

## 1 UNDERSTAND THE NEED TO IMPROVE

*It takes courage to grow up  
and become who you really are.*  
e.e. cummings

The writing on the bridge abutment said, "Come to my LIFE SUCKS party."

I passed it every day on my way to school. After a few weeks, on a cold December morning I saw an addition to the invitation that said, "Tuesday - 4:20."

In the following days I kept building images of what that gathering of obviously disgruntled teens would be like. My mind held visions of pseudo-punk, pot smoking baggy-jeaned kids huddled in one of the semi-secluded parks near us.

The disconnect between how cool they felt and the reality of how shallow and depressed their lives actually were, was ominous and rather dark.

### **A bridge to nowhere.**

Near Azusa, California, there is a bridge that goes nowhere.

Literally.

No road goes to it, nor does one leave on the other side. The bridge is a result of political boondoggling in which considerable effort and energy were exerted with no real destination in sight.

The bridge got built.

The purpose remains hidden.

Lots of energy and work resulted in a nowhere trip.

Real bridges go somewhere. They have a purpose. Real bridges take the traveler over a hazard and actually make progress towards a real destination.

### **Where does your bridge go?**

In theory, your high school years are a bridge between the hormone-developing middle school time towards the maturity and reward of adulthood. In early adulthood you develop more fully the attitudes, philosophies and characteristics which govern your active life.

Real bridges we cross can be beautiful, providing a picturesque view of canyons and rivers while leading to new and exciting adventures. Some bridges are ancient and decaying, appearing unsafe for any kind of traffic. Those bridges may not be perfect, but they do get us to the other side.

What is the bridge of your life like right now?

Is it an exciting ride, leading to a better place?

Or do you feel like joining the "LIFE SUCKS" party?

If your life is going nowhere, it is time to fix it.

Get a grip on reality and join life in a way that has meaning, excitement and maybe even an adventure or two along the way.

### **What defines you?**

You are not defined by what goes in, but what comes out.

Our thinking is affected by the multitude of signals that enter our minds through our senses. Those stimuli and events that enter our being must be run through an inner filter that controls the person we become.

Like it or not, people perceive our worth and importance by what comes out of us, by the actions and attitudes we display. We may claim to have great intentions in any area of life, but what we do determines who we are. We may *want* to accomplish tasks in a timely fashion, but if we are consistently late on getting things done, others perceive us as irresponsible and unreliable.

We eventually become defined by those thoughts we allow to live in our minds. When those thoughts are good and beneficial, there is a high probability of becoming the person we have defined by our inner musings.

### **The struggle for control.**

It is impossible to have total control over all the items that enter our mind. You just can't escape certain signals.

- Highway billboards
- Language of co-workers
- Unexpected expletives

Other signals we have more control over, but not necessarily total control.

- Television and print advertisement
- Movie previews
- Radio programs

At the other extreme are those things over which we have full control.

- Our reading
- Movies we attend
- Music we listen to
- Television programs we watch
- People we hang out with

In the realm of defining yourself, it is obvious that what goes into your mind has the potential to determine the type of person you become. It is totally up to you to decide whether that determination is positive or

negative. Your internal filter needs to be highly alert to deciding which things stick and which ones get discarded.

### **What others think does matter.**

There is one other component of the melding of external and internal stimuli and thoughts that determine the kind of person we become. Some people inadvertently become the kind of person they *think* other people think they are.

The conclusion of defining yourself is fairly simple. What other people think about you does have the potential to define who you are. Similarly, other external stimuli can also affect your overall persona. Most importantly, the person you are on the outside should be decided by who you are on the inside, and that inner person is fully under your control.

Or at least it can be.

The first step in defining yourself is to understand that you alone are in charge of who you are and who you become.

It isn't always easy to take charge of your inner self, but it is possible. It is possible, and you can acquire the courage and strength to live better from the inside out.

### **Today does affect tomorrow.**

Dennis Miller, a former SNL participant, Monday Night Football analyst and now radio talk show host ends his broadcasts with the sales phrase, "always be closing." Bringing the deal to closure is the goal of all good sales people.

"Always be improving" is a good adage by which to live life.

Many athletes think if you aren't getting better you are always falling behind. The great Negro League baseball pitcher Satchel Paige is often quoted as saying "Don't look back. Someone might be gaining."

You don't have to be messed up to want to or need to get better. It's okay to want to go from being good to great... or even more.

We have seen many really good middle school students both academically and athletically be content with "naturally" good at grades six through eight and the ability to dominate easily in sports. Life comes easily at that level and they stop working at improving. Other students who aren't so good then start working hard, and learn good study and practice habits. Soon come grades ten through twelve and the hard workers suddenly leap ahead of the "great" middle school kid. Too late, the lessons that lead to improvement come, and excellence at one level turns into mediocrity at the upper level.

### **Practical steps to successful improvement.**

Life is an enigma. What works today probably won't work tomorrow, but what we do today has an effect on our lives in the future. Knowing how things change, we should always be pursuing progress and improvement in our lives.

There are specific principles we should constantly be addressing.

- Realize that progress does not mean perfection.
- Seek to develop a worthwhile vision of how we want to live life.
- Continue to develop goals to achieve that vision.
- Keep your options open in crucial areas of life.
- Always be creating new options.

### **Don't let your age become a prison.**

There are some universal excuses that many people use to delay doing the things that lead to improvement.

- I'm too young.
- I'll do it later.
- I think I'm too old.

Mark Zuckerberg didn't think he was too young when he launched Facebook at the age of 19. Now a multi-billionaire, it's obvious he made the right decision to risk doing something great.

On the other end of life Colonel Sanders created Kentucky Fried Chicken when he was well over sixty, and Peter Roget wrote the *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* at the age of 73.

People who fear entering any type of change or goal are mostly unknown and still wallowing in mediocrity. Not starting is a larger catastrophe than starting then failing. History is filled with risk-takers who had several failures, but then emerged victorious. Abe Lincoln and Thomas Edison are two outstanding examples of men who struggled through many failures, yet each emerged victorious as their imagination and perseverance brought vision into reality.

### **SUCCESS STEPS**

An old saying tells us, "Every journey begins with the first step."

The journey of life improvement you are starting may seem daunting, even a little fearful. But it is possible. You can take some definitive action to help assure your success.

- Have the courage to set strong goals.
- Commit to working continuously to achieve those goals.
- Risk sharing with someone you trust and respect your vision for improvement.