

# PERSPECTIVE

“*Every exit is an entrance to somewhere else.*”

*~Tom Stoppard*



# 1

## TODAY IS YOUR WAKEUP CALL!

“*The next morning, my wife saw that I was dressed and ready to go. She gave me a surprised look and said, ‘I thought you were taking the later train today?’ She asked me whether we were still having breakfast together or if she should drive me to the station so I could make my normal train. Little did I know, at that moment, I was standing at the crossroads of my life and my answer to that innocent question would determine whether I lived or died . . .”*

*~Mike Jaffe*

**S**ometimes it's the small decisions that make the biggest differences in our lives. That was the case on that day in September when I had to make a split-second decision on whether or not I'd keep my promise to my family to have breakfast with them before heading to work. Sounds simple enough, right? Have breakfast with the family. But like so many other Americans, my work routine started early—and that meant no time for breakfast with my wife and one-year-old daughter. Except that day was supposed to be different. I had promised myself that work could wait. And, yet, there I was, all set to go

to work early, like normal. If I caught my regular train, I'd be at my office by 8:45 AM.

There is a lot of drama built into that excerpt above. I'm not someone who gets entangled in too much drama, but I included it there for a reason. That statement above is part of the story I share with you below. My story. Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but the small decision I made that day really did determine whether I lived or died.

### **DEFINING THE WAKEUP CALL**

Before I share that story more fully I want to return to our focus for this book, which is about designing and living an extraordinary life, starting today. For many of us, including me, the ability to accomplish this amazing and worthwhile goal starts with a realization—with a wakeup call. But what does that really mean—a wakeup call?

Wakeup calls occur when you experience an event or have a powerful insight that is significant enough to shake you up and scream, "LIFE'S TOO SHORT! WAKE UP!" They remind us that we don't have endless tomorrows. A wakeup call occurs, as I said in the book's introduction, when you become driven by a need to move away from where you are in some aspect of your life (job, relationship, etc.) or driven by the need or desire to move toward something—a bigger job, a new challenge, or something else compelling.

The definition of a “wakeup call” includes a “portentous event that brings an issue to immediate attention” or “a sign to take action concerning something that was overlooked or neglected.” I don’t want you to have to wait for a “portentous event” or a sign to realize you’ve been overlooking or neglecting any part of your life. You bought this book and you’re receiving this message today—there’s your event and your sign.

Why is it important to recognize your own wakeup call, you ask? I sum it up simply by proclaiming that if there are changes you want to make in your life, and you haven’t started on them yet (for whatever “reason”), you are wasting precious time! Don’t wait until more time has unnecessarily passed, or it simply becomes too late. Stop empowering the reasons and excuses you are using, no matter how real and valid they feel.

Are you able to step outside of your day-to-day life for a moment and really see what a wakeup call might look like for you? Is what I’m saying resonating with you, or is it just a bunch of words on a page? How does the prospect of a wakeup call feel? For some of you, it is utterly terrifying. For others, it’s motivational. For still others, no matter how hard you try, it just isn’t real. But I’m telling you that it is very real, and the time is now to take an honest look at your life to decide where you want to make powerful and positive changes for yourself, strengthen your relationships with those you love, and create entirely new relationships with those things that have been stopping you all this time.

## WE'RE ALL HUNG OVER

I have a theory about how life feels for so many of us these days. I see people who have grown all kinds of electronic appendages to their bodies—cell phones, PDAs, iPods, etc. They can't bear to be away from their gadgets. (I thought technology was supposed to make our lives easier?) "What if I miss something important?" is the general sentiment. Guess what? You *are* missing something important right now. It's called "your life!"

As a result of all of this 24/7 access, information overload, and constant stimulation, so many of us feel "hung over" these days. I don't mean that we drank too much tequila last night (at least I don't *remember* drinking that much tequila last night)! What I mean by "hung over" is that we're OVERworked, OVERstructured, OVERloaded, OVERinformed, OVERstimulated, and OVERwhelmed. Too many of us feel this way. By continuing this mode of operation, we get to keep lots of data and information in our brains and be up-to-the-minute on all news and events, but there is a tremendous cost to living this way: burnout.

Fried, frazzled, irritable, and fatigued. All that information intake, all that meeting of deadlines and timelines and schedules and appointments, and you may just find one day you can't do it anymore. Or maybe the opposite—you won't have the energy needed to do anything about it. You may keep pushing through and find that your physical and mental health really start to suffer. Believe me, I understand the importance of meeting family and work responsibilities, but you also need to recognize when it's

all too much or you've gotten off course from the life you really want to live.

The truth is, burning out isn't going to serve you, your family, your clients, or anyone. What we want is to get you living the kind of life that feeds you rather than depletes you.

### **WHERE DO YOU START? MY STORY**

I was in a rut myself for many years. Prior to becoming a coach, I was unsatisfied with much of the work I was doing for most of my career. Days weren't all horrible—I had plenty of good days too. But they just didn't provide the meaning that I was craving.

My biggest problem was that I had no vision for my life. I didn't know where I wanted to go or even how to begin. So I did what most of us do . . . nothing. But then time started melting away—days became months, which soon added up to years. Back then, I worked in New York City and lived in Connecticut. I was commuting two hours *each way* to work (four hours in total each day), and I hated that I didn't have any time to spend with my wife and one-year-old daughter. This was not the husband or dad I wanted to be. But as the sole breadwinner of the family at the time, I couldn't simply stop working. Although I didn't know what to do, I realized that I had to at least stop "losing" days.

Then, one beautiful afternoon, I was having lunch outside, reflecting on my situation and feeling very stuck. Have you ever

felt that way, like you're running in place and you know you want things to change but you don't know what to do about it?

Well, there I was, in that exact state and I didn't know what I could do to change it. The thought of switching to another meaningless job again and trying to recreate my career closer to home was completely overwhelming. I was numb.

But then I had an insight, and a vision popped into my head. It was a picture of me at my kitchen table, having a relaxed and enjoyable breakfast with my wife and daughter. We were all smiling and I was very happy. *That* was the kind of husband and dad I wanted to be—not the one who was tired and cranky each day, kissing my daughter who was sound asleep on the forehead, wondering if she even remembered who I was.

I was determined to create that vision as my reality (was that my sign?), and I decided right then that the very next morning, instead of rushing to the early train as I always did, I would take the later train so that I could have breakfast at home with the two of them. Instead of being at my desk by 8:45 AM as I usually was, I would get there a little bit after nine o'clock. This was not going to be a monumental life change. In fact, it was only a twenty-minute difference in my schedule. But, even so, it would be a nice little start in the right direction.

What happened next was so interesting. As soon as I made that simple little decision, something inside of me shifted. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what, but it literally felt as if I had just taken

control of my life back—even from just that one small decision I made. That little break from routine changed *everything*. One of the most important lessons I realized from making that decision was that nothing would change until I changed it. It was clear that I would never *find* the time to spend with my family in the morning. I had to *create* it!

I immediately called my wife and shared my intentions with her; for the rest of that afternoon, I felt “bulletproof.” Nothing bothered me—in fact, I felt the best I had for a long time. I even enjoyed the rest of the day at work. My job duties were exactly the same, but because I took back the responsibility and accountability for my life, my relationship to what I was doing changed. (Creating a simple intention can be very powerful, regardless of whether it actually occurs or not!) The resentment I felt for my job eased as I realized that I didn’t have to make myself miserable and sabotage my situation! That was essentially what I was doing after all, waiting for someone else to force me to change instead of doing something about it myself. But in declaring that intention, I realized that if I was miserable, I had no one to blame but myself.

That evening, I went to bed with a renewed sense of hope, possibility, and empowerment. I still didn’t have direction, but I had made a start at getting into action. Life was good!

The next morning came and I got up and dressed at my normal time, not quite sure whether I was going to stay true to my intention of having breakfast with my family or not. It’s funny

how powerful habits are, even if you haven't been doing them for very long.

My wife, surprised to see that I was already dressed and ready to go, asked quizzically, "I thought you were taking the later train today?" She asked me whether we were still having breakfast together or if she should drive me to the station so I could make my normal train.

The chatter in my head started. "Do I just take the early train and have breakfast together another day? It's just breakfast. We can do it anytime. Will my daughter even be aware that we're having breakfast? Do I risk going in late? Will I get in trouble at work? I've only been there a few months, can I even do this?" Little did I know, at that moment, I was standing at the crossroads of my life. My answer to that innocent question would literally determine my fate.

I always thought I would see the most important day of my life coming—that I would recognize it as a "crossroads" moment: you know, some kind of sign—a cloud that looked like a wise man, a piece of toast with a holy image burned into one side, a glimmer in a stranger's knowing eye—something. As it turns out, there was nothing that looked any different in my house on that morning as compared with any other day.

Instead, I engaged what was going on *inside my body*, as my logical head battled my intuitive gut. It was as if there were two

completely different people in there with opposing points of view, debating to see who would win.

My head started louder with, "Take your train. It's a great intention but you don't need to do anything today. It's the thought that counts. No big deal. Take your normal train."

On any other day, it would have been easy to simply agree and have my wife take me to my train, letting another good intention slip by.

However, for some reason, that morning was different. Something inside my whole body stirred (another sign?) and stopped my internal chatter dead in its tracks. I looked at her and saw that nothing was more important than keeping my breakfast plans. "No," I said. "The whole point of the morning was to have breakfast together, so let's have breakfast together. I'll catch the next train as planned."

It was a simple declaration, a seemingly innocent decision.

For the next twenty minutes, we had a wonderful time together having breakfast in our small dining room. It was a beautiful morning, and I could not stop looking over at my family and just smiling. I was completely filled with love. My wife and I met on a ninth-grade trip to Quebec, and I knew that she was "the one" the first moment I saw her. Here we were, eighteen years later, and I was living the reality of my dreams. It was one of those moments of pure appreciation for what I had. I loved my

life—not my job or my commute—but life was good! I remember thinking that it was amazing how such a small decision could shift my whole sense of being. In fact, this was the best I had felt in a long time.

After breakfast, my wife dropped me off at the station and I took the train into New York City, smiling the whole way. I'm sure I looked out of place among the cranky faces of the other commuters who were beaten down by the many hours they had spent getting in and out of the city at such a cost. But nothing could bother me that day—I had regained control of my life and I felt nothing but love inside. I felt great!

I made it into New York City, got on the subway, and, instead of being in my office, I was still underground when the first plane slammed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, into my floor, *hitting my desk!* The morning I had chosen to have breakfast with my family was Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Yes—that is how fast it can happen. That is how unexpectedly it can come. We don't have endless tomorrows.

When I exited the subway, I stood across the street from the building, watching, as if it were a movie, not truly believing that on any other day, it would have been me up there. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like on the inside—that view I had known so well, up on the 96th floor.

Since that view will never be known again, I'm going to share a little bit of what it was like working from such a majestic viewpoint.

On windy days, you could feel the building sway slightly and could often look outside of the window and see small planes and helicopters flying well below you. But there was never any fear. The sunsets from up there were some of the most magnificent I'd ever seen—the whole left half of the floor would turn orange and red as the sun beamed through uninterrupted—so much so that most times people would have to lower the shades in order to see their computer screens, many times annoyed and complaining about having to do so. Thinking back now, that seems absurd—shutting out nature's miracle in order to salvage fifteen more minutes of staring into a lifeless screen. But at the time, it seemed all too normal.

Now, that beautiful view is gone forever.

So there I stood, from a less familiar, outside-in perspective, looking up at my world that had a gaping hole where I should have been, not being able to comprehend what had happened and whom it had happened to. My perspective had shifted on September 10th when I had had a vision of having breakfast with my family. On September 11th, that perspective was solidified, never to reverse.<sup>2</sup>

## **RESPONSIBILITY, NOT FATE**

When I share my story with others, whether it's a large audience at a conference or a single person, I am often told that I was meant to be saved, or that God has plans for me, or that I have

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<sup>2</sup> More details about the rest of that day can be found on my website at [www.HumanWakeUpCall.com](http://www.HumanWakeUpCall.com) as it was too much to include here.

an angel on my shoulder looking out for me, or something to that effect.

While I'd like to believe those statements, I can't accept them outright. The people I knew that worked with me were simply not as lucky that day. How can I have been meant to be saved while none of them were given that same offer? I knew them. I heard their life stories—saw their passion and commitment, shared pictures of our beautiful families with each other, spent 70% of my waking hours with them. I'm no more special than they were. They were me, they were you, they were us.

So rather than spending more time looking back and saying, "Why?" "Why did that happen?" "Why me?" and "Why them?" I have to accept that I am here. I am alive. I have a beautiful family, great friends, and a meaningful mission. And I have a responsibility to look *forward* and say, "What now?" "What will I do with this opportunity—with this *gift* that I've been given?"

You have been given that same chance! Today is your gift!

Life is all about balance. Shouldn't you make sure your plans include a mix of joy, satisfaction, and service today? If you tilt too far in any direction, you are missing out on one or more aspects of your life. Tomorrow is not guaranteed. Plan for tomorrow but live today.

## **“FINE” IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD**

Some of you who are reading this book may think your life is fine. That’s okay. But I invite you to take a deeper look at why you’ve chosen to stop at *fine*.

I say *fine* is a four-letter word. We get lured into *fine*’s lair, giving us just enough success, just enough happiness, and just enough comfort to get sleepy. It makes us complacent, tricking us into believing that *fine* is where we need to remain. It starts planting its roots into us, making us attached to the way things are in our fine life. It deprives us of the urgency we once felt to create more for our lives! It skews our vision and thoughts into believing that we must defend *fine* at all costs and that more than *fine* is dangerous, even selfish. We start to worry about what we’re risking if we seek more, aim higher, and play bigger.

Things were fine for John. I met him at a talk I was giving and he challenged this concept, telling me that he was perfectly pleased; his life was fine. I asked him to discuss this further and he shared that he was in the mortgage business, working 10–12 hour days in a job that was paying the bills. He and his wife were okay—no major fights—his days and weeks ran pretty smoothly, and, basically, things were fine. As he shared the details of his life, he was leaning back in his chair, hands crossed behind his head, one ankle resting on the knee of his other leg.

Then I invited John to tell me about something he really loved that he hadn’t done in a long time. At first, he had a hard time

remembering. But as I continued to probe, the lost dreams started surfacing to the top. He shared that he had always loved coaching high school football and did it for years but gave it up when it became harder to earn a living in his industry. Money was tight and he had to focus all of his time on the job. Exploring his love of coaching further, he described how he could spend endless hours designing plays and game plans, being outside working with the kids, and keeping himself and the team fit, strong, and active. By now, he was sitting upright, legs uncrossed, hands moving around energetically. This was a different man in front of me. I yelled "STOP!" and had him become aware of how his energy and presence had shifted, something that was very obvious to everyone in the room except himself. John thought that *fine* was enough—but was it? His very energy as he began to talk about coaching—a long-lost passion—said differently.

When fear and need are leading the way—informing your decisions, your mood, your perspective, and the very nature of your purview—*fine* seems pretty good. *Fine* is safe; it is familiar. It feeds us, it provides shelter, and it gives us a place to catch our breath. There is a very useful place for *fine* within the context of our lives.

But what if we lose everything that has made our lives *fine*? What if we risk *fine* and lose? Can't you hear your parents (or friends or in-laws—insert your own influences here) telling you, "I told you so! You couldn't be happy with what you had? You had to have more? You're selfish. You're only thinking about yourself."

On and on they go, with the limiting perspective that has kept them right where they are, the Mayors of Fineville.

I say that *fine* is not enough. Indeed, it has a very important role to play as we are rebounding from certain experiences. It is a wonderfully welcome plateau and safe haven in which to recharge, refocus, and begin to rebuild. But our vision and our aim need to be for more than fine. Otherwise, we risk the notion of looking back on the decades of *fine* and asking ourselves with the hard-earned wisdom of our years, “What the hell was I so afraid of?”

Ask any eighty or ninety-year-old and they’ll tell you. I have yet to meet one of them that told me they would strive lower if they could do it all again. The recurring theme in those I’ve spoken with has been that they would be less afraid to try more things. They would not be beholden to their assumed limits and boundaries. They would have squeezed more life out of life. That is not *fine*.

As an example, look at school-aged kids. I have two wonderful children and, in hearing the daily drama of their lives, I think back as to how I would do it all again so differently. I would be more confident—real confidence, not merely a façade that I’d live into. I would take more chances, ask more girls out, and be more aggressive at the plate playing baseball.

So what’s the difference between you looking at kids and an older person looking at you? You have this opportunity to be that

person you would have been—now! *Fine* has a place, but it is a holding space, not a destination.

### **TODAY IS YOUR WAKEUP CALL!**

Are you going to spend more time wishing your life was different in some way or hoping to make changes *one day*—after the kids get older, or once things at work settle down, or next month, or next year, or *some day*?

Unfortunately, I have some bad news for you. That day, *some day*, is never going to come. If you keep falling back on the attitude that you can accomplish what you really want someday, you're going to wake up five years from now and look back and wish you started five years earlier (and aren't you already doing that?) I say, look past those excuses. You have a chance to *rewrite your future . . . now!*

You don't need a tragedy *in* your life to wake up to the possibility that exists *for* your life. Did I see my wakeup call coming? Absolutely not! Was I living my life like I had *endless tomorrows*? Yes, I was! I got lucky. But I also got in action and I made that small decision to have breakfast with my family, which ultimately saved my life.

What is it time for you to put out into the world? What are you being a little hesitant about declaring because it would make it *too real* or it might actually put you on the hook for it? Look

around. Really look. What are the signs you have been missing? What is it time for you to see?

Life is a gift and every single day counts. We think and we act like we have endless tomorrows, but we don't. We can't afford to waste our time or energy looking back and asking, "Why?" Instead, we need to look forward and say, "What now? Where do I want to go? What shall I do with this gift I've been given?"

September 10th was my wakeup call—a day that looked like any other day. Today is yours. What are you going to do with it?