he talked. I mimicked him, and everyone laughed. I have never spoken to Randy about this, but I'm sure that those days were very traumatic for him and probably did some lasting damage to his psyche. Randy was not the only object of my wrath. There were other kids in school, but my little brother definitely fell victim to the cruelty that I dished out. He is exceptionally smart and not very athletic, so you know what happens to those boys.

The labels “gay” and “fag” were thrown around a lot. I would do just about anything to take back those words, because I know now that they were doing a lot of damage. I have written many things in my life, and I would have to say that is probably the toughest paragraph that I have ever had to write. No one likes to admit that he or she hurt someone else, especially one's own brother, but I must tell the truth if I'm going to help anybody with this book.

In no way am I writing this to justify my actions—everyone is responsible for their own behavior—but there seems to be a correlation between devaluing yourself and devaluing others. I

look at it like this. When I went to school, most mornings I felt small and powerless because of the abusive situation at home. Instead of finding power in bettering myself slowly through focusing on school and better choices,

**I grabbed immediate gratification by humiliating socially weaker kids.**

I went for the cheap laugh. All the other kids thought I was hilarious, and I got to feel powerful for 10 minutes. That's the problem with the cheap laugh, though; it doesn't last very long, so you must keep doing it to feel powerful again. The other problem with the cheap laugh is that although the other students may think you're cool at the time, there is a huge difference between popularity and respect. Those kids didn't respect me at all.

**They laughed because they were immature and afraid to be the victim, so they sided with me, the guy that had the social power for the moment.**

Before you get too upset with me, you need to understand something. I was definitely a bully in those days, but I was also a victim—not just in my family situation, but in my school as well. All throughout my school career, I watched kids with more social power put people down and use their power to control others. Some of them came from abusive backgrounds and took it out on my friends and me when we were younger. As we got older and gained social power ourselves, we did the same thing. We were just imitating what we saw. The culture of the school produced bullies.

I have spoken in over 2000 schools in the last twelve years, and what I have described here happens every day in schools all over the country. In the years since the Columbine massacre,

there has been a big push to bring awareness to the issue of bullying and social profiling. As more young people take their lives because of this cruelty, I suspect there will be a lot more education on the matter.

Most of the reaction that I have seen involves policing the actual bullying that takes place in the school: putting up cameras, passing bills for stricter laws, and adopting anti-bullying policies. I applaud these efforts, but if we don't address the culture of the school that produces bullies, we are just wasting our time. Kids in your school and schools all over the country will find ways to belittle others if we don't coach them to think differently.

**Bullying is slowly moving out of the hallways and classrooms because of these efforts, but it's alive and well in the bedrooms of young people all across America, thanks to the Internet and cell phones.**

The same culture of cruelty still exists; it's just not in our faces as much as it was when I was growing up. In just about every school I visit, there is an undercurrent of social pressure, and it is usually undetected until it reaches into the hallways of the school. I was in a meeting in Alaska with a bunch of principals, and one of them said eighty-five percent of the bullying that he addresses in his school starts on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. It's still happening; it's just gone more underground. In my opinion, the simple truth of the matter is that most of the negative behavior that we see in schools, like drug use, illicit sex, alcohol abuse, and bullying, comes down to a value issue. When I speak in a school, I say something like this:

**"Your school doesn't have a drug problem, an alcohol problem, or even a bullying problem. If that stuff is going on, it is a value problem."**

If there are students in my audience that are destroying their lives with drugs, alcohol, or destructive behavior, I'm not assuming they don't know it's bad for them. I'm assuming they do know, and they don't care. Somewhere down the line, they stopped believing that their lives were valuable enough to treat with care. It's the same thing with bullying. Most people know that it's wrong to socially diminish someone's worth, but if you don't value yourself, you don't value others either. It becomes almost natural to pick on people or try to diminish their value when you don't like yourself. I know that not all bullying comes from people who had been bullied in the past, but a lot of it does. My personal bullying, and overall lack of respect for others, was a byproduct of how I felt about myself.

### **I don't see many bullies that have a healthy self-esteem.**

This book is about knowing how valuable you truly are and how valuable the people that are around you are as well. I am going to challenge you to take a hard look at yourself on two levels. First, I will get you to look at how you truly see yourself. How valuable is your life to you? I can challenge you all day long to treat others with respect, but if you don't first respect yourself, you will have a harder time naturally respecting others.

### **It is a waste of time to tell students to respect others if they do not already respect themselves!**

Second, I will show you how to truly value others and treat everyone with dignity and respect. I am going to challenge you to go deep inside yourself and discover any prejudices you may have and why. Everyone has a story, and when we walk in each other's shoes, we discover that our story is not significantly different from everyone else's stories. A lot of prejudice and hate comes from ignorance. Have you ever truly asked yourself, what

would it be like to be that person? What if I walked in that person's shoes? There are reasons why we treat some people with dignity and not others. We are going to look at those reasons.

I was speaking with my brother once, and he told me that he remembers when I changed. He said, "You looked at me differently. You used to hate me (I never hated him, I hated myself) but you looked me in the eye and really wanted to hear what I had to say." He described the timeframe, and it was right around the time when I began to have a new respect for myself. The natural byproduct of gaining a renewed sense of value is treating everyone else with respect as well. This could happen to you. Don't take this book lightly. Grab a pen and answer the questions at the end of the chapters.

Answer this question, why are you reading this book right now? What are you expecting to get out of it?

# Notes

# Chapter Two

## Dirty Mirrors

*“Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You may become Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything.”*

*Pablo Casals*

You may be asking this question right now: if knowing my true value is that important, how in the world do I find out what it is? Let me ask you some questions. What do you think you are worth? What is your value right now? How have you determined your value in the past? We know that if you were totally broken down to just the chemicals that are in your body, you would not be worth much more than \$100. Obviously, there is a lot more to you than just your chemical make-up. Your capability, your intelligence, and your character all play a role in what you feel you are worth.

Recently, I sat with a friend who was fixing my iPhone. (I dropped it and smashed the glass, again.) I watched him take it apart and put it back together, and it was fascinating. On the way home, I was thinking about how incredible that phone is and what detailed work was done in order to make it so functional. Then, I started thinking about the human body. Human bodies are unbelievably put together. When you investigate how all the

intricate details come together, it is remarkable. We are capable of doing such incredible things that, if you really think about it, it can blow your mind.

Think about how far we've come in building artificial limbs. We can now give injured people such as veterans a new arm or a new leg. Still, no matter how much technology and brainpower goes into this limb, it is never as functional as your biological parts. In other words, to try to duplicate what your fingers can do would cost millions of dollars, and the mechanical fingers would still not be as functional as what you have been given. You are amazing! The word "intrinsic" means something that is built in. It's already there. You are going to see the word "intrinsic" often in this book because your value is like that. It is intrinsic. You were born with it. It is set. You are like a piece of pure gold. You can't do anything to pure gold to add to its value; it has very high intrinsic value. It's the same with you. You have value no matter what you have done to yourself, or any mistakes you have made, or how tarnished you think you are. People can say you don't have value. You may even feel like you don't have value, but it doesn't matter. Your value is built in.

**If that is really true, then why are there so many people in our world that don't think they are worth much?**

After I spoke at a school in Iowa one day, a senior girl wanted to chat with me. She explained that she didn't see much value in herself, but when I was talking about dreams and not giving up on them, and I explained the difference between social value and intrinsic value, she began to see that she really did have value. We talked for about thirty minutes, and right before I got up to leave, she reached into her purse and gave me a dirty, cracked mirror. She explained that it had been in her purse since she was a freshman. She told me that the smudging on the mirror would never let her get a true image of herself, and that was the way

she saw herself: dirty, broken, and incomplete. She wanted me to have it because it represented the old way in which she looked at herself, and she was going to start to see herself with value.

**Some people end up choosing the life they think they deserve.**

I hope she takes it seriously, because not-so-good things happen to people when they don't value themselves. When people don't feel valuable, they don't act valuable. A very important principle when it comes to value is that you have to abandon your feelings just like a pilot has to abandon his or her feelings when flying in a small plane. John F. Kennedy, Jr. crashed his plane on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1999, killing himself, his wife, and her sister. Without going into too much detail, there was much speculation on how this could have happened. There were reports on the news that he was not trained on his instruments, so when it got dark, and he was flying through clouds, he got disoriented. A couple of weeks after his crash, I was flying somewhere on a commercial airline. There was a pilot sitting next to me, so I asked him what he thought happened. "Was he not trained on his instruments?" I asked. He said, "you can't have a pilot's license without being trained on your instruments. The problem comes when you don't believe the truth of your instruments." He said there are times that you will be flying, and you get so disoriented that you will swear that you are flying upside down. You're not upside down, but because of inertia, the speed of the aircraft, and the fact that you can't see anything, you can feel like you are. So instead of trusting your instruments, you rely on your feelings. You start to make little adjustments based on how you feel." He said that they call it a death spiral. You keep making little adjustments according to how you feel until you basically corkscrew the aircraft right to the ground.

I think the problem for a lot of us comes when we don't believe the truth of our own value. We don't feel valuable so we make small and sometimes big adjustments according to how we feel about ourselves instead of trusting the truth of our true intrinsic value.

I have looked in the eyes of so many teenagers that have told me with tears streaming down their faces about some bad choice having to do with drugs, alcohol, relationships, cutting, or even attempting suicide based on how they were feeling about themselves at the time. They made little adjustments based on their feelings that started a downward spiral.

I was standing around one day with a bunch of college students, and one of the girls suddenly asked, "Why do I always attract bad guys?" Apparently, she had a string of horrible boyfriends that treated her very badly, and she was seeing a pattern and blaming it on herself. My friends that were standing there were trying to be nice to her, so they said stuff like, "It's not you," "most guys are jerks," "you will meet your prince charming someday," etc. I said, "No, your first instinct was right, it's you." She said, "You don't even know me." I said, "I don't need to know you to answer that question. You attract what you respect. If you don't respect yourself, you automatically attract people who don't respect you, and you repel those that would treat you with respect. The opposite is true as well. If you respect yourself, you will automatically attract people who respect you and repel those that wish to treat you badly. It's that simple." People tend to follow your lead when it comes to your self-worth. So, the answer to happiness is not finding the right person that will finally treat you the way you deserve, it is in treating yourself that way first, which will attract the right kind of friends and even a potential quality partner for your life. Do you see how low self-worth tricks you into doing things that you wouldn't ordinarily do?

**I can't stress enough that you must abandon your feelings and search very hard for the truth of your intrinsic value!**

In many of my presentations, I ask teenagers to raise their hands if they have a dream for their lives. It never fails; most of the room will raise their hands. What I'm really asking them is, "Do you see value in who you are deep down, value enough to dream and dare to believe that your life and future matter?" We all want to believe that we are worth a lot, but things happen in our lives that can diminish what we think we are worth. I didn't say that the negative events diminish our worth; I said things happen to diminish what **we think** we are worth. It is very important that you see the difference.

Have you heard the phrase, "perception is reality"? What that means is that whatever you think something is, that's what is in your mind. You could be dead wrong, but to you it's right, because it's your reality. For years, people thought the earth was flat—that was their perception. They saw it that way in their minds, so they acted accordingly. Sailors would be afraid to go long distances for fear that they would fall off the face of the earth. That sounds crazy, but that was their perception, until someone came along and proved that the earth was round. Value is the same way. You are incredibly valuable. That is a fact, just like "the earth is round." If your perception is that you are not valuable, then you won't see yourself that way, and to you, you are not valuable.

**When you don't feel valuable, you don't act valuable, and people don't treat you like you have value. Slowly, the lie takes root. It is a vicious cycle.**

Let me give you another example. Let's say I had a penny in my pocket. Generally, most of us don't really value pennies. In fact,

I just see them as a pain in the neck. I hate when I have a bunch of pennies in my pocket. What if, all of a sudden, I learned that the penny that I had in my pocket was very rare and worth \$10,000? Well, that changes everything. I am going to treat that penny with great care. The first thing I'm going to do is to take it out of my pocket and put it somewhere very safe.

**My behavior toward that penny would change drastically, because now I know its true value.**

My perception changed. One of my goals for this book is to help you make the discovery that you have incredible intrinsic value. When you realize that, it changes the way you treat yourself. It also changes the way you allow people to treat you.

**At one point in your life, you knew you had incredible value.**

Think about it. You had to learn to be unvalued. When you were little, it was all about you. You were fed, bathed, played with, and taken care of at such an intense level that you couldn't help but feel valued. Your first steps, your first words—your first everything—was celebrated and most likely documented with pictures or video, or both. The world revolved around you. As we get older, things begin to happen that chip away at our self-esteem. We make mistakes. We get compared to others. We see limitations. We get labeled and pigeonholed into certain stereotypes. We get neglected and minimized by people that should care. We used to feel invincible and capable of anything, but that feeling gets replaced with feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.

It used to frustrate me to hear motivational speakers say things like, "Whatever you think you are, you are." We have all heard the principle that what we think determines our destiny. In some ways, I agree with that, but the motivational speakers

always stop there. They don't go into how you change thought patterns. I'm not a psychologist, but I know that if you have a pattern of thinking negatively about yourself, you don't change it by just deciding one day to think differently. There must be a motivation behind changing the way you think. You must unlearn some very deep things that got into your head in the first place.

### **If you learned to be devalued, then you can unlearn it.**

Let's go back to when you were little and thought the world revolved around you. You felt valued. Most babies and toddlers are very in touch with their intrinsic value because of the attention they receive on a daily basis. If we were going to put you on a scale from 1 to 10, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that most of you, when you were very young, knew you were loved and valued. You knew you were a 10. As we get older, our self-worth begins to take hits because of certain events in our lives. Neglect or abuse occurs, and the people that should be confirming our worth, in some cases, have diminished our value because those people hold power in our lives. (We will discuss this further in the next chapter.)

### **We must figure out exactly what happened to give you the perception that you are not a 10 at this very moment.**

If you feel like a 10 right now, then you can just put this book down. But if you don't, you owe it to yourself to do the work to help you raise the value of your own life in your own eyes. (It's already there; you just don't see it.) In the next few chapters, we will discuss six ways that you may have learned to devalue yourself: the source of self-worth, the social government, the power of words, the power of comparing ourselves, the power of failure, and the power of abuse. Before we get into that, let's look at what you really think about yourself.

### **Answer these questions about yourself:**

Which of these groups of statements best describes how you feel about yourself? Write a short paragraph about why you chose that group of statements.

1. I don't like myself. I see very little value in my life. I get very irritated with people who act like they are better than me.
2. I don't like a lot of who I am, but there are some things I know are good. I often compare myself to others.
3. I feel okay about my life. I'm not really happy. I have some doubts about my worth. I feel like most people are better than me.
4. I know I'm not perfect, but I'm aware of my strengths. I see value in my life. I get along with most people.
5. I have a healthy perspective about who I am. I like my life and where I am going. I'm healthy enough not to be threatened by other people's differences because I'm comfortable with who I am. I like most people.

# Notes

# Chapter Three

## “Irreducible”

*“Surrounding myself with people who love and support me has been my key to success. Once I eliminated the negative people from my circle, I was ready to soar.”*

*Eva Mendes*

I was perusing through Facebook the other day and saw this post from a very good friend of mine named Kari who lives in Illinois. There was a picture of her son, and she wrote:

This young man turned 7 today!! He is smiling the moment he wakes up and is a joy to all who know him! He was a gift to us 7 years ago! We love you Caleb!

Psychologists say that one of our main sources of our self-worth is what the most important people in our lives think of us. For most of us, when we are young, those people are our parents. If they love and value us, then we will feel loved and valued. Other family connections end up playing a key role in our value as well. As I scrolled down the comments following Kari’s expression of her love for her son, there were posts from siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, all affirming the love and value that Caleb has among family members. As he gets older, he will get connected to neighbors, friends, teachers, classmates, and others that also will contribute in smaller ways to his self-worth.

Some people would say that these people and future important people (like best friends or a spouse) will, in different capacities, be the only source of self-worth in Caleb’s life. Though this

young guy is off to a great start, I believe there must be a higher source of value that goes beyond his parents, family members, and friends. I want to be careful not to get into a religious conversation here, but let's talk about this for a minute. As we discussed earlier, your intrinsic value is set, and if we were going to put it on a scale from 1 to 10, you are a 10. Caleb probably feels like a 10 today, and you may not, but the only difference between you and Caleb is your perception.

**Remember, nothing can change the fact that you have tremendous value. It's your perception of your value that changes.**

People of different faiths would put God or the Creator in the spot of the main source of value. They believe that their value comes from what their perception of who God is in their lives. That is obviously a personal choice, and the authors of this book are not advocating any religious preference; we are merely stating that people of faith may put God in that spot. Others might be inclined to put something like Child of the Universe, or something like that, in there. Max Ehrmann, in his poem "The Desiderata," said,

**"You are a Child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here."**

I really like that quote, but regardless of what you personally would say is the source of your value, I want you to understand that you have a source of value that goes beyond your parents or any other resource of your value in your life. You are a human being, and you have a right to dignity and respect, no matter your race, gender, or anything else that makes you different from other human beings.

Here is why that is very important. Ironically, I met another little guy named Caleb a couple years ago. He was a few years older than Caleb from Illinois. I was up in Oregon speaking in some schools when a teacher pointed out this young sixth grader to me. He said last year he came up to the library after school in a panic and got on the computer right away. The librarian went over to see what he was up to. Caleb had pulled up Google Maps and was searching for a satellite picture of his house. When she asked him what he was doing, he said he wanted to see if his dad's truck was in the driveway, because if it was, he was not going to go home right away. He was afraid that his dad was going to beat him, so he was going to wait until his dad went to work. He didn't know that those pictures were not in real time.

Caleb from Oregon at some point is desperately going to need to know that no matter how he gets treated by one of his main resources of value, he still has value. For some of you, this may help you to understand why you have this constant need to please people. You might not feel valuable unless specific people treat you a certain way. Can you see how that can be a trap? If those resources break down for whatever reason, it can throw you into a helpless situation if you see them as the only source of your value.

Let's look at what a resource truly is. I call them resources because they are not the source of your value, but they serve as ambassadors of your source. Ambassadors are representatives of something. The United States has ambassadors to different countries around the world. Ambassadors can't make policy; they just represent the policies of the United States to the different countries. In the same way, our resources are not the source of our value—they represent the source.

**The resources are there to confirm your value, not create it.**

It is important to know this, because if for whatever reason your resource decides not to see you as valuable anymore, you will still maintain your value. If one of the United States' ambassadors to another country decided to act on their own and say something that was not aligned with what the source believes, they would have that ambassador removed.

**Good ambassadors know what the source believes, and they represent that source faithfully.**

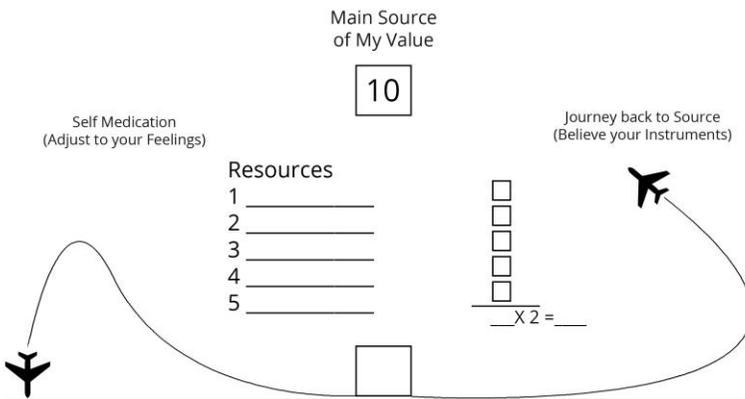
I am a parent of five children. I understand my role as a resource in my children's lives. I'm not perfect, but I have tried to be a good ambassador of my children's value. I am not the source of their worth, but how I treat them is very important. I am a Christian, and I believe that my value and my children's value comes from the unconditional love that God has for us. (That is my personal opinion, and I am not saying that is what you have to believe.) My children naturally look to their mother and I to nurture and confirm their value as their main resources. When they became teenagers, I knew that they would start to look to their friends and social circles to confirm their worth. That is very normal. I would say that by the time my children reached adolescence, they all had a healthy view of themselves. If one of their peers (who become a big resource in one's teen years) decided that they are not worth a lot socially, it wouldn't matter as much, because my kids have a healthy perception of their intrinsic value.

Just like my children, I was born with incredible value, but in my case, my dad left when I was five, and my mom made some mistakes in the way she raised me. When my mom was 27, she was raising 4 children all by herself with basically no help from any of her resources. That is a lot to ask from anyone. By the time I entered my teen years, my perception of my intrinsic value was not very high, partly because my resources of my

value had broken down. It put me in a situation where I had to make up that value somehow.

I was extremely affected by what my peers thought of me. I didn't have a strong enough intrinsic value to withstand some of the negative perceptions that people in my school had for me. I found myself acting like a puppet, doing whatever I had to do to make people like me and to feel valuable. Maybe you have felt that way at times.

I want to try a simple math exercise as it relates to your value. In the graphic below, write down the top five most important people in your life right now. Be honest and write a number from 1 to 10 next to their name that reflects how they represented your true value. For example, next to your mom's name you might write 8, next to your weird uncle Jimmy you might write 4. Write down however you think they represented your intrinsic value.



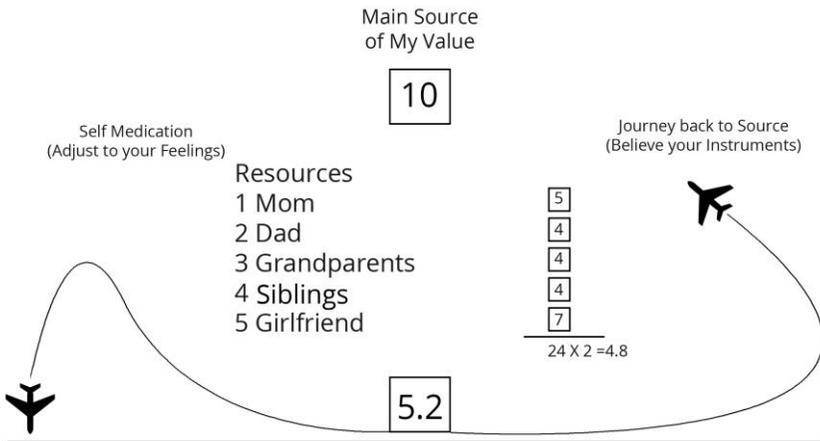
Going back to the scale I used in chapter 2, we as human beings are all 10's. That is the way the source sees all of us. Our

perceptions of our value can change just like mine did. Go back and add up the numbers next to each person's name. Take that number and multiply it by two, since we have five resources and not ten. Put a decimal point in the middle of that number. For example, if after multiplying by two you came up with 65, then your number would be 6.5. To get to a ten, you would have to make up the difference, which would be 3.5. That would get you to ten. Look at mine on page 36. Again, not exactly scientific, but if you do this formula yourself, you might have a better understanding of why your self-worth is where it is.

When I say you have to make up the difference, I mean that you have a choice to go directly to the source to confirm your value (adjust to your instruments, not your feelings) or do what many other people do. They walk around thinking they truly are the value that they feel. They accept that value as reality. All the while, they know deep down that they are worth more. Some people get into a self-medication mode (they adjust to their feelings) at this point. They get into relationships to try to make up that difference. Often it can lead them to a codependent relationship. They will get used and hurt; they are willing to put up with blatant disrespect because of how they feel about themselves. Sometimes people will engage in substance abuse to mask the way they really feel about themselves.

If you have seen me speak at your school, then you know that after I'm done, there is usually a crowd of people that want to talk to me. I know exactly what I'm going to hear when I start talking to those kids. I'm going to hear that they don't feel very

### Mike's Teenage Model



good about themselves, and their story is going to include something about one or more of their resources that broke down. It's extremely rare to hear a story about low self-worth that didn't include one of their resources misrepresenting their value in some way: a parent, girlfriend, boyfriend, ex-best friend, etc.

A few years ago, I went to Cambodia to do some speaking in schools and orphanages. I spent five days there driving throughout the country from North to South. For the entire five days, the guy that was assigned to drive us around and be like a guide kept telling us story after story about how poor these people are. He would drive us through towns and villages that had masses of people that were living in extreme poverty. After the fifth day, we were driving to another village, and I asked him about the suicide rate in Cambodia. I assumed it was going to be high because of the extreme living conditions. What he told me, I didn't believe at first. He said it's almost nonexistent.

I said, "For the last five days, you have been telling us how poor and depressed these people are. I just assumed they would be throwing themselves off bridges." He said, "I told you they were poor, but they're not depressed. Most of them live with their entire families—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc. There is a strong emotional support system because they are living with so many family members. (Strong resources make good ambassadors of your value.) If they are not in the same home or hut, they are very close by. They may not have the monetary things like you have in the US, but they have each other. That seems to keep them happy."

The same year, I was speaking at one of the most prestigious private high schools on the east coast. After my presentation, a young man came up to me and wanted to talk privately. He was about six-foot-five, and I found out later that he had a full-ride scholarship to a D1 school to play lacrosse. He said to me, "I'm self-medicating." I asked, "With what?" He said, "mostly pot and alcohol." Here was a kid who by anyone's standards had a great life. His parents were very wealthy, he was going to be attending a great college, and it would be easy to say that he had a strong intrinsic value. I said, "why are you self-medicating?" He said, "Most people would look at my life and think that I had it made. My family is probably one of the richest, if not the richest, families in our school."

"For my birthday my dad bought me a brand new Mustang GT. I have everything I need. What they don't know is that just about every night, I go home to this huge expensive home that is empty. My dad golfs a lot in the afternoon and just stays at the club and drinks with his friends; even if they don't golf, they hang out there 'til late at night. My mom goes from one meeting to the next trying to save the world, but she's never home. There's usually a fifty-dollar bill sitting on the counter with a note that says, "We'll be late, go get yourself something to eat."

He had tears in his eyes when he said to me, “I don’t want the fifty-dollar bill; I want to be with my family.”

Wow! Fifty dollars is almost a month’s wages in some parts of Cambodia. It’s rather obvious what this guy was saying. Time with his parents means more to his value as a person than any amount of money. His parents may have not have even realized that they were sending him the message that he’s not valuable enough to them to stay home and care about what’s going on in his life. They just threw money at him, thinking that is what he wanted.

I was just speaking in Duluth, MN at a foster care conference that I have been doing for over ten years. A lady named Angie Skogsted and her staff do an amazing job up there. It’s my favorite place to speak. These kids are all in foster care or homeless, and they are getting ready to age out of the system. Their stories are unbelievable. They bring in speakers like me and other groups to basically reaffirm that these kids have value. They have workshops that give them life skills to walk out that value.

One of the groups that came in this year was out of Minneapolis. They put on this skit that had a song in the middle of it in which this young African American guy was rapping these words over and over again, “We are irreducible.” I’m going to be honest with you. I didn’t even know that irreducible was a word. (I’m not a math guy.) I looked it up on Dictionary.com:

**Not reducible; incapable of being reduced or of being diminished or simplified further.**

The whole group started to sing it as well, and I was watching their faces. These were kids that have had most, if not all, of their resources completely fail them. They were basically singing that

we have value no matter what people have done to us. You can't reduce our value. "We are irreducible." It was powerful!

The same goes for you, my friend. You are irreducible. Whether it was a severe situation like my friends in Duluth, or just an honest evaluation that some of your resources have not really affirmed your true value the way they should have, you have to go back to the source. I want you to look at Illustration A on page 36 one more time. Look at the arrows going from the bottom box. That is the box with the number that you have to make up. You have a choice. You can mask the pain of not feeling very valuable by going left toward self-medication and risk "cork screwing" your life right into the ground, or you can start heading back up the scale toward the source to reaffirm your incredible intrinsic value. Going to the right is going to take some work, but I can promise you that it is well worth it.

To get started going back up to the source, you must take some deliberate actions to make this journey. I'm going to give you seven specific steps that I know will help you discover your true worth. Don't blow these off. It's very important that you do this.

**1. Take an honest assessment of your resources.** I don't want to turn you into little whiners and have you blaming everyone else for all your problems, but seeing yourself as valuable starts with taking an honest look at how much your personal resources truly represented the source of your worth. Were they good ambassadors? If you haven't done it already, do the exercise on page 32. It's not exactly scientific, but it will give you a good idea how you see yourself and why.

**2. Find better resources.** Stop putting up with people who treat you badly. Resources are important. Find people that truly appreciate you for who you are. Don't change for anyone,

because that slowly brings down your perception of your self-worth.

**3. Go to the source, or self-medicate.** After you know your number that has to be made up, you need to decide to take a hard look at how much you might be masking your low self-worth with substance abuse or self-medicating in other ways. Make a commitment to abandon that way of dealing with your low self-worth. Substance abuse just prolongs the real issue. Eventually, you are going to have to do the work to get back to your true intrinsic value.

**4. Start to make some small investments into yourself.** Warren Buffet, the very rich financial investor, said, “the best investment you can make is in yourself.” Working out, doing your homework, cleaning your room or your car, studying a little harder on a test than you usually do, dress a little sharper, etc.—all these things are good choices. They seem like small things, but I’ve learned something about small right choices. They slowly bring big feelings of self-confidence. Start to change your game a little by changing how you invest in yourself.

**5. Write out your dreams.** Seeing yourself accomplishing your dreams is very important. If you don’t see yourself in your mind living out your dreams, it won’t happen. Seeing it first in your mind starts with writing it down. Visualize yourself accomplishing these things. If you can’t see it in your mind first, you won’t do it.

**6. Become more devoted to your faith.** If you are a person that believes your source is God, then don’t be casual about it. Find a group that believes the same way you do, and pour yourself into it. Be careful, because church people are not the source, they are resources. Some people get messed up with this because they have been disappointed in some way by a person in their church

that they feel didn't represent their source in the right way. Just because someone has pastor in front of their name does not mean they are perfect. If you go to church for more than a month, you are going to be disappointed. The point of church is to be closer to your source.

**7. Do the work in the remainder of the chapters.** There are five more chapters that deal with your self-worth, and then four chapters that encourage you to value others as well. Take the time to answer the questions at the end of the chapters. Doing the work is an investment into yourself, and it will greatly help.

As you start taking these steps toward the source of your value, you will begin to feel different. You will see yourself the way you really are—**INCREDIBLY VALUABLE!!!**

# Notes

# Chapter Four

## The Sheriffs of Hunt Elementary School

*“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”*

*Oscar Wilde*

A couple of years ago, I was sitting in a room with some of the most put-together teenagers I have ever been around. I was facilitating a discussion at Sunny Side Academy in Pittsburgh, PA. The tuition to go to this high school is around \$21,000 per year. The young people that were in this room were the top leaders from this prestigious school. Most of them will be going to an Ivy League College like Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. They brought me to Sunny Side because they were having issues with social profiling and bullying. These particular students were gathered together to brainstorm with me before I addressed the student body of about eight hundred students. As we were sharing ideas, there was this young guy that spoke up with his opinion about the social climate of the school and offered an idea. The students in the room listened but then completely blew him off. I didn't think much of it until about five minutes later, when another student raised his hand and then said the exact same thing—I mean, the exact same thing. This time, the reaction was different. They all embraced what he said and actually wrote it down. I was puzzled because I know I wasn't the only one in the room that heard the first kid say it, but they just went on like it was the second kid's idea.

I don't even need to explain to you what happened, because you already know. It's what happens in your school. There are certain kids that can say things and certain kids that can't. It's the painful reality that there is a social government that is very real and, in most cases, gets obeyed more than the traditional school government that teachers and administrators control. I'm sure there are kids in your school that have no problem breaking the written rules of the school, but I think most of the kids in your school won't break the unwritten social rules. Let me explain.

**The word “government,” according to Dictionary.com, means, “the control exercised over the body of its members.”**

I doubt anyone in the room that day was really aware of it, but control was being exercised at that moment. The student with the original idea got the message that even though what he said was good, it wasn't his place to say it. Everyone in the room also got the message. There is a pecking order of value.

**Certain kids have permission to do certain things, and other kids don't.**

If you go off-script, you will pay a social price for that. The first kid knew his idea got stolen, but he didn't dare say a word. He knew his place (value) in that specific social government.

Wouldn't it be interesting if tomorrow you walked into your school and everyone, including you, had a number on their chest from 1 to 10, but instead of this number representing your intrinsic worth, it would represent your social worth? That's what it is like isn't it? You have a number. That number represents your social equity—what you can say and what you

can't. This isn't uncommon, but the confusion comes when you get tricked into thinking that your social value is your true value.

Let's go back to where psychologists say we get our self-worth. It's what the most important person in our lives thinks of us. Remember? Again, for most of us, when we are young, it's our parents. We put some (but very minimal) focus on our social world at age 7. However, the magic happens when we turn 12 or 13, right? We start measuring what we are worth according to our specific social government. We don't completely blow off what our parents think of us, but during our teenage years, what they think pales in comparison to what people in our social worlds think of us.

In our specific social government, there are important people. Whether we know them personally or not, they are important in our world because they are like measuring sticks. We measure our worth based on what they think of us. I can still remember who those people were in my life. It started in sixth grade at Hunt Elementary School in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Brian Solano, Peter Murray and Steven Parker, just to name a few—these guys had power. They were like the sheriffs. They enforced the rules in our social world. If these guys accepted you, it went well for you socially; if they didn't, you were in trouble. If you dared to go against them, it was like breaking the law. That's why I call that social world a government. You will pay a price if you break their "laws."

You could put your own names in there, couldn't you? Most likely, there are people in your world that control what others say and do. In a way, these people are like the resources of your social value. Let me ask you a question. It's the same question I asked you last chapter about the people who are resources of your intrinsic value.

## **Are the resources of your social value credible?**

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are probably basing a lot of your own value on what they think of you, so it's a valid question. Do those people really care about you, and what is going to happen to you in your future? I was talking to this girl once that told me that everyone was calling her names and making her feel bad about herself. I asked her to name them. She couldn't. So, I said, why does it matter? You are internalizing these people's words to the point where it is affecting how you feel about yourself, but you hardly know their names. Why? Why are you giving these people that much importance? What makes them credible to you?

That is a good question. What moves people into the "most important person" category in our lives? Why do we base our personal value on what complete strangers think about us? Why do they become the measuring stick? It's really kind of shallow, but extremely common at the same time. I want to illustrate this point with a scenario.

Let's say tomorrow you had two new students in your school. The first kid is a pretty good-looking guy that can throw a football a long way, and your school needs a quarterback. Without knowing much more than that, he most likely will have a high social value right away. We know nothing about his personal life, —in fact, he could be abusing his girlfriend on the weekends—but it wouldn't matter, because he has what it takes socially to have a lot of influence on his campus. This is only because of the two things we do know about him: he's good looking, and he can throw a football.

On the same day, a freshman girl comes to your school from another town. She's not particularly pretty, and she moved in with her grandmother because of some family issues that have

nothing to do with her. She will probably not get a high social value and have very little influence on the campus. She could be doing great things with her life, like saving kittens on the weekends, but the initial judgment will be negative because she doesn't fit the social criteria for being popular.

If you asked me, the person I want to emulate is not the quarterback, it's the girl who is desperately trying to make something out of her life in a world that is pretty crazy and, for the most part, out of her control. Most of you would probably agree, but she is not going to get the time of day because of her social situation. That is so unfair and can be very confusing for people. It's confusing because the standard we use to value someone's opinion in middle and high school is very shallow. Do you see what I'm getting at here? We place an immense amount of importance on the opinions of people we hardly know and who hardly know us.

One of the biggest breakthroughs in my life came when I realized the difference between my social value and my intrinsic value. Social value can change, and it usually does change quite a bit depending on your specific social government. When I was in sixth grade, I got extremely popular for about 4 months because the most popular girl in my class had a crush on me. (I loved it.) I was king for a while, but when the crush was over, my status went back to where it was. Do you see how shallow that your social world is if you depend on it for your value?

In contrast, your intrinsic value never changes. That's the whole point of this chapter. I need you to see the difference between your social value and your intrinsic value, and I need you to see that your intrinsic value is much more important than your social world is to you right now. I know that seems like what an adult is supposed to say to you, but trust me when I tell you that you must put your focus back on what you are worth

intrinsically. Eventually you are going to end up doing that anyway. Your life will take on a lot more meaning if you can do it sooner, rather than later. I have not seen or heard from Brian, Peter, or Steven for a couple of decades now. These guys that dominated my life back in the day now have absolutely no influence in my life whatsoever. That will happen to you, too.

When I tell you that you need to put more of a focus on your intrinsic value, I'm not trying to minimize or trivialize the daily pressure you feel to fit into your social government. I know it's very real, and I don't think most adults can relate well to the pressure. For one thing, as much as an adult tries to tell you that it was like that for them, it's not true.

### **The Internet and smartphones changed everything for you.**

Now there is no relief from that pressure, and your audience is bigger. There are a lot more people to impress (or obey). I graduated with over 500 students in my class. That means there were over 2,000 kids in my school. A kid from a small school in Nebraska that has 40 kids in his or her graduating class has a bigger social audience than I did. Think about it. If I made a social mistake in my school, maybe 15 kids would know about it. The next day, I would hit reset, and no one would really care about what happened yesterday.

You don't have that luxury, do you? There is no reset button for you because of technology. The kids in that small Nebraska school would have hundreds, if not thousands of people in their audience. Mistakes or rumors live longer because they get posted. That is a lot more pressure than I ever faced socially.

Last year, I was in a small school in Kansas when a girl came up after the assembly and said, "When I was in eighth grade, I was

stupid and posted a racy picture of myself. I am a senior now. Just today I got crap for it, and that was four years ago.”

I’ve watched with sadness the suicide rate among teenagers go up in the United States since I started speaking in public schools back in 2001. The Center for Disease Control says that over 4,400 teens will take their lives this year because of bullying. They are calling it “bullycide.” In essence, these young people are letting the social government and that shallow value system dictate their worth. I think when people take their lives, they are saying to themselves, “If I am rejected in that value system, then I must not be worth anything, so I need to die.” They are saying, “There is no value left in me.” It makes me sad because I believe if most of them could just have waited a few years, they would have seen how meaningless that social government really is. They would have seen that their true value is intrinsic, and it never changes.

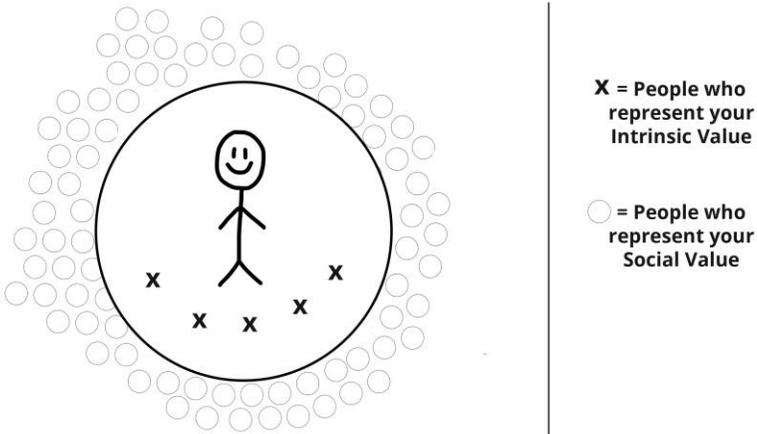
I’m not trying to disagree with the experts at the Center for Disease Control, but I don’t think you can pin it on bullying alone. In my opinion, it’s the combination of not knowing your true intrinsic value and getting diminished socially, whether it’s bullying, social profiling, or just being socially minimized. If you don’t feel valuable intrinsically, and you don’t feel valuable socially, where do you go from there?

**The less you know your true intrinsic value, the more you depend on what others think and say about you (social value) for your worth.**

When I’m traveling on a plane and someone asks me what I do for a living, I know I’m going to get an earful of his or her personal stories with bullying. Everyone has a story about how they were diminished socially in some way, but they survived it because they concluded that they were worth more than what

their social world thought of them at the time. My heart goes out to those kids who, right now, don't know that they are incredibly valuable no matter what. It's heartbreaking to go into a community and pick up the pieces after a student has taken his or her own life. Unfortunately, in the last fifteen years, I have had that job many times.

Look at the illustration below. The person in the middle is you. There are five X's in the inner circle that represent the five friends in your life that truly value you. You may have more, or you may have less. None of them are perfect, obviously, but they represent your intrinsic value. The O's on the outside of your circle are the people in your social world that don't know you very well. I want you to write down the five important people that represent your intrinsic value, and then write down the five people in your school that people follow. These are the "sheriffs" of the social government.



If you want a life that pleases these “sheriffs,” then you need to do everything you can to please them. Go to all the parties, hate who they hate, like who they like, don’t ever think for yourself, and you will have a smoother social life.

If you can see the absolute futility in that, then you need to decide now to stop worrying about them. You need to look at the people on the intrinsic list and invest in those friendships. Don’t worry about how many it is. If it’s only one or two, it’s okay. I would rather have a couple of close friends that I can confide in and trust than a whole bunch of shallow people that I have to please to stay in good standing with them. What a lonely feeling that must be.

I’m going to give you seven things that you can do right now to make the friendships in your inner circle stronger.

1. Tell these people that they matter to you. I know it sounds stupid, but you would be surprised how important it is that they know that. You can say it in a way that isn’t corny or stupid. Put it in your own words, but let them know they matter to you.
2. Spend more time with them. Prioritize them. I’m not saying you ignore everyone else, but spend quality time with your closest friends.
3. Make memories. I just got off the phone tonight with a guy that was in my inner circle back in the nineties. We both moved away and have different lives now, but we spent about an hour and a half sharing memories from back in the day. I was wiping tears from my eyes from laughter reminiscing with this guy. Make memories with these people, because that’s what lasts.
4. Commit to being a good friend to those people. I learned something very valuable in my twenties. If you want a friend,

then be a friend. The quality of friends in your life depends on the quality of friend that you are willing to be. What goes around comes around. Listen to your friends, and be there on the bad days, not just the good days.

5. Don't blow off your friends when you get a boyfriend or a girlfriend. That is a very common mistake that teenagers make. The very people that you may need to support you if things go bad are your best friends. The other important piece is that you will have a much more quality relationship with your significant other if you are not spending every waking moment with them. Make time for your friends, and it will keep everything fresh.

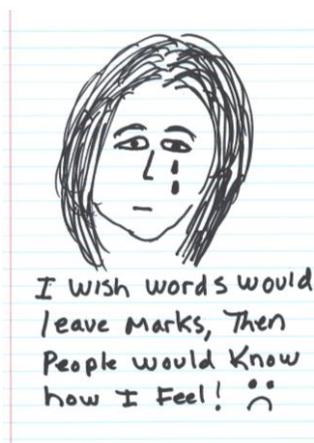
6. Be picky about who gets into your circle. Don't pick people based on their popularity or social status. Pick people of character, people that you know you can trust. If someone is always putting others down around you, you can probably bet that they will put you down when you are not there. Be picky.

7. If one or more of those people in your inner circle are your parents or siblings, I would say it is a very good idea to keep that relationship strong. There may be a bit of gap in communication right now, but if you think about it, your family really does love you and have your best interest in mind. They may not always communicate it in the best way, but these are the people that believe in you the most. Friends will come and go, but family is forever. Let them know it matters to you.

# Notes

# Chapter Five

## Sticks and Stones



A girl from a high school in Ohio gave this to me after I was done speaking at her school. We sat down on the bleachers of the gym and she told me her story. Most of it had to do with some devastating words from a few important people in her life that had dramatically affected the way she saw herself. After she walked away, I looked down at the paper again and thought about how true it is. If words were a blunt instrument, there would be a lot of bloody people walking around the earth. Let's face it, many people use words like weapons—carefully crafted words that are designed to hurt another person. I wish there was a chapter that I could write in this book, or some other book, that would have the power to stop that from happening. I wish there was some mind-blowing truth that would completely prevent all words from doing harm. You and I both know that we can't keep the words from coming, so maybe this chapter will help keep you from letting other people's words get into your head and discourage you from knowing your true worth.

We listen to so many words on a daily basis: instructional words, motivational words, random words, words on TV, words from parents, words from your friends, words from people you like, words from people you don't like, etc. Many words fly right past us, but some words have incredible sticking power, don't they?

**It's the words that stick in our heads that have the power to do damage.**

I will guarantee that if you have low self-esteem, we can point back to some words or a label that got stuck in your head and is constantly sending you the message that you are worthless. The crazy thing is that some of the words that have done the most damage can be traced back to when we were very young.

One day, I was speaking to about two hundred fifth graders in a town up in Wisconsin. I asked the boys to raise their hand if they had ever been called "fag," "gay," "queer," or "retard" at some point in their lives. Just about every boy in the gym raised his hand. Then, I asked the girls to raise their hand if they had ever been called a "slut," "hoe," or "bitch." Again, most of them raised their hands. Keep in mind that these were fifth graders, eleven- and twelve-year-olds. I asked a few of them to describe how they felt when those things were said to them. It was unbelievable how honest they were. They said things like, "it made me cry," "I wanted to hurt myself," "I felt worthless," "I wanted to crawl in a hole," and "I got very angry and wanted to hurt someone." I got a note from one of them that said,

**"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words have ruined my life."**

Whether you are a fifth grader or a junior in high school, you must admit, there is tremendous power in words. I found some

interesting quotes about words that reinforce the fact that we should take them seriously:

“A knife may scar a body, but a careless word will wound a soul.”  
**Bangambiki Habyarimana, *The Great Pearl of Wisdom***

“A strange thing, words. Once they're said, it's hard to imagine they're untrue.”  
**Sharon Biggs Waller, *A Mad, Wicked Folly***

“Words have power, and all things of power are dangerous.”  
**Ellery Adams**

“Words are living force. The words you use create your life.”  
**Lailah Gifty Akita**

“Words are potential weapons, so use them wisely.” **Joanne Madeline Moore**

“Take care what words you speak that follow ‘I am.’ In so speaking, you create your life.” **Alan Cohen**

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue.” **The Bible**

“I've always told people that for each person there is a sentence—a series of words—which has the power to destroy him.” **Philip K. Dick, *VALIS***

“Watch your thoughts; for they become words. Watch your words; for they become actions. Watch your actions; for they become habits. Watch your habits; for they become character. Watch your character; for it will become your destiny.”  
**Frank Outlaw**

“If you realized how powerful your thoughts are, you would fight to never allow another negative one.” **Peace Pilgrim from *Pilgrim’s Progress***

This last quote from *Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of my favorites. I think it is interesting that the author uses the word “fight” when it comes to not allowing negative thoughts to dominate our minds. I bet if you stopped and thought about it, there are numerous words that go through your mind completely unchecked. Psychologists say that we talk to ourselves at the rate of 1100 words per minute. The average conversation we have with another person is about 300 words a minute. It is quite possible, then, that you could be having a conversation with yourself while you are having a conversation with another person. A lot of negativity could be getting in there without you even knowing it. If you are not putting up a good fight to defeat negative words that stick in your head, then you probably don’t realize how much damage is being done by words in your life. As the rest of these quotes suggest, words can be a creative force, as well as the source of great destruction. You can’t blow off words, because they are very important to you seeing how valuable you truly are. After directly working with young people for over thirty years, let me say something in which I’m completely confident:

**The quality of your life ten years from today depends on what you are thinking about yourself right now as a teenager.**

It starts with a thought. What are you dwelling on when it comes to yourself? For some of you, it may seem harmless and somewhat normal to you that you dwell on negativity regarding yourself, because you developed that habit when you were in elementary school. You might be thinking to yourself that you will outgrow it, but I would be willing to bet that the negative

words you are dwelling on are causing some of you to be depressed and having feelings of hopelessness. I have learned something very valuable about other people's words. I can't stop words from being said to me, but I can manage them.

**I guarantee that if you are not managing the words that are said to you, those words are managing you.**

I am going to give you four things that you can do to manage these all-important words—these words that are said to you on a daily basis, that have the power to affect your future:

**1. You have to know the difference between critical words and instructional words.** We need words to make us better. I can look back on my life and tell you that there have been times that people have said some things to me that were hard to hear, and maybe even a bit harsh at times, but it absolutely changed my life. They were instructional words that helped me to be a better husband, dad, and friend.

Critical words are destructive; they tear you down. They are judgmental and usually give you no room for you to improve. They are declarative statements like, "You are a loser," or, "You are a slut." The motive behind those words is not to help you at all. When I know that people in my life are saying things from that motive, it makes it very easy for me to blow them off. Be careful, though, that you don't dismiss words just because they may not be said perfectly. Sometimes, people can have good motives but poor communication skills. You must learn to eat the meat and spit out the bones.

Instructional words are constructive; they are meant to build you up. Some of those words might even be hard to hear at times because someone might be challenging your character. The question again is the motive. Does this person care about me and

want me to be better? I can hear them a lot more easily if I know that.

**2. You have to know your true intrinsic value to minimize the effect of negative words.** The less you know your intrinsic value, the more you depend on other people's words for your value. Think about it. You can battle lies much more easily when you know the truth. Not to be redundant, but you have to hear this as many times as you can, until it really gets in your head:

**You are a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10, and nothing can change that!**

That is the problem for some of you. I can't emphasize enough that you must fly by the instruments (truth) of your intrinsic value. Otherwise, you will be tossed around emotionally every time someone says something negative to you or about you.

**Negative words are lies that feed your feelings, which will eventually cause you to crash the "plane." Words must be filtered through your intrinsic value filter.**

If someone says something to me that is negative, I weigh it by what the truth of my value is. Just recently, someone from my family texted me with some pretty negative things about me. I didn't give it the time of day, because I filtered it through what I know about myself. I am not perfect, but I am valuable. This person was not trying to help me improve on something. They were judging me and not seeing me for the valuable person that I am. I deleted the text from my phone and my mind. I only accept words that affirm my true value.

**3. Words only have the power to affect you when you come into agreement with them.** A couple years ago, I heard speaker

Joe Washington say, “It’s not what people call you; it’s what you answer to.”

Someone could call me a black cat, and it would have little to no effect on me, because I know I’m not. What if they called me a loser? Well, now I have to think about this. I feel like a loser sometimes. Maybe they are right. Is there truth to what they are saying? If there is any doubt in me that I might be a loser, then this person’s words can have an effect on me. I lived with a parent that constantly used words to put me down. “Loser” was the most common word. When I started to look at the effect that these words had in my life, I concluded that I allowed the words to stick. Of course, it was wrong for her to say them, but it was equally wrong for me to believe those words and act like a loser. If I had realized that I was valuable and acted that way by investing in my abilities and talents, I would have been much better off. I eventually did that, but I could have saved myself years of self-doubt if I had realized it sooner. Because I believed her words and agreed with them, I did more things that reinforced that label. I gave her too much power.

**4. Analyze people’s words, don’t internalize them.** The amount of damage that is done by words and labels can be determined by how much power you have given to the person that said those words. You first must determine from which value system these people are speaking. Do they represent your intrinsic value, or do they represent your social value?

**A. Those who have influence over our intrinsic worth. (Inner circle)**

**B. People who have influence over our social worth. (Outer circle)**

Let's talk about hurtful words that are said by people that really matter—the people that are in your inner circle. Obviously, if the person saying negative things to you represents your intrinsic value, then it is understandable why you would give this person power. If that person made it to the inner circle, then they are most likely a parent, grandparent, sibling, best friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, etc. Their words are going to be powerful in your life. The hard conversation we must have right now is probably going to hurt you, but it is necessary. The simple fact is that you have to turn the volume down on their words. You have to minimize their power. That's hard to do when they have played such an important role in your life, I know, but it will be a very important step for some of you. The way I did it back in the day was to try to gain a bigger perspective on the situation. Why was she really saying these things? I realized something that helped me a lot. Hurt people hurt people. My mom was hurt. She said things to me that hurt me because she was hurt. I was not the original source of her hurt, my dad and her dad were. When I realized that, it helped me to turn the volume down in my head when she said mean things to me.

**Why people say what they say is more important than what they say.**

Did my mom really believe her son was a loser, or that I was stupid? I used to think that she did, and that's why those words were so powerful to me. I believed them. When you're little, you

think your parents are like God (they're very influential resources). What they say has tremendous power. Getting perspective means getting the big picture. Maybe there were some other factors that made her say those things. When I started to think about it, I realized that my mom was frustrated with her own life. She was very overwhelmed with my dad leaving her to raise four kids by herself. She was never really trained on how to be a parent because her parents dropped the ball in many ways. It doesn't excuse what she said, but it helped me to put those words that she said in the proper perspective.

**Perspective is a huge key in minimizing the damage that words can have on us.**

Because you are a teenager, words from your social world are going to have a tremendous effect on you as well. If the words that are hurting you are from your social world, let me help you out with something. These words are affecting you because you are giving those people power. For the rest of your life, you are going to have to understand that people always will want to slap a label on you. It's easier that way for them. The question is, when they hand you the label (and they will), will you put it on? I like what Johnny Depp said,

**“People feel the need to put a label on you because that's where they put the price tag.”**

That's the problem with labels—they all come with a price tag attached to them. A couple of years ago, a girl named Haley came up to me after an assembly and told me that she can't walk down the hallway of her school without being called a slut. I know this is a common insult for girls, but Haley had done something to get this terrible label. She went to a party and was drinking for one of her first times, and things happened with a boy that she

didn't have a whole lot of control over. (I'm sure you get the picture.)

She came back to school that Monday, and it was all over the school that she was a slut. This was her first sexual experience. She was a straight-A student that was part of the honor society, and she had never been with a guy before that night. Needless to say, Haley was devastated by this new label that she received, not to mention having to deal with the horrible experience she had with this guy. I met her the Wednesday after the Friday-night party, and this is how the conversation that I had with her went:

Mike: Do you think you are a slut? (What she thinks matters more than anyone.)

Haley: I don't know.

Mike: Do you make it a habit to have sex with random guys for no reason?

Haley: No.

Mike: Then you're not a slut.

Haley: But I can't believe I did that.

Mike: You made a mistake.

Haley: Everyone in the school thinks I'm a slut.

Mike: Why do you think people see it that way?

Haley: I don't know.

Mike: Is your best friend calling you a slut?

Haley: No.

Mike: Do you think your mom or grandmother would call you a slut if they knew what happened? (She looked up at me, and that was the first time in the conversation that she gave me eye contact.)

Haley: No.

Mike: The reason your mom, grandmother, and your best friend would not call you a slut is because they know you, they care about you, and they know you made a mistake. They are not

judging you based on this one night. They know your true intrinsic value. Do the people that are saying these mean things about you really care about you?

Haley: No.

Mike: Have they ever cared about you?

Haley: No.

Mike: I know this is going to sound like B.S., but I'm telling you the truth, Haley, when I tell you this: what they say or think doesn't matter at all!

**You that are reading this right now know that I'm right. Why?**

Because this is the truth about what happened to Haley. Did she make a mistake on that Friday night? Yes. Is she a slut now? No! Did her intrinsic value change because of that mistake? No! Did her social value change? Yes. Does that matter? No! Why?

**Because her social value is not her value!**

I'm going to sum this chapter up in one sentence. Other people's words cannot change the perception of your value unless **you** agree with what they say. They don't have any more power than what you give them. Okay, two sentences.

For today's challenge, I want you to write down a list of words that go through your head that are having a negative effect on you. After you have made a list, pick out the top three and do this short exercise. It's very important that you do this. If you had a child or a very close friend that was being abused by words, you would stop it because you know those words can do a lot of damage. It's the same thing. There could be words or phrases that are floating around in your brain that are doing tremendous damage in your life, and you don't realize it. You should value

yourself enough to stop being abused by words that are diminishing what you think you are worth.

### Analyzing the Words

- 1. What is the word or phrase that is having a negative effect on you?**
- 2. Does the person saying these things reflect your intrinsic value or your social value?**
- 3. Why do you think they are saying them? Why people say what they say is more important than what they say. Knowing why someone is saying mean things to you is a huge key in minimizing the damage that words can have on us.**
- 4. How much power have you given those words, on a scale of one to five (one being not much, and five being a lot)?**
- 5. Why did you give that person power? Does this person deserve the power you gave them?**
- 6. Ask yourself how much this person or people who are saying these things really care about you. How much have they invested in**

**you, and how clearly do they see your true intrinsic value?**

- 7. Turn the volume up on people who really know and support your true intrinsic value, and turn the volume down on people who don't.**

# Notes

# Chapter Six

## Failing Correctly

*“One of the most important decisions you will ever make in your life is what you are going to do after you fail. It is a critical moment.”*

*Winkey Pratney, Author of Youth Aflame*

There is nothing like making a mistake and letting yourself and others down to make you feel worthless on the inside.

As a dad of five children, and having been a youth leader who has worked with young people for over thirty years, I can say from experience that one of the biggest ways adults have failed young people is that we have not taught you how to fail well. That’s right — fail well. Failure is a part of life. This will sound weird, but if you don’t do it right, you will do it wrong, and that can really mess up how you feel about yourself.

I have a very good friend who is a high school hockey coach who told me once that kids don’t learn much after they win a game. He doesn’t say much to them at all after they win. He says they are happy and somewhat cocky. The most crucial time to coach them, he said, is after a loss. “They are usually fragile and open to correction. If you do it right and don’t humiliate them, losing can be a great opportunity to coach life-altering adjustments into their lives.” I think it is dangerous when adults send the message that failure is not an option.

**Failure is not only an option—it is a very important part of growth.**

The problem with mistakes is that they usually come with definitions and labels, and labels tend to define us with one word. When I started speaking in schools, I don't think I was prepared for how many young people told me about some label they got because of a mistake they made or a lifestyle choice they made. Loser, slut, fag, creeper, freak, etc. — all those labels come with a price tag. I wasn't shocked that other kids labeled them, but I was shocked at how much they let a mistake they made bring a new identity to their lives. It's like they would crawl into this box that people made for them. When you let a mistake be your new definition, it will keep you in the same place, and you can't grow.

**Your mistakes should never turn into your identity.**

I met this kid a couple of years ago when I was working as a youth director for a community organization in Omaha. His name was Jason, and he had to come every day for a month one summer to do community service. I don't know what he got in trouble for, but we hit it off right away. I was in charge of him, so I would give him his list of stuff to do in the morning. Later, I would take him out to lunch. The first couple of days, he was kind of quiet at lunch, but I kept making small talk. That Thursday, we grabbed some fast food and sat in my car. All of a sudden, he started to talk.

"I didn't use to be like this, you know."

I asked, "Like what?"

"You know, a loser," he answered.

"I don't think you're a loser."

He responded, “Well, you’re the only one then. Everyone sees me like that. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of me.” (I had, but I didn’t want him to feel bad, so didn’t say anything.) “I’m considered the biggest [F-up] in my school. When I was a little kid, I was into every sport, but then I got into soccer. I loved it. I’m not trying to brag or anything, but I was good. I was on a bunch of travel teams.” He said he was on varsity as a freshman in his high school and was named captain as a junior. His team went to States every year in high school. He told me his dream used to be to play on the US Olympic team.

I said, “I don’t get it, why are you considered a big ‘F-up’?”

“This is my senior year, and I quit the soccer team.”

“Really? Why?”

“I didn’t want to do it anymore.”

I just sat there. I knew there had to be more to it than that, but I really didn’t know him that well. I didn’t want to come off as pushy, so I just asked him, “What happened?”

“I quit because I knew I was probably going to get kicked off anyway.”

“Why?”

“I got caught selling a bag to a kid in school.”

“So, you smoke weed.”

“Yeah, and everything else.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a f\*\*\*ing loser, and that’s all I’m ever going to be.”

He went on and on about how he started smoking weed after his parents got divorced. I wasn’t sure if he saw the connection, but I just let him talk. He kept saying he was just a big loser. After he finished talking, I said, “Do you know the exact moment when you decided to be a loser instead of an Olympian?”

“What?”

“Do you know the exact moment when you decided to walk away from your dream?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is no way that this is your dream, Jason. I know you are having fun partying with your friends and all that, but there is no way that doing all this makes you happier than you were when you were playing soccer and having all that success. When was it when you decided to switch labels?” I told Jason about a speaker I heard a few years ago named Joe Washington out of Atlanta, GA. We were both speaking at a conference, and I sat in on his session. He said something that has stuck with me ever since I heard it. He said,

**“The me you see is the me you’ll be.”**

“Jason,” I said, “if you see yourself as a loser, that is what you will be. You used to see yourself as an Olympian. I’m just wondering when you stopped seeing that.”

He just looked at me. Finally, he said, “it was right after soccer season my sophomore year. I was pretty pissed about the divorce and all the drama that went with it. My friend Asher

asked me to smoke, so I did. I felt bad the next day because I always looked down at those kids who smoked. I didn't understand it, but when I did it, I loved the way it made me feel."

I said, "I understand that. It made you numb. All the crap that you were feeling about the divorce, the anger, the confusion, the sadness went away for a while, didn't it?"

"Yeah, it did."

"Did it solve any problems for you? Did your parents get back together because you smoked?"

He just smiled at me. "No, it created more problems. My parents and I fought all the time. It changed who I am."

"No, it didn't. You are still the same guy."

"You don't understand. I'm known for soccer. That's who I was."

"It still is who you are."

"I don't think so. I have screwed up so bad. I don't think there is any way back."

"Do you mean to tell me that the mistake you made to medicate yourself with weed because of your parents' divorce is going to define you now? That's who you are? **You have the same heart, it just got broken.** Play this out, Jason. Where is this going? Are you going to smoke pot for the rest of your life? Do you have any dreams beyond that?"

"I used to. Everyone else sees me as a pothead now—my parents, teachers, and all the kids in school. I have made so many mistakes that I feel like I'm stuck like this now."

I feel like I'm stuck like this now. How many of us have made a mistake in life and felt the exact same way? I'm stuck like this now. I told Jason that his problem was not that he messed up. The problem was that he didn't do it very well. Over the next couple of weeks, while Jason was doing community service with us, we chatted in my car at lunch. I taught him how to fail well, and I want to pass some of those lessons on to you.

### **1. You can't consult your failure to create your future.**

The moment you do that is the moment you sell yourself short of everything that you can do and be. You can't let failure have an echo. I don't deny that I have made mistakes, but if I allow them to keep talking to me, they will talk me out of dreaming and moving forward. They will try to convince me that my failure diminished my worth. The echo of failure almost always tells you to stop trying. You don't drown because you fell in the water; you drown because you stay there too long. Everyone falls. You have to get right back up. One of my mentors would always tell us, "quick down, quick up." You are going to fall. It's how long you stay down that determines its impact on your future.

### **2. Don't ever wear the identity of your failure.**

People love to sum up other people's failures with one-word or one-sentence explanations. It's a cheap way of offering an opinion on someone's existence that doesn't require much thought. You will never be able to change the fact that people like to put labels on you. You can decide whether you will wear them or not. You will go crazy trying to change everyone's opinion because you will have to live a perfect life so no one can accuse you of anything. You can't do that. You will go nuts trying to please everyone. Instead, you have to determine what you are

going to answer to. Do you believe your dreams are done because you failed? Do you think your worth has diminished because of a mistake you have made? It doesn't matter what people say. You determine whether or not those mistakes become your identity. There is a lesson in every failure; you have to grasp the lesson as fast you can. There are awesome things that you can learn from mistakes. You will miss out on them if you just go with this new identity.

### **3. Strive for direction, not perfection.**

I have been telling teenagers for years that you don't have to worry about doing drugs or becoming addicted to alcohol if you keep your eyes on your dream. I always tell them that your dream is on the top shelf (harder to reach for) and all the bad stuff is on the bottom shelf (easy to access). It gets very easy to reach for the bottom shelf when you have stopped reaching for the top shelf.

### **Failure is natural when success is not an option to you anymore.**

Whenever I feel myself starting to be drawn to things that are bad for me, I know it's a direction problem. At some point, I stopped believing that my life and what I'm doing has value. Ask yourself this very important question: are the things that I'm saying, and doing, and dwelling on really worthy of me? Am I better than this? The reason Jason started talking to me that day was because deep down he knew he was better than what he was choosing at that point. He got stuck. Are you stuck? Where are you going? Even if you have to crawl and take baby steps, do what you have to do to start moving toward something that is worthy of you.

### **4. Put your failure into perspective.**

I imagine that one of the toughest rooms to be in is the film room of an NFL team after a loss. That is where they watch every second from the prior week's game and scrutinize it play-by-play and position-by-position. It has to be humiliating to watch yourself do something wrong that could have cost your team a victory. Great coaches know not to dwell too much on the past. That's probably why they only devote one day to looking at the past plays. Still, being able to see exactly where you made the mistake and why—and then correct it—is invaluable. Failing well has a lot to do with perspective—seeing where you went wrong and why. If we were in the film room in Jason's life, we could look back and see that the pain and pressure of his parents' divorce drove him to make a mistake. He medicated his sadness with drugs. That doesn't make him a druggie. It makes him a sad teenager who wanted to feel better instantly, so he made some bad choices.

**He was a broken-hearted kid that made a mistake. He wasn't the mistake.**

I would be willing to bet that there are some mistakes you have made that you can't get out of your mind. They have successfully formed part of your identity. You have to stop labeling yourself. One of the hardest things in the world to do is to forgive yourself for those mistakes. If you don't, you will be stuck with that identity.

**5. If you fear failure, you will live a small life.**

What most adults call apathy and indifference, I would call fear of failure. Living big may mean that you also fail big at times. History is full of people who had great failures before they finally experienced success. Fear of failure makes some people never take risks. That may seem safe, but nursing homes are

filled with people that will tell you that the biggest regrets they have in life are not that they took chances and failed but that they regret never taking the chance to do something hard to begin with. Don't fear failure; embrace it. It's going to be a part of your life for the rest of your life. Do it right, so it doesn't convince you that you are not incredibly valuable.

Answer these questions and write down your answers.

1. Have you made a mistake in your life that has kept you from dreaming?
2. In what ways did that mistake become your new identity?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how hot is your pursuit after your dream?
4. Write a short paragraph putting your mistake into perspective. What can you learn from what happened? Go into the film room and analyze what happened.
5. What are the lessons, and how are you going to go on from here?

# Notes

# Chapter Seven

## The Direct Hit of Abuse

*“One’s dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered.”*

*Michael J. Fox*

I haven’t said a lot about what physical, verbal, sexual, or emotional abuse can do to a person’s perception of their value, but, obviously, it can be devastating. The students that I talk to that have suffered abuse almost always have issues with their self-worth. My personal experience with abuse certainly clouded my view of my intrinsic value. If abuse is part of your reality, then I’m going to give you a couple of things that I have learned that might help you to rediscover your worth. If it’s not part of your reality, but you know someone that has been abused, this section will help you understand that person better.

### **1. Abuse is a direct hit to your self-worth.**

Most people experience a slow deterioration of their perception of their worth because of things that happen over time. Abuse victims take a direct hit to the perception of their value when they are abused. When a family member hurts you in any of these ways, they are communicating to you a very harmful message. The message that you can’t help getting is that you don’t matter to this person, that you are not valuable enough to be protected. This person is telling you that you must not be worth much. If this person is one of your main resources, like a parent or relative, then that message can be very damaging.

**Tragically, many abusers are the very people that are supposed to be a strong resource of one's worth, so their abuse is even more magnified.**

It is so important in these cases that you are committed to bypassing these resources as quickly as possible and make a serious effort to get back to the source of your worth.

**2. There is nothing you could ever do to deserve to be abused.**

No one deserves to be abused. It is the right of every human being to be treated with dignity and respect. I don't care what you have done or what you have said. No one ever deserves to be abused. Don't buy in to the mindset that it is your fault in any way. You may have responded in a negative way that prompted the abuse, but it still doesn't matter. No one, not even a parent, has the right to rob you of your dignity. If this is happening in your life, please tell an adult that you trust as soon as you can.

**3. The person who is doing the abusing usually has unresolved issues that have nothing to do with you.**

Unhealed wounds still hurt even if you are an adult. I have a scar on my left arm from a cut that I got in my garage while I was working on my car. It has healed, so it doesn't hurt anymore. In fact, unless I look at it, I don't know it's there. I could slap it as hard as I want, and it won't really hurt. However, let's say it never healed, and it was an open wound. All I would have to do is barely touch it to feel pain. It would hurt like crazy. When someone has an open emotional wound from their past, little things can make it hurt and cause a reaction. That is most likely what a lot of you have experienced.

The people that have abused you may have a history of pain in their lives. They could have wounds that never healed. You come along and touch these wounds by being a normal kid or teenager, and it sets them off. That is not your fault. I will guarantee that a lot of them have a low perception of their own value. They may have never had the chance to do what you are doing right now, working to rediscover your intrinsic value.

#### **4. People can't keep hurting you without your permission.**

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

You may have experienced abuse that you had no control over at all, but you don't have to stay the victim. Abuse victims don't believe that they deserve anything better than the abuse that they have received. It has become their normal. Consequently, they keep putting up with the abuse, or they even attract new people who are abusers. One of the horrible realities of life is that abusers exist, and they prey on people who don't have a strong self-worth. They look for people who will put up with abuse. If you keep being abused, then you have to ask yourself this question, “Why am I allowing this to happen to me?”

I have a close friend in her thirties who is still allowing her old boyfriend of four years to abuse her emotionally. She is a very successful person in her field and makes a lot of money, but when it comes to this guy, she lets him treat her like trash. Somehow, she believes what he says to her. One day, after she let me read one of the horrible emails he sent to her, I said, “this may not be entirely his fault.” She looked at me like I was crazy. I said, “If anyone ever said that to me, I would never talk to them again. You keep talking to him after he says those things, which tells him it's okay to keep saying it.” In a way, she

was giving him permission to abuse her. She was agreeing with him that she was not valuable enough to treat with respect.

I watched the movie *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* the other day with two of my kids. There was great line in it that I loved. Charlie asked his teacher why people put up with others that abuse them or put them down, and the teacher replied:

**“We accept the love we think we deserve.”**

It’s probably the same way with some of you. Because of your low self-worth, you don’t stick up for yourself, so that person just keeps doing it with your permission. You have agreed with them that you are not valuable. If you are letting them treat you that way, then you are contributing to your own devaluing. Obviously there are some abusive situations that are completely out of your control. If you are involved in that situation, you need to seek help from a teacher or counselor at your school right away.

## **5. Abuse can create an emotional vacuum.**

I remember a moment in my twenties that changed my life. I was trying to sort all this stuff out in my head concerning my own abuse and self-worth. I was sitting in an auditorium, and a woman was talking and said, “A hungry need is a dangerous need.” I don’t know why, but it hit me like a ton of bricks. I thought back to all the stupid things that I did to fill this hungry need I had to be loved and valued. Everyone has that need, you know. It is a very healthy need. We were born to love and to be loved. The danger in that need is that if it is not being met in a healthy way, then it becomes easy to fill it in an unhealthy way. I have seen girls put up with guys who abuse them and guys that will put up with being cheated on and used. Their low self-esteem created a vacuum. They tolerated abuse and neglect so

they could get love. My friend with the abusive boyfriend told me that after he says the mean things to her, he will apologize with flowers, tell her how much he loves her, and promise he will never do it again. Her hungry need for love keeps her from seeing through the game he is playing with her. Her low self-worth has created a vacuum. She gets sucked right in every time. If she knew her true intrinsic value, she wouldn't tolerate that.

## **6. You have to separate yourself from people who don't treat you with respect and dignity.**

It goes without saying that people that abuse you in any way are not good for you. You would think that would be a no-brainer, but I have looked in the face of many people who will keep going back to the same person who puts them down and belittles their existence. Separating yourself from these people is one of the most important things you can do in your life. I'm not saying you don't give people a chance if they truly want to change. I'm saying that if that person has a history of continued abuse, then you have to get out of that situation as fast you can.

The good news is that the more work you do in seeing what your true value is, the more it will happen naturally. I used to put up with people who didn't value me. In an odd way, I felt comfortable around them. It was my normal. When I began to see my true intrinsic value, I didn't feel that comfortable around them anymore, and I grew apart from those people. The other cool thing that happens when you value yourself is that you will attract people who value you as well. You will gain new friends that will contribute to your life and help to reinforce the value that you were born with. It's still not easy, but I will guarantee that if you make the break and separate yourself from negative people, healthy and positive people will come your way.

## **7. Believe that you are special.**

I have a good friend named Dave Shanahan. I used to have a bite to eat with him and his wife Linda a few times a week back when I lived in Omaha. They are a bit older than me, and I have a lot of respect for both of them. Dave has been a schoolteacher and golf pro, and he has worked at a very reputable accounting firm in my Omaha for years. We discuss every subject that you can talk about, from politics and religion to movies and the latest trends. Dave is a very self-confident man and usually has an opinion about any subject. Dave would tell you that he thinks he comes off cocky and arrogant. I don't agree. I think that Dave is an example of someone who knows his true intrinsic value.

One day, Dave and I were discussing the retirement of Jim Calhoun, the very successful men's basketball coach for the University of Connecticut. When he got there, Calhoun took over a program that had little to no success, and they eventually won three national championships under his leadership. He said something in the retirement press conference that made me think of Dave. He said, "I wanted everyone that played for me to know they were special. I wanted them to walk around that school like they were the elite ones on campus."

He said, "if they knew they were special, they would act like they were special, and they would expect special things from themselves." I think that is the key to Dave Shanahan, and it's one of the reasons I like being his friend. He knows he's special. He knows his true intrinsic value.

Here is the kicker. Because he knows he is special, he believes everyone else is special as well. Dave and Linda Shanahan have

contributed to more people's value than they even know. I have known them for a few years now, and I have noticed that they see value in everyone they come across. I have watched them give respect to people that were hard to respect. I think this quote from Mark Twain says it all about them and anyone that walks in the reality of their true value:

"Really great people make you feel that you, too, can become great."

Mark Twain

### **You are special! Don't expect anything less of yourself.**

I can't emphasize enough that your intrinsic value never changes. What you think you are worth can change depending on your feelings and events that have happened in your life. I have learned that you can't trust your feelings. There has to be an anchor when you feel like your value is declining. The anchor is the knowledge that you have always held your value, and it doesn't change. You have a source of that value, and you can't stop chasing it. No matter how confusing your life gets, you have to keep fighting to recognize your true value.

*There are some emotional wounds that are so deep that it may require sitting down with a mental health professional. These are very well trained people that know how to help you sort through some of these issues. Don't ever be embarrassed about seeking the help of someone like that. Go to your school counselor or psychologist if you are feeling overwhelmed by some of these issues.*

By now, I hope you are seeing the direct correlation between how you feel about yourself and how you feel about others. Before we move on to the second part of this book, we are going to take another look at how you feel about yourself. We

are going to take the value test again. I think you are going to start to see a difference over time.

Which of these reflects how you feel about yourself?

1. I don't like myself. I see very little value in my life. I get very irritated with people who act like they are better than me.

2. I don't like a lot of who I am, but there are some things I know are good. I often compare myself to others.

3. I feel okay about my life. I'm not super happy. I have some doubts about my worth. I feel like most people are better than me.

4. I know I'm not perfect, but I'm aware of my strengths. I see value in my life. I get along with most people.

5. I have a healthy perspective about who I am. I like my life and where I am going. I'm healthy enough not to be threatened by other people's differences because I'm comfortable with who I am. I like most people.

Write a short paragraph explaining why you circled that number. Did you choose the same group of statements that you chose the first time you did this exercise?

What do you think has contributed the most to the decline of your perception of your self-worth?

- a. Not knowing that there is a source of your value beyond resources.
- b. You put too much emphasis on your social value.
- c. Negative words or labels that have stuck in your head.

- d. Starting off with an ingredient list that wasn't strong.
- e. Wearing the identity of mistakes that you have made.
- f. Abusive events in your life that have hurt you deeply.

# Notes

# Chapter Eight

## The Wrench Hammer

*“The most important day of your life is the day you were born;  
the second is when you discover why.”*

*Mark Twain*

I couldn't find my hammer one day. I wanted to hang my new Boston Red Sox World Series picture that my kids gave me in my home office, but my hammer was nowhere to be found. In my toolbox I found a wrench with a heavy end, so I decided to use it as a hammer. That seemed logical to me at the time. As I tried to hang the picture, the wrench kept hitting the nail in a weird way, and I couldn't get it to go into the wall. I got frustrated and kept hitting the nail harder with the wrench until, finally, disaster happened. The wrench skipped off the nail and put a big hole in the wall. Not only did I not get my picture up, but now I also had a huge hole in the wall. When I did find my hammer, I put the picture up right over the big hole so it wasn't a complete disaster.

**Have you ever used something in a way that wasn't intended, and it only made things worse?**

When we do, we bring the value of the tool down by using it for something that it wasn't designed to do. How many butter knives in your silverware drawer have bent tips because someone used them as a screwdriver? I believe many people do that with their lives. How you feel about yourself (and what you think you are worth) can have a great effect on your ability to reach your potential, but your potential also has much to do with what you are designed to do.

Tall people make horrible jockeys. People who hate math shouldn't be accountants. If you don't like people, you shouldn't be a teacher. How many people out there don't feel as valuable because they are stuck doing things that they were not designed to do? A butter knife will get the job done, but that's not what it was designed for. You are hard wired to do something. You may not know it yet, but there are things that you are designed to do. You have greatness in you, but you have to discover it.

If you have heard me speak in your school, you know that I make a big deal out of having a goal or a dream for your life and sticking to it, no matter what obstacles get in the way of that dream. I call it the "top shelf" because it's harder to reach than the bottom shelf. The bottom shelf is where the easy fix is. If you don't feel good about yourself or your life in general, you can reach down and grab something like drugs, alcohol, cutting, or something else that will make you feel different right away. After I get done speaking, I am often asked if I think my own kids will ever use drugs or abuse alcohol. I usually answer that question by saying something like "I don't care." The kids give me a weird look because that answer seems to be a contradiction, given the fact that during the assembly I talk about how much I love and value my kids. It's not that I don't care about my kids; it's that I don't worry about drug use with my kids, I worry about them not dreaming and having goals for their life. The question of them doing or not doing drugs assumes that if they are not using drugs then everything else will be OK in their lives; I simply don't believe that. There has to be more to life than just staying away from the bad stuff.

**I think it's entirely possible to be drug- and alcohol-free and still feel like your life doesn't matter until you find a mission.**

Here is the real question for my kids, and for you: are you reaching for your top shelf? Have you experienced success on that level yet? If you have not, it's just a matter of time before you will start the process of self-medication. People tend to reach for the bottom shelf when they have let go of the top shelf.

One of the saddest things about life that I point out in an assembly is that not everyone in our world fully lives out their dreams. It's not just the homeless people on the side of the road begging for money. I can't tell you how many "successful" people I have talked to that consider their lives a waste because they didn't do what gave them a sense of purpose. The reason that is sad is because when people (rich or poor) don't feel like their life is useful, they gravitate towards things in life that are useless.

### **Self-destruction follows self-doubt.**

We don't start out doubting ourselves, though, do we? Here is a conversation that I have never had with any of my kids.

Me: Hey, buddy.

Kid: Hey, dad.

Me: What's on your mind, son?

Kid: Dad, can you teach me how to be a loser today? I really don't want my life to matter, so I thought I would ask you to help me out with that, since you are my mentor.

Me: Why yes, son, I would be glad to teach you how to be a loser.

Kid: Thanks, dad. You're the best.

Me: Don't mention it, son. Let's get started.

Obviously, that is a very ridiculous conversation because no one starts out with wanting to be a loser or having their life not matter. I wish you could be in the room with me when I ask a bunch of kindergarten kids what they want to be when they

grow up. They light up when they say stuff like, “I want to be an astronaut.” “I’m going to play for NFL.” “I’m going to be the first girl president.” “I’m going to create video games.” They mean it, too. It gets pretty intense when I get to that part of my presentation with them. Can’t you just picture it? Their little hands are all up in the air, and their faces are glowing, because they are so full of hope.

I have never had a little kid raise their hand and say something like, “When I’m 32, I want to be passed out on my couch half-drunk, neglecting my kids and not paying my bills.” Or, “I want to be wealthy but not be doing something that gives me a sense of purpose, so I’ll probably waste a lot of time hanging out with my golf buddies, drinking and talking about things that don’t really matter.” That would be so weird if I heard that stuff come out of some little kid’s mouth. I won’t hear that, because that is not what we dream about as kids. Some people end up there, though, don’t they? Is that because they are losers or bad people? That’s what society calls them.

When they were in kindergarten, nobody called them that. They were full of hope. What happened to them? My guess is somewhere down the line they took their hands off the top shelf. They stopped believing in themselves. Why did they do that? There could be a lot of reasons from what we talked about in the previous chapters: not knowing their intrinsic value, not feeling valued socially, mistakes that they made, some words that got to them, etc. That all may be true, but I want to focus on something else right now. I want to focus on your purpose. Again, I don’t want to get into a deep religious conversation, but let’s talk about this. I love the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

***“The most important day of your life is the day you were born; the second is when you discover why.” Mark Twain***

That statement is so true for me. I don't remember the day I was born, but I remember a time in my life when I discovered why I am here. The word "discover" may be a little deceptive, though. It assumes that discovering your purpose is a one-time event, like you were walking in the woods one day and, all of a sudden, there it was—your purpose. Many people feel that they need to discover their purpose; I believe there is a creation process when it comes to your purpose.

I grew up in the seventies, and everything was kind of weird and psychedelic back then. People talked very strangely. For some reason I have this memory of one of my hippy babysitters having a conversation with her hippy boyfriend who was breaking up with her, and he said something like, "I'm sorry Loretta, I just haven't found myself yet. I'm on a journey, man. I need to ramble on and discover who I really am." People actually talked like that back then. I thought that guy was strange anyway; he never wore shoes, and he smelled weird. In the years following that conversation, I've heard that phrase a lot: "I have to find myself." Or, "I haven't discovered who I am yet." I like this quote I found from Shaw:

**"Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself." ~ George Bernard Shaw**

I'm a lot older now, and I couldn't agree more. If I was looking for myself, I can honestly say that I still wouldn't be found yet. I don't even know what that means.

**Life is about creating who you are out of the ingredients you have been given.**

Whether you know this or not, you have been given ingredients to create something. For the most part, you had nothing to do with the ingredients that you have. I'm talking about things you

were born with: what country and state you're from, your physical abilities and limitations, your family dynamic, etc.

Think of your life like some kind of creation. The teacher comes in and says you have to make something out of these parts that are right in front of you. Immediately, you look around the class, and you see that everyone in the room has different ingredients. As you scan the room, it seems like there are some people that have better ingredients than you, and some that don't even have what you have. Still, you have been given a task: make something out of what you have. Some of you look down and see that you have some good ingredients. Your parents aren't perfect, but they love and provide for you, so that's a good start. Add some other good ingredients like brainpower, passion, athletic ability, and maybe good looks, and you are in pretty good shape.

Others of you look at your ingredients and see that there is not a lot there to work with. Maybe your parents were divorced at a young age, or you live with a grandparent right now. Maybe you are in foster care. Some of you may have a learning disability that you have to deal with every day. All people come to a point in life where they notice their ingredients. You see what you have and don't have. At that point, you have to make a choice. Are you going to do something with what you have, or are you going to get discouraged and walk away?

I understand the temptation not to try when you have limited ingredients, because our world seems to reward and even celebrate those who start out in life with good ingredients.

**We tend to reward the creation instead of the process.**

I am more impressed when I see someone taking what they have and doing something positive with it, no matter what the end

product looks like. I think that is why some successful people become depressed. To the rest of the world their lives look successful, and they may have a lot of money or prestige, but deep down they know that they didn't tap their true potential. I don't want to make it sound like starting out with good ingredients makes you a bad person. What I'm saying is that you get a sense of accomplishment in life when you have done the best you can with the ingredients you have, no matter what you have at the start.

**What gives your life more meaning is that it is yours. You created it out of what you had.**

Who hasn't looked at another person and wished to be him or her, even for a day? Comparing yourself to someone else is as natural as sleeping. We all do it. When we compare ourselves with others, it distracts us from what we do well. It brings discouragement and, sometimes, keeps us from exploring our natural abilities to achieve our dreams. I have done this. I have a friend named Reggie Dabbs who is an incredible speaker. I have heard him speak in public schools about a hundred times. He is amazing. I will admit that when I first thought about speaking in schools, I compared myself to him often! It discouraged me quite a bit because this guy is incredible. I thought there was no way I could ever be as good as him. I even went as far as doing things just like him because I was insecure about what I could do.

One day, I realized that I needed to be myself, tell my story the way I know how, and stop worrying about trying to be like anyone else. I have now spoken in over 2,000 schools all over the world. I still don't think I'm better than this guy, but what I have learned is that it doesn't matter. It's been such a blast for me over the last fifteen years traveling around the country,

taking the ingredients of my life and creating something useful with them.

**When I stopped looking at his ingredients and looked more intensely at what I had, I was able to create something that I owned. It was totally mine.**

That's what I want you to do. I want you to look at your ingredients today and decide to do the best you can with what you have been given. There isn't a person on the planet that does not have the potential to do something amazing with his or her life. Remember, you had nothing to do with your ingredients. Your job now is to take the ingredients and create something useful with them. There are three categories of ingredients that we all have to use: our families, sudden events and circumstances that are beyond our control, and our natural abilities and limitations.

**1. The family you were born into.** Wouldn't it be great if we could pick our parents? You come out of the womb and get a menu. They could be rich, good looking, from Europe or California. You get to choose like you're picking what to eat at a fancy restaurant. I wouldn't have picked my parents. No offense, but my dad abandoned his kids, and my mom was just too overwhelmed at times to be a functional parent.

I was talking with some kids in a gym in Missouri after an assembly last week, and the counselor pointed out this girl and asked if I would speak with her. I said, "Of course." The counselor told me that her name is Chelsea, and she has an A-Plus scholarship, which means she can go to any school in Missouri for free because of her grades. She is a very smart kid. Then, the counselor looked at me and said, "But she's a little rough around the edges." One of the first things this girl said to me when I went over to her is, "I really hate truck stops." That

took me back for second because it was kind of random, but I said, "Why?" She went on to tell me that her mother was a prostitute, and she would take her kids with her when they were young and park the car at the truck stop. Chelsea was the oldest, so it was her job to keep her younger brothers and sisters occupied while her mother was with the truckers. She told me that at first her mother told her she had to go see a friend, but she said, "I caught on to what was really happening pretty early on." This goes without saying, but if she were picking the ingredients of her life, she wouldn't have picked that. What an awful thing for a daughter to have to process about her mom. It's pretty humbling when you are on my side of this. She is looking at me to say something to her that is going to make this better.

I told her what I'm going to tell you. These are your ingredients. This is what you have. Is it fair? No, it's not! But it is what it is, and the faster you come to that conclusion, the better things will be for you. Ingredients can be deceptive, though. What looks like bad ingredients can actually turn into assets. I told Chelsea to look around the room. There were still a couple hundred kids in the gym. I said, "How many of these kids do you think have been through something like this?" She said, "Not many." I said, "Exactly." Then I asked if she knew what the word "resilient" means. She said, "Kind of." I said, "Essentially, it means mentally tough. How many of the kids in this gym do you think could handle what you have been through?" She said, "Not too many." I said, "That's right. You have something they don't have. You have resilience."

Much of what we create for our own lives comes from what our parents model in front of us. If your parents were trustworthy, then most likely you will be trustworthy, because that was modeled for you. What happens if there are things in life that

you want to have for yourself, but they were either modeled poorly or weren't modeled at all?

**There is a difference between creating something from memory and creating something from scratch.**

I asked Chelsea what kind of mother and wife she wanted to be. She went on and on about dressing her daughters up in little dresses, loving them, having a strong marriage, etc. I said, "If that is really going to be part of your creation, you will have to create that from scratch. Being a faithful wife and a nurturing mom is not something you are going to be able to pull from the 'library' of memory. You are going to have to recreate it."

The cool thing is that you can. I'm a lot different from my parents now. I'm not bragging or trying to disrespect them; I'm just saying I wanted something different than they had, so I went out and found it. I got involved in my church, and some guys were there that were good dads. I learned from them. I read, and I learned some things that were not modeled in my life. I am not perfect by any means, but I know that there are some things in my life that are mine. I created them out of what I had to work with, and I have a sense of accomplishment because of that. You can too.

Not everyone fits into the category of having a crazy family. Some of you reading this come from families that have modeled very good ingredients for you. I would hope that my own kids fit into that category. I'm going to tell you what I told my son a couple years ago when he turned 21, though. I said, "Keegan, I know I wasn't a perfect dad, but I did do a lot of things right. However, I know I did some things that were not so right as well. I want you to eat the meat and spit out the bones. It's OK for you to look at some of the things that were modeled for you that weren't so good and change them up. It's not going to insult me.

I know I had limited ingredients at my disposal. My goal has always been to give you kids better ingredients and more to use than what I had. I think I have done that. Your job now is to take those ingredients and build on them. Be better than me.” In other words, I was saying, I want you to take the good stuff of how you were raised and then add your own stuff in and create a good life for yourself. That goes for some of you that have had poor modeling as well. If you look hard enough, you can find some good ingredients in any situation. My mother was a hard worker. She modeled that for me. She was also very moral, and I know that has affected me in a positive way. Take the good stuff and pitch the rest.

**2. Life events and circumstances that are beyond your control.** Let’s face it, stuff happens. You’re going along in life and, all of a sudden, boom, your normal changes. Your girlfriend breaks up with you, or you find out your best friend hooked up with your boyfriend. Maybe it was more drastic than that. There was a death in the family, or a divorce that you didn’t see coming. The guy that wrote the foreword to this book, Craig Scott, had a day like that. In his freshman year, April 20, 1999, he was in the library at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado when two shooters came in and started unleashing hell. When it was all said and done, 13 people were murdered, including his sister and best friend. Whether he likes it or not, for the rest of his life these are the ingredients that he is forced to deal with.

I have had many conversations with Craig over the years, and these events have definitely changed his life. He would probably tell you that there have been things that are very hard to deal with, like reliving the trauma of that day from time to time. He would also tell you that there have been positive things, like

meeting several presidents and being a main voice that speaks to school violence in our country.

That is the point of sudden ingredients that you didn't expect. These new ingredients are part of the mix now. You didn't want it to happen, but it did. The faster you come to the conclusion that this stuff is a part of your life, the faster you can get on with it and build something that includes this new reality. On that Wednesday in 1999, I don't think Craig had any idea his life was going to look like it does now. You never know what's coming down the road. Life is about reinventing your normal as many times as you need to when the unexpected happens.

**3. Gifts, aptitudes, and learning disabilities.** Everyone is born with gifts, abilities, and shortcomings. The hard reality is that there may be some things about you that make it hard to function in a normal learning environment. You may have been diagnosed with a learning disability like ADHD. Maybe you have a mild form of autism, or you are dyslexic. Or, maybe you have some genius in you, like a friend of mine that can read a huge paragraph from a book, then put the book down and recite what she just read perfectly back to you.

Whether good or bad, these are physical and biological conditions that are outside of your control. You came out of the womb like that. I have ADHD. That is part of the ingredients of my life that I had nothing to do with creating but have to deal with on a daily basis. What does that mean for me? Well, first of all, it is very hard for me to sit and write this book. I have to get up every five minutes and do something different—play with the cats, check my emails, etc. I can't sit down for a couple of hours and write. I wish I could, but I can't. That caused some problems for me when I was in school. I couldn't sit still. Schools were not on top of that stuff like that like they are now, so I was labeled “rebellious” and out of control. I was extremely creative, but no

one knew that, because I couldn't stay still long enough to create anything. I was definitely misunderstood.

Maybe you feel like that. They keep trying to put you in the box. Be like this, learn this way, try to fit this mold, be like this person, etc. Embrace your disabilities and gifts, because they are yours. It's part of who you are. They are the ingredients that you have to use. The good thing about today's education system is that they are catching on to different learning styles that fit specific individuals. They will help you with coping mechanisms, so it won't be so overwhelming. Go to your counselor and have a discussion about this. You can take different aptitude tests to see where you're gifted and where you are limited. I have made my ADHD work for me. There is no doubt that I am limited because of it, but I also am very creative, and I have made a living with it as well.

Embrace your uniqueness. Be yourself. I love this quote from Bette Midler:

***"I didn't belong as a kid, and that always bothered me. If only I'd known that one day my differentness would be an asset, my earlier life would have been much easier."***

I'm guessing that one of the most frustrating things about being a teenager today is that during the time when you are wired to explore your uniqueness and experiment with different things socially, your social world is very restrictive. The unfortunate thing is that most social governments are incredibly controlling. Going out of the box and doing something that goes against the norm is not acceptable in most social situations. That stinks because this is a time when you are trying things out. My advice is not to worry about it as much. You are you. You have ingredients for greatness. Be yourself and have fun figuring it all out.

I want to sum up this chapter by talking about racecars. I don't know if you have ever been up close to a real racecar. I have, and I was very impressed. That car was just sitting there doing nothing, and I was still blown away. Sitting there doing nothing and looking impressive was not what it was built for, though, was it? It was built to be screaming around a racetrack at 180+ miles an hour. That car is just as valuable sitting in the parking lot, but I think it's safe to say that it is a lot happier when it is out there doing what it was built to do. You are like that racecar. Your value is set, no matter whether you are fulfilling your purpose or not. But there is no doubt that one of the greatest feelings in life is when you can take that inborn value and do what you were built to do. I know I'm valuable just sitting here, but I love feeling useful as well.

I have never dedicated a chapter of a book to anyone before, but I want to now. I'm dedicating this chapter to Chelsea. I hope and pray that she knows that even though her past was painful, she has the ingredients to create something awesome from it. So can you. Don't give up. Take what you have and get to work.

To help you to discover your purpose, answer these questions. Good luck.

1. If you didn't have to worry about money, what would you do with your time?
2. What are three occupations that you cannot ever see yourself doing? Why?
3. What are three occupations that you would love to do? Why?

4. What are some of the good ingredients that you got from your family?
5. What are some things that you want for your life that you will have to create from scratch?
6. Name some natural abilities that you have that will be an asset in creating your life.
7. Knowing your ingredients, what you have and don't have, write out a five-year plan for your life.

# Notes

# Chapter Nine

## Value Up

*“Compassion and respect for yourself translates into compassion and respect for others.”*

*Suki Jay Munsell*

This chapter is going to be a little headier than the chapters before. What I mean is, I’m going to attempt to logically explain to you why I feel this incredible need to help young people understand their true value. Why write a book called Value Up, and why am I spending so much time and energy trying to get people to understand this? I’m going to share with you part of a research paper that I wrote for school administrators to help them see that if they are leading a school where students feel good about themselves and feel safe socially, it will drastically effect everyone’s lives in a positive way. When you explain things to adults, you need to have research behind it, so forgive me for sounding so formal.

To help you to comprehend this a little better, you have to understand how administrators are judged: test scores, truancy levels, and controversial student behavior that ends up in the news media. In other words, in order to keep their jobs, school administrators have to make sure that the overall student body is testing well, the kids are going to school, and the school doesn’t end up in the newspaper because of some kind of hazing incident or something like that. They are judged, for the most part, on things they can’t control.

The research paper is in italics. When the font is normal, it is me talking to you.

***Change One Change a School (In Part): By Mike Donahue Jan. 15, 2016.***

*As the research I will present suggests, motivation for learning increases when students feel good about themselves and safe within their learning environment, leading to higher test scores, lower dropout rates, and improved teacher morale.*

*In The ABC's of School Climate by Patrick and Judith Hruz, the authors state:*

*School climate has become the buzzword in recent years. Educators say that looking at bullying, dropout rates, academic performance, violence and suicide as individual problems does not answer the larger issues because each of these is connected to the others. Research has shown that an effective school climate means increased and sustained academic achievement, limiting the individual challenges. On the Center for the Study of School Climate website, monitoring school climate is critical because perceptions about school climate impact teacher morale and student achievement. Positive school climate benefits students, teachers and staff. Teachers are motivated to teach and students are motivated to learn.*

What that article is saying is to just look at suicide, bullying, dropout rates, drug use, etc. as separate issues and ignore the specific climate in a school that may be fostering some of this

behavior is not working to change things. You have to look at the social climate of the school to see if these things are being allowed on that level. It may sound ridiculous to some people, but essentially if the students in a school want that stuff to be part of their culture, then it will be an uphill battle for the administration to get these things to change. Not to sound rude, but it really doesn't matter that much that adults want these things to change. They have been trying to change it for years with very little success because they take an outside-in approach. In my opinion, it's an inside-out change that needs to take place. I will explain that better later.

*After more than a decade of talking to students, teachers, and administrators, we couldn't agree more, and we believe it's time to address the issue of how to improve school climate head-on.*

### **HOW DOES A NEGATIVE SOCIAL CLIMATE DEVELOP?**

*The negativity and outright cruelty going on in schools today have reached alarming levels. It seems like every week we learn about another student who has taken his life because of how he feels about himself and how he was treated socially. On November 11, 2015, a young man in Tampa, Florida stood up in front of his English class and shot himself in the head. Early indications suggest this student was bullied.*

*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports there are 4,400 suicide deaths per year among children who are bullied. Calling it "bullyside," the CDC says 14% of high school victims of bullying have considered suicide and 7% have attempted it.*

*Administrators today are holding their breath, hoping and praying their school doesn't end up on the front page of the paper*

*because of a similar tragedy. We've all seen the effects, but how does this kind of negative social climate develop?*

### ***IT'S A VALUE PROBLEM***

*Simply put, students who don't feel valuable don't act valuable. They don't see the need to invest in themselves, academically or otherwise. And, how a student feels about himself personally has a direct impact on the overall social climate of a school. Therefore, if you have a high percentage of students in your school who don't feel valuable, that drags down the school's overall "value climate."*

*After literally thousands of conversations with students and staff over the past dozen years, we've seen the same theme repeated over and over: when students do not value themselves, it is difficult for them to value others. As more and more students struggle to realize their individual intrinsic value, the overall social climate of the school becomes increasingly negative, and a negative social climate is dangerous.*

A negative social climate is not just dangerous because there might be an active shooter in your school someday. That is very rare, by the way, and stopping school violence shouldn't be the only goal for a school to want a positive social environment.

**A negative social climate is dangerous because it kills ideas and creativity, which stops real progress and growth.**

You can't be yourself and grow when you feel the pressure to stay in the "box." The overall Value Climate of a school is a huge factor in determining whether you are going to feel socially safe in your school or not. When you feel socially safe, it takes away fear and awakens the part of you that wants to create and

progress. If the majority of students that you walk down the hallways with have a low self-worth, then you will have a negative culture, because when kids don't value themselves, they don't value others. I speak in schools all over the country, and as soon as I get to a school, I can tell if the school's overall Value Climate is high or low. If it is high, then there is less drama, and it is a more positive environment. If it is low, you can feel the tension in the air. It's not a safe place socially, and everyone kind of shuts down and is apathetic toward achievement.

### ***POLICING THE NEGATIVITY: A LOSING BATTLE***

*Oftentimes, teachers and administrators are forced into a reactionary role, forced into a vain attempt to police the negativity and its effects in the classroom. However, with the rise of social media and cell phones, verbal assaults through texting and social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are almost unaccountable.*

*There is simply no way to stay on top of the constant communication that occurs between students. And, when pockets of negativity exist within the student body, it profoundly affects the overall climate of the school. We continually hear from administrators that their student body is apathetic toward school and academics, while the social aspects of the school draw most of the energy.*

Think about all the emotional energy that goes into the social stuff going on in your school. For the most part, the drama goes unchecked by an adult because the majority of it does not happen in front of adults. It can get pretty nasty before anyone knows there is damage being done. Most of that negativity just

drains the life out of a school. It's easy to get consumed and worried about where you fit in that world to the point that it numbs you from the things that are really important, like your future. The approach from educators has been to try to minimize the drama by imposing more rules and monitoring conversations, but that gets dicey with first amendment issues.

*That being said, we don't believe the lack of academic focus is due to apathy as much as it is to fear. Students tend to "live small" when the risk of living big is too great. If the social flow of a school is filled with negativity, the social cost of trying to be positive about life and learning is simply too high. Students don't want to be seen as "out of the flow."*

This is what I was talking about in chapter four, The Sheriffs of Hunt Elementary School. If the "sheriffs" are negative about school and learning, then the overall social climate is going to be negative. I have been in schools where the students downplay any academic achievement because they will pay a price socially if they achieve outside the allowed amount set by the sheriffs. A teacher once told me that one of his students told him to stop announcing in the class that he got an A on tests and papers because the other kids mocked him because of it. This is something he should have been proud of, but instead he had to hide his achievement for fear of social repercussions. Do you think that kind of environment encourages achievement? Of course not, so the overall drive for achievement goes down. That negative culture affected not only him but the rest of the student body as well.

### ***SAME CLASSROOM: DIFFERENT STORIES***

*Not only that, but schools are also faced with the challenge of supporting kids with dramatically different needs. Consider this: In the same classroom, you could have two students who may look similar, but whose stories couldn't be more different.*

*One is a college-bound student who is very motivated because his parents have invested in him and raised him in a way that has given him a lot of confidence and self-respect. Sitting next to him is a girl with the same intellectual potential, but her family life is much different. She has an alcoholic mom who has gone from one boyfriend to the next. Her life is full of drama that she has had very little to do with creating. She has behavioral issues and is not very motivated to learn.*

*The x-factor is how those two students see themselves.*

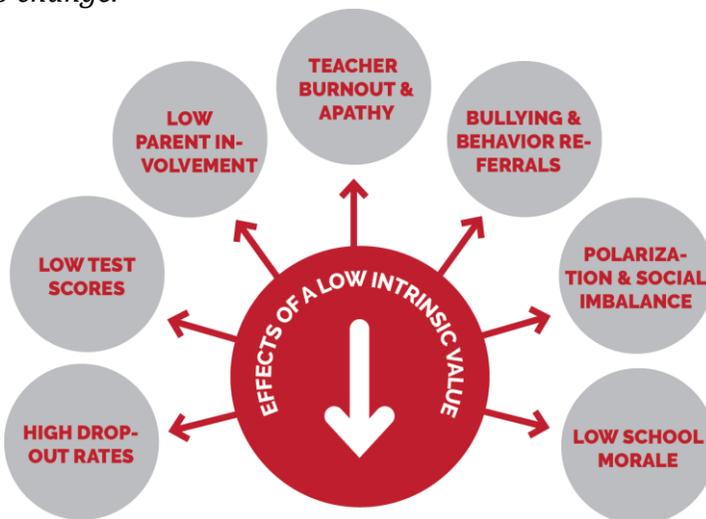
*One has big dreams and sees a clear path to achieve them. He is not only willing to invest in himself academically but is eager to do so. The other is just trying to get through the day without breaking down. Schools are expected to teach both of these students equally. The Value Up system is designed to level the playing field so she has a fighting chance to achieve her dreams as well.*

Sometimes it just doesn't seem fair that some kids have a good setup for success and some kids don't. It's not a contest, though. What I mean is, if the girl in that scenario achieves greatness in her life, it doesn't bring the first guy's value down. In fact, the more students in your school that are motivated to do something with their lives, despite whether they are set up for success or not, the easier it gets for everyone to achieve their dreams. The culture becomes less and less concerned about the stupid social stuff and more concerned about things that really matter. Everyone's perceived value goes up.

I'm about to use an old phrase here, but nothing else really fits. "When the tide comes in, all the boats in the harbor rise." In other words, when you have a culture where the people in it value themselves and others, everyone will feel the positive effect of that. The opposite is true as well. When you have a culture of negativity, everyone is affected. The perceived value of everyone goes down. My question to you is, what kind of culture do you want to be in?

### ***THE EFFECTS OF LOW INTRINSIC VALUE ON SCHOOL CULTURE***

*As mentioned, these factors and more contribute to a negative culture with far-reaching effects. Take a look at the illustration below. When the overall perceived intrinsic value of the student body is low, the school climate is weighed down by apathy, social polarization, teacher burnout, parental mistrust, and low involvement, among other problems. Typically, the approach to addressing these issues has been from the outside in, changing structures or setting policies to (hopefully) improve outcomes. We believe a whole new perspective is in order. It's the culture that has to change.*



*According to a 2009 paper, “The effects of school climate on student achievement,” by Angus J. MacNeil, Doris Prater and Steve Busch for the International Journal of Leadership in Education, features of school culture must be changed in order to improve schooling for students. “Simply altering the structure and expectations of schools has failed over the last 50 years,” they write. The paper cites information from Phil Schlechty, founder of the Schlechty Center, who suggested in 1997 that “structural change that is not supported by cultural change will fail because it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability.”*

*Hruz says, “Teachers and schools must reward academic effort and achievement. But it is not enough to recognize the highest achievers such as the honor roll or straight-A students. All students must be recognized for what they achieve.”*

*In The ABC’s of School Climate, the authors state,*

*The key (to a positive school climate) is putting into place tools that educate and empower EVERYONE. When everyone feels ownership of the school, they are more inclined to do their part. Each person — student, teacher, administrator, staff, parent and members of the community — must feel involved.*

*You can read more about our Value Up School Climate System on our website: [www.value-up.org](http://www.value-up.org).*

Basically, what these experts are saying is when you walk into your school every day, you should feel like people want you to be there. Administrators, teachers, and students will all have a better experience if there is a culture of acceptance, not just tolerance. EVERYONE in your school should feel like they matter. Whether they are the star quarterback or just a kid trying to get through the day, their school should be a place where they come and know they are valued. When people don't feel that, they don't achieve. It's a proven fact. As more and more people embrace the importance of valuing others, a cultural shift takes place. Suddenly, everyone — from the lunch lady, to the head of the English department, to the smallest freshman — starts to see the value they offer to their school culture. The goal for all of us, teachers and students, should be to raise the individual and collective “intrinsic value score” within a school.

## **WHAT DO WE DO?**

Change has to come from you. It has to be an organic movement by young people who are tired of watching the senseless brutality dished out by negative students that are just bringing the value climate of the school down to the level of how they feel about themselves.

Let me explain this further. Adults will never be able to change the culture of a school, because they don't live in that culture. They exist in it, but there is a big difference between living in it and existing in it — just like you exist in their world, but you don't live in it. Remember how I talked about the two governments in your school? Basically, it's the adult government and the student government existing in the same building. They are two completely different realities that have to interact with each other on a daily basis, but they are not the same.

**Social culture of a school is what is being said, student-to-student, when the teachers are not listening.**

Culture is not adults talking to kids; it is kids talking to kids. Whatever is the predominant attitude among the students in the hallways of your school is basically the culture of the school. If it's a culture of meanness, then the only way that changes is if students decide they don't want that to be part of the culture anymore. Adults can have rules all day long that say you must treat each other with respect, but their rules will not be part of the culture until it becomes the student's idea. School rules will just keep it from being in everyone's face, and that culture of meanness will happen where adults can't control it, like the hallways, locker rooms, and social media. The rules will just force it to go underground, but they won't change anything. I didn't write that article because I think adults can change this alone; I wrote it to encourage them to engage you in the process. That is the only way culture can change. You have to be involved.

I know when you take an honest look at the social climate of your school, you can get a little overwhelmed. You may be asking yourself, what can I do? It seems like a pretty daunting task to try to make a difference in your social government. Don't underestimate the power of one person to change things, though. You could start a ripple effect of change just by taking your own value and the value of others seriously. To be honest with you, I don't want to just write a book called Value Up. I want to start a Value Up movement. I'm writing this at a time in our nation where there is a lot of mistrust and pain because certain groups in our society do not feel valued. The lack of valuing others and ourselves is pretty much in every news cycle lately. At the time of writing, the 2016 Presidential Election has just finished, and our nation is pretty fragmented. If there were ever a time for us a nation to embrace the Value Up message, it is now. I want to share three simple things you can do to start to

make a difference today.

**1. Value Up by knowing your true value and walking in it.**

I know I keep stressing to you over and over that you have to grasp your true value. I have pointed out to you how positive that revelation can be for your life personally. What I want to focus on here is that not only will it affect you when you know your true value, but the world you live in changes as well. When your perceived value goes up in your own eyes, the water level of value goes up in the world around you. Your classmates, friends, and family will all notice a difference in you, and it will affect them. When several students individually start to understand how valuable they are, everyone in that culture gets a greater sense of their own value, which will create a more positive environment all around. You may not be able to change how someone feels about himself or herself, but you can change you, and I guarantee that will positively impact them.

When I was in high school, I had an epiphany about myself. It's kind of a long story, so I won't get into how all this came about, but suffice it to say, I started to see my value and began to invest in my life and future. I worked out, I did my homework every night, I stopped abusing my body with substances, and my world around me completely changed. What surprised me more than anything else is how people around me reacted to my newfound perceived value. Some of my more negative friends didn't want to hang out with me as much. We didn't have a lot in common anymore. I began to attract friends that had more of a positive view of themselves.

The quality of my interactions with people improved. Some of my friends that didn't have a strong view of themselves were curious and wanted to know what happened to me. They wanted to make some changes in their own lives because of

what I was doing. They could see that I was a lot happier in this new reality. A few of them made some positive changes in their lives. The fact that I began to see myself the way I really am — valuable — had a direct impact on them. I didn't set out to do that necessarily; it was just a natural byproduct of the water level of value going up in my "harbor" because I began to see my life differently. I was changing my world by changing me.

You can change your world by changing you. The more you see how valuable you are, the brighter the light you are to the world around you.

**2. Value Up by seeing that everyone you come in contact with is valuable.** I didn't say you should treat people like they have value, I said you have to see people like they have value. There is a big difference. Treating people with respect but not really seeing their true intrinsic value is just behavior modification, and that doesn't change anything in the long run. It is entirely possible to be nice to someone's face but not really see him or her as valuable. I don't want you just to change your behavior towards someone; I want you to change your heart toward someone. Then, your behavior will be more genuine. It is the difference between acceptance and tolerance.

**Tolerance says, "I don't think you are valuable, but, in order to be politically correct, I will tolerate you in my world anyway."**

**Acceptance says, "I may not have a clear view of this right now, but I accept that you are just as valuable as I am, no matter what your social status is or what your life circumstances are."**

I have made up my mind a long time ago that I am going to try

to see people the way their source sees them. I am going to see everyone like they have value. I have been a negative person before, and I'm not going to lie, there is a measure of power that comes when you put others down. Let's face it, there is a feeling of superiority that is there for a brief moment when you can make people feel bad about themselves or just minimize their worth. There is power in negativity, which is why it is so addictive and prevalent in our society. Watch this, though.

You can't add or subtract value to anyone. No one has that kind of power. We have talked about this. Everyone's value is set. It is intrinsic.

**Your interaction with others does one of two things: it either reveals their true value or covers it up.**

When someone in your school treats someone badly, it doesn't devalue the person who is being put down. They stay valuable. The disrespect just covers the value in that person for that moment. When someone gets treated with respect, it doesn't add value to that person either; it just reveals the value that was already there to begin with.

I covered a lot of people's value when I was growing up because of the gross insecurities I had. I didn't know my true value, so I really couldn't see anyone else's. When that changed, I began to do a lot of revealing of other people's value. I don't think I was prepared to see the huge difference in influence I had with others. When I saw people for who they really are, it gave me power and influence in their lives in much more powerful ways. Covering people's value gave me a small measure of power, but revealing their value was like throwing gas on it. These people wanted to hear what I had to say because they trusted me. I like the feeling of someone trusting me over someone fearing me. It

has a much deeper impact.

A few years back, when I was a youth pastor in Omaha, NE, there was a girl in our community that hated youth pastors for some reason. I didn't know her personally, but every time I went up to the high school to have lunch with students from my youth group, she had something to say to me and about me that wasn't exactly revealing my true value. She was mean. I tried to figure it out so she would stop, but no matter what I did, she just kept it up. Even though this girl was rude and awful to me, I decided to keep seeing her value and treating her with respect anyway. I was tempted to treat her the way she was treating me, because it wasn't fair. She did not make it easy for me to see her value.

This went on for a year with absolutely no change. She berated me every chance she got. One night after youth group, I was walking out to my car, and she was standing in front of it. I'm not going to lie, I was a little worried because I didn't know what she would do. When I got up close to her, I saw that she was crying, and she said, "Why can't we hate you?" I said, "Who's trying to hate me?" She said, "Me and my friends. We can't hate you. We have tried really hard, but we just can't. Why?" I said "Because I don't hate you, and you know it. Even though you have given me a lot of reasons not to like you, I still do, and I always will." She just cried for about twenty minutes.

Her name was Tina, and she had some things happen to her that contributed to her not seeing her true value that I'm not going to get into right now. We had a very productive conversation about her worth. I didn't influence her because I won the insult battle. I was able to reach her because I continued to reveal her value when she was trying to cover mine. By me continuing to see her value when she was trying to devalue me, I just increased my perceived value in her and her friends' eyes.

**When you see people through the lenses of their true value, your value goes up in the eyes of people that are watching what's going on.**

You won't be powerful because you win the negativity battle. You will be powerful because you do the opposite. Think about how influential you could be in your school by simply seeing people the way they really are — valuable!!!

**3. Value Up by owning your culture in order to affect change.** Why didn't terrorism die when we killed Osama Bin Laden? Because terrorism isn't a person, it is an idea. The only way to kill a bad idea is to introduce a better idea. Young people know that bullying is a bad idea, but it lives in most schools because the people that move the culture still think it is a good idea. The ones that don't think it is a good idea will not step up to the plate and own the culture. They quietly sit back in discontent while people with lesser values rule the hallways of their school. In most schools, the majority of students are positive and want to treat people with respect. Negativity is the minority, but it becomes a huge part of the culture for one reason: the students with a more positive outlook are afraid to own their culture. For all the declarations of "being free to be me" that I see expressed online, teenagers still let weaker people lead them.

You have to understand that you are contributing to a negative culture if you don't own it. You can't just sit back and wait for it to change. An outside-in philosophy (adults imposing more rules) will not change culture. Like I said before, adults can't do that. They can manage behavior, but that isn't the same thing as changing culture. An inside-out approach (students talking to students) is the only thing that will change it.

I worked in a private high school up in Illinois as a dean of students a few years back. It was my job to encourage students to own the culture of their school. I empowered students to express what they wanted the social climate of the school to be and then provided support to them to help them make it happen. I worked intensely with the leadership team and other culture influencers.

One day I was about to go teach a leadership class, and I stopped in the men's room. I saw a racial slur written on the wall in pencil. I am not going to reveal exactly what it said, but suffice it to say, it was not conducive to the culture of acceptance that we were trying to create in the school. I came out of the bathroom and asked a couple of the leaders that were standing there if they had seen what was written on the wall, and they said, "Yes, it has been up there for a couple of weeks now." That part bothered me more than it being there in the first place. You are always going to have a few knuckleheads in a school; the problem comes when we let their stupidity dictate the culture. I walked into the leadership class that I was about to teach and wrote verbatim what was written on the bathroom wall in big letters on the chalkboard. You could have heard a pin drop. It was pretty offensive.

I asked if anyone was offended by what I wrote on the board, and most of the students' hands went up. "So," I asked them, "then why is it written on the bathroom wall?" They all looked at each other. The girls had no clue what we were talking about, thank goodness. One of the guys spoke up and said, "No one in this room wrote it." "That's not what I asked," I said. "Why is it on the wall, and why has it been up there for a couple of weeks?" One of the students said, "Maybe the administration hasn't seen it yet." So I replied, "Whose school is this?"

Some of them knew where I was going and said sheepishly, "It's our school." I said, "Exactly." Then I said, "I guess we are racists now." Some of them protested hard and said, "No we are not!" I said, "Yes we are. It's in our bathroom. It's right there on the wall, forty feet from where I'm standing." They reacted back, "That's not how we all feel." I said, "Yes it is. You left it there. Just because you didn't write it doesn't mean you don't believe it." "We don't," they said. "I don't believe you," I answered back. "It didn't bother you enough to get it off the bathroom wall, so you must believe it." I went on to ask them, "If a visitor came to the school and read what was written in the bathroom, would that be a good reflection of who you are? Are you racists?"

I knew they were not, but I challenged them. "You said it's your school, and I believe you. So, if you want what is written on the wall to represent you, then leave it there. In fact, if that is who we are now, let's take it out of the bathroom and put it all over the school, like I put it up on this chalkboard. We could even come up with more offensive ideas than that. If it's not who we are, then one of you leaders better get your butt off that chair and get it off your bathroom wall." Ten guys got up and took care of it. It was a great leadership lesson.

Ownership. I think we have lost what that means. We want you to own the football field, or own a subject matter, or own the school play. There is nothing wrong with that, but I also think you can and should own the values that greatly affect the social climate of your school. Not to be overly dramatic, but some young people's lives literally depend on it.

There are students walking through your school today that are greatly impacted by that culture. I know some of you see how your culture affects other kids negatively, and it bothers you a lot. Are you waiting for an adult to make it all better? It's not going to happen like that. As strong of a leader as I was to those

kids, I knew I alone couldn't change that. That's why I took the approach that I did. I think some of the kids in my school wanted me to do something about it. They wanted me to have it removed, go find out who did it, and make an example out of them because that would make them feel better. The incident would have gotten resolved, but they wouldn't have had to get "dirty." That is the traditional outside-in approach that I'm talking about. Me doing something about it would take care of the incident but wouldn't have affected the culture.

I was challenging them not to take the easy route and let an adult own it. They needed to own it. I guarantee that those kids that were in my leadership class that day knew who wrote the racial slur. I knew who did it five seconds after I read it. They wanted me to do something so they wouldn't have to stand up to those guys, because some of them had social power. Up until that point, racism wasn't a good idea in our school, but these particular guys that put that on the wall had the social power to change that part of our culture. Me imposing some discipline wasn't going to stop that from happening. I'm not saying some discipline wasn't appropriate, but I knew that keeping racism from becoming a good idea in our school depended on one of them standing up to those individuals. The leaders had to own the better idea. It's never easy to do that, but when you own something, you have to be willing to fight for it.

Adults are not completely powerless in changing culture. Smart adults realize they can't change culture, but they can provide experiences for students to help them change it. They have to provide opportunities and support for you to have the platform to bring about real change.

There is an awesome school up in East Jordan, Michigan. One of the teachers in the school, Matt Hamilton, decided to start a "Shoe Club" after I did my presentation there to help the

students focus on going for their dream (valuing themselves) and walking in others' shoes (valuing others). The school is not perfect, but they have changed the culture to make it so that everyone feels important. They have raised the value of human life in their community. Matt Hamilton and the students at East Jordan High School and Middle School have actually contributed to this book in a huge way. I'm proud to call those guys my friends.

When I first spoke there eight years ago, there was a very negative social climate in that school. Kids were mean to each other, there was a lot of disrespect with the staff, and there was very little motivation for learning. There needed to be a culture change. When I did my presentation, Matt was flooded with students that wanted to see change in their own lives and the lives of their friends. There were a lot of bad ideas that were just accepted as the norm in that school, and those kids wanted it to be different. What Matt did so brilliantly was to introduce better ideas to key kids. Instead of going negative and policing all the bad ideas, he went positive and provided platforms for kids to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.

The Shoe Club is one of the most amazing things I have ever seen in a school. They have had numerous news articles written about them, and the whole town knows who they are. I just spoke there recently, and that culture is completely different. Bad ideas still exist in that school, but better ideas are getting more press, which is making it harder for negativity to win. The students are taking ownership, and it's making a huge difference.

When it comes to the social culture of your school, or even your world in general, if you don't like the way something is, change it. Stop waiting for someone else to do it. You have the power to make changes. You have it in you. I want to be one of those

adults in your life that will provide platforms for you to do this. I want to be a support to you as well. On our website, we will be continuing to provide practical ways for you to make a difference in your school: [www.value-up.org/student](http://www.value-up.org/student)

# Notes

# Chapter Ten

## Walk a Mile

*“Just when you think that a person is just a backdrop for the rest of the universe, watch them and see that they laugh, they cry, they tell jokes.... they’re friends waiting to be made.”*

*Dr. Jeffery Borenstein*



This is a picture of over 500 shoes that I have collected over the last ten years from teenagers all across the country. It looks a little creepy if you don't know the reason I still have them all. In August of 2016, I decided to take them out of the garage and put them all out on the driveway so I could take a picture of them and put it on Facebook. It was supposed to be a 20-minute project. Five hours later I was still out in my driveway looking at the shoes and taking pictures of some of the things that kids wrote on them. I decided to put a slideshow together that I show when I present the Value Up program in schools. They take up a

lot of space in my garage, but I won't get rid of them, because they represent so many people's stories. If you have heard me speak, then you know that those shoes mean the world to me. Everywhere I go, I bring a bag of shoes and the stories that go with them. I start my presentation off in a school by standing up, holding a shoe, and saying;

**"Everyone in this room has a story, and your story matters."**

I got the idea about twelve years ago when I was at a church thing, and a guy was talking about his personal hero who had passed away. He held up one of his shoes and talked about all the places that this guy had walked. He talked about the good times, the bad times, and all the lives that this man had impacted. I really liked how he pieced it all together with the guy's shoe. As I was listening to him, I thought about some of my heroes, the people who have made an impact on me. I certainly have a long list, but when I stop and really think about it, my hero is you.

Over the last thirty years or so, it has been my absolute honor to present young people with truth that has been life changing for some of them. I've been everywhere from Alaska to Beloit, Wisconsin. Over a million students have heard our message of hope. I have been called a hero many times from kids across the country in Facebook messages, personal emails, some kids even wrote it on their shoe they gave me. Here is the raw truth of it all, though. I'm not a hero because I present truth to young people. People become heroes when they take that truth and apply it to their lives.

**You are reading a book right now to try to be a better person, and if you follow through with the things I'm advising you to do, it will take guts and personal courage.**

**That is heroic—not in a Hollywood kind of way, but in a real way.**

The truth is that you have impacted my life in ways I would have never imagined when I first started speaking to young people. My life is so rich because of you. This chapter is not going to be about principles that can change your life. This chapter is about the people that have changed mine. Please indulge me while I tell you some shoe stories.

The first shoe I got was from a girl that toured with us speaking in various places. Her name was Mandy. We used to travel with a team of people just out of high school. They would tell their stories and make an impact on others. It was fabulous. The young people that traveled with us wanted to be there and actually paid tuition to be there. Mandy was different; her parents paid the tuition, but she didn't want to be there. She was very defensive, and we all knew there was story there, but she was closed up to all of us. All I knew about her when she came on our team was that her parents were wealthy, and she was a model student in high school. She was captain of the tennis team and received a scholarship to a D1 college, so she was a talented tennis player. When she got to college, she unraveled and started participating in very self-destructive behavior. She lost her scholarship and got kicked out of college. No one had any idea what happened to her. That's when I met her. She travelled with us for about three months before we saw any signs of her making any real progress for change. We just loved on her.

One day, it was finally the right time and the right place: Burger King in Wisconsin. I'm not kidding. We were coming back from a trip, and we stopped there to have lunch. She was sitting with the other kids, and I asked her to come sit with me at my booth. She came over with her food, and I asked her a question.

“Mandy, why did you walk away from your dream?”

“What?”

“This can’t be your dream. The guys you’re with are just using you. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“The things you’re doing can’t make you feel good about yourself. There’s no way this is your dream.”

She started to tear up. “It isn’t,” she said.

“Then why did you walk away?”

“Do you want the real answer, or do you want to hear what I tell everyone else?”

“What do you think?”

At that point, I went for a walk in her shoes, and, to be honest with you, her story blew my mind. She said, “You are the first adult to ever hear this story. When I was eleven years old, my older brother brought his friends home. They were all about fourteen or fifteen. They had been over a ton of times, so I didn’t think anything of it. We were wrestling around like we always did, but my brother wasn’t in the room this time. For some reason, he left. All of a sudden it got really weird, and they did things to me.” She explained it further, but let me just tell you, she was raped.

I asked her why she didn’t tell her parents, and she said she didn’t want to get her brother in trouble. She said she didn’t know what to do. Of course she didn’t. Eleven-year-old girls are

not supposed to know what to do in that situation because they are not supposed to be in that situation. My youngest is twelve right now, and I don't even want to imagine what she would be thinking if something like that happened to her.

I asked, "What did you do?"

With tears rolling down her cheeks, she said, "I went down in my room and took the longest shower of my life. Then, I went around my room and collected all my Barbie dolls, stuffed animals, and all the things that represented that little girl and put it all in a box in my closet. That's where it is right now."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I grew up that day; that was the moment I lost my innocence. I became an adult that day."

That story will stay with me for the rest of my life. I will never forget her face and all the pain and fear that I saw as she told me the story. I don't think that was the only thing she packed up in that moment. She packed up trust, hope, and maybe even her dreams. Then, she did what a lot of people do: pretend. She put a big smile on her face and smiled her way through middle school, then high school. By the time she got to college, she was done pretending. The pain of that day came crashing into her reality.

I have Kylie's shoe. She told me about an incident that happened in her school. It seems that a bunch of girls in her class decided to go on this hate campaign because Kylie liked one of their former boyfriends. Kylie lost her mom to cancer about six months before this. The girls would follow her from class to class and say really mean things to her when there were no

teachers around. Kylie stopped at her locker and one of the girls said, "Do you know what's awesome? Having a mom."

I have Jason's shoe. He is a sixth grader from New York who has cerebral palsy. He was crying after I spoke at his school. I went over and chatted with him, and he told me that every day the kids in his school call him cripple boy. They try to trip him when he is walking down the hall. One boy shoved him down one day and told him that girls would never like him, because he was a freak. Jason didn't ask to have cerebral palsy. With tears streaming down his face, his dad told me that night at our parent meeting that Jason is his hero because every morning it takes him half an hour to eat his breakfast because he doesn't have the same motor skills that other sixth graders have. It takes him that long because he has to lift the spoon over his mouth and dump it in like a dump truck. His dad said that Jason wouldn't let anyone feed him because he wants to be like all the other boys.

I have Anna's shoe from Kansas. I met her at her school because she wanted to talk with me after the program. She made a mistake with a senior boy. She liked this guy a lot and ended up dating him. He failed to tell her that he had an STD, and she got it. The kids in her school found out and harassed her in the hallways daily, to the point where she eventually had to leave the school because she was suicidal. In tears, she told me that she didn't even have sex with him; they were doing other stuff, and she got it. I asked her if the guy was cool with her, and she said that he was the one spreading the rumors around the school saying that she had it first and gave it to him. The other girls who were jealous of her just ran with it.

I have the shoe of Joe D. He is a teacher at a school in Connecticut that grabbed me on the way out of the gym and, with tears in his eyes, he said, "If I had heard this message when I was in high school, it would have saved me from so much personal pain. I let

too many people label me and try to define who I am.” He went on to say, “Don’t stop telling people it is OK to be different.”

I have Eric’s shoe from Illinois. After I got this shoe, and this guy went back to class, I called my wife and said, “I’m pretty sure I just heard the worst story I ever heard.” Eric waited until everyone was out of the auditorium before he would tell me what happened. He was a senior and a pretty tough-looking kid. He said he grew up in a pretty rough home. His dad and mom are both alcoholics. He said, “I want to tell you the worst day of my life. It was when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and my dad came home from work and asked me if I had remembered to feed my dog.” Eric had forgotten that day, so he was going to go do it, when his dad grabbed him by the back of the neck and dragged him down to the garage with the little dog. He told me his dad said, “If you are not going to be responsible enough to own a dog, then you don’t deserve to have one.” And then his dad hooked up battery cables to the dog and killed him in front of Eric. He said the worst part of it was that his dog was his only real friend.

I have Jade’s shoe from Pittsburgh. She came up to me after an assembly and was crying. She said all the kids in school are calling her a freak. She looked pretty trendy to me, so I was a little confused so I said, “How come?” She said, “Because I stopped going to the cool kid parties.” I said, “Why?” She said, “Because I know what happens to sophomore girls who go to parties with senior boys.” Basically, Jade found a value that was important to her and tried to live it out in world where the social government was not about to let her do that without a social price to pay. She was pretty heartbroken about this new label she got.

I have the shoe of Sophia from Montana who showed me her scarred arms, gave me a cloth with a razor blade in it, and asked if I would help her stop cutting herself. I told her that I wasn’t a

cutter, so I needed to ask her a question. I said, “I don’t understand cutting, why does pain take away pain?” The best explanation I have ever received about cutting wasn’t from Google, a book, or a psychologist, it was from her when she said, “It’s like taking emotional pain that I have no control over and turning it into physical pain that I can control.” That made sense to me.

I have the shoe of a guy named Robert. He was in the last row of the auditorium waiting for me after an assembly. He had his wrestling shoes in his lap. The story he told me blew my mind. He was a three-time state champion wrestler for the state of Oregon. This was his senior year, and he was pretty sure he would get a fourth title. In the summer, he went over to one of his coaches’ houses to hang out and talk wrestling with a few other teammates when something crazy happened to him. The coach wasn’t the head coach; he was just helping out the team. He wasn’t much older than Robert. The coach put something in Robert’s drink, and he passed out; that’s when he molested Robert. The other guys that were there ended up walking in on it and actually got a picture on their phone of what was happening. They were concerned, so they told their parents. The parents took the picture to the police, and the guy got arrested. When it came out that this guy did this, other students came forward to report that he had done that to them as well. When the coach got out on bail, he killed himself. I met Robert a month after that had happened. He gave me his shoes and said, “I don’t think I want to wrestle anymore.”

I have my son Keegan’s shoe. (It smells pretty bad.) I don’t have his shoe because he is my son, but because of an incident that happened at his school that he had to deal with. We had just moved back from Illinois to Omaha, Nebraska, and my son was in seventh grade. He knew no one at this new school, but he had never had any problems making friends.

We weren't worried about him. He came home one day and was sitting at the kitchen table getting something to eat, and I noticed he wasn't himself. He was quiet, and he looked depressed. I asked him if he was okay, and he mumbled that he was fine. I knew he wasn't, so I pulled up a chair and asked him again. He burst into tears and told me that a bunch of guys at his new school were calling him gay and spreading rumors about him.

My natural reaction was to get names and take care of it myself, but I knew that he wouldn't want me to do that. I asked him, "Why do you think they are calling you gay?" He said, and I'm not making this up, "Dad, in a way, it is your fault." That's really what he said. I said I didn't understand, and he said, "Do you remember when I was in fifth grade, and you told me not to laugh at dirty jokes?" What he is referring to is a conversation that I had with him, trying to give him a heads-up before he went to middle school. I told him that there were going to be dirty jokes about girls, and he had to remember that he has three sisters, a mom, and two grandmothers. If you laugh at those jokes, you are basically disrespecting the females that are in your life. I was trying to instill a value into my son.

**What I didn't realize at the time was the social price he was going to pay if he really lived up to the value.**

That's what happened. It was the first week in a new school. He was in the boys' locker room after gym class. Dirty jokes were being told, and he didn't laugh. The other kids noticed he wasn't laughing and decided that if he wasn't laughing, then he must be gay. They ran out of the locker room announcing to everyone in the hallway that the new kid is gay. It really hurt him socially in that school for about six months. He was trying to live out a value that I was teaching him at home, and he paid a huge price

socially for that. Let me tell you what I told Keegan that day. I said, “First of all, let me tell you how proud I am of you for taking a hit like that today. Wow! You are my hero. I know it’s tough to stand up for what you believe, and I don’t blame you if you feel tempted just to laugh at the jokes. Let me tell you what is going to happen as you get older. The fact that you didn’t laugh at the jokes sent those guys a message that you have values.

“That isn’t going to mean much to them right now, but I guarantee that as you get older they will look at you differently. They will notice that you are a strong person, and you will gain influence in their lives. Think about it. The people that they are surrounded with are just like them. They are followers, just copies. Ultimately, we don’t respect followers. We respect true leaders, and that is what you are, Keegan, because you were willing to pay a price for your personal values.”

I recently spoke at one of the high schools that Keegan’s middle school feeds into, and I talked about his story. I got this email not too long after that.

*Dear Mr. Donahue,*

*You came and spoke at my school the other day. I realized who you were after you started talking, and I know your son. I am really sorry that I was trying so hard to fit in that I had to join in on picking on the “new kid.” I’m just saying this to get it off my chest. It has really impacted me for the last several years.*

Wow! “It has impacted me for the last several years.” My son went to a different high school than this kid, but it still bothered him. I’m not sure if he was one of the boys in the locker room that day, but I would be willing to bet that the spectators that watched what happened and who probably joined in on the

abuse secretly had more respect for Keegan than the kid who started the verbal assault to begin with.

I have Brittany's shoe from Vermont. She sent me an email that I want you to read.

*Dear Mike,*

*You talked in my school today. I want to share my story with you because some of the things you said really related to me. It seems like everyone talks about courage in these huge dramatic ways, like in movies when someone stands up for what they believe in or accomplishes that impossible task despite some kind of crazy set back. Don't get me wrong, I'm a sucker for movies like that, but I'm always dissatisfied after I watch them. I wonder if I could be that courageous? Could I stand up in the face of some crazy tragedy? Then, I get knocked down to reality because that's not my world. I don't live a life where I'm going to be put in situations like that. I'm an average teenager from Vermont. I have a normal home. My parents love me. I have a brother and two sisters. We are all pretty good students. People wouldn't look at me and say that I need courage, but why do I like movies like that? Why do I always wish I were the person in the movies that conquered their fears? I think it's because deep down in my world that nobody knows about, I want that kind of courage. When you spoke at my school today, you said,*

***For a teenager, walking into their school every day is like walking on to their own personal stage. You have to perform every single day. You can never screw up socially or you will feel pressure.***

*I don't think I listened to anything you had to say after that. All I could think about was my personal stage. If I don't put on a show for my friends and all the people in my school every day, I'm going*

*to get a bunch of sh## for it. Wow! Later on when I was walking down the hall, I just kept staring at all kids that I go to school with. Most of them I have known since kindergarten. How many of these kids really dare to be themselves? How many of them are just following social scripts? What you said today was so true. I find myself sometimes saying all the right things to all the right people, not really knowing what I believe. It does take courage to stand up for who you are and what you truly believe in. Thanks for talking to us today. I hope they have you back. Brittany H.*

I could go on and on because over the last thirty years I have heard and been a part of hundreds of stories that have greatly impacted my life. Some have ended tragically, and some of the stories have blown my mind on how strong and resilient young people really are. I don't know how long I can keep doing this. I live on airplanes and hotel rooms. Traveling gets hard, and sometimes I get tempted to get a normal job where I'm working nine to five and staying home with my family. Maybe I will do that someday, but I already know what I'll miss. I'll miss the fifteen-year-old coming up to me and saying what I just said changed his life. I'm not a hero. Students are heroes to me because someone turned a light on and they walked in the room. Who's the real hero, the one who turns the light on, or the one who has the guts to go into a room they have never been in before?

If I could pick my own super power, I have no doubt what it would be. I would have the ability to take the shoes of these amazing people and put them on the feet of the people that find it easier to judge them rather than know them. My super power would give me the ability to let them experience their worst day for thirty minutes. They wouldn't read a book about them or watch some video. They would be them, and if they got to feel what they felt and experience what they experienced, there is no way they would be able to slap labels on those people.

I've been to award ceremonies at the end of the school year and watched young people receive trophies and prizes for things they have accomplished and thought to myself, we need to give trophies for the right things. For the most part, the pain and struggle that most teenagers deal with have nothing to do with them. They are products of other people's dysfunction. What I have witnessed over the last thirty years is nothing short of amazing. I have so much respect for the resilience and integrity of the American teenager. If I was the one handing out our trophies, there would be some people that society has overlooked that would have some of the biggest trophies I could find.

I'm going to end this chapter by telling you one more shoe story. His name is Dave.

I grew up with him because he is my brother. Most of the time when we were growing up, we didn't get along. Like I have described in the previous chapters, our family was broken and dysfunctional, so we were not loyal to each other. I never really walked in his shoes when we were young, because we were in competition for our mom's affection. I put him down every chance I got. I was athletic and into sports where he struggled with that, so I could be superior to him in that world. He is incredibly smart and witty, so he had some advantages there.

One day the lenses through which I saw him completely changed. It was my junior year, and I was on the bus going to school. He was three years younger than me, but he had already quit school. Our bus had stopped at a light, and Dave was walking up the street on Route 18, just south of Boston, where we lived. His hair was uncombed, he had ripped jeans, he had a raggedy old coat on, and his shoelaces were untied. Some kids in front of me started to talk about him. They were putting him down and laughing at him. I remember the knot I had in my

stomach that morning watching my brother David struggle through his life. One of the kids on the bus said, "What a loser." If you were just taking a snapshot of his life at that point, I guess those kids would be right. But, I knew the real story. I lived there, and I knew his pain, because some of it was coming from me.

Those kids had no idea what he had been through. They just saw what they saw and made their judgment. I dedicated this book to him in part because I have watched him over the years take some ingredients that were not the best and turn them into a pretty good life. He put himself through college and has done very well for himself. He has a great heart, and everyone who meets him is glad that they did. I love you, David, and I'm proud to call you my brother!

My challenge for you is to pick out three people that get judged and labeled harshly in your school. I know you know who they are. We always know who they are. They are the ones that make an easy target. Maybe they get in trouble a lot. Maybe it's the new girl who's living with her grandmother because of family issues. Whoever it is, write their names in this book. You can give them another name if you are afraid they might see it. Write down the label they may have from other students. I want you to imagine what their life may be like. I don't want you to feel sorry for them, because, in a way, that is a form of judgment as well. Empathy is different. It's not pity; it's understanding. It is simply taking the time to understand that you can't just reduce someone down to a sentence. They have a story, and that story matters. If you really do this, I think it will change you more than you know. I know it changed me. Good luck.

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

# Notes

# Chapter 11

## The Value Up

### Twenty-One-Day Challenge

*Watch your thoughts; they become your words.  
Watch your words; they become your actions.  
Watch your actions; they become your habits.  
Watch your habits; they become your character.  
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.*

*-Frank Outlaw*

One of the biggest truths in life is that you can't add or subtract value to your life. You are already valuable because your value is intrinsic. If you have a negative view of yourself, it is a perception problem, not a value problem. As you go through your day, you are either revealing your true value with your actions and thoughts or you are covering your true value with your actions and thoughts.

It is the same thing with your relationships with others. You cannot add to or subtract from anyone's value. When you are interacting with others, you are either revealing their true value or covering it by the way you treat them. Like the quote above says, destinies start with thoughts, which eventually lead to actions. Psychologists say that it takes twenty-one consecutive, deliberate actions to form a habit. For the next 21 days, I am challenging you to do one thing a day that reveals your intrinsic value and one action a day that reveals someone else's value. That is the Value Up challenge.

I'm going to list out several things that you can do for yourself and a separate list of things that you can do to help you to treat others with respect. I want you to commit for the next twenty-one days to do at least one of the things on the list for you and one of the things on the list for others. I really believe you will begin to raise the perceived value of your life and the perceived value of others.

You don't have to follow everything on this list, and you can repeat these as many times as you need. As you are doing this, you will probably come up with your own things you can do as well. Write what you do down, and write how you felt as you were doing them. The point is to take this time and challenge yourself to Value Up. Value yourself and value others.

### **Value Me List**

1. Take yourself shopping and buy something you don't need but you just want. It can be something small or big, depending on your budget.
2. Clean your room or your car. You will be amazed how much you will feel better when things are uncluttered in your life.
3. Sleep in until noon on Saturday. Teenagers need lots of sleep.
4. Do all your homework this week. You will feel great about yourself when you accomplish this.
5. Practice your faith. Our organization doesn't endorse any one religion, but I personally am a Christian. I know when I press in a bit and get more involved than just sitting in pew, I feel better. My connection to God seems stronger.
6. Ask your best friend to tell you something positive they see about you. This may seem strange to ask them to do that but

you will be surprised what others see that your strengths are. You will be encouraged.

7. Do your nails if you are girl. Change your hairstyle.
8. Dress up one day for school. Not like a tux or a dress, but just up your wardrobe a bit and see how others treat you and how it makes you feel.
9. Read something that you don't have to read for school.
10. Work out. Some of you like working out, but some of you may not. Don't put a lot of pressure on yourself with this. Do a little something that will make your heart pump hard for thirty minutes. Working out is not about how you look; it's about how you feel.
11. Spend some time with your best friend. Don't talk about your girlfriend or boyfriend. Don't gossip. Try and do more listening than talking.
12. If you have a pet, go hang out with them for a while. It sounds weird, but animals can be therapeutic.
13. Write out your story. Don't just make it about the hurtful things. Include tragedies and triumphs. Include your dreams as well.
14. If you have nieces, nephews, or a little brother or sister, take some time to hang out with them. There is nothing like being with a child that puts things into perspective. Buy them ice cream; you will be their hero forever.
15. Write down how you want to be remembered by your classmates. What characteristics would you want your classmates to remember about you 10 years from now?

16. Set 10 life goals.
17. Make a Proud-of-Me list. On a piece of paper, list as many things that make you feel good about who you are and proud of yourself. Keep this list handy, and refer back to it as often as you need to.
18. Make a Passion Plan. Pick one of your passions. Decide what you'd like to do with it someday. How will you go for it? What's a good first step to take?
19. Research a career that interests you. Write down the amount of education needed for that job. What is the starting salary? Would you have to move? What are the pros and cons of that career?
20. Write down a role model in your life. List the qualities that you respect in this person. Do you have similar qualities? What can you do to develop the same qualities?
21. Do something positive today that you have wanted to do, but never dared. Leave your comfort zone and go for it. Ask someone out on a date, join a club or a team, or raise your hand in class.

### **Value Others List**

1. Sit by kids at lunch that you have never sat with. Talk with them and get to know them.
2. Say "Hi" to 7 kids that you never talk to this week. Look them in the eyes, and smile when you do.

3. Count how many negative comments you hear said towards other students in one day. Each time you hear one, you have to say a positive comment to someone.
4. Compliment 3 kids that you rarely talk to. Try not to make simple surface compliments like “nice shoes,” or “I like your shirt.” Make deeper statements that they won’t forget, like, “I notice you always do your homework, and I am impressed with how hard you work.”
5. Compliment each one of your teachers. You may not like all your teachers, but chances are, they do something that you like/appreciate. Find it and let them know. It will do wonders for your relationship.
6. Set 5 goals of how you can positively impact your school. What can you do to own the culture of your school?
7. Set 5 goals of what you want to accomplish before you graduate.
8. Do a random act of kindness for a fellow student that you are not good friends with. Whether it’s helping someone that you see struggling with school work or taking care of someone’s lunch tray, go out of your way to do something for someone else.
9. Look around your community and find something you can do to make a difference, like cleaning up a park in your neighborhood, volunteering in a senior citizens’ center, or reading to someone who can’t.
10. Try to go the entire day saying only positive things about others.
11. Don’t talk so much today. Spend the day listening.

12. Do something nice for your parents this week for no reason. Ask your mom how her job is going or bring home a coffee for your dad.
13. Sit down and write a thank you note to a former teacher or coach that you had. Tell them how much their investment changed your life.
14. Sit down with an elderly person at a nursing home and ask them questions about life. Tell them you are doing a paper or something. You will be amazed at how much wisdom you can pick up from people that have lived life for a while.

I hope this book has been an encouragement to you. In the next few months, [value-up.org/student](http://value-up.org/student) will have more suggestions and encouragement for you to make a difference in your school.

# Other Books by Mike Donahue

## [www.value-up.org](http://www.value-up.org)

- 1. Talking to Brick Walls:** Anyone that has ever tried to communicate with a teenager on hot button subjects such as drugs, alcohol, sex or bullying knows that it can be very difficult. Mike Donahue will share secrets with you on how to get through to them. Whether you are a parent or a youth leader, you will thoroughly enjoy the straight talk and practical advice in this book.
- 2. Reinventing My Normal:** Is there such a thing as normal in the world today? This book will help you develop the skills necessary to survive and reinvent your normal when your normal may have been shattered. It goes beyond just surviving, but actually doing something with your life that matters. This book will challenge you to take some time and examine your own life, and assist you in taking the necessary steps to reinvent your normal.
- 3. Hidden Scars, A conversation about cutting:** In this book are answers to the real questions being asked, and solutions to problems that often seem unsolvable. This book will reveal the underlying issues and unmask the truth that can so often be disguised. Recognizing the issue of cutting is a great first step, but beating the issue takes wrapping your hands around the right mechanism. Until now, holding a tool in your hand might mean you are thinking about the decision to cut. By purchasing this book, you are holding in your hand the right tool, and the proper mechanism to answer your questions, solve your issue with cutting, and heal your hidden scars.