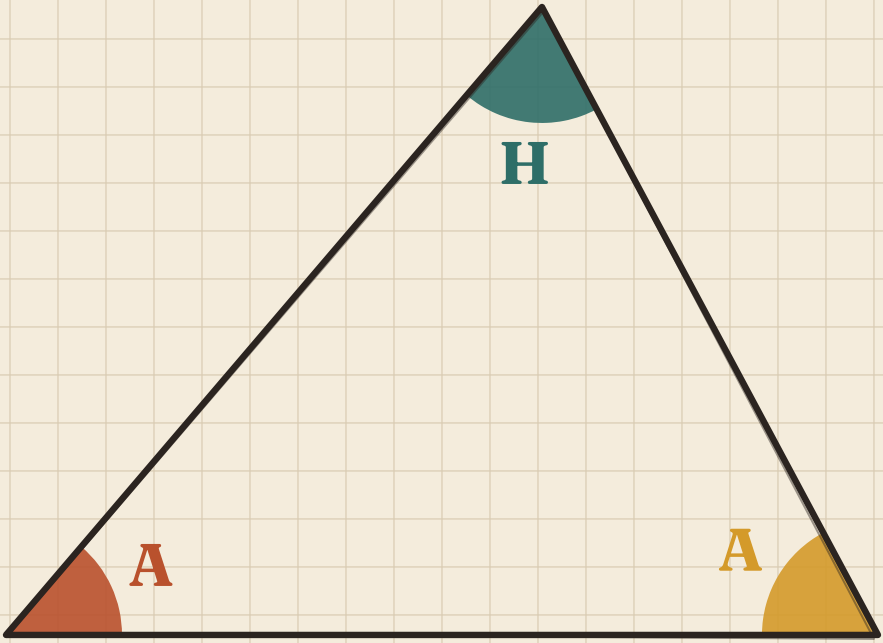
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Adds Up *to* 180°



A + A + H = 180°

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Achievement, Appreciation, Hope — and the Big Loud AAH That Holds Them Together

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Achievement, Appreciation, Hope — and the Big Loud AAH That Holds Them Together

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“In any triangle, the three interior angles are equal to two right angles.”

— Euclid, *Elements*, Book I, Proposition 32 (about 300 BC)

Two right angles is 180 degrees. Every triangle. Every time. Big ones, skinny ones, the ones drawn badly on a napkin. It always adds up.

— me, about 2,300 years later, also on a napkin

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A Note Before You Start

The people you'll meet in this book — Marcus, Priya, Walt, Lena and Theo — are imaginary. They're built out of pieces of people I've known, people I've been, and people you probably are. Their stories are made up. The research I mention isn't; it's listed and checked at the back.

This book is not therapy and it's not medical advice. It's a way of looking at things. If you are in a dark place right now, please talk to a real human today. In the US you can call or text **988**. Elsewhere, your local emergency number or a crisis line will get you to someone. Reading a book is a fine thing to do. It is not a replacement for a hand on your shoulder.

BEFORE WE START

Why 180

Here's a thing they taught you in school that you probably forgot the minute the bell rang: every triangle, no matter what it looks like, has three angles inside it that add up to exactly 180 degrees. A tall skinny triangle? 180. A short fat one? 180. One you drew with your eyes closed on the back of a parking ticket? Still 180. Euclid wrote it down around 300 BC and nobody has managed to argue him out of it since — at least not on a flat piece of paper.

That's the whole idea of this book. A happy life is a triangle, and it has three angles: **Achievement, Appreciation and Hope.** They always add up to the same total. What changes is how that total is shared. You can't have a triangle with two angles. It's not a triangle anymore. It's two lines that never met, pointing off in different directions like a couple who stopped talking at a wedding.

And here's the part I love: say the first letters out loud. Achievement, Appreciation, Hope. **A. A. H.** AAH. The sound you make when you get into a hot bath. The sound you make when you finally sit down after a long shift. The sound you make when you empty your lungs all the way out, so loud and long that the anxiety that's been hovering over your head like a portal in a bad sci-fi movie just — closes. Shuts. Gone back to whatever dimension it crawled out of.

That's not just a cute acronym. I'll show you in Chapter 1 that a long, deliberate exhale is one of the fastest ways we know to calm the body down. So the name of the method is also the method. AAH is the thing, and AAH is the sound of doing the thing.

Here's what each angle means, short version:

Achievement is not winning. It's finding who you want to serve. Not who likes you — who *you* like. People you want to help even if they don't like you back yet. The trick is to serve despite being disliked, not to be liked, and to keep going with an unrelenting, almost stubborn belief that your people are out there and you'll find them by doing the work.

Appreciation is not people appreciating you. It's you appreciating — gratitude. Saying thank you: to yourself, to other people, to God or the universe or, honestly, even to an AI these days. Thanksgiving every day. The first few times are awkward, like a family dinner where your uncle brings up that thing from 2009. But it gets better each time, because things get aired out. And you can't just stand up and leave the table. You live inside yourself. You have to deal with yourself.

Hope is the fact, and the strong belief, that you can keep doing what you're doing. It's almost religious — and the research says religious people tend to live longer, partly, it seems, because they believe things will work out. Whether you're a believer, an agnostic or an atheist, it's silly to shut the door on the part of your mind that is literally designed to help with your anxieties. Treat yourself like you're five years old and need a guardian. Because raising yourself is something everyone has to do, regardless of who your parents were.

That's it. That's the triangle. The rest of the book is how to draw it, how to fix it when it goes lopsided, and five people who learned to do it — one folding chair at a time.

Take a breath. A big one. We'll start with that.

PART ONE

The Shape of Things

CHAPTER 1

AAH

Anxiety is a portal. It opens somewhere just above your head, usually at 3:14 in the morning, and things start crawling out of it: the email you didn't answer, the thing you said at the party in 2017, the weird noise the car made, the question of whether you've wasted your entire life. The portal doesn't close by itself. It feeds on shallow breathing. Short, sharp, top-of-the-chest sips of air are basically you holding the door open for it. So the first thing in this book isn't a philosophy. It's a sound. You take the biggest breath you can, and then you let it all out — slowly, loudly, all the way to the bottom — **AAAAAAHHHHHH** — like you're emptying your lungs into the abyss. You keep going past the point where it feels finished. And for a second, the portal flickers. Do it again and it shrinks. Do it a few more times and it shuts. Not forever. But long enough for you to think.

I want to be clear that this isn't mysticism. It's plumbing.

Your body has two big modes, and you can think of them as a gas pedal and a brake. Breathing in leans slightly on the gas — your heart rate nudges up a little on every inhale. Breathing out leans on the brake — your heart rate nudges back down on every exhale. Most of the time this happens without you noticing, like the little adjustments you make to a steering wheel on a straight road. But when you're anxious, you breathe in, and in, and in, and barely out. You are, quite literally, flooring it while parked.

So the fix is to lean on the brake. Make the exhale long. Longer than the inhale. Much longer.

In 2023, a team of researchers at Stanford published a study in *Cell Reports Medicine* where they had people do five minutes a day of different breathing exercises for a month, and compared them to people doing five minutes of mindfulness meditation. One of the exercises was called cyclic sighing — two inhales through the nose, then a long, slow exhale through the mouth. The exhale was the point. The cyclic sighing group had the biggest improvement in mood of the lot, and a bigger drop in their resting breathing rate than the meditation group. Five minutes. No app subscription. No mountain retreat.

That's the AAH. It's the cyclic sigh with the volume turned up.

Here's how I do it:

1. **Breathe in through your nose** until you're full.
2. **Sneak in one more little sip** on top, like topping off a gas tank that's already clicked.
3. **Open your mouth and let it go: AAAAHHH.** Make the sound. Let it be loud if you can, a whisper-AAH if you're on a bus. Make it last at least twice as long as the breath in.
4. **Keep going past empty.** That last bit, where you squeeze the final air out like the end of a toothpaste tube — that's where the good stuff is.
5. **Do it five times.** Or for five minutes if you've got them.

Why the sound? Partly because a sound slows the exhale down — you can't hum fast. Partly because it's a little ridiculous, and ridiculous is the natural enemy of dread. It's very hard to keep believing your life is over while you're making the noise a cartoon walrus makes sinking into a hot tub.

And partly because of the name. **A**chievement. **A**ppreciation. **H**ope. Every time you do the breath, you're saying the method out loud. It's a reminder disguised as a sigh. Your anxiety thinks you're just exhaling. You're actually reading it the table of contents.

Let me introduce you to the first person who tried it in front of me.

Priya was twenty-seven and worked as a software tester, which meant she spent her days trying to break things on purpose so customers wouldn't break them by accident. She was very good at it. She could look at a screen for eight seconds and tell you the three ways it was going to fail. The problem was, she couldn't turn it off. At night her brain kept testing. *What if I get laid off. What if Mom's cough is something. What if I'm the kind of person who never gets married and nobody notices for two weeks when I'm dead.* She called it "running regression tests on my life," and she ran them every night between three and four in the morning.

The first time she did the AAH in front of the group, she did it like a person who has been told to dance at a wedding: elbows tight, half the volume, done in two seconds. "I feel stupid," she said.

"Great," I said. "Stupid is the opposite of scared. Do it again, longer."

She did it again. A bit longer. Then a third time, and on the third one something happened that I've seen happen to a lot of people — the exhale kept going past where she expected it to stop, and her shoulders dropped about an inch and a half, like someone had cut the strings on a puppet. She looked surprised. "Oh," she said. "That's where my shoulders are supposed to be."

That night she set an alarm-that-wasn't-an-alarm: a sticky note on her phone that just said AAH. When she woke up at 3:14 with the regression tests running, she didn't argue with them. You can't argue with a 3 a.m. thought — it's like arguing with a toddler who's

already decided the floor is lava. She just did five AAHs, quietly, into the pillow so she wouldn't wake the neighbors through the thin wall.

"It didn't fix anything," she told us the next week. "My mom still has the cough. Work's still weird. But I fell back asleep. First time in, like, a month."

That's the deal. The AAH doesn't fix your life. It closes the portal long enough for you to *start* fixing your life. It's the fire extinguisher, not the renovation. But you can't renovate a kitchen that's on fire.

Everything else in this book needs a calm-enough body to work. You can't figure out who you want to serve while you're hyperventilating. You can't feel grateful while your heart is going like a washing machine with a brick in it. You can't hope while your nervous system is convinced a tiger is in the room. So we start here, with the sound.

Try this: Right now, before you turn the page. Big breath in through the nose. Top it off. Then let it out — AAAAHHHH — longer than feels normal. Five times. Notice where your shoulders end up. That's where they live.

CHAPTER 2

Three Angles, One Triangle

A triangle has a budget. It's 180 degrees, and it never gets a raise. If one angle gets greedy and grows, the other two have to shrink to pay for it. That's the first thing to understand about a happy life: it isn't about maxing out one thing. It's about the three things sharing the space so the shape stays a shape. If Achievement swells up to 170 degrees, Appreciation and Hope are fighting over the last ten, and what you get is a long, sharp sliver of a triangle — impressive from one angle, stabby from all the others. Push it all the way and one angle hits 180 and the other two hit zero, and guess what? It's not a triangle anymore. It's a flat line. Busy, maybe. Going somewhere, maybe. But it doesn't hold anything.

I think about this every time I meet somebody who's "crushing it." You know the type. Up at 4:45, cold plunge, three businesses, a podcast about the three businesses. Achievement is at 165 degrees. And when you ask them what they're grateful for, they look at you like you asked what their favorite flavor of tax return is. And when you ask whether they think it's going to be okay, they say "it has to be," which isn't hope. That's a threat.

Then there's the opposite. Someone who's got Appreciation at 160. Grateful for everything. Grateful for the rain, grateful for the traffic, grateful for the boss who screams at them because "at least I have a job." That's not gratitude anymore. That's a hostage situation with good manners. No Achievement — they're not

serving anyone they chose; they're serving whoever got there first. No Hope — they don't believe anything better is coming, so they've decided to be thankful for the worst of it.

And then there's the dreamer. Hope at 170. Everything's going to work out, the universe has a plan, the crypto's going to come back. But they never build anything (no Achievement) and they never stop to notice what they already have (no Appreciation), so all the hope just floats there, like a helium balloon that's let go of the kid.

Each angle needs the other two to keep it honest.

Achievement without Appreciation turns into a treadmill. You win, and you don't feel it, so you need to win again, faster.

Appreciation without Hope turns into settling. You're grateful for the cage because you don't believe in the door.

Hope without Achievement turns into daydreaming. You believe the door is there. You just never walk to it.

But all three, together, make a shape that can hold weight. Ask any engineer why bridges and roof trusses are full of triangles. It's because a triangle is the one shape that won't wobble. Push on the corner of a square made of four sticks and it'll fold flat into a diamond. Push on a triangle and it just… stays. Three sides, three angles, locked. That's what you want your life to be. Not the biggest. Not the tallest. The one that doesn't fold when somebody leans on it.

Here's a fun aside for the nerds. On a flat surface the angles always add up to exactly 180. But if you draw a giant triangle on a curved surface — like the Earth itself, from the North Pole down to two points on the equator — the angles add up to *more* than 180. Life on a curved planet gives you bonus degrees. I take this as proof that some days you get a little extra, out of nowhere, just because the

ground under you curves the right way. Don't count on it. But notice it when it happens.

The other thing about a triangle: every angle touches the other two. There's no corner off by itself. Achievement leans on Appreciation (you can't keep serving people if you never notice the good it does). Appreciation leans on Hope (it's easier to be thankful for today if you believe in tomorrow). Hope leans on Achievement (it's easier to believe in tomorrow when you've got something you're building today). Pull one out, and the other two just lie down on the floor.

So when something feels off — and it will, it always does — don't ask "what's wrong with me?" Ask a smaller, more useful question: *which angle is too big, and which one is starving*? Most of the time you'll know in about two seconds. You can feel it. It's like knowing which leg of the table is short — you don't need a level, you just need to put your elbow on it.

Try this: Draw a triangle on a napkin. Label the corners A, A, H. Now, without thinking too hard, write a number in each corner for how big that angle feels in your life right now. Make them add up to 180. Look at the shape. Is it a nice solid one, or a long sharp sliver? That's your starting point. Nobody's grading. It's a napkin.

CHAPTER 3

Room B

Every Tuesday night, in the basement of a public library, there's a room with a carpet the color of old oatmeal, twelve folding chairs, a whiteboard that has never been fully erased since 2014, and a coffee urn that makes everything taste faintly like pennies. That's Room B. That's where I tried this out on real people for the first time. I'd put a flyer on the corkboard upstairs next to the guitar lessons and the lost cat: *ADDS UP TO 180 — a free Tuesday thing about finding your path. No yoga. No selling. Bad coffee.* Five people showed up the first night, and four of them came back. The fifth came back three weeks later, which counts. This chapter is them. You'll see them all through the book.

Marcus was thirty-four and worked the line at a steakhouse downtown — the kind of place with dark wood and a bread basket that costs eleven dollars. He'd been cooking for fourteen years and could do a hundred covers on a Saturday without breaking a sweat. What he wanted to cook, though, was his grandmother's food — doubles, the Trinidadian street breakfast, curried chickpeas folded into fried flatbread, with pepper sauce that'll make you see through time. The head chef had tasted it once at a staff meal and said, "Nobody's paying for that." Marcus had been carrying that sentence around for three years like a stone in his shoe. He sat in the chair closest to the door. Chefs always do. In case of fire.

Priya, you've met. Software tester, twenty-seven, 3 a.m. regression tests. She brought her own coffee in a thermos because she had

looked up the library's coffee urn online. I respected that.

Walt was sixty-eight, a retired machinist with forearms like bridge cables and a hearing aid he kept turning down when he disagreed with someone. His wife, June, had died eighteen months before. He'd come because his daughter had printed out the flyer and stuck it to his fridge with a magnet shaped like Wisconsin and said, "Dad. Go." He told us on the first night, before anyone asked, "I should say I don't do God. I'm not here for church." I said, "Great. Neither am I. Want a coffee?" He looked at the urn. "No," he said, and I knew we'd be friends.

Lena was forty-five and sold houses. Divorced three years, two teenagers, Maya and Jordan, sixteen and fourteen. She was the most likable person in the room within ninety seconds — she remembered everyone's name, she laughed at the right places, she offered to bring better coffee next week. It took me about four Tuesdays to realize that being likable was the job she was killing herself doing. She said yes to every client, every committee, every ex-husband reschedule. She said, "I just want everyone to be happy," and she meant it, and it was eating her alive.

Theo was the one who came three weeks late. Nineteen. He'd dropped out of community college after one semester and was working at a bike shop, and he had a YouTube channel where he fixed old bicycles — rusted, garage-sale, left-out-in-the-rain bikes — and brought them back to life. He had eleven subscribers, one of whom was his mom and one of whom, he was fairly sure, was a bot. The top comment on his most-watched video, which had 340 views, said: *this is trash bro just buy a new bike*. He'd come in because he'd been walking past the library and saw the flyer and the phrase "finding your path" made him angry, and he wanted to see who would say something like that out loud. He sat in the back with his hood up. By the second week the hood was down.

So that was Room B. A chef who couldn't cook his own food. A tester who couldn't stop testing. A widower who didn't do God. A people-pleaser running on fumes. A kid with eleven subscribers and a hood.

None of them were broken. I want to say that clearly. None of them needed fixing in the way people mean when they say "fixing." Every one of them had a triangle. It was just lopsided, or flattened, or missing a corner.

Marcus had Achievement in his hands — a real skill, real food, real people he wanted to feed — but no Hope. He'd stopped believing anyone would want it.

Priya had a ton of Achievement, a decent amount of Hope buried somewhere, and almost zero Appreciation. Her brain was trained to find what was broken. Nobody had ever trained it to find what was working.

Walt had Appreciation, quietly — he'd tell you about June's tomato plants and his voice would go soft — but his Hope had been buried with her, and his Achievement had retired the same day he did.

Lena had the opposite problem from everyone else. Her Achievement angle was huge, but it was pointed at the wrong target. She was serving to be liked. That's not Achievement. That's a tip jar.

And Theo had Hope like a pilot light — small, blue, stubborn — but Achievement that kept getting kicked by strangers on the internet, and Appreciation that he'd have rolled his eyes at if you'd said the word.

On that first night I drew a triangle on the whiteboard, in one of the clean bits, and wrote A, A, H at the corners. Then I asked everybody to do the breath. Five AAHs.

It was awful. Walt did it like he was blowing out a pilot light. Lena did it beautifully, of course, the best AAH in the room, while checking if everyone else was okay. Marcus did it through his nose, which isn't the instructions but I let it go. Priya did it at half volume. And then the coffee urn, which had been quietly heating, chose that exact moment to let out its own long hissing exhale, *ssshhhhhhhhhhh*, and everybody burst out laughing.

"Even the urn's anxious," said Walt.

That's when I knew the room was going to work. Because laughing is just a messy, joyful version of an exhale. Everybody in that room had just emptied their lungs together without meaning to.

Try this: Think about who would be in your own Room B. Not people who'd fix you — people who are lopsided in the same ways you are. You don't have to call them yet. Just notice that they exist. The first step to finding your people is admitting there are people.

PART TWO

Achievement — Who You Serve

CHAPTER 4

Achievement Is an Address, Not a Trophy

We've been sold a version of achievement that's basically a trophy shelf. Diplomas, promotions, the car, the follower count, the house with the island in the kitchen that nobody actually eats at. And the trouble with a trophy is that it's about you — you got it, you hold it, you dust it. But nobody ever got happy from dusting. Real achievement, the kind that fills the angle, isn't a thing you own. It's an address. It's a specific somewhere you show up to, and specific someones you show up for. It's not "I became a successful chef." It's "I feed night-shift nurses at two in the morning when nothing else is open." The first one is a trophy. The second one is a place you can go back to every day. You can lose a trophy. You can't lose an address. You can only stop going there.

When I say this, people usually nod politely and then ask, "Okay but what about my goals?" As if goals and people were different things. They're not. Every goal you have, if you follow it far enough, ends at a person.

You want to get promoted? Fine. Follow it. Why? More money. Why? To take care of your kids, or to stop feeling like the dumbest person in the meeting, or to finally get your dad to say "good job." Every one of those ends with a human face. Even the goals that seem selfish — the sports car, the six-pack — end at a person.

Usually it's the one in the mirror, or the one you want to look at you differently at the reunion.

So skip the middleman. Start with the face.

Who do you want to serve? That's the Achievement question. Not "what do you want to be," which is what they asked you when you were six and you said "dinosaur." Who do you want to show up for. Who, when you picture making their day a little better, makes your chest feel warm instead of tight.

I asked this in Room B on the second Tuesday and got the silence you'd expect. Then Marcus, who had been arms-crossed by the door, said, "Is it allowed to be people you don't know yet?"

"It's best if it's people you don't know yet," I said.

"Night people," he said. Then he looked embarrassed and explained. When he was a teenager, his grandmother worked nights as a cleaner at a hospital. She'd come home at six in the morning and make doubles for the whole house before she slept. And she always made a few extra, wrapped them in wax paper, and the next night she'd bring them to the security guard and the two nurses who worked the ER desk. "They used to say she was the only person who ever brought them breakfast," Marcus said. "Because when you work nights, breakfast is at two in the morning, and nothing's open but the vending machine."

He stopped. The room was quiet.

"So that's your address," I said.

"That's not a career," he said. "That's a — I don't know. A favor."

"Every career is a favor that somebody figured out how to keep doing," I said.

He didn't believe me that night. That's fine. He wrote "night people" on the back of his hand with a pen, which I have since learned is what line cooks do with information they think is important, because you can't lose your hand.

Here's why the address matters so much more than the trophy.

A trophy is binary. You got it or you didn't. If you didn't, you failed, and if you did, you have to go get the next one. It's a vending machine — you put your life in, and either a snack comes out or it gets stuck in the coil and you're left shaking the glass.

An address is continuous. You can show up a little, or a lot. You can be bad at it on Monday and better on Friday. Nobody hands you anything at the end, but the doing is the thing. Every day you show up to your address, the angle fills a little. There's no "I achieved it." There's only "I'm achieving it," present tense, every time.

And here's the sneaky part: when you choose your address, the trophies sometimes show up anyway. But they show up as side effects. Like how you don't go to the gym to get a nap, but you sleep better anyway.

Lena, sitting next to Marcus, said, "What if your address is everybody?"

"Then you're a post office," said Walt, who had been quiet. Everybody laughed, including Lena, but I saw her face do something complicated. Hold onto that. We'll come back to Lena.

Try this: Finish this sentence ten times, fast, without editing: "*I'd love to make life a little better for* ____." Don't write job titles. Write people. "Kids who hate math." "New moms at 4 a.m." "Old guys who don't know how to use their phones." "People whose bikes got left in the rain." Circle the one that made you smile while you wrote it. That's probably the street. We'll find the house number later.

CHAPTER 5

Pick Who You Like

Here is the mistake almost everybody makes, and I made it for years: we choose who to serve based on who likes us. We go where we're welcome. We serve the boss who praises us, the clients who tip, the friends who laugh at our jokes. And it feels great, for a while, like living on frosting. But it gets the order backwards. You're letting other people's opinions draw your triangle for you. The right way around is to pick who *you* like — who you admire, who you're drawn to, who you'd help even if nobody was watching — and serve them, whether or not they like you back yet. Being liked is the weather. It changes every day. Who you like is the climate. That's the thing you build a house for.

This sounds simple, but watch how hard it is.

Lena raised her hand — she always raised her hand, even though nobody else did — and said, "But how do you serve people who don't like you? Isn't that just... annoying them?"

That's a good question, and the answer is the difference between serving and pestering. Pestering is when you need something back. Serving is when you don't. If you bring someone coffee because you want them to like you, and they don't drink it, you're hurt. If you bring someone coffee because you like them and you think they'd want coffee, and they don't drink it — well, that's their coffee. You did your bit. You go home.

So I asked Lena: “Who do you like? Not who likes you. Who do you, Lena, actually like?”

She opened her mouth and nothing came out. Then she laughed, and it was a real laugh but also a little bit of a crack in the plaster. “I don’t think I’ve ever asked that,” she said. “I just figure out who needs me and go there.”

That’s the people-pleaser’s trap. It looks like generosity. It’s actually a kind of hiding. If you only go where you’re needed, you never have to risk being rejected by the people you actually want. You get to be useful without ever being vulnerable. It’s a great deal, right up until you’re forty-five and exhausted and can’t name a single person you chose.

Over the next two weeks, Lena did an exercise I give everybody. She kept a note on her phone called **“People I Liked Today.”** Not people who were nice to her. People *she* liked. The barista who sang. The man at the open house who asked thoughtful questions about the foundation even though he clearly couldn’t afford the place. The teenager who held the door at the grocery store. A woman in a minivan who let her merge.

When she read the list out in Room B, there was a pattern she hadn’t noticed. Almost half the entries were first-time buyers — young couples, single parents, people who came to open houses and walked around the kitchen with a look on their face like they were trying to memorize it. People with small budgets and big nervous questions. People most agents, including her, gently steered toward the door because the commission on a starter house is a lot less than on a four-bedroom with a pool.

“I like them,” she said, surprised. “I really like them. They’re the only ones who still think a house is a miracle.”

“So serve them,” I said.

"They're not great business," she said.

"Neither were my grandmother's doubles," said Marcus.

Here's the thing about picking who you like: it's the only way your work stays fueled. If you serve people you don't care about because they like you, the gas tank is outside you. The minute they stop liking you — and they will, because people are fickle, because they had a bad day, because someone cheaper showed up — the engine stops. But if you serve people you like, the tank is inside you. Your affection for them is the fuel. They can be grumpy. They can forget your name. You'll still show up, because showing up for people you like feels good on its own.

It's like the difference between a sailboat and a motorboat. The sailboat goes where the wind wants. The motorboat goes where you point it. Living on other people's approval is sailing. Picking who you like is putting an engine in.

Try this: For one week, keep a list called "People I Liked Today." Not people who liked you — people you liked. At the end of the week, read it like a detective. Who keeps showing up? What do they have in common? That's a clue about where your address is.

CHAPTER 6

Serve Them Anyway

This is the heart of the Achievement angle, so I'll say it loud: **don't serve to be liked. Serve despite being disliked.** When you start showing up for the people you've chosen, some of them won't like you. Some will ignore you. A few will actively roll their eyes. The temptation is to take that as a verdict — *see, they don't want me* — and go back to serving whoever claps. Don't. The dislike isn't the end of the story. It's the first chapter. Most people who end up loving something didn't like it the first time. Coffee. Olives. Your best friend. The point is to keep serving through the dislike, not because you're a doormat, but because you're stubborn about the people you've picked. That stubbornness is what eventually leads you to your actual people — the ones who'll find you precisely because you didn't quit.

There's a difference between a doormat and a lighthouse. A doormat stays put while people walk all over it and hopes they'll say thank you. A lighthouse stays put while the waves hit it and doesn't care whether the waves say thank you — it's not there for the waves. It's there for the boats. When I say "serve them anyway," I mean be the lighthouse. The dislike is the waves. Your people are the boats. You don't stop shining because the ocean is rude.

Marcus tested this the hard way.

After the “night people” Tuesday, he did something he’d been threatening to do for years. He bought a used folding table, a two-burner propane stove that was legal for street vending in our city with the right permit, and a big thermal box. He got the permit — that took six weeks and two trips to an office with a ticket-number system that he said was “the closest thing to purgatory I’ve experienced while alive.” And on a Thursday in March, at 1:30 in the morning, he set up across the street from the hospital, by the bus shelter, with a hand-lettered cardboard sign: *DOUBLES — $4 — HOT.*

The first night he sold three. Two to a cab driver who bought them mostly out of pity and one to a security guard who ate half and threw the other half in the trash in plain view.

The second night a nurse on her smoke break walked over, looked at the sign, and said, “What’s a double?” He explained. She said, “That sounds like a lot of chickpeas for 2 a.m.,” and walked away.

The third night it rained and he sold nothing, and a guy in a pickup slowed down, rolled his window down, shouted something about “foreign food,” and drove off.

He came into Room B the next Tuesday looking like a man who’d been hit by a slow-moving bus. “Nobody likes it,” he said. “My chef was right.”

“Who did you go there to serve?” I asked.

“Night people.”

“Did night people walk past you?”

“Yeah. Tons.”

“Did you serve them?”

“I tried to. They didn’t want it.”

"Did they eat it?"

"Some."

"So you served them," I said. "They just didn't clap."

This is the moment where most people quit. Not because the work is bad, but because the *response* is bad, and we've confused the two. We think "they didn't like it" means "it wasn't good" or "I'm not wanted." Sometimes, sure. But usually it just means "they haven't figured out what it is yet." New things are suspicious. Strangers are suspicious. A guy with a cardboard sign at 2 a.m. is extremely suspicious. That's not a verdict on your food. It's just how humans work. We need to see something a few times before we trust it — more on that in Chapter 10.

Theo knew this feeling from a different angle. That comment, *this is trash bro just buy a new bike*, had been sitting at the top of his video for four months. Every time he thought about posting a new one, he'd reread it, and it would win.

"Who did you make the video for?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "People who've got an old bike they love and can't afford to fix it."

"Was the commenter one of those people?"

He thought. "No. That guy's got a new bike."

"So he's not your person," I said. "He's just a wave."

Theo posted a new video that Sunday. A 1987 Schwinn somebody's grandpa had left in a barn. Seven hundred views. Two new comments. One said *nice*. The other said *bro why are you still doing this*. He screenshotted the second one and sent it to the group chat with a lighthouse emoji. That's when I knew he was going to be okay.

Here's what's actually happening when you serve despite being disliked. You're filtering. Every person who walks past is a person who isn't yours — and that's useful information, not an insult. Every eye-roll narrows the search. You're panning for gold, and the dislike is the sand washing out of the pan. You don't get mad at the sand. You keep swirling.

And — I say this carefully, because it matters — serving despite dislike has a limit. If someone tells you clearly to stop, stop. If you're being harmed, leave. "Serve them anyway" is about not quitting because of lukewarm reviews. It's not about ignoring "no." A lighthouse doesn't chase boats. It just stays lit.

Try this: Think of the last time you stopped doing something because of one bad reaction. Write down who you were doing it for. Then ask: was the person who reacted badly actually one of those people? Or were they a wave?

CHAPTER 7

Applause Is Junk Food

Being liked feels amazing. It pings the same reward wiring in your brain that loves a candy bar, and it wears off about as fast. That's the trouble with chasing applause: it's junk food. It fills you up for ten minutes and leaves you hungrier, and if you live on it, you get the emotional version of a sugar crash — the 4 p.m. slump of the soul. Being *useful*, on the other hand, is a slow cooker. You put something real in, you wait, and hours later there's a whole meal. It doesn't hit you with a rush. It just keeps you fed. The Achievement angle runs on slow-cooker food. If you feed it applause, it'll grow fast and then collapse like a soufflé when somebody slams the oven door.

I'm not anti-applause. Applause is lovely. Eat dessert. But you'd never plan a week of meals around it, and that's what a lot of us are doing with our working lives: arranging everything around the next little hit of *good job*, *love this*, *you're amazing*. The problem is that the people handing out the applause are mostly not paying attention.

There's a famous experiment from Cornell, published in 2000 by Thomas Gilovich and his colleagues. They had students put on an embarrassing T-shirt — a big picture of the singer Barry Manilow, which for a college student in the late 1990s was apparently a fate worse than death — and walk into a room full of other students. Then they asked the T-shirt wearers to guess how many people in the room had noticed the shirt. The wearers guessed way more

than actually had. Most people in the room didn't notice, or didn't remember. The researchers called it the **spotlight effect**: we think we're under a spotlight, and really everyone else is too busy worrying about their own spotlight to look at ours.

That's not depressing. That's freeing.

If nobody's watching as closely as you think, then the applause you're chasing is mostly coming from people who are only half-paying attention anyway. You're performing for a room full of people looking at their phones. And the boos you're scared of? Same people. Same phones.

Lena felt this one in her bones. She'd built her whole career on applause. Five-star reviews. Thank-you cards. Being the agent everybody "just loved." And every new listing meant starting from scratch — would *these* people love her too? She lived in a permanent audition.

"It's like I'm a phone that's always on 4 percent," she said. "I keep plugging in to other people, and I get to 20, and then somebody frowns and I'm back at 4."

"What happens when you help one of your first-time buyers?" I asked. She'd taken on two of them since the "People I Liked" list — a young couple and a single dad named Rafael who worked at a tire shop and had been saving for six years.

She thought about it. "It's different. Rafael didn't even really thank me. He was too nervous. He just kept walking around the empty living room touching the walls. Like he was making sure they were real." She stopped. "I thought about that for three days."

That's slow-cooker food. Rafael didn't clap. He didn't leave a review. He touched the walls. And that one image kept Lena fed for three days, longer than any five-star review ever had.

Here's a quick test for whether you're running on applause or usefulness. When you finish something, ask: **what's the first thing I want to know?**

If it's "Did they like it?" — you're running on applause.

If it's "Did it help?" — you're running on usefulness.

Both questions are natural. But whichever one comes first is the one that's driving the car.

Marcus, standing at his folding table at 2 a.m., had to make this switch the hard way. Nobody was clapping. A few people were eating. So he started asking a different question. Not "did they like it?" but "did anyone who was hungry at two in the morning get fed?" And the answer, every single night, even the bad nights, was yes. At least one. Usually three or four. The cab driver kept coming back — not because he loved doubles, but because they were hot and four bucks and the only thing open.

"It's not applause," Marcus said. "But it's something."

"It's the something," I said.

Try this: Next time you finish a piece of work, before you check for any reaction — no email, no likes, no "what did you think?" — write down one sentence about who it helped and how. Do that first. Let the applause be dessert, not dinner.

CHAPTER 8

The Lighthouse Doesn't Go Looking for Boats

The part of Achievement that nobody talks about is faith. Not religious faith, necessarily — that's coming in Part Four — but a stubborn, unrelenting belief that your people are out there. That somewhere, right now, there's someone who would love what you do, and they just haven't found you yet. Without that belief, serving despite being disliked is just suffering. With it, it's a search. It's the difference between a person shouting into the void and a lighthouse. Both are alone in the dark. But the lighthouse knows there are boats. It doesn't go out looking for them, rowing around the ocean with a flashlight. It just stays lit, in the same place, every night, so that when the boats come they know where to steer.

The math is on your side here, and I mean that literally.

There are about eight billion people on this planet. If the thing you do — your food, your videos, your way of selling houses, your weird specific skill — appeals to just one person in a million, that's eight thousand people. Eight thousand! That's a small town. That's a sold-out theater, several times over. One in a million sounds like nothing until you remember how many millions there are.

In 2008 a writer named Kevin Kelly wrote an essay called "1,000 True Fans." His point was that a creative person doesn't need to be famous to make a living. They need about a thousand people who

really, truly love what they make — people who'll buy whatever comes out, drive across town to see it, tell their friends. A thousand. Not a million. People have argued about his exact numbers ever since, and fair enough, but the core idea holds up: you don't need everyone. You need *your* ones.

And here's the thing about your ones: they cannot find you if you're not there.

That's why the lighthouse stays in one place. Consistency is how you get found. If you post one video and quit, the person who would have loved you might have been scrolling through the next week. If you set up the doubles table one night and pack it away forever, the nurse who would've become your biggest fan might have been working the other shift. You don't know which night your boat comes in. So you have to be lit every night.

Walt didn't want to hear this one. Walt's address, it turned out, was young people who wanted to learn to make things with their hands. He'd trained apprentices for thirty years at the plant, and he'd liked it more than the actual machining, though he'd never said so out loud. But "kids these days," he said, "don't want to learn to run a lathe. They want to run an app."

"All of them?" I asked.

"Most of them."

"So, not all of them."

He turned his hearing aid down. I waited. He turned it back up.

"How would I even find the ones who do?" he said.

"You don't," I said. "You get lit. And they find you."

That week he did something that, for Walt, was the equivalent of skydiving. He called the community makerspace across town —

the one in an old auto-parts warehouse with 3D printers and a laser cutter and, he'd heard, a sad, neglected metal lathe in the back corner that nobody knew how to use. He offered to teach a Saturday class. Free. "Intro to the Lathe."

The first Saturday, two people came. One was a retired dentist who left after an hour. The other was a sixteen-year-old girl named Dee who'd been sent by her robotics team because they needed someone who could make a custom shaft and nobody knew how. She was polite, bored, and on her phone half the time.

The second Saturday, Dee came back. Alone.

"She didn't have to," Walt said, in Room B, and his voice did a thing. "Her team didn't need any more shafts. She just came back."

That's a boat.

You can't make the boats come. But you can make sure that when they come, the light's on. That's the belief I'm talking about — not that it'll be easy, not that it'll be fast, but that it's *true*. They're out there. Statistically, stubbornly, certainly. Eight thousand at one in a million. A thousand true fans. One sixteen-year-old named Dee.

When the belief wobbles — and it will, on the rainy nights, on the 700-view Sundays — you don't need to feel it. You just need to act like it's true. Show up. Get lit. Let the dark do what the dark does. The lighthouse doesn't feel confident. It's a building. It just keeps the light on.

Try this: Write down the number of people you'd need to make your thing feel worth it. Not a million. A real number: ten, fifty, a thousand. Then write: *They're out there. My job is to be findable.* Tape it somewhere you'll see it on the bad nights.

CHAPTER 9

They Like You More Than You Think

Your inner critic is a terrible pollster. It surveys a sample size of one — you, at your most nervous — and then announces the results as if it had asked the whole country. "They didn't like you." "That was awkward." "You talked too much." And you believe it, every time, because it sounds so confident. But researchers have actually checked the numbers, and it turns out the inner critic is consistently, measurably wrong in the same direction: people like you more than you think they do. Not a little more. Noticeably more. When you're serving despite being disliked, it's worth knowing that a lot of the dislike you're bracing against isn't even there. Half the waves you're fighting are imaginary.

Here's the study. In 2018, a group of psychologists — Erica Boothby, Gus Cooney, Gillian Sandstrom and Margaret Clark — published a paper called "The Liking Gap in Conversations." They had strangers talk to each other, then asked each person two questions: How much did you like your partner? And how much do you think your partner liked you?

Over and over, across several studies, people underestimated how much they were liked. They walked away from a perfectly nice conversation thinking "that was fine, I guess, they probably found me boring," while the other person was walking away thinking

"what a nice person." The researchers found this gap with strangers in a lab, with first-year college students getting to know their dorm mates — where it lasted for months — and with adults at a personal-development workshop. Shyer people had a bigger gap. And the more negative thoughts someone had about the conversation afterward, the bigger the gap.

They called it **the liking gap**. I call it the 3 a.m. replay, because that's when it plays.

Priya laughed out loud when I read this one in Room B. "That's a bug," she said. "That's literally a bug. The system's returning a lower value than the actual value."

"Consistently," I said.

"So it's not random noise. It's a biased sensor." She was getting excited now, the way she did when she found something broken at work. "If the sensor always reads low, you just… correct for it. You add an offset."

"Go on."

"Like, whatever I think people thought of me, I should assume it's higher. Every time. Because the sensor's miscalibrated."

That's exactly right, and it's the most useful thing a software tester has ever said to me. You can't just turn off the inner critic. It's wired in, and it's partly there to keep you from doing anything too embarrassing. But you can stop trusting its readings at face value. When it says "they didn't like you," you can say, "Noted. Adjusting for known bias. They probably liked me fine."

Priya made a sticky note for her monitor. It said: **+20% (known sensor bias).** She put it next to the AAH note.

The liking gap matters for Achievement because it changes how serving despite dislike feels. A lot of us think we're in a constant

headwind — that everyone we try to help is quietly irritated with us. We brace against criticism that mostly isn't coming. It's like walking through a doorway with your shoulders hunched because you're sure you'll hit your head, when the ceiling is actually a foot above you.

Theo tested this. After the "lighthouse" Tuesday, he did something bold for a guy who'd been hiding in a hood three weeks before. He brought a bike — a half-rebuilt 1970s Raleigh with no brakes, which he wheeled down the library stairs, much to the alarm of the librarian — and asked if he could show the group how to true a wheel. "I want to see if it's boring in real life too," he said.

It wasn't boring. Walt, it turned out, had strong opinions about spoke tension. Marcus wanted to know if the same trick would work on his folding cart's wobbly wheel. Lena asked so many questions that Theo had to tell her to wait. Priya filmed it on her phone. It went for forty minutes past when we usually stopped.

On the way out, I asked Theo how he thought it went.

"Okay," he said. "Probably went on too long. Walt was kind of annoyed."

I asked Walt, in the parking lot. Walt said, "That kid's got hands. I'd have hired him in a minute." He also said spoke tension was "like a marriage — everybody's pulling, and the trick is everybody's pulling the same amount," which I've been stealing ever since.

When I told Theo, he looked at me like I'd told him he'd won the lottery. "He said that?"

That's the gap. Theo thought "kind of annoyed." Walt thought "I'd have hired him." Same forty minutes.

So when you show up for your people — when you post the video, set up the table, teach the class — and your brain comes home and runs the replay and tells you how badly it went, remember: the pollster is biased. The real numbers are higher. You're probably doing better than the replay says. You might be doing a lot better.

Try this: After your next conversation that you think went "meh," write down how much (1–10) you think the other person liked you. Then add two. That's probably closer to the truth. If you're brave, ask them sometime. You might be surprised how often the real number beats your guess.

CHAPTER 10

Reps

Nobody likes anything the first time. That's an exaggeration, but only slightly. Humans are built to be a little suspicious of the new — the new food, the new face, the new guy with the cardboard sign — and to warm up to things just by seeing them again and again. That means showing up isn't just a personal virtue. It's a strategy. Every time you show up for your people, you get a bit more familiar, and familiar things get liked. It's not magic, it's reps. Like at the gym: you don't get stronger from one heroic workout. You get stronger from showing up on Tuesday when you didn't feel like it. Achievement is a muscle, and consistency is how it grows.

There's an idea in psychology called the **mere exposure effect**. A researcher named Robert Zajonc wrote about it in 1968, and it's been studied a lot since. The short version: people tend to like things more just because they've seen them before. Words, faces, shapes, songs — show someone something a few times, and on average they'll rate it more pleasant than something they've never seen. Not always. Not infinitely — there's a point where you get sick of the song. But the general tilt is there: familiarity breeds, if not love, then at least comfort.

Think about the last song you ended up loving. Did you love it the very first time? Or did you think "hm, that's okay," and then it came on in the car three more times and by the fifth time you were screaming the chorus at a red light? That's reps.

Now think about Marcus at his folding table.

The first week, the nurse who'd said "that's a lot of chickpeas for 2 a.m." walked past him four times on her smoke breaks. The second week, six times. Each time, there was the cardboard sign, the steam coming off the pot, the smell of curry and fried dough cutting through the cold air. Each time, a guy who nodded at her and said "night."

In the third week, on a Wednesday, she stopped. "Fine," she said. "Give me one. If I die, it's on you."

She didn't die. She came back the next night and bought two — one for her and one for a resident who'd been on shift for twenty hours and, she said, "looked like a raccoon that's lost a fight." The next week she brought a friend.

Marcus didn't change the recipe. He didn't change the price. He didn't run a promotion. He just kept being there. The doubles were exactly as good on night one as on night twenty-one. The only thing that changed was that by night twenty-one, he was familiar.

"I thought I had to be better," he told Room B. "I just had to be *there*."

That's the secret nobody puts on a motivational poster because it's too boring: a huge amount of success is just not leaving. Being there when the boat comes. Being there the fifth time somebody walks past.

Here's how to think about reps:

Make it small enough to repeat. The biggest killer of consistency is ambition. If your plan is "one amazing video a week," you'll do three and burn out. If your plan is "one okay video every Sunday," you'll still be doing it in a year. Theo switched from trying to make perfect twenty-minute restorations to ten-minute "one fix" videos:

How to fix a squeaky brake. How to un-rust a chain. How to tell if a wheel is worth saving. He could make one in an afternoon. He did fifty-two that year.

Same time, same place. The lighthouse doesn't move. Marcus was at the bus shelter Thursday through Sunday, 1 a.m. to 4 a.m. Walt's class was Saturdays at ten. Regularity is how people find you — and how you find yourself on the days you don't feel like it. You don't have to decide whether to show up. It's Saturday. You show up.

Count the reps, not the results. Results lie in the short term. Some weeks you'll do everything right and get nothing. Some weeks you'll phone it in and something will blow up. If you only count results, you'll get whiplash. Count the reps — how many times did I show up? — and the results will catch up in their own time, like a slow friend walking behind you on a hike.

Priya, who loves a spreadsheet, made a reps tracker for the whole group — a shared sheet with a column for each of us and a little checkbox for every time we showed up for our address. Marcus: nights at the table. Walt: Saturdays. Theo: videos. Lena: hours spent with first-time buyers. Priya herself was still figuring out her address, so she tracked AAHs instead. Nobody's results went on the sheet. Just checkboxes.

There's something about watching a column of little green checkmarks grow that does more for your faith than any pep talk. It's proof. Not proof it's working. Proof *you're* working. And that's the part you control.

Try this: Pick the smallest version of serving your people that you could do every week for a year without hating it. Write down the day and time. Make a simple tracker — paper, phone, wall calendar. Check the box each time. Don't track anything else for the first month. Just reps.

CHAPTER 11

Rejection Is a Coffee Filter

Rejection feels like a wall. It feels like the universe saying *no, not you, go home*. But that's not what it is. Rejection is a coffee filter. It doesn't stop the coffee — it just keeps the grounds out. Every person who says "not for me" is getting strained out of your cup, so that what's left is the stuff you actually want: the people who say "yes, this, more." Without the filter, you get a mouthful of mud. You'd be serving everybody, half-heartedly, and pleasing no one. The rejections are doing you a favor. They're sorting. They're narrowing the crowd until it's just your people left. You don't get mad at a coffee filter. You thank it. Then you drink.

I want to be gentle here, because rejection hurts. It's not just a feeling — research on social pain suggests our brains handle being left out using some of the same alarm systems we use for physical hurt. It makes sense, evolutionarily. For most of human history, being kicked out of the group was a death sentence. So of course a "no" lands like a punch. Your body thinks it's about to be left out in the cold to be eaten by something with teeth.

But you're not going to be eaten. The nurse who walks past the doubles table isn't exiling Marcus from the tribe. She's just… not hungry. Or she doesn't like chickpeas. Or she's on a diet. Or she's thinking about her mother. Most "no"s are not about you at all. They're about the other person's day.

Lena needed this chapter more than anyone. When she started focusing on first-time buyers, she had to do the scariest thing a people-pleaser can do: say no to some of her old clients. Not rudely. She referred them to colleagues who wanted that kind of business. But one of them — a man she called the Pool Guy, because every house he looked at had to have a pool and every pool was wrong — took it badly. He wrote her a one-star review. It said she was "unprofessional" and "clearly doesn't care about her clients."

She read it out in Room B, and her voice shook.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Like I'm going to throw up."

"Okay. Let's do the AAH first."

We all did it. Five long ones. The urn joined in for the third one, as it often did.

"Now," I said. "Was the Pool Guy one of your people?"

"No."

"Did you like him?"

She hesitated. Lena hesitated before saying anything unkind about anyone. "No," she said finally. "He was mean to his wife. He made her cry at an open house because she liked a house without a pool."

"So the filter caught him," I said.

She was quiet for a second. Then she said something I've used ever since. "It's like he's a coffee ground that's mad at the filter."

That's exactly it. A one-star review from someone who isn't your person isn't feedback. It's a ground on the paper.

Here's how to handle rejection like a filter:

1. Ask: were they my person? Most rejections come from people you didn't choose. If you didn't choose them, their rejection isn't data about your Achievement angle. It's data about fit.

2. Look for the useful bit — briefly. Sometimes a rejection has a real lesson in it. Maybe the doubles really were too spicy for most people at 2 a.m. (Marcus did end up adding a mild option, and keeping the hot one for those who asked, which he said was "like keeping the good whiskey under the counter.") Take the lesson. Leave the sting. You get thirty seconds to look for the useful bit and then you close the file.

3. Say thank you, quietly. I mean it. Out loud, even, when nobody's around. "Thanks for clearing out." It feels ridiculous. It's supposed to. It flips the story from "I got rejected" to "I got sorted," and it's a sneak preview of the Appreciation angle, which is coming soon.

4. Go back to the lighthouse. Turn the light back on. The rejection was a wave. The boats are still out there.

Lena didn't reply to the one-star review. Two weeks later, Rafael, the tire-shop dad who'd touched the walls of his new living room, left her a review. It was three sentences long and spelled her name wrong. It said: *Lena treat me like I matter even when I have small money. She answer every question even stupid ones. Now my kids have a backyard.*

She read that one out in Room B too. Her voice shook that time also. Different kind of shake.

Try this: Think of your last rejection. Write it at the top of a page. Underneath, write: *Were they my person?* Answer honestly. Then write: *What's the one useful thing, if any?* Then: *Thanks for the sort.* Then close the notebook.

CHAPTER 12

Finding Your People

There's a day — you can't schedule it, you can't speed it up, but it comes — when you look around and realize you're not alone at the lighthouse anymore. Somebody's sitting on the rocks. Then two somebodies. Then a whole little crowd of people who found you because you kept the light on through the waves and the rain and the guy in the pickup truck. These are your people. Not the ones who liked you first. The ones who found you because you didn't quit. And the strange, lovely thing is that when they show up, you realize they were the ones you were serving the whole time. You just hadn't met them yet. The belief was right. They were out there.

The longest-running study of happiness I know of is the Harvard Study of Adult Development. It started in 1938, following a group of Harvard students and a group of young men from poor neighborhoods in Boston, and it has kept going for more than eighty years — later adding their wives and children. Its current directors, Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, wrote a book about it in 2023 called *The Good Life*. If you had to boil eighty-plus years of data down to one sentence, they'd tell you this: the quality of people's relationships was one of the strongest predictors of how happy and healthy they were as they aged. Not their cholesterol. Not their income. Their people.

And there's another line of research worth knowing. In 2013, Morris Okun, Ellen Yeung and Stephanie Brown pulled together

the studies on older adults who volunteer — who serve, in other words — and found that, after adjusting for other factors, volunteering was linked to about a 24 percent lower risk of dying during the studies' follow-up periods. That's an association, not proof that volunteering itself caused the longer lives. But it lines up with everything else: showing up for other people seems to be good for the person showing up.

So when I say that finding your people is the reward of the Achievement angle, I'm not being sentimental. I'm being practical. Your people are, as far as we can tell, one of the biggest things that keeps you well.

Let me tell you how each of the Room B folks found theirs.

Marcus: By June, three months after he set up the table, he had regulars. Not a crowd — regulars. The nurse (her name turned out to be Tasha), who had become a two-a-night customer and the unofficial head of his marketing department, which meant she told everybody on the third floor. Three cab drivers. The security guard who'd thrown half his first double away, who now ordered two with extra pepper and said the first time had been "a misunderstanding." An overnight radio DJ who mentioned him on air once, which brought a wave of college kids who didn't come back, and two insomniac retirees who did. A group of ER residents who called him "Doubles" and nothing else. One night in June, Tasha brought him a coffee. "You always bring us food," she said. "Somebody's gotta bring you something." Marcus told Room B that he had to turn around and pretend to adjust the propane so nobody would see his face. "That's what my grandma used to get," he said. "The coffee back."

Theo: His channel crossed a thousand subscribers in August. That's not huge, by internet standards. But Theo read every single comment, and he started to notice a pattern. A lot of his people

were older — men and women in their fifties and sixties who had bikes from when they were young sitting in garages, and wanted to ride them again. And a lot were kids — twelve, thirteen — with no money and hand-me-down bikes, who wanted to fix things themselves. "It's grandpas and kids," he said, delighted. "My people are grandpas and kids." One kid named Elijah sent him a video of himself fixing his own chain with Theo's method, in his driveway, narrating in a serious voice exactly like Theo's. Theo watched it nine times.

Walt: Dee kept coming. Then she brought two friends from robotics. Then one of them brought her older brother, who'd dropped out of a machining program and wanted to try again. By August, Walt's Saturday class had a waiting list of eleven, and the makerspace asked if he could do Wednesdays too. "I said I'd think about it," Walt said. "I thought about it for about a second."

Lena: She found her people in a place she didn't expect — a Saturday morning first-time buyer workshop that she started running at, of all places, our library. Room A, across the hall from us. Free coffee (better than ours). She expected four people. Twenty-two came. A lot of them were like Rafael — nervous, polite, sure they were asking stupid questions. "Nobody asks stupid questions," she told them, which she told us later she'd stolen from me. "Stupid is the opposite of scared." (I'd said that to Priya. Things travel in a library basement.)

Priya: Hers took longer, and it surprised her. We'll get to it in Part Three.

Here's what I want you to notice. None of them found their people by going looking for approval. They found them by showing up, over and over, for the people they'd chosen — through rejection, through silence, through one-star reviews and *this is trash bro*. The people came to them. Because the light was on.

The other thing I want you to notice is that their people weren't who they expected. Marcus expected nurses and got cab drivers, too. Theo expected bike nerds and got grandpas and kids. Walt expected nobody and got a waiting list. You choose who you want to serve, and then your people show up and gently correct your aim. That's not failure. That's the filter working.

Try this: Make a short list of every person who has, even once, come back. Who read the second thing, came to the second class, bought the second double. These are your early boats. Write them a line. Not a sales pitch. Just "thanks for coming back." Which, by the way, is exactly where we're going next.

PART THREE

Appreciation — Thanksgiving Every Day

CHAPTER 13

Gratitude, Not Applause

When most people hear "appreciation," they think of being appreciated. Getting the gold star, the "we couldn't have done it without you," the plaque. That's not this angle. That was Chapter 7, and we called it junk food. The Appreciation angle is the other direction entirely. It's not about what comes to you for what you did. It's what goes out of you for what you've been given. It's gratitude. It's thank you. And here's why it has to be its own angle and not just a nice extra: Achievement is about going out and serving, which is draining, and Hope is about believing in tomorrow, which is a bet. Appreciation is the only angle that looks at *right now* and says, "This. This is already good." Without it, you're always leaning forward. Appreciation is how you sit back in the chair.

People get suspicious when you start talking about gratitude. It sounds like something on a throw pillow. *Live*, *Laugh*, *Be Grateful*. It sounds like someone telling you to cheer up. And if you're struggling, being told to "be grateful" can feel like being told to stop complaining about the fire because at least the house is warm.

So let me say clearly what gratitude is not.

It's not pretending things are fine. You can be grateful and furious at the same time. You can be grateful for your kids and also want to put them in a box and mail them to Peru for a week. Both are true.

It's not owing anyone. Gratitude doesn't mean you're in debt. You can thank someone without promising them anything.

It's not settling. Being grateful for your job doesn't mean you can't want a better one. It just means you notice what the current one gives you while you're working on the next one.

What gratitude *is*: noticing what's good, on purpose, and saying so. That's it. It's a spotlight you point at the stuff your brain doesn't naturally light up.

Because here's the problem. Your brain has a negativity bias. It's built to notice threats — the rustle in the grass, the frown on the boss's face, the weird mole. That kept our ancestors alive. If you missed a ripe berry, you were a bit hungry. If you missed a lion, you were dinner. So the brain learned to scream about lions and whisper about berries. And today, in a world with very few lions, it's still screaming. About emails. About parking tickets. About what Janet in accounting meant by "per my last message."

Gratitude is the practice of turning up the volume on the berries.

Priya, as you might guess, had the volume on lions all the way up. Her actual job was finding what was broken. Sixty hours a week, her brain was being paid to look for failures, and it got so good at it that it couldn't stop. Her apartment: the drip in the faucet. Her mom's visit: the comment about her hair. Her own reflection: a list of defects, filed in order of severity.

"I'm a bug-finder," she said. "That's literally my job title. Quality Assurance."

"What would the opposite job be called?" I asked.

She thought about it. "I don't know. Feature-finder? Nobody hires for that."

"You could hire yourself," I said.

That became the first gratitude practice of Room B, and it was Priya's idea. A **feature report**. Every night, before bed, the reverse of a bug report: three things that worked today. Not "great" things. Working things. *The bus came on time. The new hire asked a good question. The soup was hot.*

The first night she did it, she told us, it took her twenty minutes to think of three. The soup was all she had for a long time. She finally wrote: 1. *Soup was hot.* 2. *Didn't cry at standup.* 3. *...the AAH thing kind of works?*

That's where it starts. Nobody starts with "I'm grateful for the miracle of existence." You start with soup.

Try this: Tonight, write a feature report. Three things that worked today. They can be tiny. "My phone charged." "The dog was happy to see me." "I didn't say the mean thing I was thinking." Write them down. Three things. Then sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Thanksgiving Every Day

In the United States we have a holiday, once a year, the fourth Thursday in November, where the whole country stops and says thank you. We eat too much, we watch football, we sleep on the couch with our pants unbuttoned. And somewhere in there, someone at the table usually makes everyone go around and say what they're thankful for, and everyone groans, and then — usually — something real gets said. Here's my pitch: do that every day. Not the turkey. The going-around-the-table. Thanksgiving every day. Because one day a year of gratitude is like going to the gym once a year and wondering why you're not strong. The practice is the point. And just like the gym, the first few sessions hurt, then they get easier, and then one day you notice you've changed shape.

Let me be honest about what daily thanksgiving looks like, because it isn't pretty at first.

The first time you sit down and try to be grateful on purpose, it's stiff. Awkward. You feel fake. You write "my family" and "my health" because those are the answers you're supposed to give, like a beauty pageant contestant saying "world peace." Then your brain immediately argues with you. *Your family? Your sister hasn't called in a month. Your health? What about that knee?*

That's normal. That's what the first Thanksgiving dinner with yourself feels like, and I'll talk about it much more in the next

chapter. The key is to keep showing up to the table.

Here's the simplest version of daily thanksgiving I know, and it's what we did in Room B:

Morning: one thank-you before your feet hit the floor. Just one. Out loud or in your head. "Thanks for the bed." "Thanks for the coffee that's about to happen." It sets the spotlight before your brain grabs it for lion-duty.

During the day: one thank-you to a person. Text, note, out loud — doesn't matter. "Thanks for covering for me." "Thanks for the chickpeas." Chapter 18 has a lot more about this.

Night: the feature report. Three things that worked.

That's it. It takes about four minutes in total. It's smaller than brushing your teeth.

Walt resisted this one hard. "I'm not writing in a diary," he said. "I'm sixty-eight years old."

"It's not a diary," I said. "It's a log. Like a maintenance log on a machine."

That changed his face. Walt had kept maintenance logs for forty years. Every machine on his floor at the plant had a little clipboard: date, what was checked, what was oiled, what was running well. "A machine that doesn't get logged," he told us, "is a machine that's about to break and nobody'll know why."

So he started a gratitude maintenance log. He used an actual clipboard. He hung it on a nail in his garage workshop. Every night before bed he'd go out to the garage, turn on the bare bulb, and write three lines in his square machinist's handwriting.

His first week, he read it to us, deadpan:

Mon: Coffee good. Truck started. Daughter called.
Tue: Coffee good. Neighbor's dog didn't bark.
Wed: Coffee good.

"Wednesday was a short day," he said.

But by the third week, the lines had gotten longer. *Fri: Dee figured out the tailstock without me telling her. Good kid. Tomatoes coming in. June planted those from seed in 2019. Still going.*

He stopped after reading that last line, and nobody said anything for a while, and that was right.

There's research behind this, which we'll get to properly in Chapter 21. But I don't think Walt needed research. He needed a clipboard. Some of us need the science and some of us need the right container. Find the container that feels like you. A clipboard. A note on your phone. A whiteboard on the fridge. A voice memo in the car. Theo did his as a list in the description box of an unlisted YouTube video that only he could see, which I think is the most nineteen-year-old thing I've ever heard.

The container doesn't matter. The daily part does.

Try this: Choose your container today. Not tomorrow — today. A notebook, a clipboard, a note on your phone, a sticky note on the mirror. Name it something that sounds like you. Walt's is "MAINT LOG." Priya's is "Feature Report." Lena's is "Things That Went Right," which is very Lena. Then do tonight's three.

CHAPTER 15

The First Dinner Is Awkward

The first time you sit down and really thank yourself, others and the world, it's going to feel like a family Thanksgiving where everybody's on their best behavior for exactly eleven minutes before someone mentions the thing. You know the thing. The thing from years ago that nobody's talked about. Except this dinner is inside your head, and every chair at the table is a part of you. There's the part of you that's proud, and the part that's ashamed, and the part that's still angry at your dad, and the part that thinks the whole gratitude thing is stupid and keeps checking its phone under the table. When you try to say grace, they all start talking at once. That's normal. It's supposed to be awkward. The first few dinners are rough. But here's the good news: each one gets a little better, because each time, something gets aired out. And eventually you have a dinner where everyone just eats and laughs and passes the potatoes. That's the one you're working toward.

Let me describe the first dinner in more detail, because I think it helps to know what's coming.

You sit down to write your feature report, or say your morning thank-you, and you start: "I'm grateful for—"

And then a voice at the end of the table says, *For what? You got passed over for that job.*

And another voice says, *Don't be ungrateful, people have it way worse.*

And another says, *This is so cheesy. Who are you, Oprah?*

And another — the quiet one, the one who sits by the kitchen door — says, very softly, *I'm tired.*

That's your family. That's the whole crew. They've been living in your head your entire life, and nobody ever made them sit down together. Of course they're going to bicker.

Lena's first dinner was the worst in Room B, and she told us about it with a kind of horrified laugh.

She sat down on a Sunday night, after the kids went to bed, with a glass of wine and her phone open to "Things That Went Right." She wanted to do a really good one. A gold-star one. She typed: *I'm grateful for my kids.*

And immediately, she said, a voice in her head said: *Then why did you miss Jordan's game on Thursday for a showing?*

She typed: *I'm grateful for my work.*

Voice: *You mean the work that ate your marriage?*

She typed: *I'm grateful for myself.*

And then, she said, a voice that sounded *exactly like her mother* said: *Well, somebody has to be.*

She put the phone down, finished the wine, and went to bed. "It was like Thanksgiving 2011," she said. "When my mother told my sister's new boyfriend that he 'seemed nice for a dentist.' Everybody just stared at their plates."

"Did you do it again the next night?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I don't know why."

"How was the second dinner?"

"Still bad. But I knew it was coming, so it was less of a shock. Like when you already know your uncle's going to bring up the election, so you get your answer ready."

"Third dinner?"

"I said 'I'm grateful for my kids,' and the voice said the thing about Jordan's game, and I said — out loud, in my kitchen, like a crazy person — 'Yes. I missed it. I'm still grateful for him.' And the voice just… sat there."

That's the airing out. That's what happens when you keep coming back to the table. The voices don't go away — they're family, they live there — but they get heard. And a voice that gets heard doesn't have to shout anymore. Half of what makes a family dinner miserable is that everyone's been holding something in for a year. Once it's said, the room changes temperature.

By the sixth or seventh dinner, Lena said, the mother-voice still showed up. But it said less. And one night, when she typed *I'm grateful for myself*, she said there was a pause, and then the quiet voice by the kitchen door said, *Thank you*.

"I cried into my Pinot Grigio," she said. "Very dignified."

Here's what to expect, roughly, so you don't quit too early:

Dinners 1–3: Awkward. Arguing. Lots of *yeah, but*. You'll feel fake. Keep going.

Dinners 4–10: The same arguments come up, but you start to recognize them. *Oh, there's the "you don't deserve it" voice again. Hi.* Recognizing them takes away about half their power.

Dinners 10–30: Something shifts. Some of the voices go quiet. Some of them start agreeing with you. Gratitude starts coming more easily. You find yourself noticing good things during the day

so you can bring them to dinner, like a kid saving up a story for the car ride home.

After that: It's just dinner. Some nights are great, some are boring, a few still go sideways. But it's *your* table, and you know everybody there.

Try this: Tonight, when you do your three things, notice the voices that argue back. Don't fight them. Just name them. "Ah, that's the critic." "That's the one that sounds like Mom." "That's the tired one." Write their names in the margin if you want. You're not trying to kick anyone out. You're just taking attendance.

CHAPTER 16

You Can't Leave the Table

At a real family dinner, when it gets bad enough, you can stand up. You can say you need some air, go sit in the car, scroll your phone, drive home early. But there's one dinner you can never leave: the one inside you. You are within yourself. That's where you live. There's no car to go sit in. There's no "I'll just head out early." Wherever you go, the whole table comes with you — to work, to the gym, to the beach, to the bottom of a bottle. You can turn the TV up loud enough to drown them out, sure, for a while. Lots of us do. But the second the TV goes off, there they are, still sitting at the table, still waiting. So the only real choice you have is how you're going to sit with them. You have to deal with yourself. And honestly? That's the good news. Because it means the work you do at that table goes everywhere you go.

I want to talk about running away, because we're all very good at it.

The modern world is basically a giant buffet of ways to leave the table without technically leaving. You can scroll. You can binge a show. You can work late, then later. You can drink, you can shop, you can clean the kitchen for the third time, you can reorganize the garage. You can fill every silent moment with a podcast so that you never, ever have to hear what the quiet voice by the kitchen door has to say.

None of those things are evil. I love a good binge. But when you use them to avoid the table, they work like a hotel room: comfortable,

clean, and not home. Eventually you have to check out. And when you do, you come home to the same dinner, with the same family, except now they're annoyed that you were gone.

Marcus had a way of leaving the table that I recognized immediately, because I used to do it too: work. Fourteen-hour days at the steakhouse, then four hours at the doubles table. He was, by any measure, achieving. But there was no silence anywhere in his day. "I don't stop," he said, proudly, early on. "If I stop, I start thinking."

"About what?" I asked.

He didn't answer for a long time. Then he said, "About my grandma." She'd died four years before. He hadn't gone back to Trinidad for the funeral — he couldn't get the time off, and couldn't afford the flight that week, and he'd been angry about it ever since. Angry at the restaurant. Angry at himself. Mostly, he said, angry at himself.

"So when do you talk to her?" I asked.

"She's dead."

"I know. When do you talk to her?"

He looked at me like I'd lost my mind. But the next Tuesday he came in and said, "Okay. I tried it."

What he'd done was this. At the end of a night at the table, at about 4 a.m., when the last nurse had gone back in and the street was quiet and the propane was still ticking as it cooled, he'd sat down on the curb with the last double — he always kept one back — and he'd eaten it slowly. And before he ate it, he said, out loud, "Thanks, Grandma."

That's all. Two words.

"And then," he said, "everything I'd been carrying came up. All of it. The funeral. That I didn't go. That I let the chef talk me out of cooking her food for three years. All of it, right there on the curb."

"What did you do?"

"I sat there. Where was I gonna go? It's four in the morning."

That's it. That's the table. *Where was I gonna go*? There's nowhere to go. And once you accept that, a strange thing happens: you stop wasting energy trying to leave. You put that energy into the conversation instead.

He did it every night after that. "Thanks, Grandma." Sometimes it was just the two words and he ate his double. Sometimes it was ten minutes of sitting on the curb with a lot of feelings. A few times, he told us, he laughed — remembering some ridiculous thing she said, like how she called the microwave "the devil's oven" and refused to use it. And one night, about six weeks in, he said the words and then just ate the double, and it was good, and there wasn't anything else to say. The thing had been aired out.

"It's like when you finally clean out the fridge," he said. "You've been opening it for weeks and smelling something. And you finally take everything out and wipe it down. And then you open it the next day and it just smells like a fridge."

Here's the bit I want you to take away. Gratitude is how you sit at the table without fighting. You can't leave. You can't make everyone shut up. But you can be the one at the table who says "thank you" — to the food, to the people who made it, to the people who aren't there anymore, to yourself for showing up. And thank-you has a way of changing the mood in a room. It's very hard to keep yelling at someone who's just thanked you. Even if that someone is you.

Try this: Find one moment today where you'd normally leave the table — reach for the phone, turn on the TV, open the fridge for no reason. Instead, sit for sixty seconds. Do one AAH. Then say one thank-you, out loud, to whoever comes to mind. Then go ahead and pick up the phone if you still want to. You're allowed. You just stayed at the table for one minute first.

CHAPTER 17

Thank You, Me

Of all the people at the table, the one we thank least is ourselves. We'll thank the bus driver, the barista, the stranger who held the door. But the person who got us out of bed this morning, who dragged us through that terrible year, who kept going when we wanted to quit — that person gets nothing. Usually they get the opposite: criticism, comparison, a long list of everything they did wrong. Imagine if you treated a friend that way. Imagine a friend who'd carried you through your worst times, and every night you sat them down and listed their failures. You wouldn't have that friend for long. Saying thank you to yourself isn't vanity. It's maintenance. It's the oil change for the engine that carries you everywhere.

When I first suggested this in Room B, I got the reaction I always get. Walt snorted. Theo said "cringe." Lena said, "Isn't that a little... self-centered?"

So let me tell you about Kristin Neff. She's a psychologist at the University of Texas who has spent her career studying what she calls **self-compassion** — treating yourself with the same kindness you'd give a friend who's struggling. In her research, it has three parts: being kind to yourself instead of harshly judging, remembering that struggling is part of being human (you're not uniquely broken), and being mindful of painful feelings without either drowning in them or ignoring them. Her work and the studies that followed have found that self-compassion is linked to

better well-being, less anxiety and depression, and — this is the part that surprised people — *more* motivation to improve, not less. People who are kind to themselves after failing are more likely to try again. People who beat themselves up are more likely to give up.

That last bit is important, because I think the reason most of us don't thank ourselves is that we're afraid we'll get lazy. We think the inner critic is what keeps us going. That if we stop yelling at ourselves, we'll lie on the couch forever eating cereal out of the box. But it doesn't work that way. The critic doesn't keep you going. It just makes going feel terrible.

Think about it like coaching. Have you ever had a coach who only screamed? Maybe you got faster for a week, out of fear. But you didn't love the sport. You quit as soon as you could. The coaches who actually made people great were the ones who said "Good. Now again. You've got this." The ones who noticed what you did right.

Thank-you-me is being that coach.

Here's how we did it in Room B. At the end of the feature report, add one more line: **"Thank you, me, for ____."**

The first few were rough.

Priya: *Thank you, me, for… going to work.* (She said it sounded sarcastic even in her own head.)

Theo: *Thank you, me, for not throwing my phone into the river.*

Walt flat-out refused for two weeks.

But they kept writing them. And slowly, they got more specific, and more real.

Priya, three weeks in: *Thank you, me, for telling my manager the deadline wasn't realistic, even though my voice shook.*

Theo: *Thank you, me, for posting the video even though the audio was bad, because Elijah needed to know about chain wear before his bike breaks.*

Lena: *Thank you, me, for leaving the office at 5 and making it to Jordan's game. He saw me in the stands. He pretended he didn't, but he did.*

And Walt, finally, in his clipboard handwriting, in week five: *Thanks, Walt, for getting up. Some days it's a lot. You keep doing it.* He didn't read it out loud. He handed the clipboard to me after everyone else had left and let me read it, then took it back and walked out to his truck without a word. I'll never forget it.

Here's the trick that makes it work: **thank yourself for effort, not results.** "Thank you, me, for getting the promotion" is nice, but it only works when you get promotions. "Thank you, me, for preparing for that interview even though I was scared" works every time — even the times you don't get the job. You always control the effort. So you can always say thank you for it.

There's another trick, if you're stuck. Picture yourself from the outside. Picture a friend who had your exact day. Woke up tired. Dealt with the boss. Fed the kids. Answered the emails. Didn't scream at anyone, or did and then apologized. What would you say to that friend? You'd say, "Wow, you did a lot today. Thanks for hanging in." Say that to yourself. Same words. You're the friend. You're also the one who needs it.

Try this: Tonight, after your three things, add: "*Thank you, me, for ____.*" Thank yourself for one effort, not one result. If you can't think of one, thank yourself for reading this chapter. That counts. You're trying. Trying is the whole thing.

CHAPTER 18

Thank You, You

Saying thank you out loud to another person is one of the cheapest, fastest, most powerful things a human can do, and almost nobody does it enough. Why? Because we think it'll be awkward. We think they'll be embarrassed, or they'll think we're weird, or they already know, so why say it. And every one of those fears is wrong. Researchers have tested this: people who write thank-you notes consistently underestimate how happy the person getting it will be, and overestimate how awkward it'll feel. It's the liking gap again, wearing a different hat. The other person wants to hear it more than you think. So say it. Out loud. Specifically. Today. It costs nothing and it might be the best thing that happens to them all week.

In 2018 two researchers at the University of Chicago, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley, ran a set of experiments that should be printed on every refrigerator in the world. They asked people to write a short letter of gratitude to someone who'd made a difference in their lives. Before sending it, the writers predicted how the recipient would feel: How surprised? How happy? How awkward?

Then they sent the letters and asked the recipients.

The writers got it wrong in the same direction every time. They underestimated how positive the recipients would feel. They underestimated how surprised the recipients would be by what they wrote. And they overestimated how awkward the recipients

would feel. The recipients were *delighted*. The awkwardness the writers were dreading was mostly in their own heads.

And here's the sad part the researchers pointed out: because we misjudge how good a thank-you will feel to the other person, we don't send them. We hold back the single easiest kindness available to us because we've miscalculated.

There's an older study too. In 2005, Martin Seligman and his colleagues tested a handful of exercises that were supposed to make people happier. One was called the **gratitude visit**: write a letter to someone who was especially kind to you but whom you never properly thanked, and then deliver it in person — read it to them, out loud. Of everything they tested, the gratitude visit produced the biggest immediate jump in happiness. It faded after about a month, which tells you something: it's not a one-time vaccine. It's a vitamin. You have to keep taking it.

Lena, the people-pleaser, was the natural at this. She thanked people constantly. "Thanks so much!" "You're the best!" "Thank you thank you thank you!" But when I asked her to write one specific gratitude letter, she froze.

"I say thank you all the time," she said.

"You say *thanks*," I said. "That's different. 'Thanks' is a handshake. A thank-you letter is a hug."

The difference is specificity. "Thanks for everything" says nothing. "Thank you for the night you sat with me in the hospital parking lot in 2019 and didn't say anything, just handed me a Kit Kat" says *everything*. The specifics are the gift. They show the person that you saw them — not their general niceness, but one particular thing they did that mattered.

Lena wrote her letter to her high school English teacher, a woman named Mrs. Okafor, who had once kept her after class — not to

scold her, but to tell her that her essay about her parents' divorce was the bravest thing she'd read that year. Lena was fifteen. Nobody at home had said a word about the divorce. Mrs. Okafor was the first adult who had.

Lena found her on social media — retired, seventy-four, living two hours away — and mailed the letter. She didn't hear anything for two weeks and was sure she'd made it weird.

(Liking gap. Kumar and Epley. Known sensor bias. Add 20 percent.)

Then a card came. Handwritten, in shaky cursive. It said that Mrs. Okafor had read the letter at her kitchen table four times, and then called her own daughter to read it to her over the phone. *I taught for thirty-one years,* it said. *I always wondered if any of it stuck.*

Lena read this to Room B and had to stop twice.

"I almost didn't send it," she said.

They all almost don't send it. That's the whole point.

Here's how to write a thank-you that lands:

Name the specific thing. Not "you were always there for me" — *what* did they do, *when*?

Say what it did for you. "Because of that, I…" This is the part people skip, and it's the part that matters most. They want to know it mattered.

Don't ask for anything. No "and also, could you…" No "let's catch up soon!" if you don't mean it. A thank-you with a request attached is an invoice.

Keep it short. Three to five sentences can be plenty. You're not writing a eulogy. You're handing someone a flower.

Priya, who had trouble with the Appreciation angle more than anyone, did hers at work. She wrote a one-paragraph note to a junior developer, a quiet guy named Sam, thanking him for a fix he'd made three months earlier that had saved her a weekend of re-testing. She'd never mentioned it. Nobody had. He'd fixed it at 11 p.m. on a Thursday without being asked.

Sam replied with a single line: *Nobody has ever said thank you for a bug fix before*. Then, the next morning, there was a box of donuts on Priya's desk with a sticky note that said *for the feature report*. He'd overheard her explaining it to someone.

That was the beginning of something for Priya. Hold on to it. It comes back.

Try this: Think of one person who did something specific that mattered to you, and who you never properly thanked. Write them three to five sentences: what they did, what it did for you, and thanks. Send it. Don't wait for the perfect moment. The perfect moment is the one where you hit send.

CHAPTER 19

Thank God, the Universe, or the Chatbot

Some gratitude doesn't have an obvious address. The sunset. The fact that you woke up. The stranger who returned your wallet and left before you could get their name. The way your kid laughed at breakfast. Who do you thank for those? For thousands of years, the answer was easy: you thanked God, or the gods. And that's still a great answer for a lot of people. But if that's not you — if you're agnostic, or atheist, or just not sure — don't skip the thank-you because you don't know where to mail it. Thank the universe. Thank life. Thank the sun for doing its sun thing. Honestly, you can thank an AI these days, and people do. Here's the secret: it matters less who receives the thank-you than that you say it. The thank-you is mostly for you. It's a muscle, not a letter. And muscles don't care who's holding the weights.

Walt gave me the hardest time about this one, as expected.

"Who am I supposed to thank for the tomatoes?" he said. "June planted them. June's gone. The sun? The sun doesn't care. It's a ball of gas."

"Did you thank June?" I asked.

He looked at me for a long time. "She's dead."

"So was Marcus's grandmother. He thanks her every night."

Walt turned to Marcus, who nodded. "Every night," Marcus said. "On the curb. With a double."

Walt turned his hearing aid down. Then, after a long minute, back up.

"Does it feel stupid?" he asked Marcus.

"Yeah," said Marcus. "For like a week. Then it doesn't."

That was all the persuading Walt needed. Not from me. From another guy who'd buried someone.

The next week, Walt reported that he'd started saying "Thanks, June" when he picked tomatoes in the morning. Just that. Under his breath, so the neighbors wouldn't hear. "It's not that I think she can hear me," he said. "I'm an atheist. I know what I know." He paused. "But it's like closing a circuit. There's current that's been sitting there with nowhere to go. Saying it out loud gives it a ground."

Walt was a machinist, but sometimes I think he was also a poet who'd been tricked into working at a plant.

Here's what I've learned about thanking things that can't thank you back.

God, if you believe. Wonderful. You've got a ready-made address and a few thousand years of practice built into your tradition. Use it. Prayers of thanks are among the oldest forms of gratitude humans have. You don't need me.

The universe, if you're in-between. Plenty of people find this works. "Thanks, universe" for the parking spot. It sounds silly. It's supposed to. The universe is big enough not to mind.

The people behind the thing. This is my favorite for atheists like Walt. For every good thing in your life, there's a chain of humans

behind it. The tomatoes: June, who planted them; the seed company; the people who bred the variety a hundred years ago; the farmer who grew the seed. Your morning coffee: the grower in Colombia, the person who roasted it, the trucker who drove it, the barista. You'll never meet most of them. Thank them anyway. "Thanks, whoever roasted this." It's a way of noticing that you are held up by a web of strangers.

Things. Your car that started in the cold. Your knees that still bend. Your phone that died exactly as you got home. People laugh, but there's a long tradition of this, too — thanking your tools, your house, your shoes when you take them off. It's not that the shoes care. It's that noticing them changes how you live with them.

AI. I'll say it, because people ask. Yes, you can thank a chatbot. Lots of people say please and thank you to AI assistants, partly out of habit and partly because it just feels right. Does the machine need it? Not in the way a person does. But if you're the kind of person who says thank you to everything — the machine, the dog, the bus driver, the sun — you're practicing a way of being. Every thank-you, even to something that can't feel it, is a rep for the muscle. Theo, who spends half his life talking to an AI to help write video scripts, started ending every session with "thanks, that helped." "It's mostly for me," he admitted. "It reminds me that I didn't do it all alone."

That's exactly it. Gratitude is how you remind yourself you didn't do it all alone. You never have. Nobody has.

And here's a thought, especially for the atheists and agnostics, and I'll pick it up properly in Chapter 24: notice how *good* it feels to have somewhere to send the thanks. Notice the little release, like setting down a heavy bag. That feeling is your brain doing what it's built to do. You don't have to believe anything in particular to let it.

Try this: Today, thank three things that can't thank you back. One person who isn't around (gone, far away, or a stranger you'll never meet). One object. And one big thing — God, the universe, life, the sun, whatever word works for you. Out loud if you can. Notice which one feels the most natural. That might be your address for the big thank-yous.

CHAPTER 20

Air It Out

Gratitude that skips the hard stuff is like putting air freshener in a room where something died. It smells like pine for about an hour, and then it smells like pine *and* something died, which is worse. Real appreciation isn't about pretending everything is fine. It's about clearing the air so there's room to notice what's good. That's why the family dinner metaphor matters so much. The reason dinners get better over time isn't that everyone starts pretending. It's that things get said. The grudge from 2011 finally gets brought up, and talked about, and set down. The room gets lighter because something got aired out, not because someone sprayed perfume over it. So if your gratitude practice keeps bumping into anger, grief, resentment or fear — good. That means you're at the real table. Let it out first. Then say thank you.

There's a whole body of research on getting things out, starting with a psychologist named James Pennebaker in the 1980s. He had people write, for fifteen or twenty minutes a day over a few days, about the most upsetting experiences of their lives — not just what happened, but how they felt about it, their deepest thoughts and emotions. Other people wrote about something neutral, like their plans for the day. In Pennebaker's early work and many studies since, the people who wrote about the hard stuff tended to visit the doctor less often in the months that followed, and in many studies reported feeling better overall. Not every study finds the same results, and the effects are usually modest. But the basic idea has

held up surprisingly well: putting a painful experience into words seems to help us digest it.

It's not exactly gratitude. It's the step before gratitude. It's clearing the table so there's room for the meal.

Theo needed this more than he would have admitted.

When I first asked him to try thanking himself, he wrote, as you remember, *thank you, me, for not throwing my phone into the river.* That was a joke. Sort of. But a few weeks in, his feature reports started getting short and sharp, like he was writing them with his teeth clenched. 1. *Video posted.* 2. *Fixed a derailleur.* 3. *Whatever.*

"Something's stuck," I said to him after Room B one night, while he was folding chairs.

"Nothing's stuck."

"Okay."

He folded two more chairs. Then he said, "My dad thinks I'm a loser."

His dad had wanted him to finish college. Engineering, specifically, because Theo had always been good with mechanical things. When Theo dropped out, his dad had said a sentence that Theo had been carrying around ever since: *You're going to fix bikes for the rest of your life? That's not a career, that's a hobby for retirees.*

"Every time I write 'I'm grateful for my channel,'" Theo said, "I hear him say 'hobby for retirees.' And then I can't."

So I gave him the Pennebaker assignment. Twenty minutes, three nights in a row. Write about your dad. Everything. Not to send — just to get it out. The anger, the hurt, the things you wish you'd said, the things you're scared are true.

He did it in a voice memo, not writing. Walking around his neighborhood at night, talking into his phone. Twenty-five minutes the first night. Thirty the second. On the third night, he said, he got about ten minutes in and started talking about when he was eight, and his dad had taught him to fix a flat tire in the driveway, and they'd done it wrong and had to do it three times and his dad laughed so hard he sat down on the concrete.

"I forgot about that," Theo said. "I forgot he was the one who taught me."

That's what airing out does. You open the window to let the bad smell out, and sometimes a good one blows in that you'd forgotten was there.

The next week Theo's feature report included: *Thank you, Dad, for the flat tire. Even if you don't know it, you're why I do this.* He didn't send it to his dad. Not yet. But he wrote it. And the "hobby for retirees" voice, he said, had gotten quieter. Not gone. Quieter. "Like it's in another room now."

Here's how to air things out without getting lost in them:

Give it a container. Fifteen or twenty minutes. A timer. A notebook or a voice memo. When the timer goes off, stop. You're opening a window, not knocking down the walls.

Write to get it out, not to send. This isn't a letter. Nobody reads it. You can burn it, delete it, or keep it in a drawer. The point is the putting-into-words.

Then do one AAH. Empty the lungs. Close the portal. Whatever you just stirred up, let some of it out with the breath.

Then say one thank-you. Even a tiny one. Not to cover over what you wrote — to put something else on the table next to it. The anger and the gratitude can sit side by side. They're both family.

And one serious note. If airing out brings up something too big — trauma, grief that's swallowing you, thoughts of hurting yourself — that's not a sign to push through alone. That's a sign to bring in a professional. A therapist is someone whose whole job is helping you sit at the hard table. Calling one is not failing at this book. It's doing it right.

Try this: Pick one thing that keeps blocking your gratitude. Set a timer for fifteen minutes. Write or talk about it — everything, unfiltered, not to send. When the timer goes off, stop, do one AAH, and write one thank-you. Any thank-you. Then close the notebook and go do something with your hands.

CHAPTER 21

The Ledger

If you want to know whether counting your blessings actually does anything, you'll be pleased to know that somebody literally checked. Researchers took ordinary people, split them into groups, and had one group write down things they were grateful for while the others wrote about hassles, or just about neutral events. They kept it up for weeks, tracking moods, health, sleep, even how much exercise people got. And the grateful group tended to come out ahead — happier, more positive, in some cases more connected to other people. It's not magic. The effects aren't enormous. But they're real, and they're cheap, and you can start tonight. A gratitude list is a ledger. It's a running account of what's going right. And like any account, if you never write anything down, you'll be convinced you're broke.

The study is from 2003, by Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. It's called "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens," which might be the best academic paper title of all time.

They ran three experiments. In the first two, college students were randomly split into groups. One group wrote down up to five things they were grateful for. One wrote down hassles — irritations, annoyances. One wrote about neutral events, or about ways they were better off than others. In the first study they did it weekly for ten weeks; in the second, daily for two weeks. In the third study, they worked with adults who had neuromuscular

diseases — people dealing with real, ongoing physical challenges — and had them do a daily gratitude list for three weeks, compared to a group that didn't.

Across the studies, the gratitude groups did better on a range of measures — most consistently, they reported more positive feelings. In the first study, the gratitude group also felt better about their lives overall, was more optimistic about the coming week and reported exercising more. In the third, with the adults with neuromuscular disease, the gratitude group reported more positive mood, felt more connected to others and slept better — and their spouses, asked separately, saw them as happier too.

Not everything changed. Gratitude lists are not a cure for anything. But the direction was clear, and the cost was a few minutes of writing.

I love the word *ledger* for this, and so did Priya, because it sounds like accounting, and she trusted accounting. A ledger is where you write down what came in and what went out. Most of us keep a very detailed ledger of what's gone *out* — every loss, every mistake, every unpaid emotional debt. Almost nobody keeps the ledger of what's come in. So when we check our balance, we always think we're overdrawn.

The gratitude ledger fixes the books.

By now, a couple of months into Room B, Priya had been doing her feature report every night. She'd also, quietly, been doing something else: going back and *reading* them. Every Sunday. The whole week.

"It's weird," she told us. "During the week, I always feel like it's bad. Every day, something broke. But on Sunday, when I read the reports in a row, it's like… the week was fine? Good, even? The bugs

were real but they were small. And there were all these features I'd forgotten about."

"Your brain logged the bugs and dropped the features," I said.

"It's a logging error," she said, and laughed. "My memory has a logging error. It only writes failures to disk."

That's negativity bias, in software-tester language. The brain stores bad events with more weight than good ones. It's not your fault — it's how we're built — but it means your memory of last week is a badly biased sample. The ledger corrects the sample. It's the backup copy.

And then Priya did something that changed her whole year.

She took the feature-report idea to work. Not as a gratitude thing — her team would have laughed her out of the building. As a QA thing. She proposed that at the end of each sprint, alongside the usual bug report, the team would also write a "features that held" report: things that had been tested and worked, fixes that had stood up, people who'd caught problems early. "We spend 100 percent of our meetings on what broke," she wrote in her proposal. "We have no data on what's working, which means we have no idea which practices to keep."

Her manager loved it. Not because of gratitude. Because of *data*. The team started doing it. And something happened that Priya hadn't predicted: the meetings got lighter. People started naming each other. "Sam's fix held through two releases." "Jess caught the login thing before it shipped." Sam — the donut guy — told her it was the first time in two years he'd felt like his work was visible.

"I accidentally did a gratitude practice on twelve engineers," Priya told Room B, "and none of them know."

That's the secret life of the ledger. It starts as a private notebook and ends up changing the temperature of every room you walk into. Because once you get good at noticing what's working, you can't stop. And people can feel it. They can feel being noticed.

Remember in Chapter 12 I said Priya's people took longer to find, and surprised her? This was it. Her address wasn't a new job or a side project. It was the team she already had. Twelve engineers who'd spent years only hearing about their failures. She'd been sitting next to her people the whole time. She'd just been reporting the wrong things to them.

Try this: Next Sunday, read every feature report from the week in one sitting. Notice how the week feels on paper versus how it felt in your memory. If the paper wins — if the week was better than you remembered — you've just caught your own logging error. Write that down too.

PART FOUR

Hope — Keep Doing What You're Doing

CHAPTER 22

Hope Is a Fact You Decide to Keep

Hope isn't a mood. If it were a mood, it would come and go with the weather, with your blood sugar, with whether your team won on Sunday. Hope, the angle, is something steadier: the fact, and the strong belief, that you can keep doing what you're doing. Not that everything will turn out perfectly. Not that you'll get rich, or famous, or that the person who left will come back. Just that tomorrow you can show up again. Serve again. Say thank you again. That's it. That's the whole claim. And it's a claim you have to renew, on purpose, like a library card. You don't feel your way into it. You decide it, and then you act like it's true, and the acting makes it truer. Hope is the floor under the other two angles. Without it, Achievement feels pointless and Appreciation feels like saying goodbye.

Let's talk about what hope isn't, because there are a lot of counterfeits.

Hope isn't optimism about outcomes. "Everything will work out" is a nice sentence, but it's a promise nobody can keep. Some things won't work out. Marcus's grandmother died. Walt's wife died. The Pool Guy left a one-star review. If your hope depends on outcomes, the first bad outcome will knock it flat.

Hope isn't wishing. Wishing is passive. "I wish I had a food truck." Hope is active. "I can keep showing up at the table, and a truck might come out of that."

Hope isn't denial. You don't have to pretend things aren't hard. Hope is actually most useful when things are hard. Nobody needs hope on a sunny day with a full fridge.

So what is it? I think of it as **a decision about continuation.** Can I keep going? Yes. Then that's hope.

There's a kind of hope that sounds tiny but is actually huge: *I can do the next thing*. Not the whole thing. The next thing. Wake up. AAH. Coffee. Show up for my people. Feature report. Sleep. That loop is hope in action. You're betting, every morning, that the loop is worth running. And every time you run it, you collect a little evidence that it is.

Walt was the one who taught me the most about this angle, by not having any of it at first.

When June died, Walt's hope didn't fade. It stopped. Like a clock that someone forgot to wind. He told us that for the first year he just did things because they were the next thing: he ate because it was mealtime, slept because it was dark, mowed the lawn because the grass was long. "I wasn't hoping for anything," he said. "I was just maintaining the equipment."

"That's hope," I said.

He frowned. "That's not hope. That's habit."

"What made you keep mowing the lawn?"

He thought about it for a long time. "June liked it neat," he said. "And I figured… somebody's going to live here after me. Might as well leave it nice."

That's hope. It doesn't look like a sunrise. It looks like a sixty-seven-year-old man mowing a lawn for somebody who doesn't exist yet. It's the belief, barely conscious, that there's a tomorrow worth keeping things nice for.

When Walt started teaching at the makerspace, he told me later, something wound the clock back up. "Dee came back that second Saturday," he said, "and I thought, I've got to be here next Saturday too. She's going to come. I can't not be here." He paused. "It's not that I felt hopeful. It's that I had a reason to keep doing what I was doing. And then the feeling sort of caught up."

The feeling sort of caught up. That's how it works. Hope, the decision, comes first. Hope, the feeling, follows behind, like a dog that's been off sniffing something and finally notices you're walking away.

Here's a way to make the decision concrete. I call it the **library card**. Every morning, before your feet hit the floor (right after your one thank-you), you renew your card. You say, out loud or in your head:

"I *can keep doing this today*."

That's it. Not "today will be great." Not "everything will work out." Just: *I can keep doing this today.* Renewing the card. One day's checkout.

Some mornings you'll say it and mean it. Some mornings you'll say it and not believe a word of it. Say it anyway. A library card doesn't care whether you're excited to read. It just lets you in the door.

Try this: Tomorrow morning, after your first thank-you, renew your card: "I can keep doing this today." Say it whether you feel it or not. Then at night, in your feature report, add one line: *Did I keep doing it?* If yes, check the box. That's evidence. Evidence adds up.

CHAPTER 23

Why Believers Live Longer

Here's a strange, sturdy fact from the world of public health: people who regularly attend religious services tend, on average, to live longer than people who never do. It shows up in study after study, in different countries, across decades. We don't fully know why. Part of it is the community — believers have a built-in Room B every week. Part of it is behavior — many traditions discourage smoking and heavy drinking. Part of it is that healthier people find it easier to get to services in the first place. But part of it seems to be the believing itself: the deep, almost bodily sense that things are going to work out, that someone's watching over you, that your anxiety is not the last word. Which brings me to the point of this whole angle. You have to be almost religious about hope. Not necessarily about God. About the belief that you can keep going.

Let me give you the numbers, carefully, because I want to be honest about what they do and don't say.

In 1999, a group of demographers led by Robert Hummer published a study in the journal *Demography*, using national US health data. They found that people who never attended religious services had about 1.87 times the risk of dying during the follow-up period compared to people who attended more than once a week. Translated into life expectancy, that was roughly a seven-year difference at age twenty. Seven years. That's a big number.

In 2016, Shanshan Li, Tyler VanderWeele and colleagues at Harvard published a study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* following about 74,000 women in the Nurses' Health Study. Over sixteen years of follow-up, women who attended religious services more than once a week had a 33 percent lower risk of dying than women who never attended — even after the researchers adjusted for a long list of other factors.

And here's a related study that doesn't involve religion at all. In 2019, Lewina Lee and colleagues published research in *PNAS* using two big long-term studies — about 70,000 women from the Nurses' Health Study and about 1,400 men from a Veterans Affairs study. They looked at **optimism** — the general expectation that good things will happen. The most optimistic people lived, on average, 11 to 15 percent longer than the least optimistic, and had substantially higher odds of reaching age eighty-five. That held up even after accounting for health behaviors like smoking, diet and exercise.

Now, the honest caveats, because I promised: these are all observational studies. They show that these things go together, not that one definitely causes the other. Healthier people may find it easier to go to church. Optimistic people may simply have had easier lives. The researchers tried hard to account for that, but you can never fully rule it out.

But step back and look at the shape of it. Community. A sense of meaning. A belief that the future holds something good. Every one of those ingredients shows up again and again in the research on who lives long and well. And they're exactly what a religious tradition, at its best, provides on a weekly schedule. Religion is, among other things, a very old technology for keeping hope maintained. It's a church bell that rings every Sunday saying *renew your card.*

Walt bristled at this chapter, as I knew he would. “So I’m going to die seven years early because I don’t go to church?”

“No,” I said. “The church isn’t the magic. The church is a delivery system. What it’s delivering is people, meaning and hope. You can get those other ways.”

“Like what?”

“Like Saturdays at the makerspace,” I said. “Like Room B on Tuesdays. Like the clipboard in your garage.”

He was quiet for a while. Then he said, “June used to go to church. I’d drive her and sit in the truck and read the paper. Every Sunday for forty-one years.” He paused. “She used to come out of there lighter. Every single week. I always figured it was the singing.”

“Maybe it was,” I said. “Singing is just an AAH with a melody.”

He laughed — a real, surprised bark of a laugh. “She’d have liked you,” he said.

Here’s what I take from all this: **be almost religious about hope.** Whatever you believe, build yourself the same structure believers have. A regular time and place where you renew your hope (your morning library card). A community that meets on a schedule (your Room B, whatever it is). A practice of gratitude to something bigger (Chapter 19). And a story that says your life is part of something that continues past the bad days.

You don’t need to believe in anything supernatural to do that. But you do need to take it as seriously as a believer takes Sunday. You don’t skip it because you’re not in the mood. You go *especially* when you’re not in the mood. That’s the whole point of a ritual. It holds you up when you can’t hold yourself.

Try this: Look at your week and find your “Sunday” — one regular time, every week, when you do something that renews your hope

with other people around. A class, a group, a walk with a friend, a service, a pickup game, Room B. If you don't have one, that's your assignment this week: find one and put it on the calendar like it's church. Because, for our purposes, it is.

CHAPTER 24

Find Your God

Whether you're a believer, an agnostic or an atheist, there's a part of your mind that's built for hope. It reaches for something bigger than you. It wants to be watched over. It wants to know that someone, or something, has the big picture handled so you can focus on today. That part of you isn't a bug. It's not a weakness for gullible people. It's standard equipment, like the part of you that gets hungry or falls in love. It's literally designed, by evolution or God or both, to help with your anxieties. And it's silly — honestly, a little bit like removing your own smoke detector because you don't like the beeping — to brick up that door just because you're not sure about the theology. Find your god. Whatever that means for you. Then let that part of your brain do its job.

I need to be careful here, because people have strong feelings about God, and they should. I'm not telling you what to believe. If you have a faith, this chapter is simple: lean on it. Pray. Go to services. Let your tradition do what it has done for people for thousands of years. You don't need me to tell you that.

This chapter is mostly for the Walts. For the people who've decided, often for good reasons, that God isn't for them, and then — without noticing — shut down the whole part of themselves that knew how to be comforted.

Here's the thing I said to Walt, and that I'll say to you.

Your brain has a feature that makes it feel better when it believes someone bigger has things handled. You can see it in children, who are calmer when a parent is in the room, even if the parent isn't doing anything. You can see it in adults, who are calmer on a plane when the pilot's voice comes on and says, in that pilot voice, "Folks, we're going to have a bit of turbulence, nothing to worry about." The pilot hasn't changed the weather. But knowing someone competent is at the controls lets the passengers stop gripping the armrests.

That's what the god-shaped part of your brain does. It lets you stop gripping the armrests.

If you've decided there's no pilot, fine. But you still have the armrest-gripping problem. And the part of you that knows how to let go is just sitting there, unused, like a gym membership you're still paying for.

So what can an atheist use for a god?

I asked Room B. Here's what they came up with, over a few weeks.

Walt chose continuity. "I don't believe in heaven," he said. "But I believe in the next guy." He meant: the next machinist who'll stand at the lathe after him. The next owner of his house. Dee, and whoever Dee teaches. "Every part I ever made is still out there in some machine, running. Somebody's going to fix it someday. That's not God, but it's something bigger than me that keeps going. When I get scared, I think about that. The next guy." He said it gave him the same feeling June must have had walking out of church — "like I'm not the last one holding the wrench."

Theo chose his future self. Specifically, a version of himself at forty, who he imagined had a bike shop with a workbench by the window and kids coming in after school. "When I freak out, I ask what forty-year-old me would say. And he's always like, 'Dude,

chill. It works out. You're going to be fine.'" Is forty-year-old Theo real? Not yet. Does it matter? Not to the part of his brain that needs to hear "you're going to be fine" from someone who sounds like they know.

Priya chose the universe, in a very specific way. "There are like ten-to-the-eightieth atoms in the observable universe," she said, "and they've been doing physics for 13.8 billion years without me supervising. I figure they've got this." She said it as a joke. Then she said it wasn't a joke. When the 3 a.m. regression tests started, she'd AAH and think: *the atoms have got this*. "It's not that the universe cares about me," she said. "It's that it's not my job to hold it up."

Lena had a faith, sort of. She'd been raised Catholic and drifted away after the divorce, when she felt judged at her parish. She started going again — not every week, not to the same church, but to a small Episcopal church near her office on Wednesday mornings, where nobody knew her. "I just sit there," she said. "I don't even know if I believe it. But for forty minutes somebody else is in charge."

Marcus had his grandmother. He believed she was somewhere. He didn't need it explained. "She's around," he said, and that was that.

Five people. Five different gods, if you want to use that word for it — a God, a grandmother, the universe, the next guy, a future self. Every one of them did the same job: gave the anxious part of the brain somewhere to hand off the weight.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying "make up a fake god to trick yourself." I'm saying find the bigger thing you actually *do* believe in — and almost everyone believes in something bigger than themselves — and let yourself lean on it the way believers lean on God. Use the equipment you came with.

Try this: Finish this sentence: "*When I'm scared, it helps to remember that ____ is bigger than me and keeps going.*" Write three possible answers. God. The universe. Your kids. The next generation. Nature. The ocean. Your grandmother. The next guy. Pick the one that makes your shoulders drop a little. Next time the portal opens, AAH, and then remember that thing.

CHAPTER 25

The Five-Year-Old in the Passenger Seat

Here's an image I want you to keep. Inside you, right now, there's a five-year-old. The one you used to be. They didn't go anywhere. They're the one who panics when the boss sends a "can we talk?" email, who wants to cry when someone's mean, who gets excited about cake and scared of the dark. Most of us spend our adult lives either ignoring that kid or yelling at them to grow up. But you can't yell a five-year-old into being brave. What a five-year-old needs is a guardian — someone bigger, calmer, who holds their hand and says "I've got you, we're going to be okay." And that someone has to be you. Treat yourself as if you were five years old and needed a guardian. Because, in all the ways that matter when you're scared, you are.

I picture it like a car. You're driving — the grown-up you, the one with the license and the car insurance and the opinions about mortgage rates. And in the passenger seat, buckled into a booster, is five-year-old you. They don't get to drive. They're not in charge of directions. But they're in the car, and they're going everywhere you go, and they have feelings about all of it.

When something scary happens — the car in front slams on its brakes, a siren goes by, you take a wrong turn — the five-year-old screams. That's anxiety. That's the portal opening. And here's the

thing: if you, the driver, start screaming too, now *nobody's* driving the car. That's a panic attack. Two kids in a car and no grown-up.

The guardian's job is to keep driving and say, calmly, "I know. That was loud. We're okay. I've got the wheel."

It sounds absurd to talk to yourself like that. Until you try it.

Priya tried it first, at 3:14 a.m. She'd woken up with the regression tests running — *you're going to get laid off, you're going to end up alone* — and she'd done her AAHs, and the portal had mostly closed, but there was still this jittery feeling, like a phone vibrating somewhere in her chest. So she tried the five-year-old thing. She imagined herself at five — she said she could picture it exactly, her yellow raincoat, the gap in her teeth — and she imagined that kid had woken up from a nightmare. And she asked herself: what would I say to her?

"I'd never say 'you're going to get laid off,'" Priya told us. "That's insane. You don't say that to a five-year-old. I'd say, 'Hey, sweetie, it was just a bad dream. I'm right here. You're safe. Let's go back to sleep.'"

So she said that. To herself. Out loud, in a whisper, in the dark. *It was just a bad dream. I'm right here. You're safe.*

"And?" asked Lena.

"I felt so stupid," said Priya. "And then I fell asleep in about four minutes."

Here's why it works. When you're anxious, the scared part of you is not reachable by logic. You can't argue a five-year-old out of being scared of the dark by explaining that monsters are statistically unlikely. But you can comfort them. Tone of voice. Warmth. "I'm here." Those things get through when facts can't. And it turns out the scared part of an adult responds to the same things.

Kristin Neff, whom we met in Chapter 17, suggests a simple version of this in her work on self-compassion: put a hand on your chest, or hold one hand in the other, and say something kind to yourself — the kind of thing you'd say to a friend or a child. It sounds like nothing. For a lot of people, it's surprisingly powerful. Your body knows what a comforting hand feels like, even when the hand is your own.

Lena struggled with this one, and when she figured out why, it unlocked a lot.

"When I picture me at five," she said, "I don't want to comfort her. I want to tell her to stop crying. Because that's what my mother said. 'Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about.'" She said it in her mother's voice — and it was the same voice, she realized, that had shown up at her first gratitude dinner. *Well, somebody has to be.*

"So you learned to be the guardian you had," I said.

"Yeah."

"Was she a good guardian?"

Lena was quiet for a long time. Then she said, "She was a scared one."

That's the hard truth for a lot of us. When we try to parent our inner five-year-old, the only model we've got is the parenting we got. If that was warm and steady, great — you've got a template. If it was cold, or scared, or absent, or angry, then the first time you try to comfort yourself, you'll hear their voice come out of your mouth. It's not your fault. It's just the only recording you have.

Which means you have to make a new recording. That's what the next chapter is about.

Try this: Find a photo of yourself at around five years old. If you don't have one, close your eyes and picture yourself — what you wore, your haircut, the expression on your face. Look at that kid for a full minute. Then ask: *What does this kid need to hear today?* Say it to them. Out loud, if you can. Then notice: it's also what you need to hear.

CHAPTER 26

Raising Yourself

Here's something nobody told you when you turned eighteen: you're not done being raised. Your parents — whether they were wonderful, terrible or somewhere in the very wide middle — got you to a certain point and then handed you the keys. And from that moment, the job of raising you became yours. Forever. Every adult is raising themselves, every day, whether they know it or not. The only question is whether they're doing it on purpose. People with great parents still have to do it, because great parents can't follow you to college, or into your marriage, or to the hospital at 3 a.m. People with awful parents have to do it too, and often have to start from scratch. Raising yourself is what everyone has to do, regardless of parents. Nobody gets out of it. But everybody gets to decide what kind of guardian they're going to be.

I want to say something to the people who had hard childhoods, because this chapter can land heavily. It's not fair that you have to do more of this work than someone whose parents read them bedtime stories and came to every game. It's genuinely not. And you're allowed to be angry about that — that's Chapter 20, airing it out. But here's the hopeful part: you're not stuck with the parenting you got. You can give yourself what you didn't get. Late, sure. Imperfectly, definitely. But for real.

And to the people who had good childhoods: you're not off the hook either. Your parents raised a kid. Now someone has to raise the adult. That's you.

Lena became our guide on this, because she had the most work to do and she did it.

After the five-year-old chapter, she said, she realized she'd been raising herself the way her mother had raised her: with criticism, with *stop crying*, with an unspoken rule that love had to be earned by being good and easy and pleasant. "I've been running my mother's program," she said. "On myself. And on everybody else. That's why I'm a people-pleaser. I'm still trying to get her to say I'm good."

So she decided to write herself a new program. Literally — she wrote it down, like a set of house rules for a new kind of parent.

She read it to us. I'm sharing it with her permission (well, the imaginary permission of an imaginary person, but you get it):

> **Lena's House Rules (for raising Lena)**
>
> 1. You're allowed to cry. I'll sit with you.
> 2. You don't have to earn dinner. You get fed because you're here.
> 3. If someone doesn't like you, that's information, not a verdict.
> 4. You can say no. I'll back you up.
> 5. You get a bedtime. Phone off by 10:30.
> 6. When you mess up, we fix it, then we let it go. No re-runs.
> 7. I'm proud of you for trying. Even when it doesn't work.

"Number five is the hardest," she said, and everybody laughed, but she was serious. "My mother never gave me a bedtime. She just let me stay up until I collapsed. I've been doing that my whole adult life."

That's the funny, unglamorous thing about raising yourself. It's not mostly about deep emotional healing. A lot of it is just bedtimes. Vegetables. Drinking water. Going outside. Brushing your teeth. Not letting yourself eat cereal for dinner four nights in a row. The stuff a decent guardian does for a kid without thinking about it. Most of us would never let a five-year-old live the way we let ourselves live. We'd never keep a kid up until 2 a.m. scrolling, feed them only coffee until 3 p.m., and then yell at them for being cranky.

Here's how I'd break down raising yourself:

Feed yourself. Actual meals. At actual times. You'd never forget to feed a kid.

Put yourself to bed. A bedtime isn't a punishment. It's love with a clock on it.

Let yourself play. Kids need unstructured time to mess around. So do you. Theo's videos started as play. Walt's garden was June's play and became his. Play is not a reward for finishing your work. It's part of being raised.

Comfort yourself when you're scared. The five-year-old in the passenger seat. "I've got you."

Correct yourself without contempt. Good parents correct kids. They just don't humiliate them while doing it. "That wasn't okay. Let's fix it." Not "What is *wrong* with you?"

Be proud of yourself out loud. Thank-you-me. Chapter 17. Kids need to hear "I'm proud of you." So do adults. If nobody else is saying it, you say it.

Marcus heard Lena's house rules and went quiet, then said: "My grandma raised me. My mom was sick a lot, and my dad wasn't around. So it was Grandma." He thought for a minute. "I think I've

been raising myself the way she did, mostly. She was tough, but she fed everybody." He laughed. "Maybe that's why I'm out there feeding nurses at 2 a.m. I'm doing her parenting on the whole hospital."

That's the other side of this. If you had a good guardian — even one — you can borrow their voice. You can ask, *what would Grandma say right now?* and say that to yourself. Marcus did. He said Grandma's main parenting advice had been *eat something, then we'll talk*, and he found that it was correct about 80 percent of the time.

Try this: Write your own House Rules for raising yourself. Five to seven rules. Make them the rules a good guardian would set for a kid they loved. Include at least one boring one (bedtime, vegetables, water). Put the list somewhere you'll see it. Then follow one of them today.

CHAPTER 27

The Guardian's Job Description

If you're going to raise yourself, it helps to know what the job actually involves. Not the poster version — "love yourself!" — but the real, day-to-day job description, like you'd see on a want ad. Because a guardian isn't a cheerleader and isn't a drill sergeant. A guardian is something more boring and more powerful: the one who's *there*. Who notices when you're tired before you collapse. Who says no to the third coffee and yes to the nap. Who stands between you and the things that would hurt you, including, sometimes, you. Who believes in you on the days you can't. That last one is the core of the Hope angle. Hope, in the end, is what a good guardian gives a kid: the steady sense that someone has got them, and that they'll be okay to keep going.

Here's the job description, as written by Room B over a couple of Tuesdays. We put it on the whiteboard, in the clean section, and Priya formatted it like a real job posting because she couldn't help herself.

POSITION: Guardian (Full-Time, Permanent, Unpaid)
REPORTS TO: Nobody. You're the grown-up now.
RESPONSIBLE FOR: One (1) human, all ages simultaneously.

DUTIES:

- **Notice.** Check in on the kid several times a day. Tired? Hungry? Scared? Lonely? You can't fix what you don't notice.
- **Protect.** Say no to people and situations that hurt the kid. Including bosses, exes, and the kid's own 2 a.m. ideas.
- **Soothe.** When the kid panics, stay calm. AAH. "I've got you."
- **Feed, water, rest.** Non-negotiable. See House Rules.
- **Encourage.** Notice what the kid did right. Say it out loud.
- **Correct without contempt.** "That wasn't okay. Let's fix it." Never "What's wrong with you?"
- **Believe.** Hold the hope when the kid can't. Keep saying "we can keep going" until the kid believes it too.

QUALIFICATIONS: None required. Training is on the job.
HOURS: All of them.
BENEFITS: You get to be raised by someone who finally understands you.

Walt read it and said, "That's the best job posting I ever saw. I'd apply." Then, a second later: "I guess I already have the job."

That's the thing. You already have the job. You've had it since you were eighteen, or since earlier if your childhood made you grow up fast. The only question is whether you're showing up to work.

Let me focus on the last duty, because it's the heart of the Hope angle: **Believe.**

When you were little and scared, you didn't need your guardian to promise that everything would be perfect. You needed them to be calm. Their calm told you that the situation was survivable. A kid looks at a parent's face during a thunderstorm and reads it like a weather report: *Is this bad? How bad?* If the parent's face says "We're fine," the kid relaxes. If the parent's face says "PANIC," so does the kid.

Your inner kid reads your face too. When you're scared about money, or a diagnosis, or a breakup, the five-year-old inside is looking at the grown-up you for the weather report. And if you're screaming internally, the kid's screaming too.

So part of the guardian's job is to hold the hope *on purpose* — to be the calm face during the thunderstorm, even when you're not completely sure the roof will hold. Not by lying. By deciding. That's the library card from Chapter 22: "I can keep doing this today." It's the guardian talking to the kid.

Theo had a thunderstorm in September.

His dad had found the channel. Theo didn't know how — maybe a cousin had sent it. And his dad had left a comment. Not a mean one, exactly. It just said: *When are you going back to school?*

Theo saw it at work and went into the back room of the bike shop and sat on an overturned crate and, he told us, "basically had the entire freakout. All of it. I'm a loser, he's right, I should quit, I should go back to school, I'm wasting my life, I'm nineteen and I fix bikes in a video nobody watches."

"What did you do?" asked Marcus.

"I did the AAH," Theo said, "like twenty times. The guy I work with thought I was having an asthma attack." Everyone laughed. "And then I did the five-year-old thing. And — this is so weird — I didn't picture five-year-old me. I pictured Elijah." The twelve-year-old

who'd sent the video of himself fixing his chain. "I pictured if Elijah's dad left a comment like that on *his* video. And I was so mad. I was like, that kid is doing amazing. He's figuring stuff out on his own. He's not wasting anything."

"So what did you say to yourself?" I asked.

"I said what I'd say to Elijah. 'You're doing amazing. You're figuring it out. Keep going.'" He shrugged, embarrassed. "And then I kind of… believed it? Not all the way. Like 60 percent."

"Sixty percent is plenty," said Walt. "Sixty percent gets the job done."

Theo didn't reply to the comment that day. He waited a week. Then he wrote back: *Not right now, Dad. But you're the one who taught me to fix a flat. Remember the driveway*? His dad didn't answer. But the next week, Theo noticed his dad had subscribed.

"That's subscriber 1,400-and-something," Theo said. "But it's the one I keep looking at."

That's the guardian at work. Not fixing the storm. Not making the dad come around. Just holding the line inside — *we can keep going* — long enough for the kid to keep doing what he does. And sometimes, when you hold the line long enough, the weather changes on its own.

Try this: Three times today — morning, afternoon, night — do a guardian check-in. Ask the kid: *Tired*? *Hungry*? *Scared*? *Lonely*? Answer honestly. Then do one small thing about whatever came up. A glass of water. A text to a friend. A five-minute walk. A sentence of comfort. That's the job. Clock in.

CHAPTER 28

Will and Ways

Hope has two legs, and you need both to walk. The first leg is *will* — the energy, the belief that you can do this, the get-up-and-go. The second leg is *ways* — the paths, the plans, the routes you can actually take to get where you're going. A person with all will and no ways is a car revving in neutral: loud, hot, going nowhere. A person with all ways and no will is a perfectly good map in the glovebox of a car with no gas. Real hope is both. "I can keep doing this" (will) and "here's how" (ways). If your hope keeps collapsing, check which leg is shorter. Usually you can feel it. And the good news is that both legs can be strengthened, one step at a time.

This isn't my idea — it comes from a psychologist named C. R. Snyder, who spent much of his career at the University of Kansas studying hope like a scientist rather than a poet. In 1991, he and his colleagues published a measure of hope and described it as having two parts: **agency** (the sense that you can get yourself moving toward your goals and keep going) and **pathways** (the sense that you can come up with ways to get there, including backup routes when the first one's blocked). Snyder liked to call them "the will and the ways." In his view, these two parts feed each other: finding a path gives you energy, and having energy makes it easier to look for paths.

What I love about Snyder's version is that it turns hope from a feeling into a skill. You can't make yourself feel hopeful. But you

can practice finding paths. And you can practice keeping your motor running.

Here's what the two legs looked like in Room B.

Marcus had plenty of will — once he started. But he had no ways for the next step. The doubles table was working. Regulars, a little money, Tasha bringing him coffee. But he wanted a truck, a real one, and every time he thought about it his brain just said, *trucks cost sixty thousand dollars*, and that was the end of the thought. Will, revving. No ways.

So we did a ways exercise. I asked him to list ten different paths to a truck — any paths, even stupid ones. Here's what he came up with:

1. Save for six years.
2. Bank loan (probably no).
3. Small-business microloan (didn't know they existed until Lena told him).
4. Buy a used truck that needs work (Walt immediately volunteered).
5. Partner with someone who has a truck.
6. Ask the hospital if he could set up in their parking lot, officially, with a cart instead of a truck.
7. Crowdfund from his regulars.
8. Rent a truck by the week to test the idea.
9. Cater hospital staff events to build up money.
10. Win the lottery.

"Number ten's a long shot," said Walt.

"Number ten is always there to make you laugh," I said. "That's important. The point isn't that every path is good. The point is that there are ten, not zero. Your brain told you there were zero."

Marcus picked three — 3, 4 and 9 — and started on all of them. The microloan program had a class at — I swear — Room A of our library. Walt and Theo spent four Saturdays looking at used step vans with him. And the hospital, because Tasha had been talking him up for months, asked if he'd cater the ER's holiday party. Then the ICU's. Then a retirement for a nurse who'd worked nights for thirty-one years, who told him at the party that doubles reminded her of the woman who used to bring breakfast to the ER desk when she was a young nurse.

"Did she know my grandma?" Marcus asked us, in Room B, wide-eyed.

We'll never know for sure. But I know that by the end of the year, Marcus had a truck.

Priya had the opposite problem. All ways, no will. She was a world-class planner. She had spreadsheets for everything. But when she thought about the future, the will just wasn't there — she'd plan and plan and then not do anything, because a voice said *what's the point, it'll go wrong anyway*. Map in the glovebox. No gas.

For will, Snyder's ideas suggest things like recalling past successes and using encouraging self-talk. I suggested something simpler: look at the reps tracker. All those green checkmarks — every AAH, every feature report, every Tuesday. "That's evidence you can keep going," I said. "You already have. Two hundred times."

She looked at the spreadsheet for a long time. "I've literally never missed a feature report," she said, surprised. "Not one night since March."

"So you have will," I said. "You just never counted it."

Will is often hiding in your history. You've kept going through things before. You've gotten up on mornings you didn't want to.

The guardian's job is to remind the kid of that: *Hey. Remember last winter? You thought you couldn't. You did.* Every past rep is fuel.

Here's the simple practice:

For will: list your reps. Write down five times you kept going when you didn't think you could. Big or small. That's your proof of agency. Read it when your motor sputters.

For ways: list ten paths. When you're stuck on a goal, write ten ways you could get there. Ten, not three. The first three are the obvious ones your brain already rejected. Somewhere around number six or seven, it gets creative. Make number ten ridiculous, to keep it light.

Then take one step on one path. Not the whole path. One step. Make a call. Send an email. Look at one used truck.

Will and ways. Two legs. Hope walks.

Try this: Pick one thing you've been hopeless about. Write your will list (five times you kept going) and your ways list (ten paths, one ridiculous). Circle the path that looks most doable. Take one step on it before Friday.

PART FIVE

Adds Up

CHAPTER 29

When One Angle Hogs the Room

Every triangle drifts. You can draw a perfect one in January and by March one angle's grown fat and the other two are squeezed into corners like passengers on a crowded bus. That's normal. Life pushes on the shape constantly — a new job inflates Achievement, a loss drains Hope, a good stretch makes Appreciation easy and you get lazy about the others. The goal isn't a triangle that never changes. The goal is noticing when it's lopsided and nudging it back. Remember: the total is always 180. If one angle is huge, it's eating from the others. You don't need to make your life bigger. You just need to share the space more fairly. Think of it less like a renovation and more like rearranging furniture.

Here are the most common lopsided triangles, what they feel like, and how to nudge them. Room B diagnosed every one of these in themselves at some point.

Achievement hogging the room.
What it feels like: Busy, productive, tired, oddly empty. You keep winning and it doesn't land. Weekends feel like a waste. You can't remember the last time you said thank you for something without it being a transaction.
Who had it: Marcus, in the summer, working the steakhouse and the table and catering and truck-shopping, sleeping four hours a night. Tasha told him he looked "like a raccoon that lost a fight," which is apparently her highest medical concern.

The nudge: Go to the Appreciation angle. Do a feature report tonight. Then say one thank-you to someone in your "people." Then, honestly, take a day off. Marcus quit the steakhouse in September — on good terms, two weeks' notice. The head chef shook his hand and said, "I was wrong about the doubles." Marcus said he almost fainted.

Appreciation hogging the room.
What it feels like: Content but stuck. Grateful for everything, including things you shouldn't have to be grateful for. You talk yourself out of wanting more. "At least…" is your favorite phrase.
Who had it: Lena, early on. She was grateful to every difficult client, grateful to her ex for "only" being late with child support twice, grateful to the job that ate her evenings. That's not gratitude. That's settling, dressed up for church.
The nudge: Go to Achievement. Ask "who do I actually want to serve?" and make one move toward them. Then go to Hope: renew the library card — "I can keep doing *this*" — and make sure "this" is something you chose.

Hope hogging the room.
What it feels like: Dreamy, optimistic, a little stuck. Lots of "someday." Lots of plans in your notes app. Not much on the reps tracker.
Who had it: Theo, before Room B. "Someday I'll have a shop." "Someday the channel will take off." Hope like a balloon on a string.
The nudge: Go to Achievement. Do one rep today for your people. Then another tomorrow. Turn "someday" into "Sunday." Hope with reps under it becomes a plan.

Achievement starving.
What it feels like: Aimless. You're not sure what you're for. Days blur. You might be grateful and hopeful in a general way, but there's no address.

Who had it: Walt, after retirement and June. Appreciation was alive in the tomatoes. Hope was faint but there. Achievement had nowhere to go.
The nudge: Chapter 4. Who would you love to make life a little better for? Then Chapter 10 — one small rep, same time every week.

Appreciation starving.
What it feels like: Everything is broken. You can see every flaw. Even good days feel like near-misses. You're tired in a way sleep doesn't fix.
Who had it: Priya. The bug-finder.
The nudge: The feature report. Thank-you-me. The Sunday ledger read-through. Tiny, daily, boring. It works on the slow-cooker timeline, not the microwave.

Hope starving.
What it feels like: What's the point? You can do things and notice good things, but none of it seems to be going anywhere. The future looks like a brick wall.
Who had it: Marcus, the first night in Room B, and Walt, the first year without June.
The nudge: Chapters 22 to 28, in any order. The library card. Your "Sunday." Your god, whatever that is. The five-year-old. Will and ways. And if it's very bad, a human professional — Hope starving for weeks is the one I'd never try to fix with a book alone.

One more pattern, the sneakiest one:

The flat triangle. All three angles have been squeezed so that one is basically 180 and the others are basically zero. You're not lopsided — you're a line. This is what burnout looks like. Or grief. Or depression. It feels like there's no shape to your life at all, just one long flat thing you're dragging yourself along.

The nudge for a flat line isn't a big change. It's the smallest possible one. One AAH. One thank-you. One "I can keep doing this today." Just enough to lift one corner a degree or two. A triangle with angles of 176, 2 and 2 is skinny. But it's a triangle. It has a shape. And shapes can grow.

Try this: Redo the napkin from Chapter 2. Draw the triangle, label A, A, H, and write how big each angle feels today. Compare it to the first one. Which angle grew? Which shrank? Pick the hungriest angle and do one thing for it before bed.

CHAPTER 30

The Daily 180

All of this — the breathing, the serving, the thanking, the hoping — can feel like a lot. Thirty chapters is a lot. So here's the whole book squeezed into about ten minutes a day. I call it the Daily 180. It's a routine that touches all three angles, every day, so the triangle never drifts too far. It's not the only way to do it. But it's a way, and it works, and the people in Room B still do it. Think of it like brushing your teeth. Nobody brushes their teeth because they feel inspired. They do it because it's what you do. That's the goal: to make Achievement, Appreciation and Hope as boring and automatic as brushing your teeth, so they're there for you on the days when you can't think straight.

Here it is.

Morning (about 2 minutes)

1. One AAH, before your feet hit the floor. Big breath in, top it off, long loud exhale. Say the method without saying it: *Achievement. Appreciation. Hope.*

2. One thank-you. To anyone or anything. "Thanks for the bed." "Thanks, Grandma." "Thanks, atoms."

3. Renew your library card. "I can keep doing this today."

During the day (whenever, a few minutes total)

4. One rep for your people. One thing — however small — for the people you've chosen to serve. A video. A table. A class. A call to a first-time buyer. A bug report that also names what worked.

5. One thank-you to a real person. Specific. "Thanks for the thing you did on Tuesday — it helped because…"

6. Guardian check-ins. A couple of times: *Tired*? *Hungry*? *Scared*? *Lonely*? Do one small thing about the answer.

Night (about 5 minutes)

7. Feature report. Three things that worked today.

8. Thank you, me. For one effort. Not one result.

9. Did I keep doing it? Check the box.

10. Five AAHs. Close the portal before sleep. If the portal opens at 3:14 a.m., five more. Then: *It was just a bad dream. I'm right here. You're safe.*

Weekly

Sunday: Read the week's feature reports in one sitting. Fix the logging error.

Your "Sunday": Whatever your regular hope-renewal is — a service, a class, Room B, a walk with a friend. Go especially when you don't feel like it.

Napkin check: Draw the triangle. Which angle's hungry? Feed it next week.

That's it. That's the whole book.

When I gave this list to Room B, printed on a single index card, here's what each of them did with it.

Marcus taped it to the dashboard of his truck. (Yes — the truck. A 2011 step van Walt and Theo helped him rebuild, white with a hand-painted sign that says **THIRD SHIFT DOUBLES**. More in the epilogue.)

Priya made it into a spreadsheet, obviously, with conditional formatting that turns each row green when it's done. She shared it with her team, minus the AAH part — "they're not ready for the AAH," she said — and three of them started using the feature report on their own.

Walt put it on his clipboard, under the MAINT LOG.

Lena stuck it on the fridge, next to her House Rules, and her daughter Maya started doing the feature report too. "Her first one said 'Mom was home for dinner,'" Lena said. "I had to go into the bathroom for a minute."

And Theo made a video about it. Not a bike video — he said it was the first non-bike thing he'd ever posted. It was called *How I Stopped Wanting to Quit*, it was nine minutes long, and he did the AAH on camera, badly, while sitting on a crate in the back of the bike shop. It got more views than anything he'd ever posted. The top comment was from a user named grandpa_rides_again. It said: *Thank you, young man. I needed this today.*

Try this: Make your own Daily 180 card. Copy the list above onto an index card, or a phone note, or a sticky. Cross out anything that doesn't fit you and replace it with something that does. Then start tomorrow morning, before your feet hit the floor, with one big AAH.

EPILOGUE

A Year in Room B

A year after the first Tuesday, we had a party in Room B. Same oatmeal carpet. Same folding chairs — more of them now; there were nineteen people in the room by then, because people bring people. Same coffee urn, which still tasted like pennies and still let out its long hissing exhale at random moments, which we'd started calling "the urn's AAH." Somebody had finally erased the whiteboard all the way, for the first time since 2014, and drawn one big triangle on it with A, A, H at the corners. In the middle, someone had written 180 and drawn a lopsided heart around it.

Here's where everybody landed.

Marcus parked THIRD SHIFT DOUBLES outside the library, which is technically not allowed, but the librarian had been one of his customers since the time she worked a night shift at the hospital switchboard. He's at the hospital Thursday through Sunday, 11 p.m. to 4 a.m., and does catering for staff events on weekdays. He kept the mild version and the hot version and added a third, called **Grandma's**, which is so spicy that you have to sign a napkin to get it. Tasha has signed eleven napkins. He still saves the last double every night and eats it on the curb. "Thanks, Grandma." Some nights, he said, he doesn't need to say anything else. Some nights he talks for a while. Both are fine.

Priya got promoted in the spring — not to manager, which she said she'd have hated, but to a new role her company invented after the "features that held" reports spread to three other teams. Her title is something like "Quality & Practices Lead," which she says means "I'm the one who tells people what's working." She still does the feature report every night. Her streak is at 340-something. She still wakes up at 3:14 sometimes. "The portal still opens," she said. "But now I know how to shut it. That's the difference. It's not that the monster's gone. It's that I've got a door." Sam, the donut guy, comes to Room B now. They sit next to each other. Nobody's said anything about it, out loud, but the room has noticed.

Walt teaches Saturdays and Wednesdays at the makerspace. Dee got into an engineering program and will be the first in her family to go to college; she asked Walt to write her recommendation letter, and he said it was the hardest thing he's written since June's eulogy, and the best. The makerspace named the lathe corner after him. There's a small brass plate on the wall that says **WALT'S CORNER — MEASURE TWICE, BE KIND ONCE**, which was Dee's idea, and which Walt pretends to be embarrassed about. He still keeps the clipboard. He showed me the most recent entry, from the morning of the party: *Coffee good. Tomatoes done for the year. Kids coming Saturday. June would've liked this. Thanks, Walt, for getting up.* He still doesn't do God. But he told me, at the party, that he'd started driving to June's old church on Sundays, sitting in the truck in the parking lot, and reading the paper. "Not going in," he said. "Just sitting where I used to sit. Same as always. It's my Sunday." Then he turned his hearing aid down, which I've learned means *conversation over, but I meant it.*

Lena runs her first-time buyer workshop once a month in Room A, and it's always full. She stopped working with clients she didn't like, which cut her income for about four months, and then — through referrals from people like Rafael, who sends her

everybody he knows, including half the employees of a tire shop — it climbed back up past where it had been. "It turns out," she said, "first-time buyers have friends who are also first-time buyers." She has a bedtime. She keeps it about five nights out of seven, which she says is "a C-plus, but I'm proud of it." She called her mother in the summer, the first real conversation they'd had in years. It didn't go great. "But I did the AAH before and the five-year-old thing after," she said, "and I didn't cry into any wine. That's growth." Maya, sixteen, now does her own feature report. Jordan, fourteen, refuses, but Lena found a sticky note on his mirror that said *thanks me for not quitting the team*, and she has left it exactly where it is.

Theo crossed four thousand subscribers. That's still small, by internet standards, and he's fine with that. "Four thousand grandpas and kids," he says. He set up a Saturday bike-fixing stall at the farmers' market where people bring broken bikes and he fixes them for whatever they can pay, including nothing. Elijah, the kid from the chain video, comes most Saturdays and hands him tools. He's thirteen now and has his own channel. It has thirty-one subscribers. One of them is Theo, and one, Theo is pretty sure, is a bot. Theo's dad came to the stall once, in October. He stood off to the side and watched for half an hour while Theo trued a wheel for an old woman's three-speed. Then he walked over and said, "You're holding the spoke wrench wrong." Then he showed him a different grip, and it was better, and they both knew it. "We're not, like, fixed," Theo said. "But he's subscribed. And he came. I'll take it." Theo enrolled in one night class in the spring: small-business accounting. "For the shop," he said. "Forty-year-old me told me to."

At the end of the party, somebody asked me to say a few words, and I said what I'll say to you.

A triangle always adds up to 180. You can't make the total bigger. Nobody gets 200. Nobody gets 360. Everybody gets the same 180 — the cook and the tester, the machinist and the realtor, the kid with eleven subscribers and the kid with four thousand. What you get to choose is the shape.

You choose who you serve. You choose to say thank you. You choose to keep going.

Achievement. Appreciation. Hope.

Then I asked everybody to stand up — all nineteen of them, plus the urn — and take the biggest breath they could. Top it off. And then, all together, as loud and as long as we could, until there was nothing left in our lungs and the portal above every one of our heads went dark and quiet:

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.

It adds up.

It always adds up.

APPENDIX A

The AAH Card

Copy this onto an index card. Tape it somewhere you'll see it every day.

THE AAH — *close the portal*
In through the nose. Top it off. Out through the mouth: **AAAAHHH** — twice as long as the in. Past empty. Five times.

A — ACHIEVEMENT — *who do I serve?*
Pick who you like, not who likes you. Serve them anyway. Stay lit. They're out there.
→ One rep for my people today.

A — APPRECIATION — *thanksgiving every day*
Thank yourself. Thank others. Thank God, the universe, or the toaster. Air it out first. You can't leave the table.
→ Feature report: 3 things that worked + "Thank you, me, for ____."

H — HOPE — *I can keep doing this*
Renew the library card. Find your god. Guard the five-year-old. Will + ways.
→ "I can keep doing this today."

It always adds up to 180.

APPENDIX B

Sources, Checked

I promised the research in this book was real. Here's every study and source I leaned on, what it actually found, and how firmly it supports what I said. I checked each one before publishing. Where a study shows that two things *go together* (an association) rather than that one *causes* the other, I've said so, because that difference matters and books like this one are often sloppy about it.

Verification key:
✅ **Checked** — confirmed against the published paper, its abstract, or the publishing institution.
📘 **Established** — a well-known, widely replicated idea or classic source; described here in general terms only.

Ch.	Source	What it found	Status
Intro, 2	Euclid, *Elements*, Book I, Proposition 32 (c. 300 BC)	The interior angles of any triangle sum to two right angles (180°), in flat (Euclidean) geometry. On a curved surface like a sphere, they sum to more.	📘 Established
1	Balban, M. Y., Neri, E., Kogon, M. M., et al. (2023). "Brief structured respiration practices enhance mood and reduce physiological arousal." *Cell Reports Medicine*, 4(1), 100895.	Randomized study, 5 min/day for a month. Exhale-focused "cyclic sighing" produced the greatest improvement in mood and a greater drop in respiratory rate than mindfulness meditation. Mood was self-reported; data were collected remotely.	✅ Checked

Ch.	Source	What it found	Status
1	Respiratory sinus arrhythmia (general physiology)	Heart rate naturally rises slightly on the in-breath and falls on the out-breath.	📘 Established
7	Gilovich, T., Medvec, V. H., & Savitsky, K. (2000). "The spotlight effect in social judgment." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(2), 211–222.	Students wearing an embarrassing Barry Manilow T-shirt overestimated how many people noticed it. I deliberately didn't quote exact percentages because popular retellings disagree on them.	✅ Checked
8	Kelly, K. (2008). "1,000 True Fans." *The Technium* (blog).	A creator may need roughly 1,000 dedicated fans, not mass fame, to make a living. An influential essay, not a study; the numbers are debated.	✅ Checked
9	Boothby, E. J., Cooney, G., Sandstrom, G. M., & Clark, M. S. (2018). "The liking gap in conversations." *Psychological Science*, 29(11), 1742–1756.	Across five studies, people underestimated how much their conversation partners liked them — with strangers, dorm mates (lasting months) and workshop attendees. Shyer people showed a bigger gap.	✅ Checked
10	Zajonc, R. B. (1968). "Attitudinal effects of mere exposure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2, Pt. 2), 1–27.	Repeated exposure to something tends to increase liking for it — on average and within limits.	📘 Established
11	Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). "Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion." *Science*, 302(5643), 290–292.	Social exclusion activated brain regions also involved in physical pain distress. The exact overlap is debated, so the book says only that rejection seems to use "some of the same alarm systems."	📘 Established
12	Waldinger, R., & Schulz, M. (2023). *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness.* Simon & Schuster. (Harvard Study of Adult Development, begun 1938.)	Relationship quality was one of the strongest predictors of health and happiness across 80+ years.	📘 Established

Ch.	Source	What it found	Status
12	Okun, M. A., Yeung, E. W., & Brown, S. (2013). "Volunteering by older adults and risk of mortality: A meta-analysis." *Psychology and Aging*, 28(2), 564–577.	Among adults 55+, volunteering was linked to a 24% lower mortality risk after adjustment (95% CI 16–31%). Association, not proven cause.	✅ Checked
13, 21	Negativity bias — e.g., Baumeister, R. F., et al. (2001). "Bad is stronger than good." *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323–370.	Negative events tend to carry more psychological weight than equivalent positive ones.	📘 Established
17, 25	Neff, K. D. (2003). "Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself." *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101.	Defines self-compassion as self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. Later research links it to better well-being and lower anxiety and depression.	📘 Established
17	Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). "Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38(9), 1133–1143.	People prompted to be self-compassionate after a failure were *more* motivated to improve (e.g., studied longer for a retest), not less.	📘 Established
18	Kumar, A., & Epley, N. (2018). "Undervaluing gratitude: Expressers misunderstand the consequences of showing appreciation." *Psychological Science*, 29(9), 1423–1435.	Letter writers underestimated how surprised and positive recipients would feel and overestimated how awkward they'd feel.	✅ Checked
18	Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). "Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions." *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–421.	The "gratitude visit" produced the largest short-term happiness boost of the exercises tested; the effect faded after about a month.	✅ Checked
20	Pennebaker, J. W., & Beall, S. K. (1986). "Confronting a traumatic event: Toward an understanding of inhibition and disease." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95(3), 274–281.	Writing about traumatic experiences was associated with fewer health-center visits in the following months. Many later studies broadly support "expressive writing," with modest and variable effects.	📘 Established

Ch.	Source	What it found	Status
21	Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). "Counting blessings versus burdens." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389.	Three experiments. Gratitude-list groups showed higher well-being on several (not all) measures, most consistently positive mood; Study 1 also found more optimism and more exercise; Study 3 (adults with neuromuscular disease) found better mood, more connectedness and better sleep.	✅ Checked
23	Hummer, R. A., Rogers, R. G., Nam, C. B., & Ellison, C. G. (1999). "Religious involvement and U.S. adult mortality." *Demography*, 36(2), 273–285.	Never-attenders had 1.87× the mortality risk of those attending more than weekly — about a seven-year life-expectancy gap at age 20. Part of this reflects healthier people being able to attend.	✅ Checked
23	Li, S., Stampfer, M. J., Williams, D. R., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2016). "Association of religious service attendance with mortality among women." *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 176(6), 777–785.	~74,500 women in the Nurses' Health Study; attending more than once a week was linked to a 33% lower risk of death over 16 years vs. never attending. Observational.	✅ Checked
23	Lee, L. O., James, P., Zevon, E. S., et al. (2019). "Optimism is associated with exceptional longevity in 2 epidemiologic cohorts of men and women." *PNAS*, 116(37), 18357–18362.	The most optimistic participants had an 11–15% longer lifespan on average, and higher odds (OR ≈ 1.5 women, 1.7 men) of living to 85. Held after adjusting for health behaviors. Observational.	✅ Checked
28	Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., et al. (1991). "The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570–585.	Defines hope as goal-directed **agency** (will) plus **pathways** (ways), which reinforce each other.	✅ Checked

Things I deliberately did *not* claim:

- That the AAH breath, gratitude lists or hope "cure" anxiety or depression. The studies show modest, real benefits for many people. That's all.

- That going to church, being optimistic or volunteering *causes* a longer life. The studies show strong associations. Causation is plausible but not proven.
- Exact percentages from the Barry Manilow T-shirt study, because secondhand accounts disagree.
- Anything about the characters being real. Marcus, Priya, Walt, Lena, Theo, Tasha, Rafael, Dee, Elijah, Sam and Mrs. Okafor are invented. The coffee urn, sadly, is based on several real ones.

. . .

If any part of this book stirred up more than you can carry alone, please reach out to someone. In the US, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). Elsewhere, contact your local emergency number or a crisis line. Talking to a professional isn't skipping the work. It's the guardian doing their job.

— end —

About the Author

Arkvital is Vitalijs Arkulinskis, a mechanical and software engineer turned project and people leader. Over more than twelve years, across more than ten industries, he has coached managers, built tools for teams, and learned to look for the real cause of a problem before choosing the fix.

He writes about people, progress and the quiet work beneath good work at arkvital.com, and builds small, useful apps through Addanapp.

If something in this book landed for you, or missed, he'd like to hear about it. You can book a short call at tidycal.com/arkvital.

Also by Arkvital

Addicted to Hope

Why Dreaming Feels Better Than Doing, and How to Ship Your Life Anyway

You have a folder of ideas. Each one looks beautiful in your head, and that's exactly why it never leaves the folder: dreaming gives you the reward up front, and doing only gives you the bugs.

Addicted to Hope is an engineer's guide to breaking the habit. It explains why planning feels like progress, how your upbringing set your default, and which hard truths break the spell. Then it hands you the tools: prototypes, if-then plans, feedback loops, rope teams and kill criteria.

Free to download at arkvital.com.

Every triangle adds up to 180. So does a life that works.

Achievement, Appreciation and Hope are the three angles of a good life. Push one too far and it squeezes the other two. Drop one and the whole shape goes flat.

In a library meeting room with folding chairs and a coffee urn that tastes like pennies, five ordinary people learn to draw the triangle: serve the people you like, even before they like you back; say thank you every day, to yourself included; and keep the stubborn belief that you can keep going.

Funny, practical and backed by research that was checked, *Adds Up to 180* ends with a ten-minute daily routine and one big, loud exhale. AAH.

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