

Chapter V

The Man in the Mirror Exercise

A smile costs nothing, but gives much.

*It enriches those who receive,
without making poorer those who give.
It takes but a moment,
but the memory of it sometimes lasts forever.*

*None is so rich or mighty that he can get along without it,
and none is so poor but that he can be made rich by it.*

*A smile creates happiness in the home,
fosters good will in business,
and is the countersign of friendship.
It brings rest to the weary,
cheer to the discouraged,
sunshine to the sad,
and is nature's best antidote for trouble.*

*Yet it cannot be bought, begged, borrowed, or stolen,
for it is something that is of no value to anyone
until it is given away.*

*Some people are too tired to give you a smile.
Give them one of yours,
as none needs a smile so much as he who has no more to give.*

—Author Unknown



The Man in the Mirror Exercise takes me back to an evening in 1985 when I was twenty-one years old, matriculating in business management at Salisbury State University and studying to be an army officer through ROTC. I lay dozing, frustrated and unwilling to recognize my most recent episode of adolescent clumsiness as a sign of defeat. I had another failed attempt at a romantic evening with the girl I happened to have a crush on that week. As I slept, flames danced from the candles brushing some nearby leaves of paper and skirting across my desk. My dream transformed into the conscious realization my matchbox dorm room was ablaze. A trash can and a blanket served as impromptu fire extinguishers, but not in time to spare the building from total evacuation, and myself from total embarrassment.

Although I laugh at the incident now, at the time I was under extreme pressure. I was choosing my major, experience problems with women, officially swearing in the National Guard as a cadet, and struggling with a major identity crisis. I felt as if I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders, and, as even the strongest do, I mentally and emotionally collapsed. I was unsure of the exact trigger, but I knew that for most of my life I had struggled with a crisis of identity. At twenty-one, I experienced the deepest pang of depression in my life up to that point.

It was a very dark, dreary day when I suffered a near nervous breakdown—as close to the edge as you can get without actually being hospitalized. Vacillating between hating myself and blaming myself, I struggled with the impact of my religious background. I cried uncontrollably all day in my dorm room. That day, sitting there alone and distressed, I seriously contemplated suicide for the first time in my life. In short, I faced a decision defined only by two paths—life and death. I always thought I was such a strong person. I felt as though I had a wonderful life and a happy upbringing. My family was amazing, and I had some of the best friends a guy could ask for. But my emotional clash between the life I lived and desired versus the religious life I expected of myself was totally at odds. This tormented me even in the midst of my greatest joys. This was the day that something or someone had to die. I was going to either take my own life or kill the self-hatred, replacing it with love and acceptance of myself for who I was, imperfect as I may be. I guess the fact that I'm writing this twenty years later makes clear my choice. How did I transform my life? *The Man in the Mirror Exercise*.

Late that night, wiping away the tears, I stood in front of my mirror and forced myself to make precise eye contact. I said aloud, "John, you

have chosen to live. Now how do you go on and live? You can no longer deny your past, you must love who you are today and uphold hope for a brighter future. You can no longer use your strict religious beliefs to justify destroying the good servant you are striving to be. You have to finally accept that God must still love you just as you are. Therefore, you must love yourself.” So I created a ritual for myself, now called *The Man in the Mirror Exercise*. I went to my mirror and stood there a foot away, locking eye contact with my reflection and suppressing other thoughts and sounds. Then, from the bottom of my heart and with every ounce of honesty that I could summon, I said, “John, I love you, and something positive and good is going to happen to you today!” That phrase became my therapy; it became my secret weapon to take me from such turmoil to love and acceptance of myself.

The first day of my “self-therapy” I absolutely didn’t buy it. The following day, I didn’t believe it either. But I committed myself to the exercise as a daily ritual when I woke up. Even after a few weeks went by, I still struggled to honestly believe the words falling from my lips.

By the time I fulfilled the first month of my personal ritual, I realized positive things were happening to me each day. I felt myself loving me for who I was a little more with each month that rolled by. Can you believe that by the six-month mark, I was so high on life and so in love with myself I could barely contain my joy and inner peace? I had finally put the conflict between my religious expectations of myself and who I truly was in the past. I have a new and improved relationship with God that is based on love not hate. Before this mirror exercise, I was outwardly happy, always smiling and upbeat. People saw me as the happy-go-lucky guy! But finally, I felt just as happy from within as I appeared on the outside. Finally, I was in sync with what other people saw in me and what I saw in myself. I continued doing the Mirror Exercise for over a year until I eventually realized I automatically awoke loving myself for who I was. I share this very personal story because it saved my life, and I’m still high on life today.

I also share this episode of my college life because people need to know that you can’t always see the warning signs of a teen or adult on the brink of self-destruction. Given that this book was born out of the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech shooting rampage, I felt compelled to share my college life meltdown and how I turned it around. There are many paths to healing and winning the war against depression and suffering. My path was self-healing without medication, while others may respond better to

medication and professional help. The overwhelming point is threefold: (1) seek out help from any source you can find; (2) friends, family, and peers need to reach out to others in need of support; and (3) life will get better if you reject being a victim and commit to being a survivor.

Surely, there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to saving lives. I'm a firm believer in trying everything and anything until you find what works. As long as you are still alive and breathing, you should never be too tired to forge your own path to peace and happiness. You are now armed with the knowledge that today is a new day, and peace, love, and happiness are things you give yourself. This knowledge is the greatest tool in the battle between fulfillment and suffering. I am a living witness that your entire outlook can change in one day—as soon as you choose that day, as soon as you decide that life is too short and living is too valuable to spend all your time and energy dwelling in negativity and self-hatred, you will start to finally LIVE. I took the opportunity to take one of my darkest days and say to myself, “John, I love you, and something good and positive is going to happen to you today!” That was my rebirth—that was the new day, the day I decided to live a full and happy life that began with loving myself first so I could better receive and give love. Healing, feeling better, and taking back your life all starts with *you!*



Todd