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Al's Book!

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INSPIRING TRUE STORY OF VICTORY OVER A PARALYZING MOTORCYCLE CRASH

MAKING PEOPLE



Speaker: Starting his journey, Al focused on learning to communicate with the light of his own experiences.

Al now shares refreshingly authentic and humorous stories following the devastating motorcycle crash in 1980, that

...and back of a copy of this book. We don't get to choose if our book is leather bound, gold embossed back, but what the pages say is up to us. The unforgettable lessons in this book are:

- Accept the book you've been given. Believe you can write a happy ending and care about others.
- Goal Setting: Life is what you make it—always has been, always will be.
- Self Esteem Bucket: What you say about others affects your own self esteem bucket. If you say negative things, it pokes a hole in your bucket and the bucket of person you are talking to or about.
- Focus on the blessings you have, not what you don't have.
- Lighten Up: Don't take yourself so seriously. This will help you to care about others by knowing it's not all about YOU!
- Mentoring: By helping others through their hard times, you can learn solution based techniques, plus you begin to see your own challenges in a new light! It's all about perspective.

#### PRAISE FOR *Achieving NO LIMITS—Embracing Change*

"Powerful, courageous and honest author Al Foxx takes you through an incredible and inspiring journey of self-discovery that leaves you with a feeling of gratitude and self awareness. *Achieving NO LIMITS—Embracing Change* is insightful, educational and a must read!"

—JENNIFER KRAVITZ, FETTER (PARENT STRATEGIST) FOUNDER OF CREATE HAPPY KIDS, CreateHappyKids.com

"Al Foxx helped me understand the challenges that people with disabilities have, individuals who have lost all that they previously held dear and are now challenged to reinvent themselves. Now I understand the courage it takes to not let what others say or think of you, affect how you are yourself. *Achieving NO LIMITS—Embracing Change* shows the reader that with the right attitude and faith, *Winners Don't Quit*."

—EARL BELL, AUTHOR OF *WINNING AT BASEBALL AND BUSINESS*

"Al Foxx is one of the most inspiring and moving speakers of our day. He has made me realize that to be happy in life, we need to focus on the things that we have instead of dwelling on the things that we don't have."

—PATRICK SNOW, INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR OF *CREATING YOUR OWN DESTINY*

www.WinnersDontQuitAssociation.com



Achieving NO LIMITS—Embracing Change

AL FOXX

# Achieving NO LIMITS

## EMBRACING CHANGE



# AL FOXX

Founder—Winners Don't Quit Association  
International Inspirational Humorist & Keynote Speaker

# Achieving

# NO LIMITS

## Embracing Change

## Al Foxx

Founder, Winners Don't Quit Association

Motivational Humorist and Keynote Speaker



"I was amazed at Al Foxx's ability to recognize the many mentors he had in his life throughout his adversity and struggle through major changes. It makes me want to become a mentor and help others in that way too. I would definitely recommend Al's book for anyone who wants to be inspired with the right attitude, the attitude of gratitude."

**--Mike Margolis**

**Author of *The Athlete within You***

**[www.TheAthleteWithinYou](http://www.TheAthleteWithinYou)**

"Al Foxx tells his inspiring story with honesty and humility. I walked away from reading *Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* convinced that no matter what tragic events may happen my ability to react has no limits. I have the power to respond with acceptance, belief, and compassion. It's my choice."

**--Michael Buschmohle**

**President of Applause Associates & International Speaker/Trainer**

*Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* describes how Foxx reached self-acceptance and became a humble and gracious man as a result of becoming a positive person. *Achieving NO LIMITS- Embracing Change* is moving, inspiring and unforgettable--the kind of book you want to read with a hi-lighter!"

**--Shirin Sherkat, Psy.D.**

**Parent Strategist, Author & Founder of *Create Happy Kids***

**[www.CreateHappyKids.com](http://www.CreateHappyKids.com)**

"*Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* is a true inspirational gift of hope for anyone who reads it. Foxx provides a faith born optimism that gives people the courage to not only dream big, but to realize their dreams. He is not a quitter and he provides some very basic and really quite simple life formulas that have big impact. For example, his presentation to 'focus on what you have, and not what you don't have' actually changed my life. Another one he discusses is to 'focus on your progress, not toward the perfection you would like', yet another jewel of wisdom that touched me. His humility and the joy and gratitude exhibited in his daily life are truly refreshing. I wish I could bottle it up! When reading this book, you'll realize he writes the way he speaks, from the heart. Mr. Foxx is truly authentic--the real deal."

**--Bonnie Richter-Robinson**

**Executive Director, North Region EMS & Trauma Care Council**

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# INTRODUCTION



*"Who are you?" said the caterpillar ...  
"I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present," Alice  
replied rather shyly, "at least I know who I  
was when I got up this morning, but I think  
I must have changed several times since then."*

—Lewis Carroll

*"Nothing heals like the power of a true story. When someone is speaking from the inside of an event, they are speaking from a personal authority that pierces the veil of darkness. On the other side of that veil lies the light of hope, for them and for everyone else."*

**AND NOTHING IS MORE UPSETTING** to your life than unexpected change, yet nothing is as important to your survival as an individual as change. On the front end, our resistance to change is determined by whether we perceive the change as positive or negative and how severe the impact of the change on our lives. On the back-end, it is about how well we are equipped to deal with the change. Our attitude and ultimate acceptance of change is a function of how much resistance we invest in the change as well as the resiliency and coping skills we have developed within our support system. As the Borg in Star Trek would say, "Resistance (*to Change*) is Futile." Change is constant, and we all need to know how to deal with it.

Are you afraid of the unknown? Do you have to believe and feel that the risks of standing still are greater than those of moving forward? Do you fear not being able to make the transition very well, perhaps fail? We tend to like routines. Familiarity breeds comfort.

I understand these feelings of the unknown and impending failure. For many years following my crash, I dealt with great loss and great change. My biggest

fear was that the doctors could be right, that I may never walk, talk understandably or drive. I feared that I would never bring value to anyone in my life, that I would be an anchor and that my support system, the people I loved and cared about, would resent me.

The jewels of experience that are shared in *Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* prove two life lessons, the power of resiliency (coping skills) and the life-changing influence of choosing to have a positive attitude.

My life experience alone is not sufficient to prove how strong and how resilient the human spirit is. Many others have gone and continue to go through more trying times than I can even imagine. In proving the strength of the human spirit, I mention some of these individuals, but my experiences with despair, loss and rehabilitation are the only ones I can speak to with authority, so my story is where we begin.

I will also prove to you the unbeatable power of an attitude that accepts the things we cannot change. Part of the skills we need in life is about being positive; standing firm, not giving up and making changes in our lives. Positive thinking is real and does work, but it must be balanced with a willingness to accept the inevitable.

Sometimes we need to accept that we cannot have everything we want and that events will not always turn out as we would prefer. We must know that there are some realities we must accept, no matter how painful. I believe that most of our suffering in life comes from fighting what cannot be changed. Learning to focus on what we have instead of what we don't have replaces our immobility with mobility and springboards us back into life. One of the happiest moments you will ever have is when you feel the courage to accept what you cannot change.

*Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* follows the plunge from my heights to my depths. Then it explores how I and numerous others have pushed past our comfort zones and faced our fears, finding opportunities for learning and positive growth.

This book shows how our reaction to change is something everyone can control. Once accepted, change can be empowering. We may frequently not have control over the change itself, but we always have control over our reactions to it. Mastering the art of acceptance removes us from the ranks of the victims, those who are controlled by changes, and places us among the victors, those who respond to change by using their power to control their attitudes.

If you want to respond to change with the confidence of a seasoned Sea Captain who looks into a squall and shouts, “*Do your worst for I shall do mine*” then this book is for you; it will give you the steps to build such an attitude. How we habitually respond to our obstacles determines our destiny. The strength of our attitude determines how many obstacles we overcome. That sounds bold, even arrogant, but the people portrayed in this book are proof!

You may have been told that you will only reach a certain level of recovery, yet there are thousands of survivors that surpass the expectations of the healthcare system or other baseline standards. One of the challenges to recovery is that there are no cookie-cutter solutions for rehabilitation. Each individual’s injury and healing are different. I believe, in most cases, you can accomplish more than the professionals in the field tell you. All they have to go by are averages, but if you have a stronger support system than average, and you’re willing to work harder than average, you can achieve more than average.

While the challenges many of us face are bigger than anything we imagined, the universal solution is as simple as **A-B-C**. To clearly understand the formula for success that I discovered through my many mentors and role models imagine that we are all born with a book of blank pages.

**A** is for *Accept the book you have been given*. How thick the book is or whether it is gold-embossed leather bound hardback or a cheaply glued paperback is not up to us, but what the pages will say *is* up to us.

*Achieving NO LIMITS-Embracing Change* describes how to live a story people want to read because it fills them with inspiration and hope in their own possibilities. And it shows how following certain steps enabled myself and others

to live hopeful lives and write happy endings. Accepting ourselves and others enables us to be our best and to enjoy positive relationships.

**B** is for ***Believe you can write a happy ending.*** Believing we can write happy endings enables us to bounce back from anything. We have choices. In other words, we are in control of our attitudes, which puts us in control of our stories.

**C** has been the most significant for me. ***Caring about others*** took the focal point off me and expanded my world of self-inflicted isolation. The real keys to happiness are the intimate connections we have with the people in our lives.

The key to happiness has nothing to do with money, fame, beauty, etc. Happiness is founded on how the people around us treat us. If the people in our lives treat us well, chances are that we are happy. If not, chances are we may not be happy.

My hope is that reading this book inspires you with a *Winners Don't Quit* spirit and attitude. The most important aspect of this spirit is that you will feel and act like a winner because you don't quit **A**ccepting, **B**elieving and **C**aring.

Using all three *Winners Don't Quit* formulas (**A-B-C**), results in complete acceptance of the way you are and complete acceptance of the way everybody else is; thereby building the connections we need for eternal happiness.

If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough. The world will stand aside to let anyone pass who knows where they are going.

There is one thing that we all have in common. At some point, we all face life-changing events. It's not a matter of *if*, but *when*. I have come to realize that the difference in our success or failure is not what changes. Changes do not determine our destiny. How we respond to change determines where we end up and how we get there.

My hope and desire for you is that your life book includes much happiness!  
***Good luck to you!***



## CHAPTER 1

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### What Speed Limit?

*The measure of faith is the degree to which we are willing to risk telling the truth about what we used to be like, what happened to us and what we are like now.*

**—Pat Mana—“Spiritual Infusion”**

(VMI Publications 2009)

**DO YOU REMEMBER** when you were nineteen-years-old? What were your hopes, dreams and thoughts of your future? What kind of values and goals did you have? When I was nineteen, I had an idyllic life. Everything was going my way. I had everything I wanted or needed. I loved cars, motorcycles, and one special gal.

My job as a hot-tar roofer earned me enough money to customize my Camaro and buy a brand new Yamaha 650 Special. To make life even sweeter, I had a gorgeous girlfriend named Cheryl who wore my diamond engagement ring.

She loved to ride on the back of my bike, with her arms wrapped around my waist and her bronze hair flying behind us. I felt good. I was glad the Christian school I'd been attending expelled me for smoking weed. Who needed school?

On May 7, 1980, my friend and co-worker Joe Storm and I planned to meet after work and go to a concert. I stopped by Cheryl's house on the way

to meet him. Time flew by when Cheryl and I got together. Before I realized it, I was late, “Oh-no!”

I kissed Cheryl one more time then jumped on my bike. The freedom and joy of my life filled my head and heart as I gunned out of the driveway. Wind screamed past my helmet and tore at my leather jacket as I raced down the street. I should have slowed down, but I sped up.

The orange speedometer needle climbed to vertical. I loved the wind in my face. I gave my bike more gas, more gas. I felt free, happy and powerful. I loved the feeling of being in control! Up ahead, teenagers in baseball uniforms stood around the Lake Washington High School baseball diamond.

Wham!

I never saw the pick-up truck that pulled out of a side street right in front of me. Cars packed both sides of the road. People watching the game had tried to park within walking distance. An illegally parked van blocked the view of drivers approaching a stop sign. We’ve all heard that timing is everything. It sure is! My timing was at exactly the wrong moment. My bike slammed into the truck’s front fender, stopping dead and knocking the truck 12 feet sideways. Police estimates said I was going over twice the speed limit.

I shot over the handlebars like I’d been fired from a circus cannon. My head slammed into the front fender of the truck, cracking my helmet and breaking bones in my face. My limp body crumpled to the pavement. Someone called 911.

My heart never quit beating, but because of massive internal hemorrhaging, my blood pressure was too low to read. Paramedics fit me with pressure pants to help squeeze blood from my legs toward my heart and head, buying some time. Smooth and efficient as a Swiss watch, they laid me on a stretcher, loaded me in the medic unit and raced to Harborview Hospital in Seattle.

I was rushed into surgery where doctors removed my spleen and transfused seven and a half pints of blood into me. Considering that the average medium sized individual has ten to eleven pints of blood, I was in serious trouble. No one knew if I would live or die.

The pastor and his wife from my parents' church came to the hospital to be with my parents. A twenty-four-hour prayer vigil began among church members. After two weeks in critical care, I was still comatose, but my vitals had stabilized so they moved me to a private room.

Because of the type of brain injury I'd sustained, a doctor told my parents to start looking for a convalescent home. The hospital's policy indicated that they would have to move me if I didn't wake up within two more weeks. I'm told that when my primary-care physician heard what had been suggested to my parents, he erupted in anger.

I'm not sure if he got mad because he was the one responsible for making decisions about discharge, or because the other doctor's insensitivity made my parents suffer more than they had to. Either way, I whole-heartedly agree with his reported agitation. Why cause more suffering than there already was?

Tears flooded my mom's eyes and ran down her cheeks as I lay in ICU. The doctor told her, "Even if he lives, he'll never be the same." Physically and mentally, she was warned, I'd be a different person. And there'd be behavior changes, maybe drastic changes.

Several years ago, I discovered that my mother had kept a poetic journal of her thoughts during this period. She sent me these lines that I think of as a *Mother's Prayer*.

**Mother's Prayer**

I'm sorry Lord I thought I was strong.  
I thought I was prepared to face the worst.  
The doctor told me he would never be the same.  
That his intelligence would not reach the same level  
as before the accident.  
That there would be behavior modifications,  
I knew *You* were still in control.  
That out of tragedies, blessings come.  
That no matter what happens,  
*You* can take that thing—that hurt—and  
turn it into something good—turn it into a blessing.

My parents' unwavering faith in God convinced them that blessings would flow from tragedy. Looking back, I realized this provided me courage even though, at the time, I felt nothing but contempt for my situation. Their belief that divine power could rebuild a crushed life gave them strength. Their strength gave me hope. But they were only human. I can't even imagine how they felt when the doctors told them they'd have to start looking for a convalescent home if I didn't wake up soon. My mother's prayer continues:

The doctor's words kept coming back.  
He won't be the same.  
He may need 24-hour nursing care  
When he leaves here,  
You aren't obligated to take care of him  
The rest of his life.  
But it's too early to tell.  
We don't know how much damage was done to the brain.

Thirty-one days after my crash, I began gradually waking up from my coma. Emerging from a coma is not like waking up from regular sleep. My waking up process was slow and gentle. It was like I was slowly surfacing through different layers of consciousness. I heard voices but couldn't understand what was said. There were blurred images of faces peering down

at me and moving away then darkness came again. Consciousness faded in and out. I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or not. Over time, I became aware of my surroundings, staying awake for longer periods of time.

There are amazing stories of coma recovery where brain damaged patients suddenly awaken and start talking to their friends and family. However, these are rare occurrences. In most cases, patients either wake up within a few days or weeks after going into a coma, or remain in a coma or vegetative state for the rest of their lives. I am grateful I woke up after a month and didn't put my parents through more than I had already. I would never have wanted them to be placed in a position to choose a method of care for me the rest of my life or have to decide whether I should live or die.

One result of my crash injuries included paralysis to my larynx, causing my vocal chords to relax and lie together during my month long coma, fusing together. I was asked many questions by the hospital staff, did I know my name; did I know where I was, and so on. Answering these questions blew my mind as my voice was unrecognizable to me and not understandable to others. I sounded like a cross between Sasquatch, a cave man, and a jammed chainsaw. This added more anxiety to my confused, depressed and miserable state of mind.

The "awakening" process is unique for each individual with traumatic brain injury, generally seeing the most improvement within the first six weeks. For a very long time, typically easy things challenged me to choose, understand, remember and use information. Concentrating for more than a few minutes seemed impossible in the beginning. During the first six to eight weeks I started with the emotional and mental age of an infant and slowly progressed. TBI patients can continue to regain cognitive function for many years.

A female therapist would hold up a card with a word printed on it, like “mom” or “home.” I would reach out and touch the card and then look from my mom to my therapist for approval.

That look in his eyes—that longing, forlorn look  
as he struggled to form the word “home”  
the word he had repeated so often the last few days.  
At first he could only searchingly point to  
Then slowly the sound became intelligent.  
Yes, I want to take you home.  
My heart aches when I see  
your longing eyes, your trusting face.  
Is this why God saved your life?  
Is this what God wants me to do  
with my time and energy—  
to take care of a little boy—  
a trusting little boy who just before his nineteenth birthday  
was a strong, healthy, active, handsome, young man?  
You don’t remember your birthday—  
we sang to you as you lay in a coma in ICU.

I was too disoriented to know up from down. I couldn’t pay attention for any length of time and was often agitated and frustrated. These feelings were all based in fear. How was I going to live with a disability? How would I do it? For years, fear kept me locked in a prison of loneliness. Bars of anger, self pity and confusion sunk into a foundation of anxiety kept meaningful relationships out of reach.

When they raised the head of my bed, my head flopped to the side. Disorientation kept me from knowing up from down. When they first put me in a wheelchair, my head flopped to the side, pulling me to the floor where I flopped around like a hooked fish that landed on the dock. For weeks, a strap, called a halo, encircled my head. It was fastened to a vertical bar on the back of my wheelchair. The bar projected a bit higher than my head and kept me upright. My staying upright was more important to Cheryl and my parents than to me since I didn’t know when I wasn’t upright.

My head injury kept me oblivious to how bad things had actually become. About three months after I came out of my coma, I realized with wrecking-ball abruptness just how much things had changed. Looking back I realize now how my crash affected my entire family. When I crashed, so did they in a different way. They all suffered along with me.

There were so many unanswered questions about the long-term effects of brain injury on my ability to function in the real world. The length of time I was in a coma and the duration of loss of memory (amnesia) following my coma were useful in predicting how well I would recover. I woke up from my coma on the long end range of the general length of time, 2 to 4 weeks, with mine being 31 days.

Do you realize how often in life, when we make a choice to do or not to do something, those choices and actions affect others? Have you ever thought, *"This is my life and I can live it as I choose."* I did, but later learned that how I live my life affects others. My brother delayed his plans for college for one year and my parent's lives and dreams were refocused on my rehabilitation, which was long and stressful.

Why this even matters is because the affect I have on others is how they will affect me. We are thereby held accountable for and by the type of energy we put out into the world.

We never know how we affect someone else's life, but we know we do affect others. In the movie, *"It's a Wonderful Life"* George Bailey didn't know how his life had changed others around him until he was able to SEE it. He had changed others for the better. Without him, his brother had died as a child, his mother was an alcoholic and his uncle was a mess. Remember when he lived, *"An angel got his wings."* Yes, George had changed others for the positive.

As a professional speaker now, my attitude is to *"Pay it Forward."* I may not be able to completely pay back my family for helping direct, guide and

steer me through this tragedy, but I can pay it forward to others by sharing what I have learned.



## CHAPTER 18

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### Adapting to Change

*The time to make up your mind about people is never.*

—Grace Kelly

**ACCEPTING PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS** helps people transform themselves so they can adapt to challenging *changes*, so their attitudes flow like an easy stroll on a pleasant Sunday morning. People who have not learned the power of *changing* their attitudes by accepting and adapting are likely to have attitudes that have to be weathered like unpleasant storms.

I don't happen to like excessively cold weather, especially when snow starts sticking to the streets. (Snow should stay in the mountains and on post cards where it belongs.)

If you're like me and live in a part of the country, like Seattle, that experiences more rain than snow, when it snows, the lack of familiarity and preparation makes snow dangerous to drive in.

And if you limp and are prone to falling when it's snowy and icy, as I do, then you can probably understand that it's easy for me to dislike both driving and walking in the stuff. This is where an attitude of acceptance and adaptability works and is beneficial for all concerned.

The first time this became evident to me was when my dear friend Bonnie told me that she loves the snow. She lived in a ski resort for many years and participated in all the winter sports. She said that hearing me complain about the snow and winter weather made her enjoyment of the snow and winter weather difficult. She said that I took the joy away.

Because my relationship with Bonnie is more important to me than the weather, I *changed* my attitude and adapted. I just dress warmer, use my cane, and am more aware of my comments. Manning up my attitude seemed like a more attractive option than complaining about something I could not *change*. Accepting snow is good practice for other things I cannot *change*.

Live and let live. Why should we waste our energy complaining about things we can't *change*? Choose your attitudes about weather and other issues carefully. Acceptance of things outside you starts with accepting yourself. When I'm operating from a foundation of self-acceptance, it's easier to transform myself by adapting my attitude so I avoid unnecessary conflicts.

**Burned Biscuits:** Bonnie shared the following story with me. It is a perfect example of acceptance in its highest form.

When I was a kid, my mom liked to make breakfast food for dinner every now and then. One night, she made breakfast after a long, hard day at work. She served us biscuits and gravy, complete with eggs and sausage. She placed a plate of eggs, sausage and extremely burned biscuits in front of my dad. I remember wondering what he would do.

He reached for his biscuit, smiled at my mom and asked me how my day was at school. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember watching him smear butter and jelly on that ugly burned biscuit. He ate every bite of that thing... never made a face nor said anything!

When I got up from the table that evening, I remember Mom apologizing to Dad for burning the biscuits.

I'll never forget him saying: "Honey, I love burned biscuits every now and then."

Later that night, I went to kiss Daddy good night and I asked him if he really liked his biscuits burned. He wrapped me in his arms and said, "Your Momma put in a hard day at work today and she's real tired. And besides - a little burned biscuit never hurt anyone!"

I've thought about this story many times. Life is full of imperfect things and imperfect people. I'm not the best at anything, except perhaps making the best oatmeal you will ever have. I often forget birthdays and anniversaries, just like everyone else. What I have learned is that accepting each other's imperfections, and choosing to celebrate each other's differences, is a key to creating lasting relationships.

And that's my prayer for you today -- that you will learn to take what you understand as the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of what other people say or do and realize that neither you nor anybody else is perfect. This understanding is essential to being part of a relationship where a burnt biscuit isn't a deal-breaker!

Understanding is the base of any relationship, husband-wife, parent-child or friendship: "Don't give the key to your happiness to someone else - keep it, and be happy." Please pass me a biscuit. Yes, the burned one will *be just fine*.

I'm not saying that life is about winning and losing attitude battles. It's not! Life is about *adjusting* your expectations and your tolerance so you can accept the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of people, so you both feel like winners.

**Childhood Wisdom:** The three year old kindergartner stood just inside my peripheral vision, but I was too focused on coloring with the children sitting at the round table to really see him. The kids had challenged me. They

didn't think I could color as well as a girl who was their reigning coloring champion.

"Can I sit on your knee?" the three-year old finally asked. Several other kindergartners and I sat around the table. I felt completely accepted! I love the attitude children have. They didn't adjust how they spoke to me when they heard my speech impairment. Most of them sounded like they had speech impairments, too. Why do we lose the attitude of a child?

It had been about two years since my crash, and the time I spent volunteering with children were the safest times I knew. They never acted like they thought I was mentally impaired. They never pretended they didn't see me. They couldn't always understand me, but that's OK. I didn't always understand them either.

*Changing* my expectations of myself helped me go from being a physically active teen with one life to a physically impaired person with a completely different, though satisfying life. I never felt as accepted and approved of as when a child wanted to sit on my lap or include me in their coloring contests.

A pastor that spent time with me during this period of my life had two children, a boy and a girl. I think his name was Pastor Mike Brown, but it's been 30 years or more, so I could be way wrong.

Anyway, I remember, like it was yesterday, how I taught the younger of the two to say the alphabet. And I taught the older one to read a few simple words. Mike was amazed, or at least he did a convincing job of acting amazed. The important thing is my memory of the joy I felt at teaching and interacting with those kids.

The beauty of children is their honesty. They say it like they see it. And they see it with the purity of innocence. They don't have any preconceived ideas. They don't have plans or schemes or ulterior motives. They live in the now, and they express themselves freely.

My head injury reduced me to the mental age of an infant. When a child expresses themselves freely, it's called cute. Temper tantrums, of course, are not seen in quite the same light. But, hopefully for the most part, parents simply roll their eyes or blush at some of the things their child says. What else can they do?

But when a grown man behaves with a childlike innocence, I can say from personal experience that he is seen as an immature irritant nobody wants to hang around.

Although it's been long enough since my head injury occurred for me to have grown up and become more mature in my thinking, my best friend Bonnie says I've managed to hang on to some childlike tendencies, like what she identifies as "my innocence" and the occasionally unearned trust I give to people.

She says "they're cute," but I'm given to missing sarcasm and believing things are the way I want them to be. In other words, I'm fairly gullible. So I'm trying to figure out if cute means adorable, immature or a little of both. I wouldn't mind being a little of both.

**Changing Like a River:** Have you ever seen a raging river cascading down a mountain, racing through a channel dug into the very rock? Finally it splashes into a bowl it's dug at the mountain's base. From there, it begins a gentle flow across the surrounding prairie. Rivers have an amazing ability to *change*, to adapt to the land. In many ways, each of us is like a river. We too must adapt and keep flowing, keep moving.

But how do we adapt to horrendous challenges?

In a word, acceptance! Accept the world on the world's terms, like the rivers do. A river doesn't let a rock or a tree trunk stop it. It adapts, going over, under or around them, flowing to its final destination.

Adaptability is the key. Just like a river faces obstacles and keeps on flowing, we also must face obstacles, troubles, disappointments, pains and

keep flowing. Or like a young child who falls. They just get up and keep going like nothing happened.

After my paralyzing motorcycle crash, I faced obstacles and other *changes* no teenager or individual wants to face. I could not talk, could not walk, and could not drive. I didn't want to be paralyzed, a vegetable plucked from the garden of life. Adapting to my *changed* condition was harder than the condition itself.

The key to adapting is accepting. Accepting was the hardest, and the most helpful lesson I've ever learned. Like a river that continues to flow day and night, years of rehabilitation reawakened my spirit and my life began flowing again as I learned to accept my situation.

The recovery I've gained is in proportion to my willingness to accept my condition and flow with it. When I accept what life offers, my life flows. And just as rivers flow toward a final destination like the ocean, acceptance of ourselves and of others allows us to create and flow toward our destiny of love and happiness.

*Acceptance, the act of bringing inner peace, often changes* the outer reality we had to accept. The person we disagreed with, once he feels accepted, may become a trusted friend. The challenge of a difficult new job, once accepted, may lead to a long and satisfying career. Even acceptance of a Toastmaster assignment can lead to an advancement of our poise and confidence.

Every spiritual leader that I'm aware of, whether Divine or of human origin, has something to say about peace and acceptance. The God of my understanding promises to keep His followers in perfect peace because they trust in Him.

## CHAPTER 28

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### Living with Purpose

*Challenging the meaning of life is the truest expression  
of the state of being human.*

—Viktor E. Frankl

**WHY ARE WE HERE ON THIS EARTH?** What is our true purpose in life? These questions have plagued philosophers and ordinary folks for centuries.

Viktor Frankl's central theme was the necessity of finding purpose in life. As he tells the powerful story in *Man's Search for Meaning*, he learned having a purpose was the only way to survive the tortures of a Nazi concentration camp.

He identified three ways of finding meaning in one's life. They are work, love and the one he believed was most important, the ability to rise above oneself.

When faced with tragedy and situations that were unalterable, he believed that a person could escape the feeling of being a helpless victim. The key was to find meaning in the suffering itself and to define a guiding purpose that could change the direction of one's life.

Thrown into the midst of the worst torture and suffering imaginable, subject to arbitrary “selection” for death, living through the grueling work details and lack of food only by mastery of the small tricks of survival, he learned the lesson that would shape his later life and career.

Without a sense of purpose, no one could live for long in those camps. He saw the truth that starkly. Those who could believe in a positive future, or even a single event like liberation from the camp, and who could sustain the will to achieve it, lived. Those who lacked that inner sense of purpose and meaning died. Those who held such an idea in mind could live as long as it lasted. Once it was lost or given up, they died. Learning the art of survival was not enough; there had to be a vision of what came next that transcended all the suffering.

Frankl developed the basis of his psychiatric practice from such extreme experience. He believed – and I share that belief – that all of us need a sense of meaning and purpose not just for bare survival but for fulfillment as human beings. Since I have survived after my motorcycle crash and decades of living with a disability that sense of meaning and the hope it engenders must have been much stronger than I imagined.

Getting beyond survival, beyond the goal of recovery – that’s where I am now, shaping a new future while trying to make the most of the life that fills and surrounds me. What sense do you have of the role of will and purpose in getting past depression?

Finding purpose in life that goes beyond our personal needs is often mentioned as a major step in overcoming depression. That’s a hard thing to imagine, though, when we’re in the middle of a severe relapse, and survival is the only goal in sight.

Yet, one of the hallmarks of depression is loss of motivation to do anything because we may feel that our life is meaningless. *We* are



meaningless, empty, worthless, bad, nothing but a burden. There's no sense of future, no purpose to give us hope and help pull us back to an active life.

A sense of purpose goes along with building hope for the future, hope for recovering from depression and getting your life back. Even though we can't focus on it when we're struggling, hope and purpose are basic for regaining a sense of who we are.

Victor Frankl said that the fundamental drive in human existence is the need to find meaning in life in general, not just in your life. He calls this *transcendent or divine* meaning, one that includes us in a greater whole.

Many find this greater meaning and purpose in God and spirituality or service to country or activism for social good. Frankl believes that having a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment are the by-products of attempting to fulfill a larger meaning. Putting yourself into an activity that goes beyond you can make the difference between just getting by and feeling fully alive again.

With that being said, also remember that our worth is not proportional to what we achieve in life. Part of depressive thinking and our inner critical voice keeps telling us that it is and that we always fall short. This is a classic example of *all or nothing thinking*, and it's an ever-present danger for the battered self-esteem.

How do we find this larger purpose if we feel we don't have one? Starting at any level is important, and support groups build on our own need for help. We may look at them only as a means to feel better ourselves, but what we're doing is helping ourselves by helping others.

What drew me into it was the concerned and non-judgmental response I got the first time I spoke up about my problems. As the group continued to meet over time, we would share the good feeling when one of us made progress and empathize with anyone having a tough time. We had all had similar experiences, and that helped us talk freely.

This may not sound like finding a meaning in life. That phrase suggests a great epiphany, a call from on high to some noble duty. But the reality is down to earth. You start at a level that feels good and supportive and see where you go from there.

Alcoholics Anonymous has always understood the power of one addict helping another. Both are supported and both are doing something that goes beyond their immediate personal need. That's why service became one of the three pillars of recovery from AA's earliest days.

I doubt you can live without a belief that there is some purpose to your life. It's so common to hear people say that they want to make a difference. They want recognition, but they also want a sense that they're doing something that will help others as well.

This may be the farthest thing from your mind when you're absorbed in a depression nightmare. But I feel it's one of those anchor points I need so that I can look ahead with hope.

Does this idea make sense in your work to get rid of depression? Have you been able to find a meaning and purpose that helps you keep your bearings during the worst moments?

Why does it matter whether or not your life actually has a purpose? Let's take a few steps back and creep up on this question....

If you complete a task, and there's no overall important context for that task, then the task doesn't really matter. So you watch a TV show. It doesn't make a difference — there's no larger context for it. But if you complete a task that's part of a larger project, now it suddenly matters, at least within the context of the project. If you create a web page, and it's a part of a new web site you're building, that task matters. It takes you closer to the realization of the completed project.

Now when does a project matter? Projects matter only within the context of a larger goal. If your goal is to increase your income, and you complete a

project that is likely to facilitate it, the project matters. It brings you a step closer to the realization of your goal. But if you complete a project like digging a trench through your backyard, and there's no real goal you're trying to accomplish, then the project is pointless. There's no meaning behind it.

For me, simple projects put together, made a big difference for my goal to become more independent. One sunny spring day, long after discovering the adaptive strength of accepting myself and my disability, I gripped my walking stick, hobbling and limping through a beautifully wooded section of a national park. Feeling somewhat philosophical, I wondered about the well-known story of the purpose of an oak tree.

**The Oak's Purpose is to Grow:** Let's take a look at the life of an oak tree. It starts as an acorn. It is warmed by the spring sun, the falling rains, and dark nights. Deep inside it starts growing. Finally, the stress of being pent up in a little shell is greater than its fear of what's outside. Tentatively, at first, it starts to grow. As the seasons pass, it gets bigger and stronger.

The oak is battered by the typical storms of life. One storm is so severe the tree is disabled, a huge limb torn away by lightning. What does it do then? Does it curl up and refuse to grow, or will it adapt? Without a thought, it absolutely adapts.

It continues to live, to grow, putting more and more energy into the limbs that remain. In time, it produces acorns that will produce more oak trees. So what is the oak tree's purpose? It seems that the oak's purpose is to be the best, biggest, greenest, healthiest oak that it can be in the situation in which it finds itself. In this state, it is best suited to provide food and shelter to forest denizens.

**It's About Growing toward Our Purpose:** Holding my cane squarely in front of me, I lean forward on it and look down a large hill, over miles of lush green trees and bushes. A charred, partially rotted stump injects the

reality of death. Tiny new plants growing in the rich nutrients of the decaying stump testify that its existence has always been about growth, first its own. The bigger it got the more food and shelter it provided to forest denizens. In death, its existence is still about growth, the growth of others.

One definition of life is growth. When we stop growing, we start decaying. But, through our legacies and through books, films, memoirs and journals we can still pass on wisdom to grow by, to live on, to generations that come behind us.

When I apply this meaning of life to things I come across, it makes sense. Our purposes in life do not change because we become rich or poor, disabled or athletic, Christian or atheist, fat or thin or any other thing. Our purpose is to nourish the lives around us—whether our own offspring or others. The lesson of the oak tree shows that growing and evolving and helping others do the same is what life has always been about.

Consider a grove of ancient oak trees. To a member of the British or Irish priestly class, the Druids, oaks could represent a sacred place of worship. To a craftsman, they may represent a table or a chair; to a logger, they may mean a day's work. In short, life has the meaning you or I give it.

***Disabilities Change Nothing:*** *Disabilities or any other challenges we face, regardless of their significance, have little to do with whether or not we recognize and fulfill our purpose. As I grow old enough to consider past choices, I'm realizing that we're held accountable by ourselves, if no one else, for the ways we spend our time. Since I've recognized and begun pursuing my purpose like it's a responsibility instead of something silly or vague, life seems so much richer.*

How will your eulogy read?

I imagine I'm at a funeral. It doesn't matter if it's in a church, chapel or crematorium. I wander in a bit late. The place is fairly full. I sit on the side and look around and recognize a sea of familiar faces. The service starts.

Suddenly it strikes me—this is my funeral! My best friend stands to give the eulogy.

My interest is captured. I pay strict attention to what she might say. Will she say what I hope she says? Will she say that I lived as though growing and contributing to the growth of others were sacred responsibilities? Will she say I cared about others?

I'm not a know-it-all expert; far from it, I'm brain damaged. I procrastinate, I can't help it. I get distracted by many unimportant projects, and shiny objects. I'm not as disciplined as I'd like to be.

But because I'm a relentless observer of what makes for a remarkable life, I have discovered what it takes to lead a life that counts. Judging from some of the people I've met who live with a sense of regret and hopelessness, it's obvious that we often make mistakes in the pursuit of a meaningful life. But it doesn't have to be that way.

My defined purpose is to *live consciously and courageously, to resonate with love and compassion, to awaken the great spirits within others, and to leave this world in peace*. To clarify what this means to me, I arranged it in the following chart. Sharing my physical and emotional experience, strength and hope all over the US and Canada is one project that fulfills my purpose in life. In a nutshell, my purpose is to:

<b>Live consciously</b>	Be aware of how my words and actions affect myself and others.
<b>...and courageously.</b>	Be humble enough to make amends when I say or do something that hurts someone.
<b>Resonate with love.</b>	Loving others is the best way to receive love.
<b>Have compassion.</b>	Have concern for others that is based on their comfort and not my expectations.

<b>Awaken the possibilities within others.</b>	Remember that a true winner treats others like they're winners, too.
<b>Live in peace by learning from the oak.</b>	The oak's purpose is to grow strong and to contribute to the growth of others.

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ng and accepting my purpose makes life a lot more meaningful. Regardless of the fortunate or the unfortunate things that have happened to me, I have a purpose. There's a reason to get up and do my best each day. My purpose is bigger than me. It's to contribute to the growth of everyone in my life.

We'll always have pressing concerns to address if we want to survive in this world, because life is tough.

Life will continually tell you that you can't do it. That it's too tough or even impossible. But if you're purposely living with a purpose, step back and listen carefully. You'll hear HOPE whispering: "Keep trying. You can do it. Remember: ***Winners Achieve NO LIMITS because Winners Don't Quit!***"

## Speaker Testimonials

*“Al Foxx has one of the most unique stories I have ever heard. He will make you laugh, cry and think. If you get a chance to hear him speak (or read his books), stop what you are doing and run to sign up. You will thank me.”*

**Mark Matteson, Best-Selling Author of *Freedom from Fear***

[www.sparkingsuccess.net/](http://www.sparkingsuccess.net/)

*“The response by all levels of the several hundred staff in attendance was overwhelming! The content of your message was matched by the way in which it was delivered. For many years in our County, we have been trying to point out that “I am not my disability”. Your presence in our community put the exclamation point on that concept.”*

**Michael McCartan, Executive Director, St. Clair County Community Mental Health** [www.sccmh.org/](http://www.sccmh.org/)

*Al just recently spoke at The Boeing Co at the Everett Site per a request from the Fab North Diversity Council. He delivered a message that totally captivated the audience’s attention. He has the ability to make you laugh one moment, and then cry the next. I would highly recommend Al to speak before any kind of audience, blue collar, white collar or executive.*

**Hank Meyers veteran Boeing Team leader** [www.boeing.com/](http://www.boeing.com/)

*Al Foxx was the keynote speaker at the annual spring HUG conference in Seattle. HUG (Healthcare User Group) is made up of Health Payors from all over the United States. Al's presentation was extremely motivating, inspirational, humorous, and most importantly touched the hearts of those in attendance. Al stayed to sign his book and talk with each one on an individual basis. As President of the HUG Board, I was lucky enough to have many come up to me and thank me for inviting Al to be our guest speaker.”*

**Denny Kinkead, President of HUG Board,** [www.hugconferences.com](http://www.hugconferences.com)