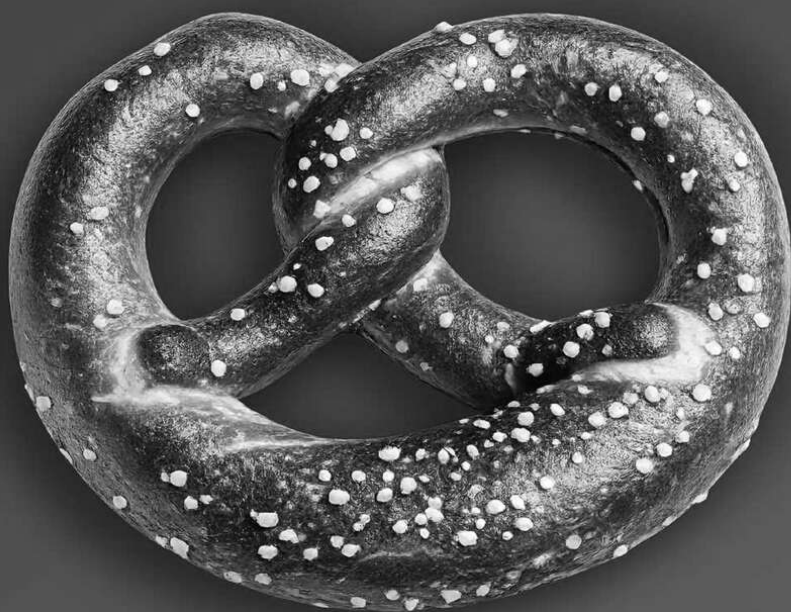


the knot

problems can be solved



SETH GODIN

foreword by Mel Robbins

The Knot

Also by Seth Godin

Linchpin

The Dip

The Song of Significance

What to Do When It's Your Turn

This Is Strategy

The Practice

The Knot

Problems Can Be Solved

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Unknotted

Name the problem

See the systems

Find the entanglements

Embrace the constraints

Acknowledge a situation

Tell the truth

Share your theory of change

Design with intention and practical empathy

Organize the others

Ship the work

Persist

*The easiest thing to do with our freedom is pretend it doesn't
exist.*

**Name the baggage, drop the baggage, and ship the
work.**

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Foreword

Hey, I'm Mel Robbins. Welcome to *The Knot* by Seth Godin.

I am so honored to be here with you right now. The fact that Seth asked me to welcome you into his book—I gotta tell you, I have been a fan of Seth's work for over two decades.

In addition to devouring his twenty-one bestsellers, which together are like a master class in *everything*, my husband and many members of my team have also earned their alternative MBAs from Seth's legendary altMBA program. Seth is the person who has taught me more about marketing, decision-making, leadership, and being influential than anyone else on this planet.

In fact, the reason why the *Mel Robbins Podcast* is one of the largest podcasts in the world is because Seth's wisdom is woven through every single decision that we make. It's almost impossible for me to quantify the impact that his work has had on me personally and professionally. It's infused into everything that I do—the way that I think, how I create art, how I show up to the world, and the impact that *I* want to make.

And *The Knot*, which you're about to read right now—holy cow, is this going to have an impact on *you*! It will transform you into a better version of yourself. The fact that you're here with this book tells me something about you. You're the kind of person who wants to create a better life, who wants to make a difference, who has something to say.

And you know that learning how to make better decisions is an important part of that, because your life is the result of the decisions that you make. So if you struggle with overwhelm or

indecision, or you constantly question your choices or have a lot of doubts, this book is going to give you the frameworks that liberate you to do more incredible work.

I know what it feels like to be stuck—to want something so badly and still not move toward it. It's so frustrating when you're trying to create something and you can't get out of your own way. It feels like a knot, a knot that's inside you, that's binding you up and keeping you stuck.

That's why you're in the right place, right now. As you read, Seth will name the thing that I've watched trip up thousands of people. See, you're not stuck because you lack talent or resources. You're stuck because you're trying to hold on to two things that can't coexist. And he's going to tell you what these two things are. You need to know them, because they create this invisible tug-of-war that you don't even realize. But once Seth reveals them, everything will shift for you.

This book will give you language for something you felt your whole life but couldn't quite articulate. So pat yourself on the back for making a really good decision to be here. As you read, I want you to really take in and consider the truth of what Seth is teaching you.

And then, sit back and watch the magic that happens when you finally let go of the rope.

Part I

The Knot

Two thousand five hundred years ago, a young man named Alexander rode into a small city in central Turkey. On the outskirts of town, he encountered an ox cart, tied to a post with an intricate knot.

The legend was that anyone who could untie the knot would become great, the ruler of many lands. The twenty-two-year-old looked at a puzzle that had stumped everyone for decades, ignored the knot entirely, and asked, “What’s this pin doing here?”

Once he removed the pin at the center, the entanglements of the knot were instantly apparent. He could see both ends of the rope and easily untie it.

He didn’t cut the rope or resort to violence. Instead, he removed the complexity that concealed the problem. The pin wasn’t part of the knot, but for as long as the pin was at the center, it couldn’t possibly be untied.

Problems can be solved.

Wanting Two Things at Once

We’ve all felt stuck. Stuck with competing options, stuck with difficult choices, and most of all, stuck in impossible situations.

Every day, smart, dedicated people find themselves stuck between two things they want, unable to move toward either.

There's a philosophical riddle about a donkey, standing exactly halfway between a pile of carrots and a pail of water. The donkey is hungry *and* thirsty. But the carrots are in one direction, and the water is in another. He can't move toward the water because the carrots are over there. And he can't move to the carrots because the water is in the other direction.

Unable to choose, the donkey stands still. And stands still. And eventually starves to death while dying of thirst.

No actual donkey would be this foolish.

But we are. All the time.

We want to innovate without really changing anything. We want to move fast and still be certain we'll get it right. We want to finish the marathon without getting tired. We want to launch a business without risking our savings.

We hold on to the job we've invested years in while dreaming about the career we actually want.

We can't do both. So we succeed at neither.



BURIDAN'S DONKEY.

The donkey doesn't starve because he can't choose. He starves because he *won't*.

That's what this book is about: the hidden forces that keep us paralyzed. Stuck with things we say we want but that don't make us happy.

We are like all the people who looked at the knot before Alexander came along. Trapped in their frames of reference, unable to see where the entanglements were, they gave up. We do this all the time—not with ox carts but with our projects, our organizations, and our lives. We tangle ourselves in problems that feel unsolvable. We pull at the visible loops. We work harder at the part we can see.

Meanwhile, there's a pin at the center. Something we added, or inherited, or simply failed to notice. It's not actually part of the problem itself. But as long as the pin is there, we can't possibly find our way past it.

Problems Worth Solving

Problems are uncomfortable. They demand our attention and drain our energy. They involve risk and stress. It would be easier to accept things as they are.

Except that problems are also how we create value. Every service, every organization, every meaningful contribution begins as someone's problem. The doctor solves the problem of illness. The architect solves the problem of shelter. The teacher solves the problem of ignorance.

Each time we solve a problem for someone, we earn the chance to solve more of them. That's not just true for businesses—it's true for families, for communities, for careers. The people who matter most in our lives are usually the ones who helped us with our problems.

This is a book about finding the problems worth our time and then actually solving them.

But here's what makes this difficult: Persistent problems—the ones that have been around for a while—aren't waiting around because nobody has worked on them. They persist because something is holding them in place. A system. A hidden constraint. An entanglement we haven't named.

Consider a problem like allocating and paying for health care in the US. People agree there's a problem. Many of the brightest minds with the purest hearts have tried to solve it. But the useful solutions require agreement on changing not just a single system but a network of entanglements. Until we grapple successfully with those entanglements, the knot will persist.

Some obstacles are structural. Systems and institutions and incentives that push back against change. The powerful trick is to learn to see them.

Many other obstacles are internal. They're the pins we've driven through the center of our own knots.

They look like good judgment. They feel like responsibility. They sound like "I can't do that because . . ." followed by something that seems reasonable. A commitment we made. A role we've adopted. A fear we haven't examined.

"I can't leave this job that's making me miserable because people are counting on me to stay and protect them. And my family's security depends on my salary."

The stickiest entanglements don't feel like traps. They feel like facts.

The entanglements borrow authority from external circumstances. They push us to be reasonable and take the easy path. And so we do. And then we wonder why the problem won't budge.

It turns out that the difficult route might be the right one. Not because it's noble to suffer but because the difficult route

is often where the answer is hiding—past the pin that everyone else neglected to touch.

Avoiding the Donkey Trap

We've heard the clues, but we rarely notice them:

This organization is committed to innovation within our established best practices.

We need to move fast on this rebrand, but the stakes are high and we need to get it right.

I want to finish the marathon, so I need to train enough to avoid getting tired.

I want to refocus our project, but my boss isn't ready for that conversation.

Customer service is our number-one priority, as long as we keep the stock price up.

I want to cook like a chef, but I don't have time to do something inconvenient.

I want to have a job I love, but I've invested so much in my education that I can't stop being a lawyer.

We're waiting until we have the right person before we move forward.

I just need to get through this busy season, and then I'll have time to focus on what matters.

Each of these is a donkey trap. A person or an organization torn between apparently incompatible goals. The donkey can't drink, he says, because the carrots are over there. I can't be over there because I also need to be over here.

Incompatible goals and a lack of clarity seduce us into the knot. We tell ourselves that we're being reasonable. Responsible. Careful.

But we're not stuck because we can't move. *We're stuck because we won't.*

The good news is that once we see the trap, we can get out of it. Not by finding a clever way to have both things—that's the fantasy that keeps us stuck—but by naming the entanglement clearly enough to make a choice.

Name the baggage, drop the baggage, ship the work.

The art of solving problems is mostly the art of seeing what's in the way.

The Three-Letter Breakthrough

There are two words that reveal everything about whether we're ready to move forward or stuck in place: The first is “and,” the second is “but.”

“And” reinforces. It moves in the same direction. “I want to run the marathon, *and* I'm ready to get tired.” The second half supports the first. It says, “I see the cost, and I'm in.”

“But” undermines. It pulls against itself. “I want to run the marathon, *but* I don't want to get tired.” Now you're stuck. The second half cancels the first. You haven't made a commitment—you've described a wish and its obstacle in the same breath.

When someone says they want this *and* that, listen for whether they mean *but*. Because “but” is where the entanglement lives. It's the word that marks the spot where fear has gotten tangled up with desire.

If we want to get the things that really matter done, we must discard every “but” and embrace every “and.”

The Soul of Entanglement

Most of our stuck comes from wanting incompatible things at the same time. We want to be at peace with our choices while also wishing we'd chosen differently. We want to accept our mortality while also living as if we're exempt from it. We want to matter while also wanting the relief of insignificance.

When we name these entanglements, we get a step closer to solving our problems.

Untangling requires deciding which thread to pull. You can't simultaneously honor every element of your experience *and* maintain the fantasy that some elements shouldn't have happened. You can't accept your squandered resources while also demanding a refund from the universe.

The knot tightens every time we insist on both. We want the peace of acceptance *and* the validation of our grievance. We want to move forward *and* to relitigate what's behind us.

What makes untangling hard isn't the complexity—it's that each of the threads feels essential. Letting go of the wish for a better past can feel like agreeing that what happened was OK. It wasn't. But "It wasn't OK" and "I accept that it happened" aren't contradictory. They only feel that way when we've knotted them together.

The path forward isn't simply about being more honest with yourself. It's about being more precise.

What's the purpose? Which of these things do you want? Because you can't have both. Pretending you can is the source of the tightness.

The tightness isn't the problem. The tightness is the clue that you already know where to look.

At the Same Time / Over Time

Entanglement tricks us into wanting contradictory things. Two things at the same time. Stay and go. Ship and hide. Lead and expect compliance.

But avoiding doing two things at the same time is very different from doing two things *over* time.

Solving the right problems doesn't require a life out of balance. We don't have to choose to compete with greedy megalomania or succeed by giving up every moment to outwork the competition. If these are the problems you've chosen, it might make sense to pick other problems, problems that respond to the work you're able to do sustainably and with passion.

When you're home, being a parent . . . be a parent. And when you're at work, be at work. You don't have to give up your life to undo a knot. In fact, we sometimes intentionally confuse the elements of our life and create that knot—a safe place to be stuck.

So yes, you can freelance on the weekends without quitting your day job. You can be the brawn on the intramural hockey team and a gentle giant with your friends. Constraints are a gift.

One thing at a time. And lots of things over time.

Two Kinds of Compromises

When we work with others, compromise is often on the agenda. Customers, committees, and people with power demand them. But there are two kinds, and they're easy to confuse.

The first kind is powerful: the compromise that comes with **commitment**. This happens when we focus on our core audience and find a way to solve a problem that they're as con-

cerned about as we are. This empathy-based compromise embraces the reason we're trying to solve the problem in the first place. We soften our point of view enough to get us the support we need to actually create a solution.

The second kind is a trap: This is the compromise of averageness, of **mediocrity**. The banal compromise seeks to convert people who don't want any sort of change. A compromise between hot soup and ice cream is not helpful to anyone.

The mediocre compromise is endemic to committees, to elected bodies, and to mass marketers. It's the compromise of network television and the big nonprofit. It's a "but" masquerading as an "and." The mediocre compromise gives us something to do but not a way to succeed. This is the consensus trap, a path where we value unanimity more than impact.

If you want to create the first sort of effective group work, you'll need to say "It's not for you" to people who are focused on the second sort of low-risk mediocrity.

Visionary architects imagine buildings without compromise. But *great* architects understand that people are going to live and work in that building, and they find the empathy to combine their vision with the compromises that make the building worth living in.

On the other hand, you don't find great food at the concession stand at the ballpark, because the many voices involved focus on cost, convenience, and risk aversion as they seek to serve masses of people who don't care very much.

When innovation arrives, the forces of mediocrity seek to avoid it or lessen its impact. But when we commit to making positive change for our chosen audience, innovation is a tool, not a risk.

Jack the Dripper

In the 1940s, the most famous artist in the US was probably Jackson Pollock. His picture was on the cover of *Life* magazine, and his paintings were instantly recognizable. Critics raced to analyze his work and its relationship to our culture. Not many artists get to be heroes in their lifetime.

Three years into his extraordinary streak, he believed he had taken it to its logical conclusion. Pollock's wife, the artist Lee Krasner, said that after these works, he "couldn't have gone further doing the same thing."

Many artists in his shoes would have done precisely what the marketplace and the critics and the media were asking him to do: paint more Jackson Pollocks. Embrace the success that his courage had earned him, continue to do this work, collect the rewards.

But Pollock wanted to live on the frontier. He felt like he had said his piece over three years, and he didn't want to find himself in a safe rut. In the words of critic Jordan Kantor, "The first post-Pollock artist was Pollock himself."

Jackson Pollock didn't want to paint versions of his previous work. He wanted to create new work, on a new frontier. So he blew up his technique, his approach, even the scale of his work. He went away and came back with a bold new approach to his art.

The response was an overwhelming yawn. At his first major exhibit of the new work, not one piece sold. The critics abandoned him. He felt the rejection and took it personally. He had a "but" pretending to be an "and." Here was Pollock's entanglement: He didn't just want to live on the frontier. He couldn't simply follow the journey of the bold creator. He *also* wanted

to be embraced, celebrated, and successful. He fell further into substance abuse and a tragic early death.

Pollock forgot how long it took him to gain acceptance the first time, and he was set on being applauded immediately—at the same time he was confronting the creative status quo. To be a groundbreaking artist but also to be immediately celebrated.

This is the donkey trap parable in real life—simultaneously seeking the edge *and* approval from the center.

We can live on the frontier, but we're not entitled to an audience. We can work with the system and do the safe thing, but we're not entitled to the thrill of a breakthrough. The choice is ours, but we often don't get to choose both.

Building on the Flood Plain

The US national flood insurance program keeps track of claimants who rebuild flooded houses in precisely the same place.

It turns out that there are thirty thousand families that have done this more than five times.

Five times, their houses were destroyed by a weather system that people believe they have no control over, and five times, thirty thousand families rebuilt in the very same place.

They weren't stupid. They were simply trying to satisfy multiple objectives, and only one of them was "Let's make sure our house doesn't flood."

It's not just these families who are stuck in a doom loop.

It's everywhere we look.

At some point, we need to take responsibility for our short-term tactics and unwillingness to respond to long-term sys-

temic change. Entanglement with the short term gets in the way of our future. Now and later are not the same.

Problems vs. Situations

Before we dive into problem-solving, it's worth pausing to consider what it means to accept that we're facing a situation, not a problem.

Sometimes we're not willing to pay the price to solve a persistent problem. Sometimes the constraints are genuinely rigid. And sometimes we simply don't have the leverage or the tools to make change happen.

Mel Robbins offers a deceptively simple practice for coping with situations: *Let them*.

Two words. Not always easy to live by.

When a situation is going to exist regardless of our actions, we don't need to let it occupy space in our heads. Acceptance isn't endorsement. It doesn't mean we approve of what's happening or want to encourage it. It simply means we're choosing to spend our time and energy on something we *can* change.

This is the stoic approach—at work and at home. It's not resignation. It's liberation.

Every hour we spend fighting a situation we cannot change is an hour we're not spending on a problem we *can* solve. Acceptance quiets our internal fisticuffs and puts us on the hook to focus on something useful instead.

Mel's *Let Them Theory* book is about living with situations. This book is about solving problems. But knowing the difference is where both books begin.

A situation isn't always something that can't be solved. Sometimes it's something we're not *willing* to solve—not to-

day, not at this cost, not with these resources. That's an honest answer. It frees us to work on what we choose. With our priorities and on our timetable.

Your competitor copies your idea. Your teenager rolls their eyes. The committee votes the other way. Let them.

If you can't accept a situation, turn it into a problem and do the work. But if it's truly a situation—if the effort you're willing to expend to change it isn't enough—then *let them*.

Live with Situations; Solve Problems

We might not like the solution to the problem. It might be expensive or difficult, or require us to change something we'd rather not change. But if it's a problem, there's a way through.

Gravity is a situation. Flying to the moon is a problem.

We make two common errors. The first is giving up on a problem too soon—we decide it can't be solved, so we resign ourselves to living with it. We stop looking for the door because we've convinced ourselves there isn't one.

The second error is the opposite: We confront a genuine situation and waste precious time and energy treating it like a problem to be solved.

When we do the hard work and discover that what we're facing truly has no solution—that regardless of our approach, there is no useful way forward—we've found a breakthrough. We've earned the clarity to stop fighting and start adapting. We don't have to like the situation, but the only productive path is to live with it.

The word “transfixed” originates with the very vivid idea of being pierced by a spear, held in place, unable to move.

Situations masquerading as problems can do that to us. We can let go of the spear and move on.

The other transformation is even more valuable: turning what appears to be a situation into a problem we can solve. Not easily but usefully.

Has anyone solved something like this before? If not, you might have a situation.

If what you have seems like a situation, can you accept it and move on?

If you can't move on, are you willing to do the work to turn it into a problem to be solved?

If the problem has been around for a while, it's probably not an easy one, since those get solved quickly. This one likely requires more time, effort, or trade-offs than you were hoping for. Knowing that upfront lets you decide—solve it at a real cost or reclassify it as a situation and live with it.

And finally: Some problems get better when we talk about them. And some situations get worse when we focus our energy and community on them, starting a tailspin of despair.

Are you ready to talk about the problem?

Find a Good Problem

Nelson Repenning, writing in *MIT Sloan Management Review*, offers a useful framework. He argues that creating effective solutions begins with a well-defined problem. There are five components that must be in place to make your “problem statement” a good one:

It has to be about something that matters. Not just to you—to the system, the organization, the people you're try-

ing to serve. If no one cares about the outcome, it's not a problem worth solving.

It clearly articulates the gap. Where are we now? Where do we want to be? The space between those two points is the problem. No gap, no problem.

It uses variables that can be understood. You don't need perfect data on day one, but you need to be able to tell whether you're making progress. "Better" isn't a metric. "Fifteen percent faster" is.

It stays neutral about cause and solution. The moment you bake in your diagnosis or your favorite remedy, you've stopped defining the problem and started defending a position. Keep them separate.

It's small enough to tackle. Grand problems paralyze. A problem you can actually work on—this week, this month—creates momentum. Solve enough small problems and the big one starts to move.

This is more difficult than it sounds. We're drawn to big problems because they feel important. We're hooked on urgent, painful problems because they capture our attention and demand urgency. And we are often working on vague problems because they let us off the hook.

But instead of big, urgent, and vague, perhaps we would benefit from focusing on doable and important.

Clarity about the problem is where our power begins.

Preventable Tragedy

The Inuit people of Canada, Indigenous First Peoples living primarily in the north, are more likely to suffer from tuberculosis than a typical resident of Vancouver or Toronto.

Not three or four times more likely. Not forty times more likely. Five hundred times more likely.

We know how to cure tuberculosis. We've known for decades. The health care professionals and politicians involved are caring people working within systems they inherited. And yet the problem persists.

No one is the villain. We are the obstacle.

This is a case study in how good intentions tangle with systems, status, and competing priorities. Sometimes, we're left with a situation that we have to accept. It may be, however, that even though the problem is incredibly difficult, a path forward is possible.

We can analyze a problem with a series of questions:

What is the change we hope to make? Keep people from dying of a curable disease.

Do we have the resources? Yes. The cost would be significant but represents a tiny fraction of Canadian health care spending.

Do we have the knowledge? We know how to treat TB. What we lack is knowledge about how to move the political, logistical, and media systems that would need to show up to solve the problem.

Who needs to change their position? This is where it gets tangled. Few people actively oppose helping the sick. The resistance isn't a wall—it's fog. Centuries of colonial systems and resource allocation protocols have built a status quo that doesn't require anyone to say no. It simply requires everyone to wait for someone else to go first.

Politicians are entangled with budget cycles, coalition priorities, and the fear of committing to something that

might fail publicly. Health care administrators are entangled with existing protocols, competing priorities, and the communities they already serve. The media is entangled with news cycles that reward urgency over persistence. Each node in the system has reasons to defer, a way to get off the hook.

Where is the fear? Everywhere. It often tries to hide. The fear of reallocation. The fear of being seen to prioritize one group over another. The fear of taking responsibility for a problem that predates your tenure and will likely outlast it. The fear of acknowledging a problem and then not acting.

This is how tragedies persist—not because people are cruel but because the entanglements are so diffuse that no one experiences themselves as the obstacle.

It was precisely this kind of fog that Paul Farmer and Partners in Health cut through in rural Haiti. They didn't wait for the system to align. They made unreasonable commitments—doctors walking six hours to deliver a single dose of medication—and in doing so, they revealed that the constraints everyone accepted as fixed were actually choices.

The question isn't whether the people of Canada care. It's whether the entanglements can be named clearly enough that the problem stops feeling like a situation.

Better is possible. But we need to see the pin before we can remove it. And then we have to do the hard work of turning a situation into a problem—and solving it.

Plausible Delight

Do you remember walking to school? It's a moment of freedom and responsibility in the development of many kids, but too of-

ten, it's no longer permitted. Too many cars, not enough safety.

The answer is the Bike Bus. It wasn't even Sam Balto's idea, but he made it real, and now millions of kids ride to school, together.

Balto is a teacher in Portland, Oregon. Every Wednesday, he leads a pack of yelling, screaming, smiling kids on a bike parade. Passing one home after another, the caravan grows as it goes, creating not just a safe way to get to school but a productive, positive moment in the lives of these kids and their parents.

Using social media to great effect, he has normalized the activity and turned it into a movement. His website makes it easy to get started, and once welcomed into the tribe, local leaders turn it into a contagious and sticky community activity.

You can't have a Bike Bus by yourself (that's just a bike). The magic is in the community, and the key to unlocking it was someone willing to identify and solve a problem.

Part II

Stuck in Knots

Three things can cause knotty problems to persist: **systems**, **false proxies**, **entanglement**.

They often show up together, and a familiar example shows how.

When Little League Baseball first became part of our culture, it offered families, communities, and kids a wide range of benefits. The togetherness, achievement, and fitness that came with organized sport were easy to embrace.

We now spend billions of dollars on youth sports. The system of travel teams, showcases, recruiting pipelines, and coaching hierarchies has turned play into professionalized competition. None of this aligns with the original stated goals, but the system transforms them into part of the culture. Even if a parent wants to change things, it's difficult because normal is working against them.

The false proxies of wins, trophies, and rankings are visceral and easy to measure but unrelated to what we set out to do in the first place. They're now the focus, not a by-product.

And the entanglement makes it sticky: Parents want their kids to have fun and grow but also want the bumper sticker, the championship story, and tangible, visible proof that all those early Saturday mornings were worth it.

Systems are invisible, powerful, and sticky. They work to maintain the status quo and establish a standard of normal.

Some systems make our lives better. Many have outlived their usefulness.

False proxies are measurements that are vivid, easy to obtain, and useless. We get hooked on the confidence and convenience that come with having a concrete measure of success but fail to consider that we might be measuring the wrong thing.

And **entanglement** happens when we try to satisfy multiple (often mutually exclusive) objectives. It begins with entitlement and confusion about what we're after. When we're entangled, it's easier to complain about the status quo than it is to take responsibility for making a change happen, especially a change that will conflict with something we're entangled with.

To untangle the knot, you first need to see what's holding it in place.

What's a System?

Systems can be powerful, with built-in constraints that are productive. Consider LEGO blocks.

One piece of LEGO is almost useless. It's unattractive, with sharp edges that are no fun to encounter barefoot.

And yet there are billions of pieces of LEGO in the world. Because they fit together. Once you have a small LEGO set, you benefit from having a larger one. Once your kids have friends with a LEGO set, you'll need to get one too.

Once there's a successful building block system in place, it's almost impossible to build a competitor. Each player in the LEGO universe (the company, the distributors, the stores, and the users) benefits from sticking with the established system.

Resilient systems persist because the more we use them, the more we want them to persist.

While the system provides benefits to LEGO's producers, its constraints are clear. It's difficult for their designers to make useful pieces that are round, for example—the designers are as constrained by the rules as anyone else. And the company that created LEGO is now without IP protection on the pieces, so others can make blocks that benefit from the existing system.

Interoperability builds networks, which create efficiencies and the power that comes with them. And thriving systems work to stick around.

Beginning with the simple and obvious example of plastic building blocks, it's not that difficult to move on to the cultural systems that control what a wedding is supposed to feel like (and cost). Or to see the systems that drive local real estate or politics.

When something that seems irrational persists over time, look for the system. The system might be helping you achieve your goals, or it could be the source of your problems.

Most problems aren't accidents. They're predictable consequences of the systems that create them.

There are three intersections in New Jersey that regularly rank among the top-ten most dangerous in the entire country. That's not because New Jersey has more careless drivers. It's because of the design of the roads.

When someone dies of dysentery, the lack of sanitation and health care is the culprit, not the accident of a particular illness reaching a particular person.

Implementing a simple checklist system in surgery decreases death rates by 40 percent. Surgical accidents usually aren't unavoidable.

Stuyvesant High School in New York notes that more than 35 percent of its graduates get into at least one Ivy League school. This is the result of a system, not an accident.

We are all participants in systems, many of them unseen.

Luck happens. What we do with luck, and how we cause luck to unfold, that's on us. If the system is causing a problem, we can do the hard work of walking away or the persistent work of changing the system itself.

We solve system problems with systemic solutions, not heroic effort.

Roads and Gravity

Consider a physical environment built by humans. The houses or other buildings are relatively adaptable. We can see them, renovate them, and move in or out. This is the part we clearly see and believe we control.

But the system is more subtle. The system is the streets, the sewers, and the utilities.

Most buildings are changed every twenty or thirty years. But the streets stick around for centuries.

If you put your building on the wrong street, it's simply not going to work very well. Worse, when the streets are moved, being in the way makes you a victim of eminent domain.

Systems are relentless, pulling us in the direction they are organized for. They're like the roads, and it's up to us to deal with the traffic.

Seeing the roads makes them easier to navigate.

Which systems have you chosen to be part of, to play with, and to amplify? And which unseen systems are undermining your work and causing the problems you hope to solve?

Systems Solve Problems (and Create Them as Well)

LEGO is a clear example, but it's distracting in one respect. LEGO is controlled by one company, and the system is obvious—it even has a name and a logo.

Most systems are more subtle and intertwined. The internet is a system. No one owns email; everyone uses it. The charity-industrial complex is also a system, with donors, galas, grants, boards, and tax forms.

Capitalism is a megasystem, one that drives everything from real estate to colonialism. It seems normal to have landlords, sales tax, and the strip mining of coal, but each of the components of our capital-based system was carefully constructed to fit into the interoperability that was already there.

Our interoperable systems produce value and productivity and drive our culture. Communications, manufacturing, and education are all built on systems that we would miss dearly if they disappeared.

But of course, the systems that are ingrained all around us also create problems. Problems of mismatched intentions or of unseen costs. Problems of unfairness or frustration.

Innocent people dying of a disease in a rural prison is a systems problem, as is widespread teen anorexia and the underused and overlooked talent in a crowded favela.

We probably won't be able to immediately change the system that's causing our problem. But if we don't see the system, it's unlikely we've got much of a chance to make a difference.

What's the Purpose of a System?

Systems are created, often accidentally, by people seeking to work together to create value. All musicians read the same music notation; most laptops in my country say “QWERTY” on the top row of their keyboards. It doesn't matter how good the original reason for a system is; once it's here, it will fight to stay.

Systems stick around because the effects they produce are of enough value that some people eagerly stick with them. But systems have side effects as well. The health care system permits doctors and nurses to perform miracles, but it also relies too heavily on treatments, often bankrupting people who might be better off finding a different way to stay healthy.

The most helpful way to consider the purpose of the system is to look for the feedback loop. A system relentlessly moves toward the processes and outcomes that earn rewards of status and connection for those at the center of it. When something veers from the connections and standards of the system, it hits resistance until it learns to fit in.

The purpose of corporations is to enrich and comfort the executives. The purpose of the educational system is to create obedient students and secure administrators. That's not what they were invented for, it might not even be what people expect, but that's what gets rewarded.

“Going along to get along” is how systems enforce cooperation, even, and especially, if it's not what we would do on our own. When we participate in a system, we're not simply under the circumstances; we are the circumstances.

The Trap of the Unexamined System

Systems are persistent, and systems hide behind “normal.”

College is a system, one that creates stress, debt, and football. If we were inventing higher learning today, it's quite unlikely that we'd end up with the expensive, inefficient, and culturally dominant system we have now.

Hollywood is a hundred-year-old system that apparently is in the business of making movies for profit. But if we look closely, we see that what it makes is *status*, and the movies and profits are just a necessary tool to achieve that aim. Many people in the film business spend most of their time not making movies—instead, they are focused on earning and using status to continue playing the game. The movies are an occasional side effect.

If a seven-year-old kid comes home with a disappointing grade in math, many high-achieving parents get stressed. Why? Is the kid now unlikely to use subtraction and fractions to succeed as an adult? This is a symptom of a four-hundred-year-old system of higher education. We are upset because we know that in ten years, we'll be competing to get a sticker for the back of our car, a sticker that validates our parenting and our place in the culture.

Avoiding False Proxies

Sometimes, we can't measure what we need, so we invent a proxy, a metric that's much easier to measure and stands in as an approximation.

TV advertisers, for example, could never tell which viewers would be impacted by an ad, so instead, they measured how many people saw it. A businessperson might choose cash in the bank as a measure of his success at his craft, and a book publisher, unable to easily figure out if the right people are engaging with a book, might rely instead on a rank on a single best-

seller list. Consider the nonprofit that uses money raised as a proxy for difference made—they didn't set out to be a fundraising engine, but that was the proxy that was easiest to focus on, one that the system rewards.

You've already guessed the problem. Once you find the simple proxy and decide to make it go up, there are lots of available tactics that have nothing at all to do with improving the very thing you set out to achieve in the first place. When we fall in love with a proxy, we spend our time improving the proxy instead of focusing on our original (more important) goal.

Gaming the system is not the goal. The goal is the goal.

Part III

Find the Pin

Problems are opportunities to create value. And the knotty ones—the ones that persist—are only still here because we haven't been able or willing to see what's in the way.

In the way of what? We can't see what's in the way until we get clarity about where we're headed in the first place.

Getting to clarity of purpose unlocks clarity of sight.

What's this for? Our answer spotlights the purpose of this work.

Purpose is an act of intention. It is our chance to choose one thing, the one thing that we're trying to create more of. What gets rewarded, what gets measured, what do we actually care about?

Purpose can be claimed. Purpose gives us a filter and a priority list. It tells us which threads to pull and which to ignore. We get the chance to announce to ourselves and others what we're going to do and what we're seeking in response. Purpose highlights the choices that put us on the hook (and let us off other hooks). Often, we hide our purpose. We might be ashamed (“make as much money as we can get away with”) or we might be entangled and unable to pick just one thing.

Your purpose is the compass that guides the feedback loop. As you get closer to where you're going, do it more. Without a compass, you're stumbling in the dark.

Clearly defining the purpose of the work—the reason we care about this problem—reveals the pin holding the knot together.

Worthwhile Work Has a Purpose

A circuit breaker isn't ornamental or fashionable. It's designed with a purpose—if the load on the wires increases and there's a risk of fire, the circuit breaks, and the home is saved. If it doesn't do that, it has failed.

The purpose of the little rubber feet on the bottom of your chest of drawers is to avoid scratching the floor.

The purpose of the free salted nuts at the bar is to make you thirsty again, so you'll buy another drink.

True purpose can easily get obscured.

The purpose of a fancy Swiss watch might seem to be telling the time. But there are cheaper and more reliable ways to do that. The ultimate purpose might be status, or sentiment, or the story the owner tells themselves about the kind of person who wears or gives or bequeaths such a thing. One object, many purposes—most of them unnamed.

If we can figure out and specifically name the purpose of the work, we're more likely to achieve it—if you don't know where you're going, how will you know if you're getting there?

If the purpose is too complicated to clearly name and explain to yourself and others, you're not there yet. It's not a glib elevator pitch; it's a specific outcome, the light in response to the shadow of the problem we've chosen.

Purpose Is Generous

When we show up in the world, we're taking something (attention), we're using something (resources), and we're asking for

something (interactions, transactions, change).

Purpose is not the passive work of “just doing my job.” Instead, it’s a recognition that we’re doing the work for a reason, and that reason isn’t simply selfish.

Purpose isn’t something we’re given or born with. It’s a choice. One that we get to make. Resilient purpose survives encounters with the real world. When plans don’t work out or the rules change, we can come back to the purpose of our work and find a new way, a more useful way forward.

We’re making an offer and making a promise. Keeping that promise solves a problem.

Purpose Guides Our Feedback Loop

We begin with intent, but our first design rarely accomplishes the goal we have in mind. So we engage in an evolutionary process, repeating what works, eliminating what doesn’t. This is the simple algorithm of evolution. Amplify success and extinguish paths that fail.

Unlike the undirected evolution we see in nature, though, our most successful interventions have a specific purpose. In 1959, Dmitry Belyaev, a Soviet geneticist, began experiments to breed domesticated foxes.

Working at the Institute of Cytology and Genetics in Novosibirsk, Siberia, he and his associate Lyudmila Trut bred hundreds of generations of foxes. When a fox pup showed traits like dogs—floppy ears, curly tails, spotted coats, and juvenile facial features—they’d reinforce those traits by breeding it with other, similar foxes.

In the wild, a tame fox is a rarity, and one that doesn’t live very long. But when someone is actively designing with purpose and building a system around that purpose, the outcomes

caused by the systemic feedback loop can arrive quickly and dramatically.

Belyaev didn't tame foxes. He built a system that tamed them over time. Our job might not be to instantly solve the problem—instead, we can build and manage systems that allow evolution to solve it.

A system working in the right direction persistently erodes the problem until it's gone.

Hiring the Milkshake

McDonald's wanted to increase profits and decided to do traditional market research on what they could offer to grow sales. They held focus groups asking customers what would make a better shake. Thicker? More chocolate? Cheaper?

They made the changes. Sales didn't budge.

Eventually, they hired Harvard professor Clayton Christensen to do the research. He and his team took a different approach. They stood in McDonald's restaurants and simply watched: Who buys milkshakes? When? What else do they buy? What do they do afterward?

They discovered something surprising. About half of the milkshakes were sold before 8:30 a.m. to people who were there alone, who then got in their cars and drove off. When interviewed, these customers revealed the job they were hiring the milkshake to do: make their long, boring commute more interesting and keep them full until lunch.

The milkshake was not competing against other milkshakes, but against bagels (too many crumbs), bananas (gone too fast, plus there's the peel), donuts (sticky fingers), and coffee (not filling). The milkshake won because it took twenty minutes to

suck through a thin straw, fit in a cup holder, wasn't messy, and kept hunger at bay.

The focus groups had focused on afternoon milkshakes, which were being hired to do a completely different job—parents buying something for their kids as a small “yes” after saying “no” all day. Different job, different competition, different solution needed. These parents didn't want a better milkshake; in fact, they felt bad about the milkshakes they were already buying.

Customers don't buy products; they hire them to do jobs. Our work is to get hired and then to do the job we got hired for. A clear purpose ensures we're in alignment.

Clarity Is Essential in Uncovering Purpose

I was recently asked to help a well-known nonprofit confront the choices and threats they face nearly a hundred years after their founding.

I asked senior leadership what their purpose was. What do you want more of? What problem do your users and partners hire you to solve?

Five people gave me five different answers.

Might as well go home now. No solution will be possible if there's no agreement on the purpose of the work.

If we can't be honest about the purpose, we're going to be confused about which feedback loops to pay attention to, about evaluating our effort, and about where our entanglements lie.

I understand how they got here—a successful organization uses its success to layer on new requirements, opportunities,

and contributions. They build sinecures, processes, and staff, enjoying the success that leads to more success.

But when we feel stuck, it's almost certainly because conflicting objectives and hidden entanglements are in the way.

It's Not About “Your” Purpose

It's possible that the story we tell ourselves about our place here in the world is fuel, fuel that helps us dig in and make a difference.

But if you're waiting for your purpose to reveal itself, you might be waiting a long time. It's only recently that it's been fashionable to imagine that we're born with a singular “North Star” purpose, one that aligns directly with the work we do.

It's more productive to focus on the purpose of our *work*, of our project, of the interactions and investments we make each day. We get to choose this purpose; it's not handed to us.

No one is ready to have their personal purpose criticized. We get confused about authenticity and brandish it like a shield.

But our work? Our work needs criticism to get better. The most useful feedback helps us consider and focus its purpose.

Intentional Feedback Loops

Real problems don't have obvious solutions. Once we start solving a problem, we can find ways to solve it better (as well as find challenges we didn't expect). Practice improves our approach.

This is all true for everything from making YouTube videos to driving a car.

If the solution to a problem is obvious, we're done. Solving the remaining problems involves poking at them and innovat-

ing until we find the way forward.

Feedback loops are the secret to improvement. The best feedback loops give us information that's useful, and they do it quickly.

Publishing books is a difficult task because the feedback loops are slow, inefficient, and unclear. What makes a book "good"?

And even after we choose a feedback loop, book feedback can take years to occur. As a result, the author gets unhelpful information years too late to do anything with it. You're not going to write that book again, and even if you did, the feedback loop wouldn't repeat.

Contrast this with the quick, direct, and often painful feedback loop of a boxer with a sparring partner. Within seconds, they learn what works (and mostly, what doesn't).

As a result, there are far more unhappy and unsuccessful authors than boxers. The boxers who don't respond to the feedback loop are long gone. The authors stick around, unsure of their purpose, struggling with conflicting data points, and unclear about the change they seek to make.

Constructing and working with feedback loops is part of the choice we make when we set out to solve a knotty problem. Don't ask your friends for feedback on your poetry if you're not writing poetry for people who like what your friends like.

Feedback Loops and Self-Marginalization

The people who cheer loudest may be leading us astray.

Feedback loops work in both directions. They can help us get better at reaching the people we seek to serve. But they can

also push us further toward an extreme that makes our work less effective.

This sort of loop looks like this: We say something bold. Our core supporters cheer for it. So we say something bolder. They love that even more. The feedback seems to be precisely what we're looking for—we're being celebrated for our courage, our clarity, our willingness to lead with truth.

But while the inner circle applauds, we are drifting away from the group we sought to help. We're no longer focused on the problem we set out to solve.

This is how movements marginalize themselves. They have good intentions but adopt a feedback loop that rewards division. They lose the ability to frame their change in terms that the larger group can embrace, instead sharpening their arguments and dividing the core group into factions.

It shows up in a few predictable ways:

- **Purity testing** that shrinks coalitions by excluding potential allies who don't always meet every ideological criterion
- Using **insider jargon** or academic language that alienates people who might otherwise agree with the underlying goals
- Ignoring the **Overton Window** and embracing positions so far ahead of stated public opinion that they become easy targets for opponents and distract from more achievable wins (more on this window upcoming)
- Signaling **virtue** to in-group members instead of telling stories and building systems that welcome the unconvinced

There's always a tension between earning the enthusiasm of the smallest viable audience and building a movement that can

spread.

Authenticity Is a Trap

We want to succeed in solving the problem, but we also want to feel like our full selves in every moment. We allow the cultural imperative of authenticity to indulge our short-term fear and dilute the work. The problem doesn't care if you're authentically solving it right now.

Professionals aren't authentic. They're consistent. They bring effort and empathy to the problem, doing great work when they don't feel like it. Especially then.

Optimism Is a Choice and a Tool

Optimism isn't the weather report, and it's not an accurate prediction of the future. But it might change how our future unfolds.

We generally choose a posture of optimism or pessimism as a response (or a reaction) to external events. We see how things are going and decide what to expect. We feel like we need to justify our choice to be an optimist or pessimist based on the facts on the ground.

But that doesn't explain why different people, similarly informed, might adopt an optimistic mood or a pessimistic one.

In fact, that mood is a choice. And it's one that determines how we'll behave.

Optimism is a tool that permits us to solve problems more effectively. If used wisely, it brings enthusiasm, inspiration, and hope to projects that benefit from it.

I'd like an airline pilot doing the preflight check to be a pessimist, taking nothing for granted. On the other hand, if a sur-

geon is hitting a rough patch in a procedure, I'd like her to be an optimist, hesitant to give up and walk away.

As a universal default, either mood will lead to poor decisions. But if we can be thoughtful about optimism as a tactic, the focus and energy it brings can solve problems that others might simply walk away from.

Our pessimism might not be an accurate diagnosis of the future. It might simply be a tool we're using to produce a future we're not happy with.

Optimism doesn't mean reassuring ourselves that everything is going to be OK. It means committing to finding things we can contribute to, work on, and improve. It means seeking out useful lessons and discovering where the benefit of the doubt might be helpful.

There are always doubts. Can you find a process that opens the door to finding the benefits?

Stuck as an Alibi

Repeating approaches that don't work might not be a failure of skill or effort. Perhaps it's an alibi—apparent proof that we did our best when it's actually cover for staying exactly where we are.

Solving a problem causes a change to happen, and that change can be frightening enough that we seek to avoid it. We might not want to become the person we'd be if the problem went away. We might fear the problems (and the responsibilities) that come after this problem is solved. And we could believe that we're not qualified or entitled to lead the change.

When in doubt, look for the fear.

Perfect and Good

When the work is socially important, morally imperative, and urgent, we'd prefer to be consistent and not hypocritical.

It's better to be perfect.

But it's also impossible to be perfect.

Virtue signaling, whataboutism, and a fear of compromise lead to paralysis.

Good enough is where we begin. Ship the work and then improve it.

Of course, this is often the language used by systems to get us to accept mediocrity, injustice, and shabbiness. "Later" often feels like "never."

We can acknowledge the defects and the imperfections. Yes, we're happily going to be hypocrites in some things as we seek to build a platform of possibility.

With all that acknowledgment, we can make commitments about the priorities of our work and even describe when and how we'll inexorably move toward the perfect that we seek. With purpose.

Perfect is a process; it's not a place.

Enrollment and the Journey Ahead

"We're going there, who wants to come?"

There will be entanglements to walk away from, costs to be incurred, prices to pay.

The message the leader is sending is clear: If you're not up for this journey, please stay behind.

When we build a team, we're signing up to share our objectives, the risks, and the effort. But this also multiplies our en-

tanglements because each person brings their own.

The lion brought his fear, the tin man brought his loneliness, and the scarecrow brought his insecurity. But Dorothy never pretended it was going to be easy. “I’m following this road. Who wants to join me?”

The lesson of *Oz* is that the entanglements don’t go away easily, but by returning to our purpose, relentlessly coming back to why we’re on this journey in the first place, we can see the problem and work to solve it.

The yellow brick road doesn’t come with a guarantee. If we invite the others, it comes with companions. Choose them wisely.

Part IV

Remove the Pin

You've named the problem you want to solve, with purpose. You've identified the system holding it in place (and the entanglements holding you in place). You've seen the pin at the center of the knot.

Now you need to design the solution. But design isn't decoration. This confusion costs us time and money.

It's not the prettiness we add at the end. Design is the discipline of solving a problem on purpose. *With* purpose.

A well-designed object makes a promise—and keeps it. Well-designed software doesn't just work; it works *for us*—increasing our satisfaction while improving our results. And well-designed systems? They're the invisible architecture that helps humans get where they're trying to go.

Removing the pin often requires designing a solution that works within the system, not against it.

Design creates connections. A connection between where people are and where they hope to go.

Intentional design is a choice. A generous one.

Intentional design asks three questions:

- Who's it for?
- What's it for?
- What is the change we seek to make?

This puts us on the hook. It establishes a standard for our effort, a way to determine if our work mattered (as opposed to simply following instructions).

We can't solve every problem, and we can't do it for everyone. Instead, intentional design brings focus and empathy (Who's it for?) to the people we hope to serve.

Who's It For?

To some people's surprise, this is where we begin. Not with what's in it for us or with the thing we hope to do. We begin with who we seek to do this work with and for.

Our audience must be the first step, simply because every problem is associated with the person who believes they have that problem. If there are no people, there is no problem.

"Who's it for?" centers our focus on the person with the problem. It gives us a chance to think about the user and the opportunity to ignore everyone else.

Every person involved in your problem has to be part of the "Who's it for?" That's not just the obvious beneficiaries or the people most affected. It includes anyone you'll need active support from—and even the people whose benign neglect makes the whole thing possible.

Changing the speed limit in front of the school is obviously for the safety of the kids. But it's also for the politicians who approve it (this power gives them status) and the parents, but don't forget the drivers, the cops, the judges who impose the fines, and so on.

The checklists for surgery that Atul Gawande worked on were demonstrated to dramatically improve patient outcomes. While they clearly benefit patients, they were also for the surgical team (it gave agency and dignity to nurses) and ultimately

the surgeons (many of whom resisted the change at first) by giving them confidence and status.

The people our work is for don't have to appreciate it or even like that we showed up. Our job is to create tension and to produce the conditions that cause people to change their actions. It's rarely a risk-free win-win. The change isn't going to benefit everyone equally, or at all.

We begin with "who." Their dreams and desires and the systems they are part of determine what happens next.

Take a moment to think small. If it's a problem for you and those you care about, it matters—regardless of what the rest of the world is focused on.

There are widespread systemic problems involving the health of millions and smaller problems involving the happiness of six friends going out for dinner. When we bring purpose to a problem, we can choose how to approach it in a way most likely to lead to satisfaction and a useful outcome.

When we find the empathy to imagine that someone else needs help with their problem, we have a chance to contribute. And if we do that well and often enough, we earn the chance to do it again.

Problems Require People

A problem exists when a human can't get what they want or need, and it's possible to apply resources or information to resolve it.

It's not a problem that it's really hot on Venus. There are no people there.

Problems persist when:

We don't have the resources or information. (Scarcity.)

We have them but don't see them. (Awareness.)

We see them but won't apply effort to solve them. (Will, fear, habit.)

We're applying effort to the wrong problem. (Misdiagnosis.)

We're solving the right problem for the wrong audience. (Misalignment.)

We accept false constraints as real. (Entanglement.)

We've mistaken a problem (which can be solved) for a situation (which can't).

Problems require people to exist. They also require people to persist. They might even be the same people.

Constraints

Runway length is a constraint. So is the density of aluminum and the potential energy in jet fuel. If you're designing an airplane, life would be easier without these constraints. But they're not going to change.

A problem is solvable. A constraint must be designed around.

For years, Apple viewed retail distribution as a constraint. They had to live with cranky independent computer stores and big-box merchants who didn't display or sell their products well.

Then they built their own stores. What had seemed like a constraint within a situation turned out to be a problem—one with a solution that changed everything.

They took a false constraint and eliminated it.

But here's the trap: Countless entrepreneurs believe they can solve problems relating to funding or technology that are gen-

uinely out of reach given their scale or resources. It's tempting to overhaul an archaic or inefficient system, but it takes time and resources. They'd be far more effective if they accepted these as real constraints and designed around them.

The hard work is in telling the real constraints from the false ones.

Constraints Are a Gift

Without constraints, we can't be productive.

A car must drive at highway speeds, be safe, and be reliable. A useful salad fork can't weigh thirty pounds. The project must meet time and budget requirements.

Acknowledging constraints gives us leverage. It limits the solution space and keeps us from wasting time chasing impossibilities. And constraints create edges—the places where creativity lives and, as we covered earlier, the only places where problems get solved.

Quacks and hustlers have a simple hack: They pretend that the constraints of science, systems, and finance don't apply to them. They offer miracle cures and fast money by promising to make constraints disappear.

We can wish away the important constraints, but it's not useful. We need to solve problems worth solving, and we begin by embracing the constraints we're facing.

Complexity arises when we try to serve multiple goals. If those goals conflict, the problem becomes unsolvable—a situation masquerading as a problem. False constraints are a trap.

The path forward isn't around the obstacle. It's realizing the obstacle was optional.

Good news: There are far more false constraints in our lives than we'd like to admit. These are the ones we can identify and remove, solving problems that previously felt like situations.

The Truth About Other People

We can't insist that other people want what we want. Just because it's important to us, really important, that doesn't mean that others will do what we want them to.

The generous act of problem-solving acknowledges that individuals have agency. They can make choices. Perhaps we can achieve our goals by helping others get what they want. That might be the only way we can.

Sometimes we can create the conditions that allow others to change their minds.

Practical Empathy

When we solve problems that involve others, we must imagine the world through their experience—it's not just our problem; it's their problem as well.

Practical empathy commits us. *I'm not you*. I don't see what you see, believe what you believe, or even want what you want. And that's OK.

It's the last part that changes everything. I don't have to agree with you or believe you, but I can still commit to solving the problem with you.

If we're not able to extend ourselves in this way, why should we believe that others are willing to do it for us?

A teacher already knows the content. Teaching requires imagining what it's like to not know. The comedian already knows the punchline. They're telling a joke in a way that people

who haven't heard it before can enjoy. And the oncologist can express empathy to a patient, even, especially, if they've never suffered in this way before. Practical empathy is a skill, and it doesn't require personal experience, only a commitment to the people we seek to help.

If we begin where others are, we can move forward without requiring them to come to us.

Customer Traction

Steve Blank says that the best way to judge the prospects of a start-up is to ignore its revenue and profit and look at its customer traction instead.

Who would miss them if they disappeared?

Who is regularly coming back for more?

And who is shifting the way they do other things to accommodate and leverage the benefits they're receiving?

Customer traction is a symptom of systems change. Not that *you* know you have a good idea. That people in the market know.

This is not an accident, nor is it a reward for simply making something good. Instead, it's the result of creating tension, rewarding status, and building community. The system isn't going to change what it seems to want, but you can help it get there in a better way.

Empathy Begins with Proximity

The physical proximity of being in the same space and breathing the same air.

The emotional proximity of embracing the reality of someone else's life.

Acknowledging the truth of lived experience, even, and especially, when it isn't ours.

Getting close enough to see what you're missing. Showing up enough times that you're not a tourist. What we see in the telescope is never as it appears. And the microscope deceives us as well.

When I met my friend Halli Thorleifsson for tea in Brooklyn one Tuesday, I finally understood how profoundly discouraging the lack of wheelchair ramps could be. As we went from one inaccessible place to another, I wondered how many other problems I'd been ignoring.

Our intentional design begins with the hard work of seeing the problem with the emotions, expectations, and heartbreak of those who are experiencing it.

Dignity Can Be Offered

We have the chance to see others as customers, as free agents, and as people with choices. We can see opportunities for dignity that systems have made invisible.

Systems enforce status roles, often without regard for opportunity, fairness, or respect. When we show up to help solve a problem that moves people forward—on their path, not just on ours—we offer a priceless gift.

The way we solve problems matters as much as whether we solve them. A solution that works but strips dignity isn't much of a solution.

Intentional design centers the person with agency and gives them choices that help them get to where they'd like to go.

The Solution Lies at an Edge

If the goal is to please every constituent and every desire, then you're the donkey stuck in the trap, and like those who came before you, the problem is not going to be solved.

It's uncomfortable to imagine going to an edge. We might look foolish. We might have to deal with new competitors who now see us as a threat.

The edge is defined as the place people haven't gone *yet*. Once someone goes there to solve a problem, it's not the edge any longer. It's the new normal.

Solving persistent problems requires the discomfort and expense of going to the edge. We need to make that commitment before we know it's going to work. Without certainty, but with the confidence that it's worth the effort.

If you're not equipped or ready to go to the problem's edge, choose a different problem.

What's It For?

When we show up asking for participation, resources, or trust, there's a reason. What are we here to accomplish? Why are we bothering? What's in it for us, sure, but what's in it for those we are here to serve?

"What" is powerful because it's specific. *This*, not that.

Important work puts us on the hook.

The "what" is directly connected to who it's for. *If it doesn't matter to them, it doesn't matter.*

When our work's purpose aligns with the purpose of the people we're designing for, change happens.

What's the Change We Seek to Make?

Our effort creates possibility, tension, and ultimately, change.

We can change someone's experience, but we can also change the culture.

The best design is sticky and contagious. It's sticky when it changes the systems in which it exists, and it's contagious when it spreads. The existence of our project has an impact on the previous alternatives, and as people use our work, the ripples spread.

The change we seek to make is measurable and worth the effort. Claiming it feels risky, because it might not happen, but intentional design requires we put ourselves on the hook.

We're engineers, architects, and navigators. What are you here to build?

The Census and the Choice

But which problem to solve? Go through the steps, and then we can bring intentional design to the problem we want to solve. Claiming a problem and working to solve it gives us a chance to find a problem worth our effort.

It begins with a census.

What's not working as it should? Where are people disconnected, traumatized, stunted, disrespected, frustrated, or underserved? Within the scope of our focus, what could be improved?

This is how public health officials begin to prioritize their efforts. Brightly lit problems might not be as important as overlooked but more widespread ones. Emergencies might not be as critical as persistent flaws in the system.

Once we identify a problem, we can look for the problems behind the problem. What caused this avoidable challenge in the first place? If we fix the symptom, will the underlying cause simply lead to it returning?

Giving someone a bottle of purified water won't help much if the water they'll drink at home tomorrow is still dirty.

Recurring problems are usually related to systems that amplify or even cause the problem. What systems are at work here? What larger systems push those systems to act the way they do? Sooner or later, the system is too big for us to shift or even consider, but naming the system gives us a chance to work on the defects and status quo where we can have the most leverage.

And then, look for the fear. Not just our own fear about owning this problem but the fears of those who are part of the system. What holds the others back? Where are the cultural impediments to speaking up and acting?

Individuals make choices. And most of the time, we make the best choice—based on who we are, what we know, what we believe, and where we hope to go. When a system is embedded in our culture, it pushes us to make choices that further the operation of the system.

The incentives for each of us are almost always status and affiliation.

Status: Who eats lunch first? Who's up and who's down?

Where do I stand? *Am I falling behind?*

Affiliation: Am I in sync? Which group am I part of, and what do they expect of me? Do I belong? *Am I safe?*

Look for ways to use the system to fix the system. The system is usually more powerful than we are, but once the system sees a way to cause action that furthers the stability and power of the system, the problem will be solved.

Which leads to the last step. Identifying and naming the actual “why.” Why does this problem matter to you? OK, but why is that objective important? Ask three or four times, and the ultimate “why” will reveal our personal desires that drive us to make this our most important problem.

Now knowing what you’ve uncovered, what’s the *real* problem to be solved?

Finally, consider your resources. You don’t have unlimited time, money, or trust. What’s a useful unit of intervention, a step you can take that will give you enough momentum to take the next step?

We’re looking for a journey, not an event. A movement, not a moment.

Three Words Extinguish Entanglements: “Tell the Truth”

Our entanglements often reveal themselves in our hesitancy to speak clearly or even admit to ourselves why we’re stuck.

How much time and effort can you expend on this problem? Say it out loud. A budget and a calendar.

What truth, when shared with your colleagues or friends, would unknot the problem and make it disappear? What does it cost us to keep this truth unspoken?

What are you afraid of? Fears unstated thrive in the dark.

What’s the purpose of this work? When we claim this, announcing the feedback loop and exposing our path, we risk

criticism. But hiding it ensures that others can't join us.

Why are you doing this? Ask why and why and why again. What's in it for you, what hole are you filling, what prize do you earn?

Strip away the corporate talk, the mission statements, the fog of imprecision. If the problem is worth solving, it's worth telling the truth.

Becoming Unreasonable

Systems create culture and use the status quo to hide and to persist. If your behavior in any setting feels *reasonable*, that's probably because you're fitting into the system that was there before you arrived.

Today, in the US, it's reasonable to drive on the right side of the road, to bring a bottle of wine when you visit someone for dinner, and to go to the hospital to give birth. But in different times and places, none of these things are true.

When we confront a persistent problem, that means that the reasonable and easy solutions have all been tried and failed. And it is probably a sign that systems are at work—systems that are allowing the problem to persist.

One approach is to bring unreasonable effort to a particular problem. Heroic risk and expense to save this one starfish, this one puppy, this one patient.

But this is exhausting. We know that the relentless tide of the system will simply replace this problem with another one, and it wears us down.

The alternative is to see the system and use the system to change the conditions that caused the problem in the first place.

Find the nodes in the system that have leverage, that seek change, that care about your problem. Find the people who want the outcomes that you want. Create the conditions for them to act.

When we model unreasonable effort, an idea can spread. Modeling what is possible reduces the risk for the next person. It creates cultural and peer pressure. A chance to create contagious action by modeling what better might be like.

Everyone said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” It’s well known because it’s true. The power of unreasonable action to change systems is often all we’ve got.

Systems don’t change from the top. There’s not much leverage there. They change from the grassroots, the foundation, the place where humans meet the system.

Systems are powerful, and systems are fragile. They bend in the face of coordinated unreasonable action. Their power comes from persuading us to believe in their power, to accept that they are normal, to avoid pushing back on them.

We have the chance to use the system to change the system. Pretending it doesn’t exist won’t help, but identifying what it does and what it wants gives us a chance to shift the inputs and the outputs.

The Hero’s Work

There’s a telling mispronunciation that reveals something important.

When we say “heroic” correctly, we’re describing a state of being. Heh-ROW-ic. It’s an adjective, a way of characterizing the generous act of showing up when we’re needed, often at

significant personal cost. The firefighter running into the building. The whistleblower who speaks up. The person who sees a problem and says, “I’ll go first.”

But what if we pronounce it differently? HERO-ic. As in, the work of being a hero.

That’s something else entirely.

That’s what happens when someone sets things up so they look good. When the photo op matters more than the outcome. Waiting until there’s an avoidable emergency and then being a savior. Being a hero instead of doing the hard, quiet work of solving the problem.

This is a form of entanglement. It’s easier to prioritize our short-term attachment to urgency and triumph than it is to sit with persistent systems and do the foundational work of causing persistent change.

Too often, well-meaning changemakers refuse to see the system and decide to be a hero instead. That’s a short-term win but not particularly productive.

Ella Baker, one of the principal organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), said, “You didn’t see me on television, you didn’t see news stories about me . . . The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

SNCC transformed the voting demographics in several US states and made a permanent impact on American politics. Baker said she didn’t want to be remembered, but she’s remembered precisely because she was willing to let the organization thrive.

We solve problems effectively when we have the insight to slow down and see the system that’s causing the problem in the

first place. Often, this involves lowering our status in the short term by walking away from our usual pattern and helping others rise up by giving them a path forward.

President Roosevelt asked General George Marshall to lead the D-Day invasion that marked the turning point of World War II. Roosevelt was giving Marshall a chance for glory, repayment for his contributions to the war. Marshall refused, insisting that he could make a bigger difference behind the scenes, orchestrating the work of others. Eisenhower got the job instead, ensuring his fame and leading to his ascension to the presidency.

Marshall devoted himself to weaving the future. Part of that systemic work included the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe, an investment that continues to change the world. We don't know Marshall because he took the spotlight—we know his name because he created a spotlight for others.

The selfless work of systems change is the heroic response to what's needed. Being a hero is only hoping to be seen.

Tugging on the Chain

Working to make change can expose us to two traps.

Some people are busy focusing on tactics, launching initiatives, and mistaking activity for progress. Swing an axe enough times and you might hit a tree.

Others are dreamers, holding a vision so abstract that it never touches the ground. Of course it feels safe—it's unassailable. And it ultimately doesn't launch.

Carol Weiss kept seeing this pattern. Working at Harvard in the 1990s, she watched complex community initiatives launch with great fanfare—staffed by dedicated people, backed by serious money—and go nowhere. The problem wasn't lack of ef-

fort. In fact, the effort was part of the problem. Magical thinking was distracting us.

Everyone had a set of activities, but the causal links between the activities and the outcomes were fuzzy, assumed, or simply wrong. *They'd skipped ahead to the destination without mapping the route.*

“Theory of change” is Weiss’s term for the bridge between activity and results. A simple recursion that challenges you to ask “And then what happens?” until you’ve traced the path from here to there. Leaders sit down with a team that’s been working on something and examine each activity. Step by step, we pull the chain. “Then what happens?” And again, “Then what happens?”

How does *this* activity make it likely that the *next* outcome occurs?

Within an hour, you’ve usually found the broken link—the place where everyone has been averting their eyes, the assumption no one wanted to examine because the whole enterprise depends on it being true.

“And then a miracle happens” is the unstated hope. But this problem is too important to need a miracle.

The work is articulating the pathway that leads to change—the sequence of outcomes that need to happen, in a particular order, so that your goal can be reached. Not the *activities* but the changes in the world those activities are meant to produce. Why do we believe this outcome leads to the next one? What’s the evidence? What has to be true for this step to work?

Has it ever worked before? Step by step, is each a proven tactic?

No points for originality. Points for building a stack of activities that solves the problem.

Applying the theory of change to driving to your office, you see a clear stack of activities. The pathway is well marked. We know what the car keys do, what the brake pedal does. We know what happens if we turn here or there. Step by step, we understand how each action leads to the next state, and how, taken together, the pathway is likely to be achieved.

When our project gets more complicated than a commute, though, projects often fall apart. It's not accurate to assume that spreading awareness leads to market share or behavior change. Or to assume policy change leads to social change. The chain seems solid until you tug on it.

Almost all promotional activity on social media fails to meet the theory of change test. It *feels* like useful work to drive up the number of followers or to measure likes or clicks. But few organizations can then show how this false proxy leads to the actual results they seek. It might keep us busy; it might enrich the online networks, but what does it accomplish?

Wendy's Hamburgers spends time and money coming up with clever tweets. There's an entire team of twenty people putting on a show on social media. And then what happens? And then what happens? The purpose of Wendy's isn't to entertain people online. The tasks are floating in the ether, disconnected from creating much of value.

A theory of change is a testable hypothesis, not a wish. You look at early outcomes to see if you're on track. You revise when evidence contradicts your assumptions. It's easy to resist this—it requires thinking about the tasks, not just doing them. If it's worth putting in the effort, it's probably worth doing it in a way that produces the outcomes we seek.

Do you have a theory of change? What will your effort lead to, and what will that lead to, and how will the cycle

compound?

As usual, the difficult work of finding the path happens before the hard work of following that path begins.

The Smallest Viable Audience

Who's it for? What story do they tell themselves, and what would have to change for their actions to shift?

Preaching to the choir is smart. But be sure that the choir you're preaching to is who you came to help.

Delighting a small cohort is a fine place to begin. In fact, it might be enough to solve our problem. Too often, we are distracted by *everyone* when we would be better off serving *someone*.

When we feel overwhelmed or impotent, it's almost certainly because we picked too big a problem or too big an audience.

Stretching the Overton Window

Joseph Overton was the president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. With his successor Joseph Lehman, they developed a theory for how systems change. It's rarely by a decree from a politician or a CEO. Instead, political and marketing systems *follow* what is already happening in the culture. Gay marriage, legalizing marijuana, even offering sushi at the supermarket—the adoption process is predictable.

If we try to change the culture too fast or lean too far away from the mainstream, the problem remains and might even get worse. That's because culture and systems return to their center, rejecting sudden shifts.

Timur Kuran has pointed out that many people in a group will lie about their preferences, saying they support the center

and the mainstream, simply because it feels too risky or expensive to speak up on behalf of an outlying idea. When we normalize an idea, bringing it in from the edges, many people who secretly agreed in the past will now join in and establish a new normal.

We stretch the Overton Window when we create the conditions for Kuran's falsifiers to reveal what they believed in all along. When the zone of safety increases, people begin to speak up and do what they hoped to do in the first place. We need to make it safe for people to announce that they're in alignment with the change.

Three cowboys can tend ten thousand cattle. They do that by herding twenty cows. Those twenty move two hundred, and those two hundred lead the rest.

Successful cultural and systemic shifts share three building blocks:

1. A small group goes outside the mainstream but frames their work in a way that early adopters can follow. Outside but not too far outside.
2. Build coalitions and networks. Enlist the others. The culture rarely leaps but is more likely to operate like a herd, a herd that follows a growing circle of outspoken, committed people who build a bridge to a different standard.
3. Sustained pressure over time. This is the most critical piece. If you don't have the patience or resources to persist, sometimes for decades, it might not pay to begin.

When Halli Thorleifsson founded Ramp Up in Iceland, the goal was to create one hundred accessible businesses for people in wheelchairs. That goal was soon reached, and they've now exceeded 1,700 ramps. By creating a system and a cultural

expectation, they've stretched the Overton Window and changed the way the community in Reykjavik interacts with the built world.

The skeptics are now their supporters. They are sure they were right all along.

Changing People's Minds

It's almost impossible to change what people want. Humans, given the option, will pursue what they want, not what you want.

Don't try to change people's minds. Don't try to change what they want. You will probably fail.

Instead, consider two things:

1. Create the conditions for people to take a different action, to find a better way to get what they wanted all along.
2. Find the people who, once they see what you have to offer, will eagerly enroll to join in on the journey. Some people. Someone, not everyone.

A different action: Organ donation rates go up 800 percent when the donor form is opt-out instead of opt-in. People in both Austria and Germany want to get paperwork over with. Instead of trying to persuade people to care enough to check a box, the Austrian system simply lets people do the convenient thing, which is nothing. It's opt-out. The German system has persisted with opt-in. The difference in results between the two countries is extraordinary. The Austrians got *eight* times the level of participation simply by getting out of the way.

An enrolled audience: Alcoholics Anonymous doesn't try to convince happy drinkers to quit. They're there for the people who've already decided they have a problem and are looking for a way out. Someone, not everyone. Niche doesn't mean small. It means you matter.

Helping people get to where they want to go is far more productive than trying to change what they want.

Everyone Is Right

Under the circumstances, we each do exactly the right thing. Based on who we are, what we know, what we want, and the world we live in, of course that's what we do.

The practical empathy of accepting that people are doing their right thing is a critical step in the work of solving problems.

We find people who are open to enrolling in the actions we seek. We create a system where they choose the actions we need them to take. Their agency works in sync with ours, and progress follows.

There's tension. Of course. The tension of change and risk and fear. The tension of seeking status or affiliation. The tension of systems colliding.

Our job is to create the tension so that people can move to a place where they make a move. They will move to what feels more right to them.

Solving problems creates tension on the way to the solution.

Creating Tension Is Generous

Change causes tension. The tension of wanting to be included, of not being left behind. The tension of “this might not work” and the tension of feeling like things might get better. Tension in human systems challenges any person to consider what the rest of the system will do in response to the external change that’s happening.

Tension isn’t the same as stress. Stress is a trap, a place where we want something else but cannot escape. Tension, on the other hand, is the engine of forward motion.

People didn’t unanimously embrace obvious innovations like the zip code or the seat belt when they were introduced. But as the systems changed to support them, people eventually went along—and now most people can’t imagine what it was like before.

When we solve a problem for someone, we’re creating the conditions for them to move forward, to help them get to where they hope to go. But that requires change, and change causes tension, the same way fire creates heat.

Who’s Wrong?

If there’s an impasse, if the problem requires someone to change their mind, it’s clear that we’re not going to be easily able to get the other parties to shift.

Which leaves just one person.

It might be *us* who’s wrong. We might be entangled across time or space in a way that doesn’t pay. It might be us who have our priorities wrong or who lack the empathy to imagine that others may have a point.

Not in their tactics or their stance but in what they want.

If we can find the practical empathy to embrace the priorities and goals of the others in our system, we have a chance to create the conditions for change. If we consider, just for today, that *we* might be the ones who are wrong in our intransigence or insistence, that can remove the pin that's holding the knot in place.

We're not going to change our project's purpose, but we might be able to change the story, the incentives, or the responses to the problem.

If we ever feel like we're right and everyone else is wrong, we've probably identified the problem.

The Intentional Design of the Model T (and the Corvette)

The Model T was intentionally designed to be cheap, dramatically cheaper than any comparable alternative. It was designed to give first-time car buyers an affordable way to travel. Henry Ford also used the project to transform the work style and wages of assembly-line workers in Detroit. And to build a nationwide dealer network. And to cajole localities into improving their roads. And ultimately, in conjunction with General Motors, to work to undermine bus lines in many cities.

The changes in the world's transportation infrastructure and methods of industrialization are still being felt today.

The Corvette, on the other hand, was a niche product from the start. In its first year, Chevrolet sold just 300 cars. By year five, they'd reached 6,300—still a tiny fraction of what the Model T sold in a good week.

But it succeeded nonetheless because it solved the problem it set out to solve. Just fifteen thousand cars sold in the first five years, but the car had an impact on everyone who saw it. As a

result, it changed the way a generation saw themselves. If the problem to be solved was creating cultural relevance, Chevrolet succeeded.

Choosing the right problem to solve enabled their designers to succeed at a very different scale.

Every successful car solved a problem for someone.

The Volvo has a different intention than the Ferrari. Each has an intentional design with clarity about who it's for, what it's for, and the change the designer seeks to make.

Pick Me!

When I began my career as a book packager/author, Chip Conley and I were lucky. The very first book we pitched sold to the one editor we offered it to. We only earned \$2,500 each, but it seemed like this would be a productive business. I needed to sell books, and publishers needed to buy them.

Over the next twelve months, I got eight hundred rejection letters in a row. Eight hundred times, someone in book publishing bought a stamp and mailed me a letter that said, “No, we’re not interested.”

It took far too long for me to figure out what I was missing.

I was pitching books that I wanted to write, I wanted to read, and I wanted to get paid for. I was suggesting that editors see the world through my eyes, understand how hard I was working, and how much I needed a gig, and *pick me*.

Of course, I had proof. Spreadsheets and data that would make my MBA friends proud. If the editors would just see things as I did, we’d be fine.

Eventually, I figured out that working to solve *my* problems wasn’t helpful.

Once I realized I could solve the editors' problems, everything got much easier. Empathy gives us a platform to create value.

When we solve enough problems for others, our problems are often solved as well.

Choosing a Useful Problem

Sometimes, problems simply show up. Public health, community challenges, the quest for a moral society—we're not going to run out of those problems anytime soon.

But we can make a living solving commercial problems as well. We can offer solutions, produce useful options, and even make compelling art. This becomes far easier if we choose a position with intent. Identify a problem and a purpose that fits a niche in the market.

The magic of positioning is to find a corner of the market where people are looking for a solution that doesn't exist (yet). The method for finding a useful corner is simple but not well understood.

Find an attribute that some people think is important. Something like luxury, health, refreshment—there are thousands to choose from.

Now find a second attribute, something you can also offer. Convenience, status, safety—find an edge. Plot the two attributes as axes on a grid.

Here's the key: All four corners of that grid need to represent legitimate choices that someone might actively want. Not better or worse—just different. Disposable versus heirloom works because some people genuinely want something they can use once and toss, while others want to pass it down. Cheap versus overpriced doesn't work because no one wakes up hoping to

overpay. But high status and low status work great—not everyone wants to wear a trucker cap, and that’s OK.

The goal is to find two valid axes that haven’t been previously combined—a corner of the market where people are looking for a solution that doesn’t exist yet.

So it’s a beer that’s imported but is also less filling. Or a car that’s sexy but also fuel efficient. Or a university that’s well respected but also lands almost all of its graduates a good job.

You know you’ve done it properly when you can eagerly recommend a competitor who is in a quadrant you’ve chosen to ignore. “We’re not for everyone” is a great place to begin.

When Marketing Fails

Marketing solves problems.

If you are struggling to get the word out, if customer traction is elusive, if you are always hustling for a little bit of attention, if it feels like you need to spend more money on promotion . . . It might be that you skipped the important part.

Marketing isn’t hype. Marketing is making a product or service that matters. Not that matters to you but that matters to someone else.

Marketing is the hard work we do long before the promotion begins.

If you’re struggling to sell the thing you made, it’s worth reconsidering the audience, the promise, and the change you seek to make—and then be honest with your team about whether your offering is remarkable or just the best you could do with what you had.

Because the market doesn’t care how hard you’re trying. They’re not here to solve your problem. It’s the other way

around.

The Most Effective Eye Hospital in the World

More people have had their vision restored by the Aravind Eye Hospital than the population of the entire city of Chicago.

When Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy (often known as Dr. V) started the hospital, his approaches to solving the problem of access to cataract surgery ran counter to the conventional methods used in wealthier communities.

The surgeries are done in shared, sterile operating rooms, with patients queued up and prepped in advance to save time. It's not unusual for one surgeon to treat fifty patients in one day.

Cataract surgery for paying patients is less than \$300, while less wealthy patients may pay only \$20 or nothing at all; no patient is turned away for lack of funds. Similar treatment in New York might cost one hundred times as much.

And yet, the hospital doesn't lose money. And the outcomes of their surgeries match those in New York and London. And the infection rate in their operating rooms is one of the lowest in the world.

It doesn't look or feel like a "regular" hospital. The standards of care are higher, but the billing, culture, and approach couldn't be more different. If it didn't help solve the problem of the patient, it was discarded. It doesn't matter what's normal; it matters if it fits the purpose of the work.

Refocusing on intentional design opened the door to solving a problem that felt impossible.

Part V

Drop the Baggage

The conspiracy of stuck is built on three confusions:

- Short-term conflict avoidance
- Unwillingness to create tension
- Misunderstanding of risk

Together, these three traps maintain the status quo, enabling problems to fester and unhelpful systems to persist. You won't be the first person stuck in this muck, and you won't be the last.

They sit quietly, unspoken entanglements, and get in the way of the change we need to make. Naming them is the first step to unlocking a better path.

Civilization exists to dampen the desires of selfish jerks. Conflict, tension, and recklessness are the hallmarks of a self-absorbed, misguided outsider. We don't want people hassling and hustling us. We avoid interactions that needlessly create tension. And our long-term success as a community requires us to avoid unnecessary risk.

When someone acts like a jerk on an airplane, the crew takes them off the plane. When a guest does this in our home, we don't invite them back.

Society is clear about this: Don't spit on the floor, text at the movies, or drive eighty miles per hour in a school zone. When in doubt, don't be selfish.

When facing problems, though, it's the three modifiers that transform these antisocial behaviors into entanglements we need to face and deal with.

Short-term conflict is appropriate when it unlocks a chance for long-term peace. The dentist who is afraid to mention a cavity today isn't doing you a favor—they're guaranteeing a root canal later.

Creating useful tension is the by-product of inviting voluntary change. The fear of missing out or being left behind is the tension that helps us overcome our fear of transition. That's why the first parent to send out invitations for the Bike Bus makes it easier for the next twenty to say yes. *Tension is the positive force that leads to forward motion.*

The feeling of risk is not the same thing as risk itself. It might *feel* risky to embrace change, but it could be the safest thing we can do in this moment. Switching careers at forty feels like jumping off a cliff. Staying in a job that's quietly eroding your health and purpose doesn't feel like anything—until it's too late.

And so, the generous, non-jerk thing to do is to find a problem worth solving and then intentionally create the conflict, tension, and feeling of risk your community needs to move forward.

Change Isn't Free

When in doubt, look for the entanglements. They're hiding in plain sight.

When we're intentional in our design, we are forced to confront the constraints that create the problem. Identifying the

false ones, the ones that are based on exhausted systems, the status quo, or entanglements, opens the door to possibility.

Once we understand that entanglements can be removed, we can see (and feel) the costs of making change happen. If it were easy, the problem would have been solved already.

Gabe Anderson reminds us that many of the steps on the road to a solution feel like barriers. *But they're not in the way. They're on the way.*

Modern Vanity

“Vanity” has the same root as “in vain.” Emptiness.

Staring at the mirror, focusing on our appearance. It's an empty pursuit of a not-very-worthwhile goal. The myths warned us about this simple sort of vanity, because it's a trap.

But modern vanity has been amplified. Industrial culture hooked the toxic emotion of shame to our instinct toward vanity. Now, instead of a chance to be seen and admired, vanity is mostly about avoiding the risk of being shamed for not being successful enough—or worse, of failing.

This new version of vanity isn't about being the prettiest; it's the endless work of avoiding being not-pretty.

If we erect the deal-killer of shame around not-pretty, then society can extend that shame into all sorts of *nots*. Not-competent. Not-respected. Not-fit. They call social media numbers “vanity metrics” for a reason.

It's selfish. Not the selfishness of hoarding resources, but the defensive decision to hold things back. To sabotage our process and our practice so we're not exposed.

Generous work scales, and it also gives us an opportunity to breathe:

Aspiration has a ceiling. You can become pretty enough, accomplished enough, respected enough—and stop. There’s a destination.

Avoidance has no floor. The threat of not-pretty (or not-competent, not-respected, or any other imagined failure) is always hanging over you. You can never outrun it permanently. Every achievement just resets the clock. It feels like a useful fuel, but it’s not.

Society relentlessly amplifies this. Once we’ve established that *not-X is shameful*, we have a permanent threat that leads to self-policing behavior. We enforce it on ourselves and those we care about.

If you didn’t care about blame or credit, what would you ship? What would you teach, invent, or contribute?

The answer tells you exactly what you’re currently withholding—and from whom.

Disappearing into apparent safety isn’t safe. It’s an empty and selfish way to make yourself small.

Finding Entanglements

False constraints are caused by entanglements. We’re seduced by a system, pushed by fear, or held back by well-meaning friends. These entanglements cause us to want two or more things at the same time, two things that are mutually exclusive, and so we’re stuck.

We say we want forward motion. There’s a problem because we’re not happy with the status quo, because we want something better. We seek to make a change happen because the outcome we want feels important.

But we *also* want things to stay as they are. Perhaps we're not willing to invest the time, resources, or risk in making a change. Or it could be that if the change succeeds, we'll end up challenging something else in our lives that we'd rather leave unexamined.

Many entanglements appear benign and normal—until we take the time to look directly at them. Observation changes the status of the entanglement.

If you know what you want and you have the freedom to accomplish it, better is possible. This is when clarity of purpose aligns with independence of action.

Letting go of entanglements isn't easy. We don't enjoy confronting our entanglements, and when it feels unfair, it's easy to transfer our discomfort into grievance. We can feel entitled, deserving of the change we seek and the stability we crave at the same time.

Entanglements confuse any situation where they arise. Multiple goals not only muddy the clarity of our purpose, but they actively impede the actions we seek to take.

Committees are a physical manifestation of this. Organizations slow themselves down chasing multiple demands. But it happens just as often (perhaps even more) within our own heads. Like the trapped donkey, our entanglements with fear, entitlement, and multiple priorities often undermine our ability to move forward.

Einstein talked about spooky action at a distance. *Spukhafte Fernwirkung*. Entanglements are always just out of focus—they don't leave fingerprints at the scene, and they're often over there, not here.

Entanglements are unrelated commitments, beliefs, and assertions that we subconsciously can't let go of. These lead to

endless negotiations with ourselves and with others that rarely lead to a solution.

Knotty problems feel knotty because these entanglements are working remotely. We create unresolvable conflicts that lead us to conclude that we're stuck, that the problem is nothing but a situation. And then, a competitor (or even a friend) arrives and solves the problem. They're not more talented or better resourced—they simply have the focus and independence to do the work that needs to be done.

The risk doesn't change, but our approach and understanding of the risk do.

We have entanglements over time, across our social networks and with ourselves. All caused by confusion and amplified by entitlement.

There are three places to look for entanglements:

Time entanglements (connections to times that aren't *now*). These connect us to a past that doesn't matter to this problem or to a future that's not here and not relevant (yet).

Social entanglements (connections to people who aren't *here*). They focus us on people and interactions that aren't related to the problem we're trying to solve.

Identity entanglements (connections to selves we don't need to *be*). They push us to imagine a person we're not interested in being, at least right now.

Each of these bridges works at a distance. Times and people that are far away, but we feel them right here and right now. Some specifics help us see the three sorts of entanglements.

Time Entanglements Aren't Now

Time moves from our history to our future, and we narrate our journey with our shared understanding of this unfolding. But our history is gone, and our future isn't here yet.

Bound to the past. Sunk costs are the most obvious form—we defend past investments of time, money, and effort even when they're irrelevant to the decision in front of us. We're also held back by unfinished grief, by failures we haven't metabolized, by opportunities we missed and keep trying to make up for. *The past becomes a debt collector, showing up at every new beginning.*

AOL, Yahoo, and MySpace defended their past instead of inventing the future. The local business loses money for years while it waits for the lease to run out. And the recent MBA grad sticks with a job for decades, even though they knew they picked the wrong gig weeks after they started work.

Bound to the future. We're exhausted in advance, feeling the weight of work that hasn't happened yet. We optimize for scale we haven't earned and may never need. We experience failure before we've begun, rehearsing catastrophe so thoroughly that the project dies in our imagination before it has a chance to succeed (or die) in the world. *The future becomes a thief, stealing energy from the present.*

If you want to see this acted out and described in detail, simply read the words of any skeptical critic—every innovation, plebiscite, and program has plenty of them. “There’s no chance that the iPhone is going to get any significant market share. No chance. It’s a \$500 subsidized item.” That was the CEO of Microsoft offering a report from a future that never happened.

Social Entanglements Aren't Here

Status and affiliation dominate our unstated assumptions about our place in the world, but they are often a trap and sometimes used against us.

Bound to phantom judges. Not real people who will encounter your work, but an imagined tribunal of sophisticated critics who live rent-free in your head. The cool kids from high school. The fancy people who might disapprove if you ever showed up on their radar. They don't know you exist, never will, and wouldn't care anyway. But we pre-edit for their approval, and the editing never stops.

This drives traditional professions to stay traditional. Medical pioneers have learned the hard way that doctors take ten or twenty years to adopt new techniques, even after they've been proven to be effective. The peer pressure to stick with the program is intense.

The same judges send us back to our clothes closet one more time before we head out to a conference. No one is going to notice what we choose to wear, but we wonder, "What if they did?"

Bound to ghost stakeholders. The parent, the ex-partner, the former boss, the mentor who moved on. Unlike phantom judges, these people are real, and they know you. But they're not in the room. You're arguing with a caricature, one that's often stricter and more rigid than the actual person ever was.

What would your dad think of this? What about that person who turned you down for the prom?

Our heroes seem perfect from a distance, but like us, they compromised along the way, bringing generous empathy to get the work done.

Bound to borrowed scorecards. Someone else's ranking system—who's important, what counts as serious work, which achievements matter—was installed in our head without our consent. False proxies are all around us, and we know this. But we find ourselves keeping score anyway, measuring our work against standards we never chose.

What's the purpose of this work? Are we measuring what matters or just what's prominent or convenient?

The kid who aced the SATs is now forty and still chasing scores. The entrepreneur measures herself against a Forbes list she doesn't even respect. The artist keeps counting Instagram followers while insisting the work is what matters.

Identity Entanglements Don't Have to Be Embraced

Combine time and social standing and we're left with our assumptions about who we are and who we promised to become. But that person in the mirror is simply a snapshot in a moment of time, not someone frozen in place.

Bound to who you were. We drag old selves into new rooms. The old you, the one who wasn't picked, who failed publicly, who made the wrong choice at twenty-four. Or we work to replicate lucky breaks. We keep trying to vindicate that person, to finally win the argument that ended years ago. But they're not here anymore. We are.

Are you still living in high school? Are the bullies or those who rejected you living rent-free in your head? You're not alone.

Bound to who you think you should be. There's a version of yourself you've fallen in love with—the one who writes every day, who stays calm under pressure, who has it figured out.

This aspirational self isn't always a goal. It's also a trap. Because you're not comparing yourself to a real standard. You're comparing yourself to a fantasy and using the gap as evidence that you're not ready.

Bound to who you promised to become. Somewhere along the way, you made commitments. To a career path, a creative identity, a way of being in the world. But that was many choices ago. The promises were real. The person who made them looked a lot like you. But you might not want those things anymore—and you haven't given yourself permission to renegotiate.

It's tempting to believe we're entitled to the future we chose long ago . . . a future based on different assumptions, systems, and realities than we live with now. That person we promised to become may have become a compass, an avatar, or even a hero.

We can forgive our past selves for inventing this person. And we can respect that future self even as we realize we're not going to become them.

Bound to the others. Not the phantom voices in our head but the real ones, the folks who are in the room with us right here and right now. There are many rooms, and the accident of history put us here. But we don't need to stay in this room, and we don't need to please these people, not today. Peers aren't fixed. It's simply the word we use to describe the people we think we belong with. Now that you know what you know, is this where you want to be?

The loyalty trap. There are few actions more esteemed than loyalty. It's a particular sort of promise, one that enables peer connection and structural cohesion. But it's easy to use loyalty as a way to hide, an excuse to accept the unacceptable.

Not just loyalty to other people. Loyalty to projects, to past decisions, even to concepts.

You're probably no longer working for the person who gave you your first job or on the project where you discovered early success. Quitting what got us here is often the best way to get over there.

We can be grateful for the opportunities we've had to make a difference, but when that gratitude holds us back from solving tomorrow's problems, we're doing a disservice to the very people who gave us a chance.

Loyalty is a virtue when it helps us create solutions to problems we care about. It turns into a trap when it holds us back from solving those problems.

We may find that our leadership is what they were hoping for, and our guess about what they wanted was wrong. Or we may find that we're better off in a different room, a room filled with peers who are eager to go where we're committed to take them.

These are just some of the shapes entanglement takes. You'll recognize others. There's a pattern. We're negotiating with moments, cultures, and people that aren't part of the problem we're trying to solve.

Am I safe? Do I belong? Am I loved? Entanglements work overtime to insulate us, but they get in the way of doing what matters.

Choose Your Fuel

What story do you need to tell yourself to become more engaged, to examine your purpose, and to find the energy to confront your entanglements?

If you look hard enough, you'll discover that you're ahead. Ahead of most of the population in areas that matter. But if you look in a different direction, you can find plenty of people who are more qualified, more committed, and more talented than you are. You're also behind.

Which one gets you going? Focus on that.

Two hundred years ago, Jeremy Bentham helped us understand that just about everything we do (from saving money to being a leader) has three ways to describe it. A neutral tone, a congratulatory one, and one laced with criticism.

There is the fuel of urgency, the one that drives us toward emergencies and away from important system change. There's the fuel of pessimism, requiring us to be backed against a wall to act, and the fuel of the sure thing, which brings us only to work that everyone is certain will work. Perhaps we need the fuel of conflict, or the opposite, where the work is only possible if there is no conflict.

Some artists will do anything to be popular. Others are fueled by their relentless commitment to not selling out. The artist known as frnnch writes, "Growing tired of painting something people love is a good problem to have. Do not worry about it until it happens. May you be so lucky."

Reality is all around us. But our oft-repeated story about reality is far more powerful. Go find the fuel that helps you move through your entanglements. *Pick your story; pick your future.*

Action Becomes Identity

We become what we do. That's more useful than believing we're able to do what we already believe to be our identity.

The entanglement of “People like me don’t do things like that” runs deep.

The alternative is to *do things like that*. And then, soon, you’ll become the kind of person who does things like that.

That’s how we learned to walk, to cook, and to be kind. Do it first, then make it a habit. Habit becomes identity.

If you want to be a writer, write. If you want to be a kind person, do kind things. And if you want to be a creator, ship creative work.

Taken too far, this turns into the entanglement of originality. Any project or idea that’s not ours is beneath us. If it’s not completely owned by us, we’re paralyzed, unable to bring it forward because we fear being seen as a hack.

Or we can find solace by waiting. The permission trap off-loads responsibility to someone else to pick us, approve of us, and give us the go-ahead. Sometimes, though, the work is so important that adopting the identity of someone who says yes is worth confronting our entanglement.

Questions worth asking ourselves as we seek to embrace a new identity:

- Am I willing to be wrong about the fact that I’m a person who doesn’t know how to do this?
- Am I open to feeling incompetent as I discover that a new skill is possible but I don’t know how to do it yet?
- Will I be resilient enough to recover if I try to do this and fail?
- Can I temporarily be an imposter, someone who acts like they know the skill but doesn’t quite?
- Am I eager to be friends with the person I’m going to become if I make this shift?

The Feeling/Acting Muscle

Feelings arise. They always do. And yet, actions are a choice.

We can feel fear but still move ahead.

We can be frustrated but still respond with calm.

We can be confident but still be curious.

Examining our entanglements often brings feelings. Emotions that tie us to traditions or habits or obligations. Those feelings are human, and we can embrace them.

The feelings are a clue. They usually arise when two of our entanglements are in conflict. We can choose to move forward by making compromises that lead to long-term unhappiness, or we can forgive ourselves for an entanglement that isn't helping and then take action despite (and because of) the feelings.

We're always going to be experiencing our feelings, but our actions are up to us. The feeling tells you where the knot is. The action is how you untie it.

Who Gets a Say?

Some voices are already in our heads; some are broadcast to us, amplified by the desires and fears of others.

We get to choose who is on the advisory board, who is in the focus group, and who gets the final say.

- The neighbor down the street who doesn't like you
- The admissions office
- The day traders who are going to sell your stock soon anyway
- This patient, this customer, this student . . .
- The kid you were when you were six years old

- The lifers in accounts payable
- The passionate fan
- The students in the first row
- The commenters on your Instagram
- The generations about to be born
- The donor who gives every single year
- The reviewer at the magazine no one reads
- The person you were, who sacrificed to pay for graduate school
- The masses who want convenience
- The bully who told you you were unlikely to ever succeed
- Your competition
- Your cheapest and least loyal customers

We get to center *someone* in our work but not everyone.

Thrashing and Identity Entanglement

When we look in the mirror, it's tempting to see someone who doesn't fail. Someone who does the work, is prepared, and usually gets it right.

Our desire to honor this person is why brainstorming sessions are so difficult. We're certainly not eager to blurt out something stupid in front of our peers. Creativity for most people is simply the act of copying what came before and then changing it as little as possible. Not because we can't invent but because we're afraid to be wrong.

Society starts indoctrinating us with competence as soon as schooling begins. Get an A, get it right, fix your mistakes, will this be on the test, don't raise your hand if you don't know the answer . . .

And then organizations amplify this part of our identity. That's how we get hired, get promoted, and keep our jobs. Sloppiness can be more than a bad habit; it could be the end of a career.

Innovation, then, is a real challenge. Innovations, by definition, don't come with an operating manual or detailed instructions. The best bet seems simple: Make as few changes as you can, then pass it up the chain.

Organizations pay the price for this. As the project gets closer to shipping, the VP notices a flaw. The general counsel starts to pay attention and gets concerned. People with power and the nervousness that comes with it point out missed opportunities. Unfortunately, the errors are now embedded in the code, the packaging, and the plans. Fixing things later always costs far more than fixing them now.

The alternative is to unentangle from our competent identity and thrash early. Thrash when it's cheap. Thrash before track has been laid and plans are in place. And thrash when the size of the team is small and the work hasn't yet begun. It's easier to argue about this now than it is to fix it later.

Thrashing is the work of changing your mind, shifting direction, and making mistakes—before the cost of mistakes gets high. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, right.

Talented woodworkers understand this. Most of the time is spent sketching, erasing, and arguing, long before the wood gets cut. You use the table saw later, and sand and polish at the end. Don't show the nearly finished chair to the client—show them the plans or perhaps the rough cut. *Have the difficult conversations long before you start varnishing.*

But this extends beyond the solo craftsman.

The Macintosh was invented and built by thirteen people. General Magic defined almost all the elements of the smart-phone with a team not much bigger than that. Important work is usually initiated by small teams who embrace incompetence on the path to better. That's not an accident. Small teams are willing to thrash. So are disciplined, creative organizations.

“Thrash early” is one more approach to forgiving and walking away from our entanglements.

“I Don’t Know” Ends the Conversation

It’s very different from “I’m not certain, but perhaps . . .”

“I don’t know” surrenders. It asks for instructions. It gives agency to the teacher, to the system, to authorities outside of ourselves. It avoids responsibility and gives up freedom.

“I don’t know” is a symptom of our entanglement with the indoctrination of school, and it doesn’t go away easily.

You don’t have to be certain. But we need to be curious enough to explore.

Fear Is a Gift

Faux fear is a trap.

When I was in third grade, two friends decided to test their courage. Marty and Joe went to Maple Avenue, a busy four-lane road, to see who could stand in the middle of the street facing down speeding cars without flinching.

Marty won. It was the last game he’d ever play.

We’re born with fear, and it saves our lives. Real fear is a gift—it kept our ancestors from walking off cliffs and into the

mouths of predators. When it shows up, we should pay attention.

But systems and culture have learned to hack that fear and use it against us. There are countless varieties of faux fear—fear that feels urgent but exists only to keep us where we are. It’s easy to get entangled with this kind of fear, because it disguises itself as prudence.

Faux fear is a symptom.

It’s proof that an entanglement is working to hold us back. And faux fear doesn’t like to be named. It hides behind excuses, rationalizations, and shame.

Writer’s block is faux fear. So is the anxiety that keeps us from having honest conversations or from shipping work that might not succeed. The clearest tell is our unwillingness to talk about it directly. I’ll freely admit that I’m afraid of riding a motorcycle or getting in a car with a drunk teenager—those fears make sense. But I’ll invent a dozen reasonable-sounding explanations before I’ll confess that I’m avoiding a difficult conversation because I’m afraid of what might happen if I speak up.

Real fear protects us from genuine danger. Faux fear protects us from imaginary judgment.

One way to begin untangling from faux fear is to name it. A surprising inversion helps: Coaches often ask, “What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?” I’ve found a more useful version: *What would be worth doing even if you knew you would fail?*

No sane person answers that question with “free solo El Capitan.” Climbing a sheer cliff without ropes triggers fear for a good reason. If you fail at that, it’s the last thing you’ll ever do. That’s real fear doing its job.

But when we find work we'd pursue even knowing it might not succeed—when the attempt itself feels worth the cost—we've found a purpose. And we've exposed the faux fear that was holding us back.

Many of the entanglements outlined in this book have faux fear as their symptom. When in doubt, look for the fear.

Confused and Entitled

There are two kinds of entanglements.

We're *confused* when we measure the wrong thing or give too much weight to a factor that doesn't really matter. Sunk costs are a source of confusion, as is the common pitfall of measuring or responding to the wrong thing. We can learn to see the truth of these entanglements, and then they disappear.

And we're *entitled* when we assert that it's only fair that the world stays as it is or only changes the way we hope it will. We're entitled to things being convenient, predictable, or straightforward. And the more we lean into the expected justice of these conditions, the easier it is to forget about the problem we came to solve.

They're easy to tell apart: Knowledge solves confusion. Entitlement requires us to care enough about the outcome to set aside an emotional attachment to outcomes that aren't going to arrive.

A Long List of Entanglements

- I want these third-grade kids to learn resilience, teamwork, and leadership while putting on a play, but I also want the performance to be perfect.

- I want my teenager to make their own mistakes and learn from them, but I also want to protect them from consequences that might derail their future.
- I'd like to have the party of my dreams, but I also want my family to love all my decisions.
- I want to be generous and say yes to people who ask for my time, but I also want to protect the space I need to do my best work.
- I want to give honest feedback that helps people grow, but I also want them to like me.
- I want to speak truth to power and challenge the status quo, but I also want to keep my job.
- I want my art to be authentic and true to my vision, but I also want people to buy it.
- I want to charge what my work is worth, but I also want everyone who needs it to be able to afford it.
- We want to hire diverse candidates who bring fresh perspectives, but we also want people who fit our culture.

This is all reasonable. It's also why the problem feels like it's hard to solve. In fact, as long as we insist on two mutually exclusive things to happen, they're situations.

I want THIS, *but* I also require THAT. But we can't have both, and so we're stuck.

When we embrace outcomes that don't fight with one another, the problem disappears.

Time and Money

In his book *Everything Is Tuberculosis*, John Green points out that public health experts estimate we could screen and cure

every tuberculosis sufferer on the planet for about \$25 billion a year. Politicians say that we can't possibly afford to do this. But they're entangled, confusing money spent right now with money we'll need to spend if we don't act. The most recent estimates from the WHO are that for every dollar we spend finding and curing tuberculosis, we save thirty-nine dollars in health care costs and lost productivity over time.

It's the "over time" part that trips people up. We're like car owners who refuse to change the oil and then whine when the engine fails.

We do the same thing in reverse when we put ourselves in future debt to buy something we want right now. The delight in buying a new car instead of a used one is probably overwhelmed by the cost of paying off that car loan every month for years.

Jacqueline Novogratz, founder of acumen.org, pioneered the idea of Patient Capital. Instead of day-trading, looking for basis points and quick wins, Acumen has spent the last twenty-five years investing in a better future for the poorest among us. More than a hundred million people have access to electric light, clean water, and the dignity that comes from possibility because of the relatively small investments Acumen has made over time.

When we can disentangle from the imperative for the quick win, the opportunities for significant systemic change are everywhere.

Sunk Costs

The unspoken rule: Defend past effort and past commitments when making future plans. This is the foundation of the status quo and the powerful tool that systems use to maintain them-

selves. It's a trap. Actually, "Ignore sunk costs" is the critical lesson of useful decision-making.

The thing you earned, that you depend on, that was hard to do—it's a gift from your former self. Just because you have a law degree, a travel agency, or the ability to do calligraphy in Cyrillic doesn't mean that your future self is obligated to accept that gift.

We hold on to the old competencies and our hard-earned status roles far longer than we should. *The only way to be creative is to do something new, and the path to something new requires leaving something else behind.*

Imagine the backpack, the one you'll take with you on this new project. What's in it? What can you leave behind? The items you take out of your backpack aren't disrespected, nor do they mean you made an error when you acquired them. It's simply a new choice based on new information.

New decisions based on new information are at the heart of leadership. But you can't make those decisions if you're also busy calculating how much the old decisions cost you.

Encyclopedia Britannica had already built an online version when Wikipedia arrived. They saw what was possible. But they'd spent two centuries earning the story of being the authoritative source. Leather bound, expert written, definitive. Filing cabinets filled with data and libraries around the world filled with previous editions. Becoming a free, crowd-sourced, "good enough" resource meant walking away from that investment.

Their reputation was a gift from their predecessors. But they didn't have to accept it.

John Grisham was a lawyer for ten years. He's happier writing books.

This isn't an easy path. It takes three years to earn a law degree. Grisham spent a lot of time and money acquiring his. And then built a reputation as a lawyer. But all of that effort is a gift. A gift from our former selves to the one who's here today, right now.

Like all gifts, you don't have to accept it. "No, thank you," is a complete sentence.

One more example, because it's so hard to learn to walk away from sunk costs:

You put down a \$900 deposit on an isolated beach shack. The idea is to spend your vacation relaxing by the shore. The final payment of \$300 is due tomorrow. Unfortunately, a huge tropical storm is ripping through the island, and there's flooding and rain. Should you go?

The \$900 is lost. Gone whether you go or not. The new decision is whether you'd pay \$300 to spend your vacation holed up in a shack, being wet and miserable. That same money would enable you to have a lovely staycation at home with friends. The answer is pretty obvious.

The past paid for options. It doesn't choose your future.

Time, effort, and money spent by the former you is simply a gift. A gift from the old you to the you of today. Like all gifts, you don't have to accept it.

Handing someone a backpack filled with expensive but obsolete (and heavy) items isn't the useful work we need to do on their behalf. Take what you need and leave the rest.

The Phantom Audience

Not real people who will encounter your work but an imagined tribunal of sophisticated critics you've never met. They live in

your head, and they're always unimpressed. You pre-edit for their approval, but they don't exist, never will, and wouldn't care anyway.

There are two opposing delusions about the people we seek to help with their problems.

The first is the mistaken fear that most of them (many of them; some of them) will *hate* your solution. No one wants to be hated, and it's easy to amplify just how much they'll dislike it, how much they'll dislike you for trying, and how many of them there are.

And the second is the false confidence that everyone will love it. This bravado pushes us to lose empathy and trade utility for a trap that feels like authenticity.

The truth is that everyone won't hate the work, and everyone won't love it either. The useful path is to identify the people most likely to benefit from the problem we're solving and focus on them. Simply for them.

Build something they would miss if it didn't arrive. Create something they'll want to share. Put yourself on the hook with this smaller audience. If you fail with them, you've failed. But if you don't try to support them, you've failed anyway.

The smallest viable audience is a choice. It's not small in an absolute sense, simply smaller than "everyone."

Our mantra can be "This might not be for you, but if it is, I hope I've helped."

If the audience you choose is too small, then it's not viable; choose again. But if you choose an audience that's too big, you're signing up to be mediocre instead of specific.

Credentialism as Inherited Debt

I'm glad my dog's veterinarian went to vet school. I'm thrilled that the pilot knows how to land this plane. And we've all seen enough charlatans and con men to last a lifetime.

Yet our reliance on accreditation and credentials can lead to impostor syndrome. Who are we to lead or to create or even to sell? We don't have all the paperwork, the experience, or the success that the market demands.

You didn't go to the right school, didn't have the right letters after your name, weren't mentored by the right people. These absences happened years ago and far away. Yet they show up in the room when you're about to assert something, whispering that you haven't earned the right.

If we get entangled in this thinking, we'll reject ourselves before the audience has a chance. We'll overindex on antique forms of proof and not spend enough energy on possibility.

We become what we do.

You aren't the product. You're not the one who's on offer. "Here, I made this" is mostly about the "this." The change we seek to make. The method, the device, the system.

It's about the people we're here to serve, not about us.

Our credentials are simply a tool to help us earn the trust we need to solve a problem. The best credential is the work we've done. The best way to improve that is to do even better work tomorrow.

Hooked

"This is just who I am."

That might not be true. It might be that this is who you are *comfortable* being. And so we return to this state, because it's

safe and it's easy.

But if being entangled with that comfortable self is keeping you from solving problems, then the comfort is a form of sabotage. It's resistance, keeping us away from change.

One pernicious form of entanglement is the vicarious leader. We decide that we're not the person who can make change or lead or challenge the status quo—that we'll make our contribution by being the sort of person who follows or simply approves.

This isn't a fixed position. You are not a bully or the class clown. You're not a victim or a naysayer. You're not the one who needs to be on the front lines all the time, or the one who only feels complete when winning an argument. These aren't permanent identities; they're chosen states. If the problem is important enough, we can choose to walk away from our hiding places.

Because we're likely to make choices to honor the identity we've chosen; on the precipice of a new problem to be solved, the old narratives arise. "People like us do things like this" requires that we figure out who the people like us are.

We become what we do, but we don't have to keep doing the same thing again and again.

We're not under the circumstances. *We are the circumstances.*

Regret Insulation

Building in excuses entangles our work today with a future we are hoping to avoid.

Of course, things have gone badly in the past. The only way to always avoid errors and failures is to refuse to innovate and

contribute.

One way to insulate ourselves from blame is to aim for less. To seek deniability. Follow the proven steps and never deviate.

As we gain in status, the expertise trap waits for us. Because we know what failure looks like, because we have more to lose, we use it to hide.

There's a cost to regret. And a cost to living our lives in avoidance.

These are choices.

Premature Optimization for Scale

You're making something for twelve people, but you design it to survive contact with twelve million. The complexity isn't for now—it's for a future that may never arrive. You're entangled with a version of success that hasn't happened yet.

"If this is worth doing, it's worth doing big."

Except that's not the way it works. The Beatles played underground in Hamburg for months. Facebook was built for three hundred lonely Harvard students. Slack was an internal tool for a tiny games company.

The alternative is customer traction. There is nothing minimal about the minimum viable product of our work. Instead, we use our nimble simplicity as a tool for empathy. We show up with the simplest solution to the smallest problem we can find, and we see if our audience, our small audience, can't live without it.

Do they tell the others?

Do they come back for more?

First, the short story. Then the novella. Then the screenplay. *Then* we make the movie.

The Borrowed Status Hierarchy

Someone else's ranking system—who's important, what counts as serious work, which achievements matter—was installed in your head without your consent. You didn't build it—you may not even agree with it—but you find yourself deferring to it.

Humans in society focus on status and affiliation.

Affiliation is community, connection, and belonging.

Status is “who eats lunch first.” Status pushes us to succeed, to rank higher, and sometimes to win at someone else's expense.

Systems depend on both to persist. Systems are adjudicators of status. Systems are built with the promise that if you follow the steps, you'll move up, and that if you stick with the rules, you'll fit in.

These hierarchies are everywhere: at church, the awards show, the fashionable high streets selling expensive luxury goods. We can see it at the cool kids' clique at the high school lunch table and the soccer stats posted on the bulletin board in eighth grade.

Why do well-paid executives make bad short-term decisions just to boost the stock price? Why do we support a philanthropy (or not) based on our friends, or a charity auction, or a gala?

Problems are often solved by people who walk away from the hierarchy. That's because system problems are caused by systems, and the system enforces the hierarchy to protect itself. Unless we walk away from the status it offers, we're tangled in the knot it created.

“If I didn't care about the short-term status this solution costs me, what value could I create?” That's a question we

rarely ask.

Jim Ziolkowski left a fast-track career at General Electric to build schools in Malawi. Three thousand schools later, he and his worldwide team at [Buildon.org](https://buildon.org) have changed the lives of millions. Yet there are still people at GE who wonder if he regrets walking away from a life defined by standard measures of status.

We get what we measure. Pick your metrics wisely.

Anticipatory Exhaustion

The labor hasn't happened yet, but you're already tired from it. You feel the weight of the project as if you'd completed it. So you simplify, shrink, hedge—not because the work is hard right now but because future-you is sending fatigue backward through time.

Nurses, doctors, and social workers burn out at higher rates than many other professions. The work is hard, but the stress is where the problem really lies.

Not simply the exhaustion of effort. More likely, it's the exhaustion of stress. Of moving forward when we feel like running away. Of sitting with the fear. Of having difficult conversations—or even imagining them. And the exhaustion of failure or even the risk of failure.

This can also cause its cousin: fear of success. We're aware of the consequences of the change that will happen if we're right. It might be easier to stand by the side of the road than it is to simply start moving and get to where we've said we wanted to go.

Part VI

Ship the Work

Our progress so far:

Name the problem

See the systems

Find the entanglements

Embrace the constraints

Acknowledge a situation

Tell the truth

Share your theory of change

Design with intention and practical empathy

And now we ship the work.

If it doesn't ship, it doesn't count.

Two Kinds of Bureaucracy

The first amplifies our dignity. It treats us with respect. And it gives us the reliable foundation to do great work. This is the bureaucracy of civil discourse and rules that make sense.

The second gives us a place to hide. This is an organization protecting itself and its system, not amplifying or pursuing its purpose.

Elizabeth King wrote that that process saves us from the poverty of our intentions. The process of a generative bureaucracy is a system optimized to get the best out of each of us.

Bureaucracies can be designed, but they often simply evolve, each node doing its best to maximize status and safety in a system that's simply trying to protect itself, often at the expense of those within it.

The opportunity is to apply intentional design to each interaction in the process. We can create interactions that make us *more* human, not less.

A useful bureaucracy is an engine we build to reliably ship the work.

On Alert for Ice-Nine

Author Kurt Vonnegut created the fictional molecule ice-nine. It freezes at room temperature, but the essence of it is that it's contagious. Once some water touches ice-nine, it becomes ice-nine.

Ideas are contagious, and systems travel on them. Once you permit the edge of a system into your organization, it can spread—successful systems persist precisely because of this contagion.

When we start using a shortcut from a system that creates problems, we'll be relentlessly pushed to use it again, just one more time. When we quietly give a single employee a single performance bonus, it's likely that this useful shortcut will spread and stick around. Until our team is motivated by performance bonuses, not the mission . . .

When a company takes on an investor, they've signed up for the entire structure and governance and timelines of any other profit-seeking company. When a nonprofit sends out an urgent emergency fundraising note or holds a gala, they've just signed up for most of what comes with the systems that inform the nonprofits all around them.

The entanglements are amplified by the systems and the culture around us.

Of course we're stuck. The system is powerful. And we let it in.

Choose your system and you've chosen your priorities.

Breaking a Stuck Loop

Drug-resistant tuberculosis kills hundreds of thousands of people every year. And it threatens the rest of us too.

There are second-line antibiotic drugs that can cure drug-resistant TB. But in 2000, they cost \$20,000 or more per patient. The people who need them most—the poor, the incarcerated, people living in close quarters where disease spreads fastest—can't afford them. So the disease keeps spreading, keeps evolving, keeps getting harder to stop.

The solution seems obvious. Most of these drugs are off patent. Generic manufacturers could produce them for a fraction of the price.

But these generic-producing companies must place bets. They're not going to tool up to produce a drug unless they know someone will buy it. And the customers for these drugs are poor countries with limited budgets. That's not an attractive market to them.

So the manufacturers wait for the countries to commit.

The countries, meanwhile, can't commit. How do you allocate budget for a drug that doesn't exist yet? Politicians need certainty before they can risk a commitment.

Each side is waiting for the other to go first. The loop's stuck.

Jim Yong Kim of Partners in Health wanted to find a way to unstick it. If the World Health Organization added these drugs

to its essential medicines list, countries could justify the commitment. It would create tension and put pressure on those that didn't. And that commitment would give manufacturers the confidence to produce.

But the WHO wouldn't add the drugs to the list. Some of their experts worried that cheap antibiotics would be overprescribed and poorly administered in countries with less-developed medical systems—accelerating resistance until we had no drugs left at all. Keep the drugs expensive, they reasoned, and they'll be used more carefully by more credentialed doctors in wealthier countries (the countries they were familiar with, of course).

Everyone had a seemingly reasonable position. Everyone was waiting for someone else to move. The system remained in place. The illness spread, and people died.

This is how a problem becomes a situation. Not because it's unsolvable but because every node in the loop is frozen.

Jim Yong Kim refused to accept it. For years, he and Paul Farmer showed up unreasonably—borrowing expensive drugs from a Boston hospital, smuggling them to Peru, hoping to pay the hospital back someday. They knew the disease could be cured. They'd seen it happen, one patient at a time.

But individual heroics couldn't scale. The system had to change.

Kim studied the loop. He found the node with the most leverage: those WHO experts who feared losing control over how the drugs would be used. These were medical professionals. They cared about the suffering and death among the poor but weren't willing to risk losing control over the last drugs humankind had available against drug-resistant TB.

What if they could keep that control or even increase it?

Kim created a nonprofit committee that would certify which countries got access to the cheap generics. To qualify, countries had to follow rigorous WHO protocols. This gave the skeptical experts at WHO exactly what they wanted—oversight, standards, and responsible use. It gave health ministers in developing countries something they wanted too: authority and structure.

Now the WHO could approve adding these second-line drugs to their essentials list. Countries would commit. Manufacturers would follow their incentives and produce. No one had to admit that they'd been intransigent or incorrect. Instead, they made a new decision based on new information.

Within two years, the cost of these antibiotics dropped by more than 95 percent. Today it's down 99 percent. The price of treating one patient a few years ago now treats a hundred.

Kim didn't fight the system. He didn't shame anyone for wanting what they wanted. He found a way to give each node in the loop what it needed—and the loop moved.

Building the First Fighter Jet

In 1943, Kelly Johnson was given 180 days to build America's first jet fighter. Lockheed had no space, no spare engineers, and no formal contract. Johnson's response was to name the baggage: the committees, the approval chains, the redundant inspections, the military specifications that existed to protect bureaucrats rather than build airplanes. His rule was explicit: "The number of people having any connection with the project must be restricted in an almost vicious manner." Not reduced. Restricted in an almost vicious manner. He saw exactly what was slowing everyone else down.

Then he dropped it. He set up shop in a rented circus tent, hired twenty-three engineers instead of the usual two hundred, and made decisions on handshakes before the paperwork arrived. He posted a sign on the wall: “Our Days Are Numbered.” The formal contract showed up four months after work had already begun. Johnson didn’t fight the Pentagon’s bureaucracy or try to reform Lockheed’s culture. He simply refused to carry what he didn’t need.

They delivered the XP-80 in 143 days—37 days early. Over the next four decades, the same approach produced the U-2, the SR-71 Blackbird, and the F-117 stealth fighter, often under budget and ahead of schedule. Johnson spent his whole career trying to convince other organizations to follow his rules. Almost no one did.

“What the Skunk Works does is secret,” he wrote. “How it does it is not.”

The baggage was just too ingrained for most organizations to set down.

Five Dollars for Food

As we’ve seen, tuberculosis is a brutal disease, and drug-resistant TB is a scourge. I’m returning to these examples because they juxtapose systems with humanity, problems with situations. And the stakes couldn’t be higher.

We have medicines that can cure TB, but if patients stop taking their meds, the disease can evolve and become drug resistant, and public health gets even worse.

In cities like Boston, studies show that as many as 6 percent of patients fail to take their meds to completion.

In Haiti and other economically stressed countries, the problem of drug compliance is even worse. When Paul Farmer and

Partners in Health (PIH) began working in a rural valley there decades ago, TB was a leading cause of death. And despite the best efforts of Paul and his team, many patients failed to take the full dose of their medication over many months.

Doctor Farmer wasn't willing to settle. Instead, he defied conventional wisdom and traditional practice by instituting two changes.

First, he required doctors and nurses to follow up in person with any patient who didn't return to the clinic. This might mean a treacherous overland journey of six hours each way, just to get one patient to take one dose of antibiotics. It would be easy to say that their time was too valuable, that sending even Paul himself on this journey was inefficient. Most medical protocols put the burden on the patient alone.

Blaming the patient or the culture is convenient and common in many areas of medicine.

In addition to putting the doctors and staff on the hook, PIH began giving patients five dollars a month to help pay for food and other necessities. Some outsiders considered this wasteful or a bribe. It's not common practice for medical interventions to include a cash stipend for the patient—the presumption was that the patient is responsible, not the system.

Two entanglements considered and then rejected. Put the onus on the doctor, not the patient, and pay patients to support their recovery.

Within a year, Partners in Health had reduced the break-age in treatment to zero. 0 percent. None.

The results in Haiti were far better than in many more urbanized locations worldwide, regardless of income. And done at a fraction of the cost of more “efficient” programs in American cities.

Partners in Health had modeled the solution to a problem in a setting that most medical professionals wouldn't even consider working in.

They walked away from entangled priorities, normalized a new sort of treatment protocol, and gave critical emotional and statistical cover to people who were just waiting for a chance to support this sort of change.

Where Are the Weekly Guests?

In 2018, Andrew Hickey decided to share his knowledge and passion for rock music, filtered through his lived experience growing up in the UK.

By then, the podcasting system was entrenched enough that the rules of thumb were well known—a good podcast had

- weekly episodes;
- guests;
- ads, usually read by the host; and
- a genial host who reminded listeners of NPR or the BBC.

Modeling the podcast system on the history of radio made sense. And most people who cared enough to start a podcast wanted to succeed, so they worked to match expectations.

Andrew contradicted conventional wisdom about podcasts and built *A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs* into one of the most profitable and most respected podcasts in the world.

He has no guests. The podcast started with half-hour weekly episodes, but some episodes are now up to seven hours long, broken into two-hour segments, and come out as rarely as monthly. There are no ads and never have been. Andrew is very specific about the sort of feedback he wants from his listeners

and delivers the podcast he wants to the people he's here to serve.

His podcast is now one of the most popular Patreon projects, earning more than \$600,000 a year in income.

Andrew's work is not for everyone, but it's clearly for someone.

The next successful podcast isn't going to be a copy of *500 Songs*. But it might copy Andrew's relentless focus on solving a problem for a specific listener, ignoring the entanglements along the way.

The Slacktivism Trap

It's an emergency.

Everyone's talking about it. It's the chance to tweet or post, to show up for the big demonstration, or to chip in ten dollars because something serious is happening.

And yet the system persists. It persists because dominant systems are resilient and good at sticking around.

We care, but we're entangled. Entangled in fitting in with the crowd, focusing on the shiny objects, prioritizing the urgent. We're entangled with our impatience and our unwillingness to look for the real causes beyond the emergency of right now.

Back surgery is tempting, but it's six months of physical therapy that often has a better outcome.

To cause system change, we need to use systems. Persistence can outlast injustice.

Movements, not moments.

Songs of the Humpback Whale

We almost killed all the whales. By 1969, the industrialized whaling fleet was so efficient and so embedded in systems of commerce that the extinction of most whales seemed inevitable. We had reduced the population of blue and humpback whales by more than 95 percent. There were only a few thousand blue whales left on Earth at the end of the decade.

In 1970, bio-acoustician Roger Payne released an album of whale songs. It went on to go multiplatinum, with excerpts being featured in a recording distributed to ten million subscribers of *National Geographic* magazine.

Payne used the initial success of the album to become a spokesperson for whales, appearing on national TV and at international conferences to teach people about the souls of these mostly ignored creatures. He didn't get entangled; instead, he built coalitions, created networks, and established a pattern of persistence. And he did it with a simple story, one that was sticky and contagious.

The result was a chance to use systems to change a system.

The media loved the tension and the narrative and spread the word. Activist organizations like Greenpeace found a way to persistently and viscerally make a statement. As organizations came together, they ultimately organized a permanent moratorium on the whaling industry.

Many of the people who grew up to become oceanographers and whale activists report being exposed to these songs and the stories around them as kids. Payne's persistence and focus on building a foundational narrative created the conditions for change to build.

One intentional side effect of this work was that consumer demand for whaling products dried up. The industrial whaling

system, which existed solely to earn a profit, found that it wasn't economically feasible. When we change demand, we change the way systems operate.

The head of Iceland's whaling fleet explained why they canceled their (still legal) hunt in 2024 and 2025: "Product price developments in our main market country, Japan, have been unfavorable recently and are worsening, which makes the price of our products so low that it is not justifiable to engage in whaling."

Once the cycle began to reverse, politicians discovered that it was often better for their status and position to oppose whaling than it was to encourage it. (The exceptions are Japan and Norway, where nationalism around this industry persists. Persistent systems are truly difficult to extinguish.)

Humpback whales are back to most of their predecimation level, and blue whales are slowly recovering.

Two Stories of Unreasonable Systems Change (One Worked; the Other Didn't)

In 1985, Danny Meyer was frustrated. In his mid-twenties, his first career attempts hadn't worked out. Going to law school seemed like a reset and a safe place to hide. The night before the LSAT, he was whining about the prospect of going to law school, and his uncle said, "You've been talking about food and restaurants your whole life; why don't you do that?"

To build a successful restaurant on a shoestring, Danny set out to solve some problems. How to bring fine dining to a new population of New Yorkers? How to pioneer in a neighborhood that was undervalued and neglected? How to update American

restaurants with a European sensibility without becoming stuffy?

Opening in crack-ridden Union Square in 1985 was an unreasonable act. So was highlighting a different sort of dining experience and setting. A relentless focus on the diner's experience gained him customer traction. Not a lot of people but enough.

They brought friends. Restaurants are contagious—we rarely dine alone.

The affluent young diners, many in media, gained in status by being early adopters of this new restaurant in this funky neighborhood. Then they amplified their status by spreading the word. They were the sort of people who filled out surveys for the soon-to-be legendary *Zagat's Guide*, and year after year, Meyer's restaurant was ranked number one among the guide's four thousand restaurants. This brought in new diners, eager to not be left behind.

Other restaurants, seeing the competitive threat (and an opportunity to build their own followings), followed suit. They copied and amplified Meyer's approach to New York fine dining. Within a decade, the culture (and thus the system) of fancy restaurants in New York was forever changed.

At each step in this systemic transformation, willing individuals—nodes in the network—chose to show up, return, bring friends, and most of all, talk about it. That traction with a subset of the dining public pushed other restaurants to follow.

Contrast this with another of Meyer's attempts to solve a problem. The issue of tipping in US restaurants is fraught. It's racist, misogynistic, and due to labor laws, unfair to the hard-working team in the kitchen that doesn't get to share the tips.

His company, Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG), ran some of the most famous and successful restaurants in the world. Danny chose to do something unreasonable: He incorporated a no-tipping policy in many of his establishments. Instead of the insecurity and randomness of tipping, a fee was added to the cost of each dish.

Beginning with the Modern in 2015, the effort lasted for five years. But it didn't catch on, and few competing restaurants adopted it. It's worth considering why the system didn't change.

One of the most important nodes in this human system was the waitstaff. At a fancy New York restaurant, an experienced server with good shifts on the weekends could easily earn over \$100,000 a year. These were often the most experienced and powerful people on the team, and without tips, they would see an instant hit to their income. Many of these waiters left to join other restaurants.

By 2015, the internet was a factor in the selection of restaurants. By incorporating the price of service into the menu, it meant that USHG restaurants now appeared to be much more expensive by any online search. It didn't matter that this wasn't true for anyone who was planning to tip—the algorithm was a critical part of the system that maintained the status quo.

And what about the diners? Some of the most influential restaurant goers are aware of their status—not just where they eat and who they bring, but how they're seen by the staff and their friends. The garrulous big tipper is a big tipper for a reason—they like the way the power feels; they enjoy demonstrating their status to their friends and business associates. No-tipping policies took that away.

Other restaurant owners, already struggling with their own issues, saw all of these factors at work. It was easier for them to believe that maintaining the system was in their interest. They could poach experienced servers, appeal to cost-inspecting diners, and attract the big spenders looking to put on a show.

Meyer's commitment to the experiment was admirable and, yes, unreasonable, but the system persisted.

Union Square Cafe gave every node in the system a way to gain status by participating. The diners got to be pioneers. The media got a story. Other restaurateurs saw an opportunity, not a threat. The no-tipping policy, by contrast, asked nodes to give up status (big tippers, experienced servers) without offering a replacement.

The system will work to protect itself unless you give it a way to move forward.

Part VII

Unknotted

Better is possible.

We can get distracted by the heartbreaking situations all around us. They're not problems, but they can transfix us.

And we can get sidetracked by the glamorous or monumental or shiny problems that we're not running out of. These perfect problems might be outside of our reach—we might not have the time or resources to take them on—but because they're there, we avoid the very real problems right in front of us.

Here are some stories about problems large and small, inaccessible or not, that have responded to persistence and an understanding of how systems work and change.

“Wearing Enough for Both of Us”

Gandhi contradicted cultural expectations around class in the fight to free India.

A trained lawyer, he wore a traditional suit and tie throughout his time in South Africa. This was a signifier of class, and it felt like an earned privilege and a requirement to affiliate as a professional.

On his return to India, the natural thing to do would be to stick with the role. Leaders lead, and one way they do this is by signifying their status.

Over time, though, Gandhi felt that affiliation, solidarity, and empathy were more important than colonial status. He walked away from the role that had worked for him and for many others and built a different kind of status, the status of sacrifice and of belonging.

He believed that he couldn't credibly ask people living on almost nothing to boycott British cloth if he dressed like a prosperous barrister. Khadi (homespun cloth) became central to his economic program—self-sufficiency, village industry, and the rejection of Lancashire mills. Wearing minimal homespun wasn't just solidarity; it was enacting the policy.

Our status is so subtly ingrained in everything we do that we don't notice it. But others do.

After meeting with the king of England, he was criticized for wearing just a loincloth. He is said to have responded, "The king was wearing enough for both of us."

The king solved problems by being *above*. Royalty's only reason for being is derived from this status.

Gandhi solved problems by being *among*.

Problems are here to be solved, as soon as we care enough to walk away from what's holding us back and begin to do the systems work to make change happen.

Three Big Knots (for Now)

Most of the problems we face each day are relatively small. Small yet still important. These are the interpersonal problems we navigate with our peers and family. The marketing problems of a small business. Opportunities in our life and our profession to make a difference and improve things for the people we interact with. Important, of course, and we can see them and understand them if we choose.

But we also live in a complex, interconnected world, one that's struggling to integrate short-term thinking with long-term consequences. We are entwined in countless systems, many of them invisible, each fighting to maintain the status quo and change the culture.

You probably have smaller versions of these intransigent systemic challenges in your life. Seeing the entanglements and the systems is the first step in taking action.

As we wrap up this manifesto on problem-solving, I want to highlight three of them.

How Much Should the Bus Cost?

We've paved the Earth. More than a third of the land of Los Angeles is reserved for roads or parking lots.

In 2021, taxpayers in the United States spent about \$250 billion to pave and maintain the roads. Almost all these roads are free to use, with no tolls or other fees for heavy usage.

At the same time, every major mass transit system in the country charges users on a per-use basis. By some estimates, a minimum wage earner who commutes by bus or subway spends more than 15 percent of their discretionary income on transport. It's difficult to imagine a millionaire accepting that their commute should cost \$150,000 a year.

Why are roads free and buses expensive? If you don't examine the underlying systems closely, it's easy to make arguments about balancing budgets, taxpayer feedback, and even keeping the homeless off the buses. Of course buses aren't free! It's normal for them to cost money.

We're entangled. Entangled in a story about status, independence, and who public services are for. And entangled in a story about what we measure.

Three hundred thousand people live in the Dunkirk metro area in Northern France. They recently shifted their bus service policy and made the buses free for everyone. The results? The bus system has become just a small percentage of their total budget. Car ownership is down 10 percent. Traffic is down; parking is available for those who choose to drive. Visits to the city center are up, and the downtown is thriving. The buses are clean and frequent. And in a recent plebiscite, 99 percent of the population said the free buses are the most important service offered by the government.

They didn't change the system all at once, and they didn't do it without thoughtful planning. But they built a new system and proved it worked.

It's impossible that someone is going to be convinced by my few paragraphs about one city. That's part of my point—imagine if the status quo were reversed. What if all public transport was free, and I was using an anecdote to argue that we should spend a quarter of a trillion dollars a year to pave the country and make roads free for private cars?

The entanglements change our perception of reality.

Normal doesn't mean it's right. It simply means that the status quo is what the system settled on.

To Feed the Hungry

Of course we don't want families to go hungry. And even a cursory look at the data shows that the productivity and health benefits of preventing hunger far outweigh the costs.

So why not simply provide food? No bureaucracy, no stigma. A simple SNAP card without oppressive rules, available to any family that needs it. (Other countries have similar programs.)

If we walked away from our entanglement with ideas around status, work ethic, and class, we could take a hard look at the costs and benefits.

It's easy to show the payback we'd all get by providing food to the hungry. Straightforward to demonstrate the increases in efficiency, family cohesion, and even health benefits. But the opposition (and more telling, the stalling and miasma) kicks in long before we get to the numbers. That's because we're emotionally stuck in a donkey trap.

This is another example of a proposal that highlights how we feel about our entanglements. The unspoken thought is "After all, if anyone could get the food they need to feed their family for free, why would they work?"

If we pause for a second, we could consider: How would people with a different relationship with status feel about it? Why is it easier for us to agree to feed one specific family, the one that's right here and right now, but difficult to focus on long-term, broad solutions? What is the purpose of the system we have now, and how will altering the feedback loop change the way we see the world?

If you want people to stop being hungry, build a system to give them food. If you want to address homelessness, build a system that gives them housing.

Simple, direct, and incredibly difficult. Our entanglement runs deep.

The Persistence of Carbon

People who have status and people who seek status are often the ones in positions of authority in the systems that we live with. And it's very difficult to persuade the defenders of these systems to voluntarily lower their status.

Thus, the most effective proposals for change are the ones that increase the status, power, and authority of the dominant systems.

Electric sports cars are an easier sell than giving up beef. An electric sports car is a signifier, a chance for someone to send a message about their insight, their community concern, and their ability to drive something very fast and very expensive.

Giving up beef, though, even though it clearly would have a huge impact on our climate, is a difficult voluntary sell. That's because beef is a cultural icon, a status signifier, and relatively cheap at the supermarket.

Our climate crisis is a system problem. It isn't caused by one evil villain with a private jet. Instead, it's the output of billions of people, each doing their best, each making individual decisions based on the systems they live in and the entanglements we each have.

Everyone is right. Based on who they are, what they believe, and what they seek, they're making their best choices.

Arguments about carbon footprint and compost piles don't change the system.

The solution needs to use the system to change the system. Right now, we're entangled with convenience, short-term urgencies, and defending the sunk costs of existing energy systems. Most of all, the people with status and power would like to keep them.

If we're going to solve the climate problem before the crisis worsens, it won't happen with warnings or conferences. It will happen when we've shifted the system such that people make new choices that feel normal and selfish, choices that work within their frame of reference.

Each of these three scenarios will remain situations, not problems, for as long as we're unwilling to build the persistent coalitions we'll need to make a change happen.

Part VIII

Offering Grace

Someone is holding you back. Someone is in your way. It's a conspiracy of you.

The conspiracy of us is real. Solvable problems persist.

In *The War of Art*, Steve Pressfield highlights our Resistance. The temptation to avoid the work that puts us on the hook. We'll go to great lengths to create a perfect problem, one that can't possibly be fixed. It feels safer in the moment, even if it undermines our stated goals.

Resistance is more than writer's block. It often presents itself in contradictory objectives, many of them unstated, separated from this moment in both time and space. These entanglements are an effective way to stay exactly where we are despite the frustrations they cause.

Problems aren't easy, and persistent problems are held in place by systems. The first step, though, is acknowledging that we've made unacknowledged choices and become mired in our own fear. That's human, and it's also something we can address.

And the second step is to bring forgiveness and grace to the moment. To embrace the fact that being on the hook is a choice, and we're not required to solve every problem, regardless of the cost.

We can forgive others for doing their best, even when it's not nearly enough. And we can forgive ourselves for the same.

When You're Engulfed by the System

Sometimes we're not the ones who can remove the pin. Sometimes we are simply the knot.

You're the patient in the rural clinic, not the doctor who re-designed the protocol. You're the worker whose job depends on the very system that's grinding you down. You're the person who sees exactly what's wrong but lacks the leverage, the resources, or the standing to change it.

Systems don't just create problems. They create situations. And not everyone is positioned to be Alexander, free to act in moments when we feel we need that agency the most.

If that's where you are, please understand: Your dignity doesn't depend on solving this problem.

This might be a situation, not a problem. Nothing you can do, not right now.

The donkey parable is useful for people who have options and *won't* choose. But many people face genuine constraints—not entanglements they've failed to examine but actual walls. The single parent working two jobs isn't "stuck" because they lack clarity of purpose. The person navigating a health care system that wasn't built for them isn't failing to "ship the work."

There's a difference between "I won't" and "I can't right now." This book is largely about the first. But the second is real, and it's not a character flaw.

What does it mean to be inside a system you can't change?

It might mean surviving. Getting through. Protecting what you can. It might mean bearing witness—seeing clearly, even when you can't act. It might mean small acts of dignity and resistance that no one else may ever see. It might mean waiting,

not passively but strategically, for the moment when conditions shift.

If you're reading this from inside a knot, know that you are not alone, and you are not the problem. The system is. Humans invented systems, and humans can change them. Perhaps this book will help us find, connect, and amplify the people who can make a shift happen.

In the meantime, what you *can* do—what remains yours—is to refuse to internalize the system's logic. To know that the constraints you face are real, not imagined. To reject the story that your struggle is simply a failure of will or vision.

You are not confused. You are not entangled. You are *caught*.

And being caught is not the same as being wrong.

Is It Hard to Be You?

No one knows what you've been through. I'm not going to win an argument about how hard things might be. Not one that would change your mind.

Regardless of how we got here, we face a choice.

Pessimism might be fuel. Seeing ourselves as unfairly burdened, facing long odds, operating without the benefit of the doubt—that could be a way to dig in and get to work.

But optimism is fuel too. An acknowledgment of our tools and our agency. A chance to extend ourselves the benefit of the doubt and act *as if*.

Choose the one that works for you.

When we set aside our expectations, our entitlements, and our entanglements, what are we capable of?

Each of us faces problems, many of them apparently insurmountable. But because they're problems, each one is solvable if we choose.

And all of us live with situations—conditions and boundaries that cannot be changed. We can view these as unfair limits, a chronic drain on our souls. Or we can use them as a platform, a foundation for focusing our effort and care on the things we *can* improve.

When we solve problems for other people, our work becomes generative. We get the chance to contribute. To see what's possible. To find the resources we need to solve even more problems.

One response to the feeling that it's hard to be in these shoes is to ask, "Compared to what?" Plenty of people are objectively worse off but still show up to make an impact.

Another, more useful response: Put that difficulty to work. Optimistically. Creating value for others.

Problems are here to be solved.

When we make a ruckus, we show up to solve problems, to refuse to accept an unacceptable status quo, and to make things better by making better things.

Go make a ruckus.

A Movement, Not a Moment

One last story. Because problems can be solved. Not all at once, but over time.

Whina Cooper had seen enough, suffered enough, and had enough.

New Zealand was the last major country colonized, and the British had used what they'd learned about stealing the land

from other Indigenous people in other colonies. Many of the sixty-six million acres of the country were quickly annexed by the government and by newcomers, but throughout the 1900s, new laws were passed to accelerate this shift.

At the age of seventy-nine, Cooper, a trusted Maori leader, organized fifty tribe members to march seven hundred miles to the capital to present petitions to parliament. She went first, holding her young granddaughter's hand, a few steps on an empty road. Day by day, for thirty days, they marched. Each day, more people joined the march, and each evening, they sat together with their peers and with the media, using the system to change the system.

By the time they arrived, the marchers were five thousand strong. Cooper had appeared on the front page of New Zealand's newspapers each day for a month. In 1975, this was the largest, best-coordinated effort to send a message to those in power in the history of the country. It took years to get to those thirty days, but the country sat up and finally took notice.

The government formed a tribunal, and while it took far too long, they passed laws ending the land takeovers. Since then, New Zealand has shifted its focus and its momentum, often working to honor the people who were there from the start and to seek to repair the cultural and economic damage done. Cooper earned the title *Te Whaea o te Motu* (Mother of the Nation).

The march is over, but the method remains for each of us.

Dame Whina Cooper lived to be almost one hundred years old and had the satisfaction of seeing the problem that defined her life be recognized and prioritized by her nation.

What problem can we solve?

Afterword

Working with Problems

We spend a lot of time thinking about our problems but not nearly enough focused effort on solving them. We need to have a theory of change, a clear path to get from here to there.

Here's a list of questions to help us see the problem before we begin to solve it:

1. Is it a problem or a situation?
2. What is the change we hope to make?
3. Who is affected by the problem?
4. Do we have the resources we need? (Can we get them?)
5. Do we have the knowledge we need? (Can we learn it?)
6. Who needs to change their position for the problem to go away?
7. How will changing their position help them achieve their goals?
8. How will it affect their status and the affiliation they have with the people they care about?
9. Where is the fear?
10. What is the risk?
11. What persistent systems are involved?
12. Who needs to be organized?

Let's take them one at a time:

Is It a Problem or a Situation?

Don't skip this one! Our lives, our work, and our impact would dramatically improve if we walked away from fighting situations and focused our work on problems instead.

What Is the Change We Hope to Make?

We'd like the problem to go away. That's the change. What, specifically, would it look like if the problem were solved?

Who Is Affected by the Problem?

Is it widespread? Do others surrounding the problem realize they have it? Do some people benefit from what we see as the problem?

Do We Have the Resources We Need?

Resources might include time or money. It might be access to medication, transportation, or health. But it could also be the appearance of power, or group solidarity, or skill. Once we're clear about which resources are needed, we can create a plan for how to get the ones we need.

Do We Have the Knowledge We Need?

It's likely we know more now than when we began. We know about what hasn't worked, and we've seen what's worked for others. The thing about knowledge, though, is that we often don't know what we need to know until *after* we learn it. Diving deep into how others have solved problems and being honest about the gap between their insight and our own un-

locks our ability to obtain what we need. Knowledge, unlike most resources, doesn't decrease in value when it's shared.

Who Needs to Change Their Position for the Problem to Go Away?

Problems often involve other people. People who are saying no or who don't realize what's happening. People who are committed to the status quo or even eager for us to be frustrated. People who may mean well, who are on their own benevolent path, but who have a position that's causing us to experience a problem.

Because we each see the world differently—based on our objectives, experiences, and narratives—it's not helpful to define challenges with behavior as “wrong” and “right.” But we can begin with a straightforward description of the humans who control resources, access, or other conditions that are perpetuating the problem.

And then we can find empathy and wonder, “How will changing their position help them achieve their goals?” Because if we can bring a different story, a different system, or different conditions to the problem, we may be able to help people realize that their objectives are also served by helping make the problem go away.

How Will Changing Their Position Affect Their Status and the Affiliation They Have with the People They Care About?

Who's up and who's down? Every day, each of us spends time focusing on our standing, our stability, and the culture and sys-

tems we are part of. *Under the circumstances, everyone does their best, always.* Seeing the circumstances helps us understand the motivations of the people involved in the problem (including our own).

Where Is the Fear?

Notice our fear around the problem persisting. Notice the very real fears we have of what will happen if we try to solve that problem—and fail (or even succeed). And then consider the fears of those fighting to keep the problem just as it is. All these fears are real, and they may be related to invisible or historical entanglements. Many fears are about a future that hasn't (and might never) happen, and some are vague enough that we have trouble even articulating them. Fear is the main cheerleader for keeping things as they are.

Every one of the points on this list is ultimately about our entanglements. The hidden ones have power precisely because we refuse to look them in the eye. When you find yourself refusing to go deep and dig into what's holding you back, it's almost certainly the fear caused by an entanglement you're hesitating to name.

What Is the Risk?

Not only the risk in trying to solve the problem and failing but the risk in solving the problem successfully. What unforeseen shifts might happen?

What Persistent Systems Are Involved?

Behind the scenes, uninvited systems are pulling the strings. Systems of organizations, of culture, of capitalism, of technology. *Persistent problems are always the work of persistent systems.*

Systems hide behind culture. The way things are around here, the way they've always been. Systems reward individuals who maintain them with status and affiliation and other rewards. Systems produce productivity and useful results for some who are involved, at least in the short run. They push us to "just do our job" and to rationalize discomfort and injustice in order to maintain the system as it is.

Who Needs to Be Organized?

The real heroes don't throw themselves into deep water alone. Instead, they patiently and persistently build frameworks and foundations for systems to change. If this problem is worth solving, it's worth dedicating the time and resources we need to find the others.

We don't need everyone, but we certainly need someone. Several someones. Who are they? What do they believe, and what do they want? When we enlist the others, we create connections and resilience, and from those interactions, change begins.

You can't solve a system problem without changing a system.

Appendix

The Questions

- Is it a problem or a situation? If it's a situation, can you accept it and move on?
- What problem are we here to solve?
- Who is affected by the problem?
- Do we have the resources we need? Can we get them?
- Do we have the knowledge we need? Can we learn it?
- Who needs to change their position for the problem to go away?
- How will changing their position help them achieve their goals?
- How will it affect their status and the affiliation they have with the people they care about?
- Where is the fear?
- What is the risk? Not only the risk in trying and failing but the risk in solving the problem successfully?
- What persistent systems are involved?
- Who needs to be organized?
- What is our purpose?
- Who's it for?
- What's it for?
- What's the change we seek to make?
- What problem are you trying to solve?
- Where is the donkey trap?

- Are we wanting two things at once that can't coexist?
- What's the pin at the center of the knot? What hidden thing, not officially part of the problem, is making it unsolvable?
- Where is the "but" masquerading as an "and"?
- What baggage are we carrying that we haven't named?
- What would be worth doing even if you knew you would fail?
- Where is the faux fear disguising itself as prudence?
- What truth, when shared, would unknot the problem and make it disappear?
- What are the unstated objectives and contradictions? Are they in our organization or in my head?
- Which constraints are real, and which are false? What limitations have we accepted that aren't actually fixed?
- Have we turned a problem into a paradox by layering on too many boundaries?
- What systems are making this problem feel normal? Who benefits from the status quo?
- What is the purpose of the system we're operating within? What does it actually reward?
- Where are the feedback loops? Are they fast or slow, useful or misleading?
- Are we measuring what matters or just what's prominent and convenient? What false proxies have we fallen in love with?
- What is our theory of change? Step by step, ask, "Then what happens?" Where is the broken link?
- Has each step in our plan ever worked before? Is each a proven tactic?

- Are we preaching to the right choir? Is the audience we're delighting the one we came to help?
- What job is our solution being hired to do?
- Who would miss us if we disappeared?
- Where are the sunk costs holding us hostage? What gift from our former selves are we refusing to decline?
- What time entanglements are binding us—to a past that doesn't matter or a future that isn't here yet?
- What social entanglements are pulling at us—phantom judges, ghost stakeholders, or borrowed scorecards?
- What identity entanglements are keeping us stuck—who we were, who we think we should be, or who we promised to become?
- Who gets a say? Who have we centered in our decision-making that doesn't belong there?
- Are we thrashing early (when it's cheap) or late (when it's expensive)?
- Where is the Overton Window, and how can we stretch it? Are we framing our change so early adopters can follow?
- Are we building movements or just creating moments?
- What would it look like if we used the system to change the system?
- How can we create the conditions for people to make a different choice—to find a better way to get what they wanted all along?
- Are we trying to change people's minds, or are we finding the people who already want to go where we're headed?
- If I didn't care about the short-term status this solution costs me, what value could I create?

- Am I willing to be wrong about the fact that I'm a person who doesn't know how to do this?
- Can I temporarily be an impostor—someone who acts like they know the skill but doesn't, not quite?
- Am I eager to be friends with the person I'm going to become if I make this shift?
- What story do I need to tell myself to find the energy to confront my entanglements? What fuel am I choosing?
- How much time and effort can I expend on this problem? Say it out loud.
- What am I afraid of? What fears, unstated, are thriving in the dark?
- Is the problem important enough to pay the price of solving it? Every problem worth solving has a cost—if the price were zero, someone would have solved it already.
- Am I prematurely optimizing for scale? Am I designing for twelve million when I'm serving twelve?
- Where is the empathy? Am I beginning where others are or requiring them to come to me?
- Is this the problem worth my life's effort right now, or should I choose a different one?
- Am I being heroic (showing up generously) or just being a hero (setting things up so I look good)?
- How can I lower my status in the short term to help others rise and create lasting change?
- How do I dance with the three holes in my pretzel: How can I be of help? What's stopping me? What am I unwilling to give up?

Glossary

Baggage: The competing goals, emotional attachments, and unexamined commitments we carry into a project. Unlike useful constraints, baggage slows us down without adding value. The work is to name it, drop it, and ship.

Constraints: Real boundaries that shape what's possible, like physics, budgets, and time. Constraints are gifts—they focus creativity and prevent wasted effort. Not to be confused with false constraints.

Customer traction: Evidence that real people want what you're making. Not projected demand or theoretical interest but actual engagement from the smallest viable audience that can't live without your solution.

Entanglement: A hidden commitment that creates internal conflict, making problems feel unsolvable. When we want two mutually exclusive things, we're entangled. Spooky action at a distance—past decisions, social expectations, and unexamined beliefs pulling at our present work.

False constraint: A limitation we accept as real but isn't. Often embedded in systems or inherited from “the way things are done.” Identifying and removing false constraints turns situations into solvable problems.

False proxy: A measurement that's easy to obtain but doesn't capture what actually matters. Bestseller lists, test scores, or follower counts—vivid numbers that seduce us into optimizing the wrong thing.

Feedback loop: The cycle of action, response, and adjustment that drives improvement. Effective loops are fast, clear, and honest. Less useful loops are slow, noisy, or measuring the wrong thing.

Hiring (a product): What customers actually do. They don't buy products; they hire them to do jobs. Understanding the job you're being hired for—not the category you think you're in—reveals your real competition.

Intentional design: The discipline of solving problems on purpose, not by accident. Begins with three questions: Who's it for? What's it for? What's the change we seek to make?

Mediocre compromise: The trap of averaging, of trying to please everyone by offending no one. A “but” masquerading as an “and.” Distinct from empathy-based compromise, which strengthens the work.

Paradox: A problem with so many layered constraints that no solution can exist. Unlike a hard problem, working on a paradox is futile. The fix? Remove boundaries until it becomes a problem again.

Phantom audience: An imaginary tribunal of sophisticated critics who live in your head and are never satisfied. They don't exist, never will, and wouldn't care anyway—but we pre-edit for their approval.

Problem: A gap between where we are and where we want to be that can be closed with resources or information. Problems have solutions. We may not like the cost, but a way through exists.

Purpose: An act of intention. Not “just doing our job” but choosing the change we seek to make and those we seek to make it for. Purpose guides our feedback loops and puts us on the hook.

Ship: To release work into the world, where it can succeed or fail. If it doesn't ship, it doesn't count. Shipping creates a line in the calendar—days before, days after.

Situation: A condition that persists regardless of effort.

Situations don't have solutions—they simply exist. Gravity is a situation. The wisdom is knowing which is which and not wasting energy fighting what cannot change.

Smallest viable audience: The minimum group of people for whom your work can matter enough to spread. Not small in absolute terms—just smaller than “everyone.” Choosing this audience is an act of focus and courage.

Sunk costs: Past investments of time, money, or identity that should not influence future decisions but almost always do. The gift from your former self that your future self is not obligated to carry.

System: An interconnected set of elements that persists because using it makes us want to use it more. Systems feel normal and hide behind “the way things are.” They solve problems and create them. When something irrational persists over time, look for the system.

Unknotted, a Path for Changemakers

Name the problem: What is the change you seek to make?

See the systems: What makes this problem normal? Who is fighting for the status quo?

Find the entanglements: What are the unstated objectives and contradictions? Are they in my organization or in my head?

Embrace constraints: What are the boundaries and requirements that can't be changed?

Acknowledge a situation: Is this a problem at all? If not, we can accept the situation, let them, and move on.

Tell the truth: Name it all. The fear, the difficult conversations, the entanglements, the risks, and the upsides. Shining a light makes the darkness disappear.

Share your theory of change: What are the steps? What actions lead to which responses that produce the next steps? Pull the chain and avoid miracles.

Design with intention and practical empathy:

Everyone else is right. Who's it for, what's it for? Find the people who want to go where you hope to take them, and be clear about the purpose of the work.

Organize the others: Systems don't respond to individuals in a hurry. Who else needs to join you in solving the problem?

Ship the work: Plans alone are insufficient. See the baggage, name the baggage, drop the baggage, and ship the work. If it doesn't ship, it doesn't count.

Persist: Persistent problems are supported by systems that are good at sticking around. Organize enough people, for enough time, and the world will respond.

About the Cover

It's said that the pretzel was invented nearly two thousand years ago. A monk in Northern Italy twisted some dough into shape, boiled it, baked it, and offered it to his students as a reward for paying attention to their studies.

The genius wasn't in the dough. It was in the way the monk baked a story into it. A story about community and possibility and the hard work of seeing and freeing ourselves from distracting entanglements.

The knotted twists represent entwined fingers. The three holes in the pretzel are a reminder of what's important.

Each of the three holes asks a question:

- How can I be of help?
- What's stopping me?
- What am I unwilling to give up?

The thing is, you can't untangle a pretzel. The knot is baked in.

The pretzel is an imperfect analogy. Our lives don't give us the obvious cues of the three holes and the three questions, but the good news is that our knots aren't permanent if we don't want them to be.

You can't unknot a pretzel without ruining it. But each of us has the chance to solve the problems in front of us. And we can do it together.

[More on *The Knot*](#)

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Seth Godin is the author of twenty-one bestselling books, including *The Dip*, *This Is Marketing*, and *The Practice*. His work has been translated into dozens of languages and has shaped how a generation thinks about marketing, leadership, and creative work. His blog—now more than ten thousand posts—remains one of the most influential in business.

The Knot represents the synthesis of decades of teaching, consulting, and writing about why good people with good intentions stay stuck—and what it takes to move.
