

# **Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®**

*Overcoming Our Self-Imposed Limits  
To Have The Life We Want*

Peter Alessandria

Second Edition

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**TO MY FATHER**

**I will always love you.**

**TO MY FAMILY**

**Thanks for all your love and support**

**I wouldn't be who I am today without you**



## **Table of Contents**

Preface

Introduction

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

Taking Responsibility

True Power & True Happiness Error!

From F.E.A.R. to L.O.V.E.

Decision-Making & The Desire To Feel Better

Would You Rather Be Right Or Happy?

Forgiveness

EPILOGUE

COVID-19: THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

APPENDIX

RECOMMENDED READING



# Preface

I suggest you take a few minutes – right now – to set your intention for this book. You're urged to decide – in advance – what you want to get out of reading it. Choose – before you even start – how your life will be different when you're done.

You can do this even if you have no idea what this book is about. You can still choose – this minute – what your experience of reading it will be. This book could contain all blank pages and it could still change your life if that's what you decide. You're that powerful.

Write your intentions on your phone or on a blank page so you won't be surprised when you actually achieve what you want. You also won't credit me for your experience (positive or negative) since you'll see it was all your own doing.

I also strongly urge you to do the written exercises at the end of each chapter. They'll help you assimilate the concepts and move your experience of this book from passive to active. The more active you are in learning the material, the deeper and longer lasting the change will be.

And either way, make sure you enjoy the ride!





# Introduction

*“Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!”®*

***T****his book has the potential to change your life.*

How do I know? Everything in it has changed mine! As you'll read in each chapter, applying these principles to my own life has transformed me in ways I could never have imagined. I know this book can do the same for you. You'll have to do your part. But if you do, you won't be the same person when you're done reading it.

The purpose of this book is, quite simply, to wake you up. It's here to open your eyes to new possibilities for yourself and for the people you love. It will help you stretch beyond your self-imposed limits and move towards an extraordinary life. In short, it will help you to “Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!”®

***I believe this book has the potential to change the world!***

That's a bold claim, I know. Yet I'm certain that if everyone applied these concepts to their own lives, the world would be a very different place. That's how powerful these ideas are.

This book is based on my experience using these principles in my own life for the past 25 plus years. Over that time I've spent hundreds of hours informally studying spirituality, psychology and personal growth. I've worked 12 Step Programs, read dozens of self-improvement books, attended workshops, seminars and

## Introduction

retreats, and then – most importantly – I did my best to apply everything I learned to change my life for the better. I've devoted myself daily for more than a quarter century to expanding my heart and mind so as to better understand the way things work. My life isn't perfect, but it's definitely better than it's ever been. And while I still have many challenges, I feel better able to cope with whatever comes my way.

My journey began in 1988, when I moved from New York to California. I was fresh out of law school and bought a one-way plane ticket for Los Angeles. I didn't have any friends or family on the West Coast, yet I was on my way to pursuing my goal of becoming an Entertainment Attorney.

As a kid from the East Coast, California was new and exciting, and in many ways very different from what I was used to. One way it was different was the ubiquitous personal growth movement that was happening there at the time. All manner of workshops, trainings and seminars were being offered. From EST to Esalen and everything in between, California was the focal point of the New Age/Human Potential/Spiritual Growth movement. Most of those trainings promised to show me how to be a better person and lead a happier life. Now nearly 30 years later, I know that those things – and much more – are possible for you and I as a result of reading this book.

After living in California for more than 20 years, I returned to the East Coast in 2009. As I'll describe in a minute, I also left the law behind to pursue my passion for photography full-time.

A big part of the impetus for writing this book is that I faced some pretty large challenges when I transitioned from lawyer to photographer. But those challenges didn't come from the economy, the marketplace or anything else outside of me. Rather, I came up against some long-standing, deep-seated blocks in my own thinking about who I was and what I was capable of achieving. I'll describe those challenges in much more detail throughout this book. Here I'll note I was eventually able to overcome many of them. This, in turn, enabled me to accomplish a multitude of things I never would have thought were possible.

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

For instance, as of the writing of this book, I've won more than 70 Awards for my photography. My photos have been published online, and in newspapers and magazines around the world. They have been shown on television, in a feature film and on major websites like National Geographic, The Huffington Post, The New York Post, The Times of London, NBC-TV New York, FOX TV New York, and others. Literally millions of people have seen my work, both online and in print.

I also have two published photography books and have shown my work in dozens of shows and exhibitions. I sell professionally framed, signed, Limited Edition prints of my photos, and have sold pictures to Collectors as far away as Australia. I've licensed my images for a variety of uses, including a line of New York City souvenirs (I am the NYC-refrigerator magnet magnate<sup>1</sup>). Several of my abstract designs were also licensed by a large international home décor company and I've accomplished much more as a photographer as I will discuss later in this book.

Perhaps the most striking thing is that I did all this without any formal education in art or photography. I'm completely self-taught!

Now of course, as you might expect, there have been some bumps along the way. The transition from lawyer to photographer was definitely not as smooth as I had hoped. Yet even the challenges have contributed to my journey. Today, I try to see life's difficulties as learning opportunities and when I do, they can help move me to the next level.

This book is my way to share the knowledge I've gained over the past 25 years from all my experiences. I believe the concepts I mention can be used to improve your work or business, as well as to enhance your personal life and relationships. Most importantly, they can help improve your relationship with yourself.

A big theme is that we have the ability to choose what we think and how we feel. It occurred to me recently that people who are truly happy are probably happy *despite* the events and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.peteralessandriaphotography.com/blog/2018/6/refrigerator-magnets-magnate>

## Introduction

circumstances of their lives rather than *because* of them. Of course, it's easy to be happy when things are going our way. But I believe we can also choose happiness when they're not. It is possible to be joyful – even when faced with challenges, disappointments or problems.

As an example, I'm currently back on the West Coast sitting in a hotel room in Yosemite, California. This is the first time I've been back to California since I left ten years ago. I came here to realize my dream of photographing this iconic landscape.

***However, to my shock and surprise, in the last 24 hours that dream has all but vanished.***

When I arrived yesterday, in what can only be described as a freak accident, I caught my right foot on a curb and tore my calf-muscle. The pain is excruciating and I'm pretty much unable to walk or drive. Not only is there no way I can get out and take pictures, but now I'm not even sure I'll be able to make the return flight to New Jersey in six days.

Bummer? Yes. Devastating? Maybe. Painful? Definitely.

As I contemplate my plight, lots of thoughts and feelings come up. In addition to being anxious about getting back to the East Coast, I'm angry and want to blame the owner of the premises where I tripped (it was a poorly designed walkway that created the tripping hazard.) I'm surprised and confused about what happened: one minute everything was fine and the next – boom – I can't walk or drive. I'm physically in pain and since I'm here on my own, I feel somewhat helpless in terms of being able to take care of myself. I'm sad that I'm less than 10 miles from Yosemite National Park and probably won't make it there for even one photo. I'm concerned about what this means for me work-wise – the recovery period for this type of injury is 12 to 16 weeks and as a free-lancer, if I don't work, I don't eat. And I'm really disappointed – I was looking forward to this trip for months and there may not be an opportunity to get back here again, at least not any time soon.

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The one thing I know is that I get to decide how I feel about all this. Most of my life I've let other people, events and circumstances determine my feelings for me. That was fine when those things were good – but not so fine when they weren't. While the reactions I described above may be “normal” for someone in my situation, I realize I don't have to let the situation itself dictate how I feel. And this isn't the first time I've had to deal with a difficult – even devastating – blow in my life. As I'll describe in a moment, my law career came to an abrupt and unexpected end some ten years ago in 2009.

### ***The move out West***

When I first moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1988, I didn't know anything about the entertainment industry. Yet I eventually realized my goal of becoming an entertainment attorney through a lot of hard work and perseverance. First, I had to educate myself about the film and television business. I did this mostly by befriending other entertainment lawyers and asking to read their contracts. Then once I got enough knowledge, I made the transition and eventually worked for two different independent film companies. In both jobs, I got promoted to Vice President of Business and Legal Affairs, and in one I travelled as far as Europe and South Africa negotiating deals for them.

Several years later, I went out on my own and setup a law practice doing entertainment and intellectual property legal work. I represented writers, producers and directors, as well as a couple of small independent film companies. Later, I took on a very large out-of-state client and I was their connection to Hollywood. While it had some ups and downs, my career as a lawyer was relatively stable and uneventful.

That was until 2008, when the Global Financial Crisis hit.

For those who don't remember, late 2008 and most of 2009, really sucked. This time brought the scary, almost apocalyptic near-collapse of the global financial system. Major banks around the world teetered on the brink of insolvency. When two big investment banks actually tipped, the world's entire structure of money and finance was thrown into disarray. Governmental

## Introduction

intervention staved off complete disaster, but confidence was badly shaken and in the weeks and months that followed, chaos and loss ensued. Companies and individuals alike were hit hard. For some, it was all just too much and they shut down.

At the time of the crisis, I had a nearly 12 year relationship with the out-of-state company. I was an independent contractor and while they didn't go under, the Global Financial Crisis resulted in a regime change as well as a restructuring of the company's internal operations. As a result, many of their outside contractors – including myself – were let go. In a matter of months, I went from a nice six figure income to almost nothing.

While a time of great uncertainty and stress, I was determined to make something positive out of it. Several years earlier, I'd fallen in love with photography and had spent most of my spare time honing my photographic skills. By the time the Global Financial Crisis rolled around, I'd gotten pretty good with a camera.

Truth is, I had been thinking about doing something more fun and creative with my life before the Crisis hit. While I appreciated the lifestyle being a lawyer afforded me, it was never really my passion in life. But like many people who are settled and somewhat prosperous in their work, the risk associated with a change of careers kept me from doing anything more than daydreaming about my desires.

That was until now.

By the Spring of 2009, it was clear that my law business wasn't going to come back any time soon. I had tried many things to get it going again, including looking for new clients and applying for jobs at law firms and production companies. At one point, I even sent out resumes for paralegal jobs to get some work on the side. But with the entire business climate in disarray, nothing came.

Eventually I arrived at a cross-roads: what was I going to do with the rest of my life? I kept asking myself, *"If I could do anything that I wanted, what would it be?"* The answer was always the same: *"Photography."* Yet I had no idea what it meant to have a photography business. I also pondered whether someone could

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

make a living doing something they loved. I agonized over these and related questions for weeks. Finally, after much deliberation, I decided I was going to pursue my passion for photography full-time.

### ***The move back East***

It was at this point that I also made the decision to move back to the East Coast. While I visited New York fairly often, I had been living in California for more than two decades. In recent years, my sisters started having kids and I was constantly flying back and forth for holidays, birthdays, etc. I'm not married and don't have any children of my own so I really enjoyed spending time with my nieces and nephews (I currently have eight!) I also missed the rest of my family and felt like it was time to come home.

At first the transition didn't go so well. I really wrestled with getting my new business going. I couldn't understand what was holding me back. I struggled with things like marketing and sales, and more than once thought maybe I had made the wrong decision.

What I eventually discovered was that it wasn't the recession and poor economy that started 2009, that was the problem. It wasn't the absence of a formal education in art or photography, or the competition from all the other photographers out there. It wasn't that I had set up shop in a small town in Northern New Jersey more than 40 miles away from Manhattan. Or even that I lacked the latest and greatest camera equipment.

*What was getting in my way was a really, really negative self-image. It was my own limiting thoughts and beliefs about myself that made it impossible to move forward.*

I saw myself as lacking talent, skill and artistic ability. I also had a lot of fear of rejection and criticism. I was certain people weren't going to like my work and I would feel ashamed and embarrassed when they rebuffed me. In fact, as you'll read in this book, my self-image was so negative and my fear was so great, that for most of the first three years I couldn't do much more than sit on the couch watching television and playing video games.

## Introduction

It was only after realizing what the true problem was, and then taking steps to overcome those negative thoughts and beliefs, that my life began to change. How I did that is what this book is about.

One of the main ideas is that what holds many of us back is our negative self-image. It's not the outside events and circumstances that are the problem. Rather, we need to change "who we think we are" in every situation that challenges us. We must see ourselves in a more empowered way to overcome our limiting thoughts and beliefs about ourselves.

As an example, in Chapter Three I talk about how I overcame my fear of public speaking. For most of my life I was terrified to speak in front of an audience. I did everything I could to avoid it and my personal life and business suffered as a result.

Today, I really enjoy speaking in public. I've travelled as far as South America to speak about my photography as well as pursuing our dreams in life. In this regard, several years ago I began telling audiences that in order to realize my goals and dreams, I have to "*bigger than I think am.*" It's only by overcoming my limiting thoughts and beliefs about myself that I can have the life I want.

This is my message to you as well – *be bigger than you think you are in everything you do.* Apply all that you read in this book to your own life and watch how it unfolds in new and exciting ways.

### ***[peteralessandriaphotography.com](http://peteralessandriaphotography.com)***

My photography business currently consists of commercial product photography, corporate videos, NYC aerial helicopter photography, architectural and interior design photography, and executive portraits and headshots. That said, my real passion is my fine art photography. I love to create beautiful cityscape and landscape images. In particular, my photos of New York City's iconic skyline have been shown on television, and published in newspapers and magazines around the world. I also enjoy teaching and lecturing on photography and related subjects. If you're curious about my fine art photography, it can be seen at [www.peteralessandriaphotography.com](http://www.peteralessandriaphotography.com).



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Going forward, I plan to use the material in this book for my own seminars and workshops. Some of these will be available online while others may be attended in person. Please visit my website [www.bebiggertoday.com](http://www.bebiggertoday.com) for more information.

Thank you for investing your time and money in reading this book! I hope to see you online or at a live event real soon!

Peter Alessandria  
Yosemite, California  
February 2019



## Chapter One

# “Who Do You Think You Are?”

*“How you see yourself determines everything.”*

-Peter Alessandria

I’m told all good books start with a story, so here’s mine:

*Once upon a time I was kind of having an argument with someone. (I say “kind of” because I’m not really a confrontational person. In fact, I hate conflict. And I became a lawyer - go figure!) Anyway, at one point during our exchange, the other person stopped, put her hands on her hips and quite dramatically said: “**Who do you think you are?!?**” While the question was meant as an insult, it stopped me in my tracks. I thought: “Wow - what a great question. Who **do** I think I am?!?” (I may have actually said those words out loud because my opponent suddenly had a very perplexed look on her face.) After a few moments had passed and I still hadn’t responded, she shook her head in disgust and stormed off never to be seen nor heard from again. Yet that question has stuck with me.*

The End.

So... *who do you think **you** are?* Even after all these years, I’m still convinced this is the most important

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

question we can ask ourselves. Why? For this simple reason:

***Whoever we think we are is exactly who we will end up being in life.***

This is because “who we think we are” informs every choice and decision we make (usually unconsciously), and it’s those choices and decisions that determine how our life goes. Later in this book, we’ll look at how we arrived at our current ideas about ourselves as well as how we can change those ideas for the better.

### ***How do you see yourself***

In his groundbreaking 1960 self-help book “*Psycho-Cybernetics*,”<sup>2</sup> plastic surgeon Maxwell Maltz talked about how a large percentage of his patients, after undergoing cosmetic surgery, essentially became different people. Not only were their physical appearances changed, but over time their personalities changed as well. In some cases the link between the surgery and the new personality was obvious. For example, many patients who had surgery to correct deformities or other stigmatizing conditions overcame their shyness. But there were also many not so obvious transformations, such as athletes or business people who started performing better after receiving surgery.

Of even greater interest were the cases where a change in the patient’s physical appearance had no effect at all on their lives. Even though these patients looked different after their surgery, they didn’t feel or act differently. As a result, Maltz concluded that when a patient’s personality changed, they were actually responding to a shift in their *internal mental image of themselves*, rather than to a shift in their external appearance. While a new physical appearance could often change their mental self-image, this wasn’t always the case. Unless the patient actually saw themselves differently in their own minds, nothing would change.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Psycho-Cybernetics-Updated-Expanded-Maxwell-Maltz/dp/0399176136>

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

The reason I mention Dr. Maltz and his patients is that another way of saying “who do you think you are” is “*how do you see yourself?*” What thoughts, beliefs and perceptions do you hold about you? This is important because:

***It's impossible to act in a way that is inconsistent with our internal self-image.***

Everything we think, feel, say and do is grounded in how we see ourselves. This is also why it can be so difficult to change – we strive to be different in one or more areas of our lives. Yet like Maltz's unchanged patients, because we haven't shifted our internal self-image, we remain the same. Or if we do change, that change is short-lived – the pull of our habitual manner of seeing ourselves eventually causes a return to our old ways of being.

For this reason, I will be suggesting that if we want our lives to be different, we must 1) become more conscious of how we see ourselves, and 2) deliberately choose a manner of seeing ourselves that serves us. We must create a new picture of who we are within our own minds before our lives can change. Thus, the purpose of this book is to help you get a new mental self-image – without the surgery! You're welcome!

The two big problems many of us face when undertaking this work are, first, we're unaware that it's our internal self-image that runs our lives. We almost always think it's the external circumstances and conditions (including other people) that dictate how things go. Second, we're usually completely unconscious of how we see ourselves. The “who we think we are” that runs our lives is often buried deep within our subconscious minds.

In terms of the first problem – understanding and more importantly, *accepting* – that our mental self-image is responsible for everything we experience in life, I'm going to slowly build a case for that. It turns out many of us have great resistance to the idea that we're the cause of our own misery. Moreover, the idea that “who we think we are” determines everything, can, at times, be highly counter-intuitive.

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

With regard to the second problem – becoming more aware of our subconscious thoughts and beliefs about ourselves – we can jump in with the following example:

Suppose you’re confronted with what many people would consider a challenging situation – the unexpected loss of a job. To begin to understand how you see yourself in that situation, notice how you’re characterizing the event. Do you label it as “*a disaster*”, “*awful*”, “*scary*” and so on? Or do you use more positive terms, such as, “*I’m free!*” or “*Now I can do what I really want with my life!*” The way you describe the event – either to yourself or others – is the first major clue as to how you see yourself in that situation.

The next clue, which is closely related to the first, can be found in the internal thoughts and feelings you experience. Negative thoughts and feelings probably mean that you see yourself in a not-so-positive way. Thoughts like, “*I’m screwed,*” “*There will never be another job like my last one,*” or “*I’m too old to compete in today’s market,*” all reflect a “who you think you are” that isn’t very confident or secure. On the other hand, if you’re thinking and/or feeling positively about no longer having the job, you probably see yourself as someone who can take care of themselves in that situation. You must have some measure of confidence that you’re up to the challenge. Optimism and positive feelings are always a reflection of a positive self-image. Thus, the way we describe a situation, and/or how we think or feel about that event internally, give us clues as to who “we think we are.”

Now the reason it’s so important to identify how we see ourselves is, as we said earlier, it’s impossible to act in a way that’s inconsistent with our primary thoughts and beliefs about ourselves. Our self-image in any situation will determine how we handle it. In the lost job example, if “who we think we are” in relation to that situation is negative, then we may find it more difficult to find a new job than someone with a more positive outlook and self-image.

But there’s another reason why it’s so important to identify how we see ourselves:

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

***It's often much easier to change "who we think we are" than it is to change the situation itself.***

For instance, in the above example of losing our job, by the time we're confronted with the company's choice to let us go, it will likely be far too late to do anything about it. In fact, other than being the best employee we could while we had the job, we probably had little-to-no control over the company's decision-making process. (And of course, even the best employees sometimes get let go during times of restructuring, etc.)

Likewise, our personal circumstances at the moment we become unemployed may also be difficult to change. For instance, our monthly expenses will likely be fixed in the short term. This means there's probably not much we can do, at least not right away, to change them.

In contrast, we can begin changing "who we think we are" at any time. Yet many of us don't know we can do this. Rather, we're certain that who we are is fixed – usually by our past experiences. We say things like, *"This is just the way I am,"* or *"I'll never change,"* or *"You can't teach an old dog new tricks."* Not only are such statements untrue, but they can keep us stuck in unhappy circumstances for many years – and maybe even our whole lives.

But it gets worse. Not only do most of us deny that we have the ability to decide how we see ourselves in a given situation; we're unaware that we're *already* doing it. We're deciding in each moment "who we think we are" in relation to every event and circumstance we encounter in life. We'll discuss why this is so in a moment. For now note that the fact we may be unaware we're doing it, doesn't mean we aren't doing it!

### ***Stress!***

We feel stress when we focus on things we don't have any control over. In the above example, the decision to fire us – who made it, how they made it and why – is beyond our control. Likewise, our personal financial situation at the moment we lose the job may also be beyond our immediate ability to change. Thus, giving our attention to any of those things will create stress.

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

Focusing on something we can't change reinforces a sense of powerlessness, and it's this sense of powerlessness that lies at the basis of all stress.

On the other hand, focusing on things we can change has the potential to reduce our anxiety. If, as we just said, we always have the ability to change how we see ourselves, then in the job loss example this means we can consciously cultivate more positive thoughts. *“I got this,”* or *“Something good will come from this,”* or *“I can figure this out,”* are examples of more constructive thinking that can begin to shift how we see ourselves in the situation.

Likewise, and perhaps most importantly, we want to avoid making ourselves wrong for our mistakes. Many people blame themselves for things like losing a job. We naturally think it's our fault – if only we were better workers we'd still be employed. The truth is, we don't always know why what happens, happens. We could have been stellar performers and still get let go. And even if we did contribute to the problem, what we want to do is learn from our mistakes – not beat ourselves up for them. Self-recrimination can add even more stress to what may already be a difficult situation. I've noticed in my own life that just being nicer to myself can sometimes make a huge difference in how things go.

Some people may object to using positive affirmations like those I mentioned a moment ago. They say, we're just making them up; that they have no basis in reality. We'll address those and related concerns later. For now, while I agree it may take some effort to shift our internal self-image, it should be obvious that focusing on more positive thoughts and beliefs about ourselves will help reduce our stress. Having less stress will, in turn, make us more effective at dealing with whatever problems we have.

### ***The problem lies within***

Now if it's true that our self-image determines everything, this means the source of a problem lies in how we see ourselves and *not* in the external events and circumstances of our lives. This is because how we react is determined by “who we think we are” *relative* to that situation. Our response is always a function of our



## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

internal self-image and not what's happening outside of us. Accordingly, we can say:

***The situation is never the problem; the problem is always – and only – how we see ourselves in that situation.***

This may be hard for some of us to accept. We've spent a lifetime looking outside ourselves for the source of our problems. We'll talk about why this is so shortly, but for now notice this is actually good news. If we can almost never change the situation, but we can always change how we see ourselves, then it's possible to transform a negative event into a positive one. By deliberately choosing to see ourselves in a more positive way, we take our power back. Taking our power back alleviates the sense of powerlessness many of us experience in challenging situations. At a minimum, this can lead to better results in whatever problems we're facing today; at a maximum, it can lead to a whole new life.

By saying that the problem can be found in how we see ourselves, we're saying that the problem lies within us. It's not in the outer circumstances or events we encounter. This is because information from the outside world must first pass through our internal filter of "who we think we are" before we can react to it. In the job loss example, as the knowledge that we've been laid off enters our consciousness, the mind tries to make sense of it. It can only do this by examining the information within the context of what it already knows. What it already knows is how we've experienced similar situations in the past. The mind thus uses our past experiences to build up and/or reinforce our self-image and that self-image then becomes the filter through which all new data must pass. By processing the information in this way, the mind assigns a meaning to the current situation *and it is to this meaning which we react.*

Of course, all this happens very quickly – within milliseconds. Yet it can be proven by the simple fact that our reactions will be different depending on how we see ourselves. Let's look again at the job loss example. As we've already said, if how we see ourselves is as someone who can handle the situation, we'll have

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

one reaction. If “who we think we are” is someone who can’t, we’ll have a very different one. It’s the exact same event – i.e., losing our job – yet we have different reactions based on our internal filtering process. Thus, we can say that:

***How we react to something is always determined by how we see ourselves rather than by the thing itself.***

Again, this is really important since we often can’t change the situation. But we can always change how we see ourselves.

I said earlier that many of us have resistance to the idea that we create our own misery. Whether in good times or in bad we’ve been conditioned to look outside ourselves for the source of our experience. As a result, we’re usually certain someone or something else needs to change in order for us to feel OK.

Think about your own life for a moment. Identify a difficult relationship. Have you ever *not* thought that the problem lies with the other person and that *they* have to change before you can feel better? Have you ever remotely considered that the cause of your unhappiness lies within you rather than within them? As we’ll discuss in the next chapter, it’s the almost universal unwillingness to take responsibility for our own thoughts and feelings that creates much of the drama and conflict in our lives. It’s also this unwillingness that leaves us powerless to have a different experience.

***Past performance is not indicative of future results.***

A moment ago I said that our self-image is the result of the mind interpreting our past experiences. When we’re confronted with a difficult situation in the present, the mind relies on who we were in the past in deciding how to react. In an evolutionary context, this makes sense. It’s important to assess present dangers based on past experiences. For instance, primitive man may not have gotten many chances to learn that fire is harmful. Or that it’s not a good idea to wake a sleeping Saber Tooth Tiger (“*Here kitty, kitty...*” Chomp! ☺). Thus, learning in this way can be quite adaptive. Yet, as we’ll discuss in Chapter Four, primitive

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man's fear of Saber Tooth Tigers has been replaced by modern man's fear of his boss, mother-in-law or the IRS. Therefore, within the context of how we live our lives today, relying on past experiences in understanding current situations may hold us back as much as it can help.

Saber Tooth Mother-In-Law's aside for the moment, the bigger problem lies in the fact that most of us believe who we *are* today is who we *were* in the past. (And actually, an even bigger problem lies in the fact that who we were in the past was completely made up – more about that later.) Deep down inside, we don't think we can change how we see ourselves. "Yes," we may say, *"it's important to have a positive self-image."* But when confronted with our own negative thoughts and beliefs, we immediately follow up with the quotes I mentioned earlier: *"Well, that's just the way I am,"* or *"I'll never change,"* or *"You can't teach an old dog new tricks,"* etc.

The bottom line is, many of us don't think we can change who we are. For example, if we've always felt anxious speaking in public, we're sure we'll continue to feel that way in the future. Or if we've always struggled with math, well, there's nothing we can really do to change that. And so on. While our past is often hard to ignore, prior experiences aren't necessarily determinative of future ones. For instance, as I mentioned in the Introduction, I changed my relationship with public speaking pretty dramatically. I went from someone who absolutely loathed and freaked out at the thought of doing it, to someone who now really enjoys it. Thus, I believe if we keep repeating the same experiences over and over, it's not because that's just the way we are. Rather, it's because we haven't changed how we see ourselves in that situation.

Many of us are also convinced we are the way we are because of what the world – and especially other people – has done to us: *"I am this way because of how my boss treats me."* Or *"If my mother had been nicer I wouldn't be so uncomfortable around women."* Or *"I'm afraid to take risks because my older brother always beat me up if I failed."* And so on. While our interactions with others can definitely have an impact on us (especially as children), it's my

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

belief that it's still possible to become whoever we want to be in life. This is in spite of what other people did or didn't do to us, or what may have otherwise happened in the past.

### ***Dressing for success***

If most of us judge “who we think we are” based on our past experiences, then negative past experiences can effectively limit how high we go. Yet when I was contemplating what successful people might be doing differently than the rest of us, it occurred to me that – perhaps without even realizing it – they see themselves as being able to handle situations *irrespective* of what may have happened in the past. They approach life from a place that says “*I got this,*” even if they have contrary prior experiences. They consciously or unconsciously ignore anything negative (other than to learn from it) in determining how they see themselves. Thus, what happened before doesn't limit them. They also probably trust they will get any additional skills or help necessary to get the job done.

As I said, the successful person may not even realize they're doing all this. But if they consistently produce positive results (which is how most of us would define a successful person), then somehow, someway, consciously or unconsciously, they must have chosen to see themselves as being able to handle whatever life is sending their way.

This belief in themselves, as well as in their ability to positively interact with others, is what *confidence* is all about. It probably goes without saying that self-confidence is helpful in achieving our goals in life. But, as I'll be discussing in future chapters, there's another type of confidence which may be even more important if our aim is to live a truly happy life. More about exactly what that type of confidence is later.

### ***Adam Ant***

Let's take a look at an example from my own life that illustrates how “who we think we are” relative to a situation determines our experience of it. Now this is definitely *not* an inspiring tale of bravery or courage. In fact, it's just the opposite.

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But it's a good example of how "who I thought I was" influenced my experience with some household pests several years ago.

DISCLAIMER: KIDS – ALWAYS GET YOUR PARENTS' PERMISSION BEFORE USING HOUSEHOLD CLEANING PRODUCTS – ESPECIALLY FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN CLEANING.

When I was first considering the idea that how I see myself determines everything, I was looking for a concrete example of that. Staring down at the ground – at the concrete no less – I saw a bunch of little red ants scurrying around on the sidewalk. I thought, *"I see myself as being able to take care of myself in relation to these ants. I don't feel threatened by them. Rather, I see myself as powerful. I know that in less than a second I could crush them under my heel and not think twice about it."*<sup>3</sup> Here, I thought, was the perfect example of how "who I thought I was" relative to a particular situation determined how I reacted to it.

Well it's funny how life works sometimes (actually it's not so funny as you'll see in a minute). A few weeks later I was in my kitchen and I noticed a couple of red ants walking along the counter. I didn't think much of it and got on with what I was doing. The next day I woke up and saw a bunch more. Now my kitchen is usually pretty clean – there definitely wasn't much to attract these little critters. So I thought to myself, *"This is just an anomaly – a seasonal thing – they'll be gone in a couple of days."*

Well the next day came and there were ants everywhere – walls, counters, floor. I'm not a bug-a-phobe, but this truly freaked me out. I started to panic. Because I don't normally kill bugs, I don't keep any insect spray in the house. So I grabbed the only spray I had: window cleaner. I sprayed the \$hit out of those little guys, until nearly half the bottle was gone. [Un?]Surprisingly, it turns out glass cleaner works pretty well as an insecticide and eventually most of the ones who weren't already dead, scattered for higher ground.

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<sup>3</sup> Before people get upset about me killing things, just so you know 1) I never touched these little guys, and 2) I have no less than four empty plastic yogurt containers strategically placed around my house so whenever I see a stray bug inside I can gently scoop them up and place them outside unharmed.

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

Now I’m not telling you this story to convince you window cleaner is a good way to get rid of bugs. What I want you to see is how, in that moment, the idea that I could take care of myself *vis-a-vis* the ants went out the window. My highly upset internal reaction shows my lack of certainty that I would be OK. “Who I thought I was” in that situation, was basically, “*Screwed!*”

The point of this sad, somewhat silly story is they were still the same little ants that I had seen scurrying around on the sidewalk a few weeks earlier. The ones I was so confident didn’t pose a threat to me. Yet now, because I saw myself differently in relation to them, I had a whole different reaction.

You might be thinking, “*well, wait a second – there lot’s more ants. It’s not really the same situation.*” And I would say, perhaps. But consider this: regardless of how many ants there were, there are people in the world who would not have been freaked out by them. They might be entomologists or they might be exterminators. But not everyone would have the same reaction I did. This is because how we see ourselves in a given situation determines how we react to it. If the situation were responsible for our reactions, then everyone would react the same way. So if even one person responds differently, this shows pretty clearly that it’s “who we think we are” that drives our experience – not what seems to be going on around us.

Of course, I’m not saying we have to live with ants – or anything else we might consider to be a problem. It’s OK to resolve whatever issues we are confronted with in life. The thing we don’t want to do, however, is let our negative reactions run the show. If we’re freaking out, chances are pretty good we won’t make the best decisions. We may actually end up doing more harm than good (note to self: don’t spray blue glass cleaner on white kitchen curtains.)

Another reason I am bringing up this example now is, as we’ll discuss in detail later in this book, many of us rely on negative emotions to take care of ourselves. In particular, we use anger to get through difficult situations and as a form of protection. Imagine that if instead of ants, my problem was with another person. In my frantic attempts to “solve the problem,” I grabbed

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the glass cleaner and started spraying that person. Harmless (perhaps) and also kinda funny. But probably not a good solution. Now imagine that if instead I grabbed a loaded gun. Thousands of people every year employ this kind of “solution” when they see themselves as powerless and threatened. As in my example, how they react is determined entirely by how they see themselves – i.e., “who they think they are” in that situation.

***Change your thoughts about yourself and your life will follow...*** We can't change something if we're not aware of what it is. So it should be obvious that if our thoughts and beliefs about ourselves are the source of our problems, it's probably important to become more aware of them.

A helpful method to notice our thoughts is meditation. I started meditating many years ago and have done it on and off since. While I have used several different techniques, when I started it was mostly sitting quietly for 20 to 30 minutes. During those meditations I never saw God or had any other mystical experience. Yet I did begin to notice my thinking. After a short time I could see certain patterns arising. For instance, I became aware that I would often have arguments inside my head with other people. I felt like I was on-trial, defending myself for the things I did or didn't do. Sometimes these encounters were with people I didn't know and/or would never meet (e.g., politicians, sports figures, etc.) It was really amazing – and kind of crazy – to see how, when left to its own devices, my mind would consistently default to such negative patterns of thinking.

I can see now that this particular type of thinking was related to my subconscious feelings of guilt and unworthiness. I had been challenged a lot as a kid to explain myself – why I had or had not done something. This was generally a negative, shaming experience, and I guess I continued those patterns on my own. Without even realizing it, I was recreating my childhood in my own mind as an adult. So the point is, if you're at all like me, your mind may not be your friend. You could be reinforcing all kinds of negative thoughts and beliefs about yourself without realizing it. Thus, however you choose to do it (meditation, journaling,

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

therapy, Facebook – oops), becoming more aware of your negative, repetitive patterns of thinking is important. This awareness is a necessary first step in the process of turning our minds – and our lives – around.

### ***Simple, but not easy***

I’m the first to admit that changing how we see ourselves may be simple, but it ain’t always easy. I’ve been at this for years and many days I still act as if “who I think I am” is a frightened, little kid. Now it wouldn’t be so bad if our unconscious thoughts and beliefs about ourselves were positive. Walking around with a subconscious program of empowering internal messages might completely eliminate the need to read this book! Sadly, however, for many of us that’s not the case. We focus almost entirely on our perceived flaws and shortcomings. We maximize what we think is wrong with us, while minimizing what we think is right.

The basis of this negative internal self-image is often found in our childhood experiences. In particular, how we were treated as kids – especially by our parents and older siblings – greatly influences “who we think we are” as adults. If we experienced a lot of negativity (such as scolding, punishment, teasing, shaming, scape-goating, verbal/physical abuse, etc.), eventually we internalize it. We can end up seeing ourselves as imperfect, unworthy, and perhaps even unlovable. In addition, the fact that we can’t protect ourselves against such negativity impacts our sense of safety and security in the world.

This negative self-image can become so deeply ingrained that by the time we reach adulthood, we just accept that that’s who we are. Yet because it’s so painful for us to think of ourselves in this way (especially as children), we *dissociate* from those thoughts. We’ll talk more about “dissociation” later, but the end result is we can literally become unconscious of how we see ourselves. Our lives are essentially run by our negative thoughts and beliefs – yet we’re almost completely unaware that that’s what’s happening.

As a consequence, being afraid of life and/or beating ourselves up for our mistakes seems normal. We avoid the people and things we’re afraid of, while internally addressing ourselves with



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cruelty rather than kindness. Such a mindset is highly destructive. It's impossible to achieve anything extraordinary when we're afraid of life and/or hating ourselves. Both steal the energy we need to move forward.

An example of this is when I started working as a photographer. I was completely unaware of how my negative thinking was affecting me. All I knew was that it was very hard for me to get anything done. Days and weeks would go by and I was still right where I started.

Eventually I saw I was terrified of rejection and criticism. I lived in fear of other people thinking poorly of me and my work. I also noticed I was very hard on myself. My mind was filled with thoughts like: *"Your photos suck," "No one is going to hire you," "You don't know what you're doing," "Why bother; nothing is going to come of this,"* and so on. My negative thinking was draining my life energy. It was literally taking the wind out of my sails when it came to moving forward with my life. It wasn't until I identified my negative beliefs and then started to undo them that things began to change.

### ***"Deal with reality kid"***

Limiting thoughts can sometimes manifest as "dealing with reality." For instance, someone might say, *"I consider myself a somewhat capable person, but I'll never be Vice President of my division,"* or *"I just don't have the talent to solo for my choir,"* or *"That attractive blonde in accounting? She would never say 'yes' to a date with me."* We all pretty much define our limits based on "who we think we are" and rarely do we try to reach beyond those limits.

Now it's true that just saying positive affirmations in and of themselves may not be enough to help us reach our goals. We might need additional skills, training, financial resources, etc. In my case, it took several years of learning photography before I had the knowledge and experience necessary to be able to work as a professional. If I just walked around telling myself, *"I'm a great photographer, I'm a great photographer,"* but never learned how to actually do it, the whole thing would have been a joke. So

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

sometimes, in order to change how we see ourselves, we need to do things beyond just cultivating a positive self-image. Yet I can also say that all the talent and skill in the world won't help someone who believes they're no good. I've met several photographers and/or artists who, though highly talented, can't get out of their own way when it comes to putting their work out there. Their negative self-image holds them back.

So the idea is to foster a highly positive self-image, while also being realistic if there is something else we need to do to achieve our goals. I also think it's clear that the more we see ourselves in a positive light, the more we'll be able to do what it takes to get any additional resources we might need. For instance, if I need financial support or technical knowledge, I probably won't even seek those things out if my predominant thought is, *“Why bother, nothing's gonna come of this.”*

### ***We're making it all up***

So far, I've tried to show that many of us are either unconscious of our negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves, or if we are aware of them, we're convinced they're true. In terms of the latter, we all have our ways of expressing this – *“I'm just not smart enough to make more money,” “I've always been unattractive,” “I'll never be able to hold a job,”* and so on. Then even if we do realize it's our negative self-image that's holding us back, we don't see any way to easily change it. So we spend all our time and energy trying to change the situation. This, in turn, usually means trying to change other people. If you're married, over 30, or have kids at any age, well you know how trying to change other people goes...

A moment ago I introduced the (probably obvious) idea that much of our self-image is the result of our childhood experiences. We come into the world as blank slates. As our brains grow and mature, our life experiences become imprinted in our gray

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matter. We eventually build a picture of ourselves and this picture becomes “who we think we are.”<sup>4</sup>

Children are literal – they take everything at face value. Children are also highly ego-centric – they believe everything that happens is about them. So if a parent is upset and tells the child he or she is bad, the child believes them. Being yelled at or scolded on a regular basis reinforces this belief. It also teaches the child that it’s their fault when someone else is upset. Eventually the child gets the message he/she is not good enough to be loved the way they are.

Because children don’t have the mental capacity to understand their interactions with others, when those interactions are negative, the child can be left hurt, confused or even traumatized. With no way to process those encounters, the child buries them deep within their subconscious mind and they become part of the automatic, habitual way the child reacts to life. They also directly shape who the child thinks he or she is in the world. Unfortunately, most of us don’t outgrow this negative self-image and we end up carrying it into our adult lives.

The point is this negative self-concept is borne out of the mind of a child. It has within it all that child’s inherently limited understandings and capacities. So in essence, many of us are relying on the conclusions of a six year old in determining “who we think we are” as adults. The fact is, for most of us, this self-image is *totally made up* – it has little or no basis in reality. It’s primarily the result of the conjecture and limited understandings of a child.

By the way, none of this is meant as an indictment of our parents – or us as parents. Parenting is hands down the toughest job on the planet. It’s easy to make mistakes in raising children. Yet I think it’s helpful to mention the issue here because our childhood experiences can so deeply impact our ideas about ourselves. The very short answer is we ultimately have to forgive

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<sup>4</sup> Some studies suggest our personality is almost fully formed by the time we reach First Grade. <https://www.livescience.com/8432-personality-set-life-1st-grade-study-suggests.html>

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

all that happened to us as kids if we want to be free of it. So children: forgive your parents. Parents: forgive yourselves.

Like many things in this book, this may be easier said than done. But you're not without help – I've devoted the entire last chapter to the topic of “Forgiveness,” so stay tuned for that.

Of course, not everyone receives negative messages about themselves as kids. There have always been parents who were aware of the importance of positively esteeming their children. Likewise, more and more parents are consciously and deliberately monitoring their words and actions as they relate to their children. They're also aware of the effect their unresolved issues can have on their offspring and so are finishing their own unfinished business. All of this bodes well for future generations.

In the next chapter, I'll discuss the importance of properly esteeming our children. But will note here that in my opinion there's nothing more important we can do for them. All the education in the world won't overcome a child's poor self-image. So esteem your kids early and often. And while you're at it, throw in a healthy dose of self-love and self-forgiveness for you. Your kids will love you for it – and you'll love yourself!

Childhood trauma aside for the moment, even our negative or unpleasant experiences as an adult don't have to define “who we think we are.” Everyone has, at some point, suffered at the hands of another person's unmindful or unloving words or deeds. Likewise, we've all perpetrated our own harmful ways – intentionally or unintentionally – on others. Our own or another's poor choices and decisions don't have to form the basis for our self-image. Yet for many of us it seems natural to do this. We either define ourselves as the helpless victim of someone else's wrongdoing. Or we put ourselves down and make ourselves wrong for our own mistakes.

In terms of seeing ourselves as victims, I'll have a lot more to say about this in future chapters. For now, note that it rarely serves us to think of ourselves this way. And in the case where we're the bad guy, saying, *“I need to be hard on myself so I'll do better next time,”* doesn't serve us either. Wanting to do better isn't the problem. Thinking we have to beat ourselves up to get

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there is. I'll argue later that self-recrimination is a primary source of fear in our lives. It's ultimately one of the main reasons that many of us fail to realize our goals and dreams.

### ***Becoming our own BFF***

I mentioned earlier that in the last few years I've won many awards for my photography. I've also had my photos published in newspapers and magazines around the world. My work has been shown in exhibitions as far away as Spain and South America. Plus I've sold signed, Limited Edition prints to Collectors in places as far off as Australia. And I did all this without ever taking a photography or art class.

Now you may say, *"Good on you! I'm sure you've worked hard to achieve all this."* While that may be true, before 2012, I never won an award for anything. Even as a little kid, I never got one of those little plastic trophies you get for being on the 14<sup>th</sup> place soccer team. And before 2012, hardly anyone ever saw my work. I was barely able to post my photos on social media, much less imagine them being published in a major newspaper or magazine. The idea that someone half-way around the world would want to purchase one of my photos, never even remotely entered my mind.

This was all because of how I saw myself at the time. "Who I thought I was" was someone who lacked talent and ability – whether as a photographer, artist, or anything else. I was certain I didn't have what it took to win a contest or an award, much less more than 70 of them. I was terrified of rejection and criticism. The result was I never entered any contests or submitted my photos for publication. I also thought I had to be perfect in order to participate at all as a creative person. And I was sure I wasn't that. Thus, these negative ideas about myself conspired to keep my life very small, safe and unhappy.

So what changed? As I mentioned in the Introduction, it started by me waking up to the fact that what was holding me back in life wasn't all the competition from other photographers. It wasn't my lack of any formal education as an artist. Or the fact that I didn't have the latest and greatest camera equipment. It

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

wasn't all the haters that I thought would be out to get me on social media. It wasn't even the recession or tough economy that started in 2009. It was always and only my own unloving thoughts and beliefs about myself. My negative self-image, and the hurtful ways I treated myself as a result, were the only things standing between me and everything I wanted in life.

All of this all came into focus (pun intended) around 2012. I realized I needed to be a different person if I wanted my life to change – especially in terms of “who I thought I was” as an artist and photographer. So I started to question all the limiting thoughts and beliefs I had about myself. As I noticed one, I tried to replace it with something more positive. This was tough going at first. Like we said earlier, those negative thoughts can seem so familiar that that's just who we think we are. I had to become super-aware of what I was thinking and/or saying to myself almost on a moment-by-moment basis. When a negative thought would pop up, I would try to question whether or not that thought was true about me. In fact, on more than one occasion I stopped what I was doing and said out loud, “*Is that really true?*” In those moments, I'm sure if anyone was in my vicinity they would have thought I was a lunatic. Yet this is exactly what I needed to do to stop the crazy train that kept making unscheduled stops in my brain.

It also got worse before it got better. The more I paid attention to my thinking, the more I could see how dark it was. Yet I stuck with it and eventually I realized it was possible to counteract my negative self-image with more positive ideas about myself.

The end result is I was able to take many of the actions I had feared to do before. For instance, I began entering shows, contests and exhibitions. I also began submitting my work for publication. I posted regularly on social media and started doing everything I could think of to get my photos seen and myself work as a photographer. I went from being totally paralyzed by fear to almost being fearless when it came to putting myself and my art out there.

If I could summarize the biggest change that's taken place over the last few years it's that I've begun to see myself differently. I've

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changed “who I think I am” from an unworthy, talentless person, to a worthy, talented person. I’ve also stopped being so hard on myself. I made a conscious and deliberate choice to go from being my own worst enemy to my own best friend. The sum total is, I’ve accomplished many things that I would have never thought were possible. Not everything has gone perfectly. And I still have many challenges, both personally and as an artist. But I have been able to marshal enough energy and enthusiasm to get stuff done that before was difficult, if not impossible.

As an example, I went from having only a few dozen, somewhat average pictures, to now having a body of work of more than 1,000 high-quality, publication worthy images. These are photos that can be sold as prints, licensed for commercial use, and/or published on editorial pages. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, I’ve created two Collections of abstract designs, several of which were licensed by a large home décor company. And as I’ll describe in detail in Chapter Four, I did a ton more to push through my fears and build my commercial photography business. All of this has happened since my “awakening” and all of it took tremendous time, effort and energy. And none of it would have happened if I was still beating the heck out of myself for being less than perfect.

A final example of how seeing myself in a new way has positively impacted my life is the fact that I’m even writing this book. Like the not-so-nice person in the story at the beginning of this chapter, there’s still a voice in my head that says, “*Who do you think you are to write a book like this?!?*” This is not a friendly voice and it doesn’t help me move forward in life. But now, being aware of its true nature, most days I am able to say to the voice, “*Thank you for sharing.*” Then I take out my computer and I get to work.

### ***The fear of self-recrimination***

I briefly introduced this subject earlier. No one likes to feel judged, criticized or rejected – especially by themselves. Deep down we all want to be loved for who we are. Yet what few people realize is that when we feel hurt, it’s usually because of our

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

judgment of *ourselves*. Remember: we’re always and only reacting to “who we think we are” in any given situation. When someone else criticizes us, that information must first pass through our internal filtering process. If our internal filter says we’re bad or unworthy and so on, we’ll react one way. If our internal filter says we’re good and valuable and worthy, we’ll react another.

Later in this book we’ll discuss how what we call “insecurity” is really just a lack of love for ourselves that we project out onto other people. As a preview, think about how you react to someone else’s unpleasanties when you feel good about yourself vs. how you react when you don’t. Is there a difference? (This is one of the exercises at the end of this chapter so you’ll have a chance to suss it out for yourself then.)

In my case, I originally assumed the insecurity I felt about showing my photos was caused by a fear of other people’s criticism of me. I was certain I was worried about what other people thought. Then one day I realized:

***It wasn’t their rejection or criticism I was afraid of;  
it was my own.***

This was literally one of the biggest “ah-ha” moments of my life – the understanding that what had kept me paralyzed with fear was *my own rejection of myself*. In all the time that I struggled with moving forward, it never occurred to me that the source of my fear was my own self-recrimination.

I also realized that I tried to cope with that fear in different ways. For instance, I often pretended that showing my photos wasn’t important to me. If you asked why I didn’t submit my work to a particular show or contest, I would probably say something like, “*I’m just not into it.*” Thus, in the past my way of coping meant I would eventually give up on my dreams. Thankfully now I have a whole new way of dealing with all this.

### ***Compare and despair***

Related to our self-inflicted insecurity is comparing ourselves to others and then feeling bad when we come up short. When I



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was just starting photography around 2004, I had loads of enthusiasm but lacked the technical knowledge and skills most good photographers have. I'm actually being nice here – the truth is, I stunk. I didn't have a clue. But – neither do most people when they're starting out on something new. Of course, I thought I was supposed to already know everything before even having a chance to learn it. So when I would compare my photos with more accomplished photographers, I always came up short. Then I would beat myself up for it.

Comparing our work to the work of others can be a good way to learn and grow. But only if we're nice to ourselves about it. For me, when I came up on the short end of the stick, I would use the rest of that stick to beat the heck out of myself. I thought certain people were born with talent and if I didn't have that innate ability, I shouldn't even try. It sounds crazy as I write this, but that's how I saw it. Luckily, my intense love for photography allowed me to continue to learn and grow despite my crazy thinking.

### ***This is not just the way I am***

I mentioned earlier that a lot of us came to certain conclusions about “who we think we are” as the result of our negative childhood experiences. For me, I arrived at the belief that there was something inherently wrong with me. I felt unworthy in almost every situation I encountered and this created a lot of pain and sorrow within me. Feeling unworthy preceded and went far beyond my photography. It affected every aspect of my life. I became convinced this was “just the way I was” and found all kinds of crazy and unhealthy ways to compensate for it. The worst part though is I ended up hating myself for being this way.

What I didn't know (and what I think most people don't know), is how much it hurts to hate ourselves. I'm of the mind that self-hatred is really the most painful and deeply damaging thing we can do. In my case, I believe the pain of this self-hatred, along with a general fear of life, gave rise to certain addictive/compulsive behaviors in me. It's also true that some

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

people can take the pain of not loving themselves and turn it into violence against themselves or others.

If you suffer from negative thoughts and beliefs about yourself like I did, the good news is you can begin to move from being your own worst enemy to your own best friend. You no longer have to beat yourself up for being less than perfect or sit around wondering why you can't move forward in life. You also don't have to live in fear of what other people think of you. As we'll discuss in more detail later:

### ***The only opinion of us that really matters is our own.***

Of course, this is good if we have a high opinion of ourselves and maybe not so good when we don't. But as I've shown, even if we have a negative self-image, it's possible to turn that around.

Will it take work if we want things to change? Absolutely. We have to do things differently if we want to enjoy a bigger life. In particular, as we'll see in the next chapter we have to start taking responsibility for every aspect of our lives. We must own *all* our actions and reactions – in each circumstance and with every person. Taking responsibility is a prerequisite for changing who we are in the world. When we do this we have a much improved chance of loving the life we have so we can have a life we love.

### TAKEAWAYS:

1. “*Who do you think you are?*” is one the most important questions we can ask ourselves since whoever we think we are is exactly who we'll end up being in life. Our idea about ourselves informs every choice and decision we make and it's those choices and decisions that determine how our life goes.
2. Another way of saying “who do you think you are?” is “*How do you see yourself?*” Everything we think, feel, say and do is grounded in our self-image. We must shift our internal picture of ourselves if we want our lives to change.

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

3. In each moment we're deciding "who we think we are" in relation to every situation we encounter in life. The fact that we may be unaware we're doing this doesn't mean we aren't doing it.
4. If you want to know how you see yourself in any given situation look at the way you describe it to yourself or others, as well as your internal thoughts and feelings about it.
5. While it's important to learn from our mistakes, self-recrimination can add even more stress to what may already be a difficult situation. Thus just being nicer to ourselves can sometimes make a huge difference in how things go.
6. The problem is never the situation but always – and only – how we see ourselves in that situation. It's usually much easier to change "who we think we are" than it is to change the situation itself.
7. Information from the outside world must first pass through our internal filter of "who we think we are." The mind then gives that information a meaning based on our past experiences. The result is we're always reacting to the meaning we give a situation, rather than to the situation itself.
8. Past performance is not indicative of future results. You *can* teach an old dog new tricks.
9. Stress comes from focusing on things we have no control over.
10. Successful people see themselves as being able to handle situations irrespective of their past experiences. They approach life from a place that says "*I got this,*" even if they have contrary evidence from their past.

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

11. Many of us have a lifetime of deeply ingrained negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves. We maximize what we think is wrong with us and minimize what we think is right.
12. It's not someone else's rejection or criticism we fear; it's our own. Self-recrimination is a primary source of fear.
13. Comparing our work with the work of others can be a good way to learn and grow. But only if we're nice to ourselves about it.
14. Positive affirmations in and of themselves may not be enough to help us reach our goals. We may need additional training or resources to get to where we want to be. Yet if our predominant thought is, *“Why bother – nothing good will come of this,”* we probably won't even attempt to seek out those additional resources. Likewise, all the talent and skill in the world won't help someone who believes they're no good.
15. Because children take things at face value and believe everything is about them, negative experiences can lead to a negative self-image. The child may end up seeing himself or herself as imperfect, unworthy, helpless and perhaps even unlovable. These beliefs can be so painful that the child dissociates from them.
16. Much of the negative stuff we believe about ourselves is the result of our negative childhood experiences. This means that for many of us our negative self-image is the product of the mind of a child. This is not a solid foundation for deciding who we are as adults.
17. Parenting is the toughest job on the planet. Children: forgive your parents. Parents: forgive yourselves.
18. Most people have no idea how painful it is to hate themselves. It's this pain of self-hatred that gives rise to compulsive

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

and/or addictive behaviors as well as to violence against ourselves and others.

19. The good news is we can move from being our own worst enemy to our own best friend. We no longer have to beat ourselves up for being less than perfect, or sit around wondering why we can't move forward in life.

### EXERCISES:

1. So, "who do you think you are?" Pick three difficult or uncomfortable situations in your life. Use the following form to identify how you see yourself in those situations. (A blank form that you can use appears in the Appendix.)

Situation	How do I describe the situation	What are my internal thoughts and feelings about it	How do I see myself
Being passed over for a promotion at work	<i>"They screwed me"</i>	Life is not fair.	Unappreciated
	<i>"They don't appreciate me"</i>	No one appreciates me.	Treated unfairly
	<i>"I'm too old/young/not the boss's son"</i>	I work hard for nothing.	A victim
	<i>"This is the last straw"</i>	I can't trust people.	Powerless
	<i>"I'll show those ungrateful SOB's"</i>	I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm afraid I'll be stuck here forever.	Not valuable
			Disrespected
			Justified in being angry

2. In the situations you identified in #1 above, describe how it would be easier to change who you think you are in that situation as opposed to trying to change the situation itself. Then write down a more empowered way of seeing yourself in those situations and practice being that person instead of who you've been in the past.

3. Review one or more stressful situations from the past few weeks. Discuss whether you feeling stress was related to being

## “Who Do You Think You Are?”

focused on things you had no control over. Then describe what you could control in those situations and how your experience would have been different if you had shifted your attention to those things.

4. *“The situation is never the problem; the problem is always – and only – how I see myself in that situation.”* Agree or disagree? Why? Give examples.

5. Describe at least three places where you feel stuck in your life. Identify any negative thoughts or beliefs about yourself, such as *“I’m not good enough,”* or *“I don’t have what it takes,”* or *“No one is going to like me,”* etc. How would changing “who you think you are” in those situations help you move forward?

6. Look at three recent events in your life and relate them to the internal filtering process we described in this chapter. See if you can discern how information from each event was processed within your own mind. What was the basis of the meaning you gave each event? Can you see how you reacted to that meaning rather than to the event itself? Discuss.

7. Identify at least three major limiting thoughts or beliefs about yourself that stem from your childhood. Clues can be found in thoughts or statements that contain the words *“I’m not,”* *“I can’t,”* *“I don’t,”* etc. Begin to question whether those thoughts or beliefs are really true. You can even ask yourself out loud, *“Is that really true?”* when you notice a negative belief about yourself. Then replace each of those thoughts with a more positive one. Can you see how those old ideas about yourself were never really the truth about you?

8. *“Dealing with reality”* – Identify at least three limiting thoughts or beliefs you have about yourself that fall into the category of you *“dealing with reality.”* (Review this chapter for some examples.) Then identify whether seeing yourself in this way is serving you, or if you need to adjust your ideas about yourself to

## Be Bigger Than You Think You Are!®

help you move forward. Also note if any additional skills, training or resources are needed to achieve your goals. Identify any limiting thoughts or beliefs that are holding you back from pursuing those resources.

9. Begin a regular practice of journaling, meditation or some other technique to help you identify your negative beliefs. We can't change what we're not aware of so our goal is to become the observer of our minds. Look for patterns or habitual ways of thinking that don't serve you. In addition to thoughts that contain *"I'm not"*, *"I can't"*, *"I don't,"* look at ideas that include words like *"People shouldn't"*, *"People won't"*, *"It's not OK to..."* and so on. The key is to identify beliefs that you would never think to question. Your job now is to question all your negative thoughts and beliefs as you become aware of them. As in #7 above, replace all negative thoughts with more positive ones.

10. What many of us call "insecurity" is really just a lack of love for ourselves that we project out onto other people. As was mentioned in this chapter, think about how you react to someone else's unpleasanties when you feel good about yourself. Now think about how you react to those unpleasanties when you don't. Is there a difference?

11. Become your own best friend. Write at least three full paragraphs about why you're such a wonderful, talented, amazing person. Say all the things you wish other people would say to you. Go through your past achievements and offer to support yourself on your future adventures. End by telling yourself that you love yourself just the way you are!

