**Reflection on Life and Leading**

**By Ed Robinson**

**Book Excerpts**

**Part 1**

**Your Life:**

I have always thought that the whole concept of work life balance is a bit of an illusion. It is difficult for me to imagine someone who has a life that is always completely in balance. Things don’t always work out this way. It’s like the idea of a fifty-fifty partnership or marriage. Rarely do both partners put in the same amount of effort all the time. ...What you hope is that in the end, it all balances out properly.

When it comes to your life, I highly encourage you to be a nonconformist. Carve out your own path! You shouldn’t worry about what other people think. Instead, think about living a meaningful life—whatever that means to you.

The problem with conforming to the “rat race” or any other prescribed system of living is that over time, it usually takes you farther and farther away from the destination you should be targeting. For example, delayed gratification is an interesting concept. Some level of self-sacrifice and patience is certainly required in life, but you better get the timing right and make sure what you think you want is truly what you want and worth the cost. Once the time is already spent, it is irretrievable. I know quite a few individuals who wish they could have do-overs in their life and bemoan the lack of time they have to make things right.

Most people I know want to create better outcomes in their life. They spend hours dreaming, thinking, and talking about what a better situation could look like. They are usually confident in their own abilities and feel they measure up favorably against their peers. It is not unusual to hear them surprised or even offer rationalizations when others they deem less talented or knowledgeable achieve more success. The bottom line is that health, happiness, and success are all the result of daily habits and behaviors. These habits lead to a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

You do not have to settle for a life of quiet desperation and hope that one day things will change. The future is now, and the sooner you start living the life you want (and need) and stop boxing yourself in and conforming to a system that isn’t really working for you, the happier you will be.

I often worry about people who read too many self-help books and/or set lofty expectations for themselves based on what others think or espouse. Many of these books or speakers attempt to create and communicate a common definition of success and/or happiness that resonates with everyone and is applicable in all situations. It’s almost as if who you are doesn’t matter, and that everyone is equally capable in all situations, and that there is a proven recipe for managing all life has in store for you.

Not everyone is meant for greatness, but we can all live a great life. Each of us can find meaning in our existence by accepting who we are and embracing this fact. We can then work on being the best person we can be, genuinely caring about the needs of others, working toward a higher purpose (whatever that may be), appreciating and enjoying the good times, and persevering when times get hard or when we get in our own way

Too often we try to force things or do what we think is right instead of listening to the clues all around us. I believe that for every person there is an ideal path, based on who they are and what they value, that they are free to choose. We are all meant to be happy, and there are forces out there trying to guide us in the right direction. Occasionally our brain tunes into this frequency perfectly and tries to tell us on what we need to focus on, understand, and act. Successful authors, musicians and artists are typically adept at recognizing when these moments occur and go with it.

Quite a few people out there claim to know what will make us happy. I am always a bit suspect of accepting general answers to mostly subjective questions. One person’s happiness can be another person’s burden, obligation, or chore. My contention is that most people don’t spend enough time truly trying to get in touch with themselves as individuals and what honestly makes them happy. In fact, we often feel a bit sheepish or odd when we don’t follow a conventional formula for happiness. There is this overriding sense that it is better to fit in than be different—which is nonsense and a direct pathway to personal malaise and/ or unhappiness.

Far too many people are simply biding their time each day, thinking there is some magic formula that is going to make them happy. As a result, they keep tinkering with their lives by making small and big changes, hoping that one day they get it right. Instead of living in the present and making the best of their circumstances, many folks are either are too nostalgic for the past and “what could have been,” or too caught up with the future and “what should be.”

Life is about quality, not quantity. It has never been about checking off boxes despite what marketing and advertising firms try to tell us. We will all eventually run out of time. It’s what we do with the time we are given that matters. Trying to do too much can only lead to stress, disappointment, and failure.

Life is much more meaningful if you believe you are part of something bigger than you are, and there is a reason for being here beyond survival and personal comfort.

The pathways to true happiness have always been the same throughout the ages:

* Find your passion and spend time cultivating that passion.
* Find your talent and spend time cultivating that talent.
* Strive to build long-term meaningful relationships that are based on mutual emotional support and respect.
* Give back to others who are less fortunate than you are; make a positive difference in someone else’s life.
* Live your life in the present tense and make the most of the here and now.
* Take responsibility for your actions, including learning from your mistakes.
* Practice acceptance and forgiveness for yourself and others as often as possible.
* Avoid negative self-talk.
* Don’t let fear rule your life; instead accept it, embrace it, and move forward anyway

A proven method to increase your levels of personal happiness is volunteering your time for a charitable organization. It is important to recognize that there are others less fortunate than you are. It doesn’t matter where you sit on the social scale. Small acts of human kindness and compassion matter.

Life is not meant to be hard, but sometimes it is. When we can make it easier for ourselves, we should.

To paraphrase the great poet David Whyte, “Don’t allow other people or circumstances to define you in ways that are too small for you to live.”

I have no idea what lies on the other side of this earthly human existence. It is a great unknown. Many people claim to have the answers, but like all great mysteries, we won’t know the truth until we experience it ourselves. All we can do is live our life in a way that reflects our appreciation that the time we have is finite. Think in terms of the legacy and impact you want to leave through your children and other close relationships. Every day is truly a gift, offering a chance to make a positive difference in someone else’s life.

**Dealing With Emotions**

All of life is lived on an emotional continuum. To ignore this fact simply won’t work in the long term. This doesn’t mean you should dwell in the land of extremes or share how you are feeling about everything all the time. What it does mean is that it is okay to show some cracks in the armor.

Life can feel like a roller coaster sometimes. There will be highs, and there will be lows. The important thing is not to overreact or think that everything has to be perfect all the time.

There have been many times where I have sat across from someone and literally watched him or her break down. I learned a long time ago to let the other individual have their moment and not try to downplay or negate their emotion. You do not make someone feel better by making him or her feel embarrassed or disappointed about their feelings.

We all “feel” all the time. It’s just that most of the time we operate on a fairly even keel basis because the stimuli are fairly harmless and don’t require all that much from us. However, each of us will inevitably encounter situations that challenge our existing emotional capacity. Embrace these moments as growth opportunities rather than trying to avoid, suppress, or disavow them.

The reality is that how we feel about something is not wrong. It’s how we act on these feelings that get us in trouble. Being sad is okay. Being stuck in a rut of sadness and preventing any joy from entering your life is not okay. Once any emotion begins to dominate your life and becomes a running theme that affects everything, it is a time to seek professional help.

One of the hardest lessons I have had to learn as an adult is the importance of letting go. When life gets hard, you feel wronged, or things do not go your way, it is easy to harbor resentment and anger. The problem is that unless you are careful, these emotions can well up inside you and become part of your identity. It’s one thing to have a brief period of grief or bitterness; it’s quite another to let it define you.

Anger is a basic human emotion that we all experience on a semiregular basis. What’s important is how you manage it when it happens. Before saying what immediately comes to your mind (or worse), pause, take a deep breath, count to ten, and think before you talk (or e-mail).

It is sad how often fear rules individual lives. You cannot blame people for being afraid. Just about every commercial and news program taps into these fears on a daily basis. When you scare people by tapping into their fears, it is easy to manipulate them.

We cannot control what people say or do, but we can control how we respond to it. It’s important to always remember that no one can make you feel anything; you choose to feel that way.

**Your Mindset**

Most of our barriers to success are self-imposed. We are all capable of accomplishing much more than we think we can in life. There are countless examples of ordinary people achieving extraordinary results through sheer grit, determination, and self-belief to allay our own anxieties and give us hope.

If you truly want success and happiness in your life, you first need to believe in yourself and that you are capable of taking the steps necessary to make this happen and deserving of it when it does.

While I do not subscribe to the theory that we can fully control our thoughts, I do believe we can manage them better. What is required is that we get better separating what we are thinking from our actual reality. Often this requires those around us to help us think and act differently, and we need to ask for this help. It helps to balance the objectivity of others against our own personal subjectivity

It’s amazing how many of us stress over little things. It is almost as if we believe the world exists to make us happy, and every small obstacle becomes a major irritation. We lose our sense of proportion and forget how fortunate we truly are that trivial issues can even occupy our attention. It is important not to forget that a large percentage of the world still struggles with basic life/survival issues… It’s not a good thing when people who are blessed forget how truly blessed they are. This tends to weaken our character, make us less charitable toward others, and allows us to become more self-absorbed.

Whenever I encounter someone who is failing or struggling, inevitably they have convinced themselves that this is their lot in life. They spend a considerable amount of time thinking about worst-case scenarios and everything that is going wrong. Sometimes they even start to believe they deserve their misfortune and/or easily fall into the role of victim. More and more energy is taken up by negative thoughts, and this only deepens their woes and solidifies self-doubt. When this mind-set takes hold for any prolonged period, they actually begin to sabotage their own success and happiness.

There are times when I have had the illusion of control, but then something comes along and shifts my view of reality and/or catches me off guard. I am working hard to grow my adaptive capacity and notice early warning signs so that I can effectively manage whatever comes my way.

The only way we evolve is through learning and experience. Personal growth happens with time as we stretch our perspectives and challenge our individual conceits and preconceptions.

Rather than rushing to judgment, try to step back and put yourself in the other person’s shoes. People have many reasons why they do or don’t do certain things. What from the outside looks one way, may look differently coming from an inside perspective.

The fact is that it is easier to be an optimist. There are still difficult times and challenges, but they rarely seem insurmountable. Positive energy is hard to keep down forever. While failure may be inevitable, it doesn’t have to define you or be your final result. I realize that not everyone is hardwired to be an optimist, but they can still choose to be more optimistic in their lives and work. To a large degree, attitude and temperament are a choice.

**Your Work**

…I have come to believe that how you feel about Monday morning is a good indicator of how you feel about your job or career. If what you are doing makes you so unhappy that you dread Monday mornings, either change how you think about it or choose to do something else. Life is too short for habitual Sunday-night misery.

If you are regularly not enjoying your work or consistently feel like you are underperforming, then find something else to do. We all have the potential to be great at something. Life is too short for you to feel like you are not tapping into your true talents or performing at a level that is beneath your best.

I am not naive enough to think that everyone will like his or her work all the time. After all, for many of us it is a job, not a vocation. However, there should be some elements about what you do and the people you work with that should make you feel self-satisfied. It’s not critical that you always look forward to going to work, but you shouldn’t dread it. Moreover, once there, you should certainly make the most of it; attitude does matter.

If you only ever do your job to get a paycheck, you will inevitably lose interest, get frustrated, and achieve less than stellar results. But if you show up to work every day with a purpose, feel you are well suited to what you are doing, and see yourself making a positive difference, you will be amazed by what’s possible.

Here are some simple tips about how to set a positive and proactive tone for each workweek:

* Set the alarm clock a few minutes early and allow yourself more time to wake up and ease into the morning. Don’t start the day by rushing out the door.
* Take some deep breaths and stretch for a few minutes when you first get out of bed.
* Have a hearty and healthy breakfast. Remember, food is fuel.
* Listen to upbeat positive music and avoid TV or radio shows that have a tendency to bum you out or make you angry.
* If you are fortunate to live with family or other loved ones, give everyone a big hug before leaving and sincerely wish them a good day.
* Factor traffic into your travel time and give yourself a time buffer.
* While driving to work, think about all the good things that happened the prior week.
* Try and get to work a bit earlier and have a cup of coffee, tea, or water to help you get settled and ready for the day.
* Spend a few minutes thinking through your top five priorities for the day and any required action items.
* Tackle your most challenging tasks as early as possible to put them behind you, and don’t procrastinate.
* Take a few minutes several times a day to exchange pleasantries with coworkers and give them positive energy.
* Avoid or redirect coworkers who are complainers and negative influences.
* Look for opportunities to laugh and to make others laugh.
* Make sure you take your full lunch break, and if possible, go outside and get some fresh air.
* If you are having difficulties or conflicts with a coworker, try and hash it out in a mature fashion rather than let it escalate or linger. Be the “someone” that has to take the initiative to resolve the situation.
* Before leaving work, take a few minutes to debrief on how the day went.
* Try not to plan or schedule anything right after work that forces you to rush out the door at the end of the day.
* If possible, exercise for a few minutes before dinner.
* Do your best to eat a healthy and well-balanced dinner

Don’t become caught in a self-imposed trap. If you box yourself in with financial or logistical constraints, you have no one to blame but yourself. Try to limit these barriers to the best of your ability—be flexible. Look for ways to cultivate rather than compartmentalize your passions and talents. The world is still full of opportunity... If you choose to, you can reinvent yourself and how you feel about your work. Happy people make proactive choices that create the conditions to make them feel this way.

**Your Strengths**

We all have natural talents, abilities, interests, and character traits that make us unique individuals. Flow is achieved when we tap into those aspects of ourselves that make us special. Self-awareness and honest reflection can make a big difference in our state of being. If you can build the wisdom and courage not to conform to societal pressures, but instead choose to chart a course based on your own uniqueness and what makes you feel purposeful, energized, and happy, the river of life will “flow” more easily.

Many of us spend too much effort trying to be what we are not instead of focusing on what makes us truly special…When we are doing what comes naturally and playing to our strengths, life tends to go a bit smoother.

Each one of us is a miracle of nature full of many gifts and talents. Pay attention to what makes you feel good about yourself, to what fits your natural abilities, to what prompts you to be more charitable toward others, and to what leads you toward healthier lifestyle behaviors.

People will forgive many things if they believe your intentions are pure. No one expects perfection, but do want compassion, competence, consistency, confidence, resilience, and determination. We all understand that things may get off track at times, but will you have what it takes to get them back on track? Will you do what is required or what is expedient? Are you focused on the greater good or your own advancement? When times get tough, will you have their back or run for cover?

People can be too much of something. For example, you can be too empathetic and spend all your time worrying about others. You can be too verbal and not spend enough time listening. Being calm is good, but being too calm can get boring and limit your emotional connection with others. You can be too confident and come off as arrogant. Too much of anything is never a good thing.

The only way to be great at something is truly caring about the outcome. The only way to care truly about the outcome is to make sure you are focused on something that genuinely connects with who you are as person and what you value as a human being. To lead others there, you need a compelling reason for why you are doing what you are doing. No one else can create this dynamic for you. All they can do is increase your style points. You must feel it within the depths of your character and be true to your own voice.

**Your Decisions**

There are many things in life beyond our realm of control, but you get to decide how you behave. You can take the high road or low road. You follow the belief that two wrongs do not make a right, or you can escalate the pattern of bad behavior. You can continually allow people to stretch your moral/ethical boundaries, or you can stick to them. You can play the victim or move on. You can act before your think or think before you act. I listened to a speaker utter the phrase many years ago that “we are what we tolerate,” and it resonated with me right away. We are also what we continually do and who we do it with.

…Just make sure you are careful about who you study and what you can truly learn from them. Diversity of input is much more important than embracing like-minded views or validating what you believe you already know. We can often learn as much about what not to do from others as we can learn what we should emulate. No one has it all figured out, and anyone who thinks they do is foolhardy.

We all need something that grounds us and guides us to make the right decisions. If there are no rules or expectations of moral behavior, then anything goes. When our family or peers look the other way, ignore, or even condone bad behavior, then we are adrift in a sea that leads to nowhere.

There are many reasons why things do or do not happen. At some point, we all are faced with difficult choices with no clear answers. Very often we make these decisions under some level of duress and/or with imperfect information or unclear guidelines. Life does just happen sometimes and piloting it can be as much of an art as a science.

Human beings are imperfect. We make mistakes. However, not all flawed behavior is equal. When confronted with stressful or less than ideal circumstances, the two questions we should regularly ask ourselves are the following: 1) Why are we doing what we are doing? and 2) What are the implications of our actions? You learn a lot about yourself when you ask “why” questions. If your motivations aren’t constructive, you need to step back and reflect more carefully on what you are doing.

Ideologues have always concerned me because they believe too much in what they say, rarely listen to other perspectives, and demonize or denigrate their opposition. They spend most of their time proselytizing or defending what they think, rather than challenging and growing their understanding of what they believe they already know.

It is okay not to have all the answers. It is not okay to create shortcuts or simple explanations where none exists. Sadly, wisdom often requires the gaining of humility through chastening experiences.

You should ask seven key questions before making any critical decisions:

1. What is your risk profile? How much risk/uncertainty can you comfortably take without losing too much sleep?

2. What impact does stress have on you, and how much can you reasonably manage without adverse physical consequences?

3. What truly motivates you? What will get you up in the morning and keep you going even when it is not always easy to do so?

4. What are your nonnegotiable core values? Where do you draw the lines on personal and

professional behavior?

5. Where do you add the most value in any given situation? What are your particular strengths?

6. What is your preferred work style? In what environments/situations do you work best, and

when do you struggle?

7. What is the personal legacy you want to leave, and how will this decision/action advance this agenda?

**What Are Your Doing for You?**

In the hustle and bustle of everyday living, it’s important to have things you do just for yourself. We all need outlets for our mental, physical, and emotional stress and catalysts for our personal well-being.

Seeking out opportunities for fun is a conscious choice. Rarely does it just happen. While we all have moments of spontaneous enjoyment, this is the exception, not the rule. I encourage you to make having fun fundamental part of your daily, weekly, and monthly activities. You don’t have to be a great planner to get more fun into your life; you just have to continually seek ways to incorporate it.

Everyone needs downtime. Even extreme extroverts must recharge occasionally. It is too much work to be “on” all the time. It is also not healthy to be constantly overstimulated. There is no shortage of options on how you spend your time, especially if you have a job with any real responsibility and/or have children. However, I encourage you to force yourself to find some quiet time with minimal distractions to give your brain a rest and allow it to focus on fewer things.

**Your Actions**

If you aspire to do something better and consistently work toward that objective especially when it’s difficult, good things tend to happen.

It’s often not the smartest or naturally gifted individuals who excel, but those who actually do what they say they are going to do when they say they are going to do it.

“Actions have always spoken louder than words.” “The little things matter.” “There are no shortcuts to success.” We have all heard these sayings, but how well have we digested the information?

You are either getting better and moving forward or stagnating and falling behind.

In my experience, truly successful people are more focused on what they are actually doing instead of being caught up talking about it. They understand that talk is cheap. It takes genuine courage to act when the task is difficult, risk is comparatively high, and few are capable of doing it.

We all must accept that there are many people who will be more intelligent, better looking, more talented, have more advantages, and be more capable than us, but only you as an individual decide if they will outwork you. I have found that when you are tired and/or feeling lazy and could easily talk yourself out of doing something, but you do it anyway, that is what separates you from the pack. Success in life and business requires consistent, focused, sustained effort.

I am guessing that in many cases when people speak out too loudly about their own capabilities or accomplishments, they are, in reality, somewhat insecure. In all walks of life, have to tell your peers what they already know, especially if your actions are transparent for all to see. True self confidence stems from a history and pattern of hard work, diligence, and accomplishment, not from self-promoting rhetoric or dreaming.

The mistake we tend to make is speed things up when we should be slowing them down. Very few actions we could take wouldn’t benefit from some thought before proceeding. Busy people tend to make themselves too busy if they are not careful. Having a sense of accomplishment is a good thing. Getting a lot done can be invigorating but feeling overwhelmed for any prolonged period is not healthy. If the amount of work you are doing or responsibilities you have assumed are stressing you out, then please step back and reflect on how to approach your activities and obligations differently.

I find that people doing things they really don’t want to be doing only makes them cranky and more stressed. Oddly enough, they often will recruit others to join them in their misery. I am always a bit suspicious when someone tries too hard to convert me to their latest fad, behavior, or point of view…I am not saying that everything should feel good. Life does, and should, involve a certain amount of stress, hard work, and sacrifice. However, when what you are doing is having the opposite of the intended effect, then something is wrong.

It’s easy to get caught up in the frenzy of being constantly busy, jumping from one thing to the next or juggling too many responsibilities at the same time. At some point the action starts to define you, and not in good ways (e.g., missed assignments, silly mistakes, frayed relationships, ill health, etc.). You become an activity junkie energized by just trying to keep up. This is no way to live.

There are way too many things competing for our time as adults. It is easy to get lost in the fog of responsibility and fall behind. If we are honest with ourselves, we end up using our time very inefficiently and often make it up as we go along. As a result, there is usually some level of imbalance in our life as we prioritize what is most pressing or convenient.

Everyone should engage in some level of self-reflection on a consistent basis. There are many ways to do this: prayer, meditation, journaling, confiding in close friends, reading books that inspire you, finding quiet moments in the day to think about things, etc.

It’s impossible to go through life and have every person you interact with like you. Some connections aren’t meant to be. Don’t fret or worry too much when you don’t connect with another person. All you can do is be your authentic self and allow others the same space.

We often rationalize our behavior through the lens of personal psychology and situational ethics. Spin it however you want, but actions will always have consequences, and wrong actions eventually lead to adverse outcomes. A win-lose mind-set is rarely advisable in business or your personal life. There is such a thing as right and wrong.

The more success you have, the more temptations will come your way. It is easy to start to think of yourself as different or special when you outperform your peers. You may begin to rationalize that the basic rules don’t apply to you, but they do.

Not everything is black-and-white. Sometimes there are mitigating circumstances and even good reasons why people act the way they do. Not everything always fits into a neat little box of appropriate behavior. However, there are some things that are usually unacceptable despite the circumstances. There is a reason why all religions are typically based on a foundation of common morality and expected ethical behavior.

I received some great advice a long time ago. Never lie in bed tossing and turning on those nights you can’t sleep. Get up and do something. If there is something pressing on your mind, put your thoughts down on paper. Brainstorm possible solutions. Think through different scenarios and what you could do should they happen. I keep an extra journal near my bed for this very purpose... If there is nothing pressing on your mind, then get out of bed, find a comfortable chair, and read a book or magazine that isn’t too deep or thought provoking. Let your mind wander a bit and escape somewhere else. You will find it won’t take too long before you’re ready to try and fall asleep again.

**Leadership Behaviors**

A leader’s job is to first provide direction and foster an environment that leads to success. You are constantly on stage, and your people are watching your every move. They look to you to decipher what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. You need to instill and codify core belief and principles throughout the organization to ensure everyone is on the same page in terms of the boundaries within which people are expected to operate. This includes whom you promote, reward, and publicly acknowledge.

If you are in a leadership role, it’s important to be known as someone who has control of his/her emotions. People expect you to have a stable and unflappable persona. At minimum, you are supposed to be the mature adult in the room.

People want to follow leaders they trust and whom they believe will move things in a positive direction. Approximately 80 percent of the population naturally just wants to follow someone else’s lead. They want to identify with that person’s values and feel comfortable that they are driven by the right motivations.

Here are a few basic rules of engagement that every leader should consider:

* All people should be treated with dignity and respect.
* You shouldn’t take advantage of other people’s personal vulnerabilities. Manipulation is a slippery ethical slope.
* It is not okay to steal and unfairly take what does not belong to you.
* Cheating is never a virtue, even if you win.
* Honesty shouldn’t be optional. Dishonesty only ever breeds further dishonesty.
* Your products/services should be safe to use.
* You have the obligation to provide a safe and secure work environment for your employees.
* You shouldn’t use your position of authority to frighten or push people into situations they find morally questionable.
* Once someone takes you into their personal confidence, you should respect this fact and be worthy of their trust, not use it against them.
* Professional and personal commitments actually mean something. When you commit to
* another party, you should do your best to honor the agreement.
* Two wrongs will never make a right. Never act out of spite.

.