



# 11. How to Stop Playing

***“No one to blame! That was why most people led lives they hated, with people they hated. How wonderful to have someone to blame! How wonderful to live with one’s nemesis! You may be miserable, but you feel forever in the right. You may be fragmented, but you feel absolved of all the blame for it. Take your life in your own hands, and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.”***

Erica Jong

**First,** let me remind you that I still play the game. I’m trying to quit and have been moderately successful at weaning down my play time. However, without much forethought, I still find myself picking it up and playing a few rounds when I’m tired or feeling sorry for myself. The Blame Game is addictive.

Not playing the Blame Game doesn’t mean that you should let yourself be taken advantage of or that you accept things that you have the ability to change. It also doesn’t mean that you accept wrong actions or that you live with resignation. So, what does it mean? Not playing the Blame Game means that you concede that other people, things, and events do not have control over you. You accept control and responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and actions—things that are under your control.

Implicit in this new-found power of control is that you may not be perfect and may, in some ways, need to change. Change is most often positive and what, on the surface, might seem to be failure, is actually an important step toward your success. To stop blaming means that you must judge others favorably. We do this by first empathizing, externalizing, and making excuses for others. Finally,

try to view your problems as situations that you can explain, rather than complain and blame.

## **Acknowledge that you have control**

“Control” implies not just having some ability to persuade, but dictating and exercising authoritative power over something or someone. When you want to turn on your TV, you may get up and walk over to it and push the power button. But more than likely, you pick up and use the remote CONTROL. Your TV has a control device and so do you. The reason that you’ve never seen your remote control is because it is internal. Only you have access to it. No one else in the world has the ability to use it, although we pretend that they can. Others have the ability to make suggestions to us, but they are only suggestions. This realization frees your mind to tap into a vast resource of power and self-control. You are not constrained or forced to do anything that you don’t want to do.

Your boss tells you that you must work all weekend to complete a project. You have plans to spend the weekend with your family and you’ve promised your kids that you will take them to the movies on Saturday and then there’s that Church function on Sunday and ... So, what to do? First, realize that you have several options. You can tell your family that you have to break your promises, do the work, blame your boss, and hate your life. You can talk to your boss, explain the situation and look for alternative solutions including the possibility of pushing back the deadline. You could also talk to your family and look for alternative times that might work out to get some work in. You could get up earlier or go to bed later and work when no one else is around. You could quit your job. That’s right—I said quit the job! You say that you can’t do that because you need the money and the security and there’s too much debt and ... Well, it is your choice to work. If you truly consider quitting your job as a possibility and you acknowledge that you do have this option, you will also realize that you and not your boss have the control. Your boss may phrase this request as a command, but it is really only a suggestion. Whether it happens or not is your choice.

Your four kids each made plans for this weekend to go for play-dates, music lessons, gymnastics classes, taekwondo lessons, and

several different parties. You may be so overwhelmed that you agree to everything—one event at a time, one child at a time. You plan to figure out later how to actually make all this happen. You get a phone call from your second-best friend (your best friend, of course, being your spouse) who just came into town and are supposed to join for lunch. You're frustrated and blame your children for planning so many activities. You blame your spouse for being out of town on a business trip. You blame your friend for picking this weekend to come and visit. You blame your kids' friends for having parties. You blame God for only making twenty-four hours in a day. You're unhappy. You believe that your kids are controlling your life by making all these plans. But this isn't really the case. You may have made promises to chauffeur your children to wherever they wanted to go and now that you have made these promises, you want to keep your word. But they were *your* promises. You had the right to decide whether you wanted to take them everywhere, or anywhere. This was your choice and under your control. Your kids have wants and desires but these weekend plans are not *needs*.

Making promises is analogous to handing over your remote. You are frustrated because you have unnecessarily given up your control. Make other transportation arrangements for them, cancel some of their social plans, cancel lunch or try to make other arrangements with your friend. Or, you can do it all and relax about doing it because you know that no one is "making" you. This knowledge will give you more peace of mind and perhaps remind you to not schedule so many things in the future. It may subtly push you toward occasionally saying no to your children when they schedule things, so that you don't later regret the decision and blame them. It's not their fault for asking, because they don't control your answer.

## Take responsibility

You even control the things that you are sure that you don't. At the very least, you control your thoughts. Your thoughts precede your

words, which precede your actions. I can't make you think anything or do anything that you don't want to.

Ken Keyes Jr. was a personal growth author and lecturer who had polio. He wrote, "You are not responsible for the programming you picked up in childhood. However, as an adult, you are 100 percent responsible for fixing it." In *Discovering the Secrets of Happiness*, Keyes described polio as a disguised blessing. He had every right to blame God or nature or his parents or the polio virus for his plight, but instead, he regarded it as a blessing, and this freed his mind, allowing him to move on with his life.

Only *you* can control what goes on inside you. You can often but not always change what goes on outside of you, but you absolutely have the ability to alter and improve how external events affect your thoughts and feelings.

Heritability alone does not determine outcome. You can be predisposed to become intelligent, but if you never read a book or become exposed to new information, you won't achieve your potential. It's up to you to make it happen. You can be "genetically predisposed" to develop arthritis, but how much discomfort you actually experience and what you do with this gift, is solely under your control.

Helen Keller was born in 1880; at nineteen months of age, she contracted an illness that left her blind and deaf. There was no standardized sign language or educational programs for those with disabilities. Did she spend her life in self-pity; blame her illness on her parents or God? No! Helen Keller became an accomplished author, women's rights advocate, the first deaf-blind person to attain a Bachelor of Arts degree, a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union, and met every U.S. President from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon B. Johnson. She was friends with Alexander Graham Bell, Charlie Chaplin, and Mark Twain, and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She wrote, "Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn, whatever state I may be in, therein to be content." If you feel that life has been cruel to you and you can't control your destiny, write a complaint letter to the Helen Keller Foundation.

Implicit in your ability to control what you think and say is that you accept sole responsibility for your actions and mistakes. Learn from your mistakes, forgive yourself and move on with your life. Find the root cause of what you think are your *problems*, realize that they are actually just *challenges* and opportunities, and either try to change them to make them better or find a way to change your interpretation and feelings about them. Look at every situation as, “What could I do to make this better and what did I do to contribute to this.”

### **Realize that failures are steps to success**

Now that you have taken control of yourself and are the responsible party, this doesn't mean that you should be beating yourself up and walking around self-flagellating. Be patient with yourself (and others). The more you actively pursue control over your thoughts and feelings, the better you will become at doing it and the more of your power you will attain. Try not to blame yourself if you don't do something perfectly.

Appreciate that your failure is part of the process and part of the journey. Learn from it and don't get discouraged by it. You can use your mistakes and failures to discover more about yourself and how you best function. This gives you an opportunity to fine-tune your skills and develop in ways that you may never have dreamed of. This is a great process. What appear to be mistakes and failures are actually the first pavers on your road to success. We all know that nobody is perfect, but we often don't truly appreciate what this means for us as individuals. The river is constantly flowing and changing. Once you admit to yourself that you control your thoughts, you have given yourself freedom to change. Everything that you do, right or wrong, good or bad, will change you. How it changes you is only up to you! There is an Indian Proverb that states, “Blaming your faults on your nature does not change the nature of your faults.”

## Judge favorably

How can you stop blaming others for things that *are* under their control? Begin by using the general principle of favorable judging. Don't start each day with an imaginary target on your chest. People are not out to get you. Don't support the adage, "Just because I'm paranoid, doesn't mean that they're not after me." This is a depressing world-view and casts shadows of doubt on everyone that you interact with during the day. We need to get rid of this attitude and replace it with a general good faith in our fellow human beings.

You cannot assume that others are operating on negative intentions and that only you (and maybe your mother) are "good-hearted" people. Everyone is essentially good. Start each day by providing everyone with a blank slate. This is the easy part. The difficult part is that even as you try to assume that everyone is well-intentioned, someone will inevitably do something at sometime that you think is undesirable to you or for you. Now you have a choice—how to handle the situation. Immediately launch a Blatant Blame counterattack and go back to playing The Game, or judge favorably and go blameless. Yes, it is legal to go blameless in a public place. But how in the world can I not blame someone for doing this?

There are many fabulous mental techniques that can be employed in the act of judging favorably. Admit that you are not perfect. I know that most of you reading this do not think of yourselves as being perfect. However, when it comes to assigning fault or blaming, we often put ourselves on a pedestal. We rely on our faulty senses and draw quick and often incorrect conclusions. We often hurt others while doing this to try to protect ourselves. We don't realize that this doesn't protect us or make us stronger. This actually hurts us and makes us weaker. Every one of us has had episodes of mis-reading, mis-hearing, mis-seeing, and mis-taking someone or something. We are absolutely positive that we heard or saw something that upset us, later to find out that it was not exactly who or what we thought it was. We thought that they were talking about us but they weren't. We thought they were talking about someone that we know, but they weren't. We thought they

referred to our kids, but they didn't. We thought that they missed an appointment with us, but we had the wrong day or time or place. There are so many instances everyday where we jump to conclusions, fill in missing pieces, and assume we know when we don't.

Don't believe everything that you see, read, or hear especially if it appears to be something that makes you feel badly or something that you think is wrong, negative, or hurtful. Yehudis Samet in *The Other Side of the Story* has described multiple ways to judge favorably and give the benefit of the doubt. She encourages us to pretend that we are investigative reporters and that there is a missing piece of the puzzle. There is some untold story that we will, at some time, uncover. If we don't have the time or inclination to uncover it, then we can still assume that there is another explanation and now it's our job to make up a few plausible reasons that turn the story into a positive or at least a "neutral." Eliminate the need for blaming. Try to stay objective and appreciate how much we don't truly understand about what actually happened, especially about someone else's motivation.

How does this help? Maybe you never even meet the person who you are blaming. So why should we care? Maybe this is a Silent Blame that you keep to yourself. Why should this bother anyone else? Because it fills your head with non-productive negativity and restricts you from reaching your potential and achieving greatness. It needlessly shapes your opinion of that person as negative. That will come back to haunt you in terms of clouding your opinion of people in general, or you may interact with that specific person in the future and what could be a productive and positive relationship begins with flaws.

Challenge your perceptions, preconceptions, and your senses. Change your inclination from assume and accuse to excuse and explain. I was speaking with a friend who pointed out that she just received a "thank you" card from a couple that had come to a party at her house. She was somewhat annoyed and commented that the card came two months after the party. I asked if they were close friends and she said that they had been friends for many years and had done many activities together. I inquired whether she had ever

been to a party at their house before and how quickly she would usually send off her thank you card. She stopped, looked embarrassed and said, “Oh my god. I never send them thank you cards. We’ve known them for so long. I think I owe them an apology.”

In Judaism, there are 613 mitzvot that Jews must perform. Some people believe the word mitzvot to mean “good deeds,” but it does not; mitzvot are commandments or obligations. One mitzvah is “In righteousness shall you judge your kinsman” (Leviticus 19:15). Judging favorably doesn’t mean that you should not try to change things that can or should be changed. It doesn’t mean that you should not make things better if you have the chance. It also doesn’t mean that we pretend that everyone is always perfect and that anything and everything that people do to us is okay. It does mean that when something happens that you are not immediately happy about, take yourself out of the role of witness and put yourself into the role of judge – an impartial judge. Don’t assume that you know the whole picture. Don’t assume that you know what’s behind someone else’s actions or intentions. Don’t assume that actions and behavior reflect someone else’s personality. Your choice is either to try to find the positive in situations that you are not able to influence, or resort to a default blame and assume the negative. The difference in how these positions lead you to feel about yourself and your life is amazing!

## **Empathize—externalize for others**

Our tendency is to not blame ourselves for things that we believe we were “pressured into” or things “beyond our control.” In other words, we externalize for ourselves by blaming things outside of our perceived power. We know we are good and kind people, so if we did something potentially harmful to others, we must have had an excellent reason. When others perform the exact same acts, we blame them by internalizing their motivation as a negative intention and bad character.

So to quit the Blame Game, externalize for others. This is reciprocity; a fundamental moral value where each party has both rights and duties. It is a basis for the modern concept of human

rights. The “Golden Rule” of do unto others as you would have them do unto you, has ancient roots. Treat all people as you would like to be treated.

Hand-in-hand with the concept of externalization is the notion of empathizing—the ability to recognize and truly understand another’s state of mind or emotions. It represents the capacity to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. If you can’t empathize *with* others, you will have a problem trying to externalize *for* others. True empathy helps us understand and anticipate others’ behavior. In general, it is easier to empathize with people with whom we spend a lot of time or those with whom we share many similarities. Like externalizing, empathizing is a skill that can be improved throughout one’s life. When you, too, try to understand and appreciate someone else’s actions in the framework of externalization, you can then empathize based on what you’ve inferred of their emotional state.

When someone does something that you don’t like or something that you feel negatively affects your life, externalize their behavior—come up with some reasons, besides negative personality traits, why they would have acted in that way. Now empathize with them. How would you feel, doing the same thing to someone else? When you are able to truly empathize after externalizing, then you will have a hard time being mad at them and blaming them.

## **Make excuses for others**

Every day we make excuses for ourselves while playing the Blame Game. How many times each day do you do something that you would be perturbed at others for doing? Driving too slowly, driving too quickly, talking on the cell phone while driving, speaking too loudly, allowing ourselves to be interrupted by our kids while we are involved in a conversation, moving in front of someone in line at the grocery store, leaving your cart in line at the grocery store while you go get one more item, etc. I know that you can come up with several hundred thousand more examples.

We make excuses for ourselves when we fail to accomplish a task or take on a challenge. We advertise our physical limitations,

headaches, stiff joints and arthritis, back pain, short legs, bad memory, flat feet, sore knees, and weak ankles. We have lots of reasons for not succeeding at anything. We can say to ourselves, "I didn't see the light change to green." But when someone ahead of us doesn't go immediately when the light turns green, we say, "That inconsiderate dim bulb. Is he always that stupid or is he just making a special effort today. Why isn't he paying attention to the road? He's probably on his cell phone. He's a danger to everyone because he doesn't care!" Try to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Make excuses for them. Make up the same excuses that you would have made up if and when you do the same thing. Perhaps the person who "done you wrong" and was destined to be your target of blame just had a death in the family, a spouse leave them, a new diagnosis of cancer or a brain tumor. All of these are possible. Perhaps they did something that seems very irrational. Is it possible that they do have some kind of brain tumor or mental disease that caused them to act in a way that is not typical of their normal behavior?

The Hebrew term *Limud Zechut* refers to looking for extenuating circumstances and trying to find excuses for others. Find merit in places that it might not ordinarily be found. Place yourself in their shoes and empathize with them. There's an old saying that states, "Don't criticize anyone until you have walked a mile in their shoes." That way, when you openly criticize them, you are not only a mile away, but you now have their shoes. Similarly, many people dream about success. We may fantasize about being famous and not truly appreciate that the reality for a celebrity may not be as glamorous as what it seems. In accordance with this, comedian and radio personality Fred Allen stated, "A celebrity is a person who works hard all his life to become well known, then wears dark glasses to avoid being recognized."

The process of excusing others begins when you suspect someone of doing something wrong, bad, or inappropriate. Instead of jumping immediately to blame, come up with several possible reasons why the person did or failed to do something that you would have liked. Pretend that it was you who did the same

thing. How would you have excused your own behavior if you had committed the same act?

Somebody cuts you off by going through a traffic light which has just turned red and causes you to jam on your brakes. You've done this before to someone else. Did you do it because you're a mean and inconsiderate person? No, you had good reasons for doing it. You were late for the most important meeting of your life. You just received a phone call that your daughter was sick and needed to be picked up from school. You had bad news about an illness or death in the family and were so upset that you didn't even notice the light just turned red. These are just a few of the possible excuses that you can assign to the other driver. You are waiting for your friend at an appointment and they don't show up. You've waited long enough and are now very upset because they were so inconsiderate and you took time out of your busy day. Stop! Think, have I ever missed an appointment that I really wanted to go to? Did you have the wrong time, wrong day, or wrong place on your schedule? How about the right time, right day, and right place but the time had changed from daylight savings (changed everywhere but on your watch). Perhaps you got detained with urgent personal or business matters that were unavoidable and your cell phone was out of power. These are real situations that happen to us and they can also happen to our friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers.

Once you have provided an excuse for them, try to believe it. Don't just mouth the words. Really make it true! You will immediately find yourself relax a bit. Tension will ease and you'll start a wonderful healing process. When you go through the large list of possible reasons for their actions, you will realize that there was a really good chance that they did have a reasonable explanation for their behavior. They did not disappoint you because they were mean, nasty and inconsiderate. What started as anxiety, stress, and apprehension from the incident, would normally progress to frustration, anger, and blame. However, now your slowness to judge, externalizing, empathizing, and development of excuses causes all that aggression to dissipate into understanding and relaxation and

repose. You can't successfully accomplish this transformation and not feel better about other people. This feeling will translate into feeling better about yourself and life in general.

I'm not saying that everything is your fault and you should take the blame for everything. Understand what it is that you can control and be responsible for your decisions. There may be the rare times when you may truly not be at fault. Your accusations and blaming of a third party may be completely legitimate. However, simply the act of blaming ourselves or others suppresses our creativity and positivity. It negatively reflects on people in general and certain persons specifically and will eventually adversely affect your own sense of self-worth.

### **Explain, don't complain**

The more that we try to truly understand other people, the more we are able to externalize their motivations and come up with viable excuses for their actions. The deeper our understanding is about any given topic, the more that we realize that answers and solutions are not so simple. Things are not so black and white. The more we can understand and explain, the less we will condemn and complain.

Motivational speaker and bestselling author of *The Energy Bus*, Jon Gordon, has also written a rule-book, *The No Complaining Rule: Positive Ways to Deal with Negativity at Work*. This one rule is so important that we are adopting it at our hospital. Mr. Gordon focuses on turning negative, toxic complaining into positive, productive solutions. In brief, "The No Complaining Rule" states that you aren't allowed to mindlessly complain to anyone who cannot help solve the problem. Bring the issue to someone who can effect change and have the complaint accompanied by one or two potential solutions (you can find more details at [www.NoComplainingRule.com](http://www.NoComplainingRule.com).) In this way you create, not simply influence change. Just as we can fact-find and attribute cause to work toward better outcomes without personally blaming, we can also discuss issues and look for positive solutions without mindlessly complaining.

About fifteen years ago after suffering from joint pain and swelling in my hands, feet, shoulders, hips, and back, I was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis. I was devastated, and then bed-ridden and depressed for about one month. After several different types of treatments, my rheumatologist was able to come up with a successful combination of steroids, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and the chemotherapeutic agent methotrexate. I slowly recovered, and after some physical therapy was able to start functioning at my job again. During the next few years there were some brief relapses during which I would go back on medications. Now after more than a decade, I am doing great! I could have chosen to play the “why me?” card and blamed God and my parents for causing or allowing my genetic predisposition to this illness. Where would this have taken me—farther down the path of feeling sorry for myself? Instead, I spent my time more productively understanding the disease process and learning the best way for my body to deal with this new situation. Today I feel great about my physical condition and have no one and no thing to blame.

By focusing on explaining rather than complaining, I am more open to alternative solutions and possibilities for improving my situation. *Complaining* assumes that you view this situation as a negative and a problem, and a negative situation often requires blame. On the other hand, *explaining* implies an open mind and a situation that requires a solution, not a blame. A solution is a productive, positive way of treating the situation. What, on the surface, appeared to be dreadful is actually a blessing in disguise. You would never have realized this if you were busy blaming someone or something for this awful incident that befell you. Explaining means looking for reasons and solutions. Implicit in the act of complaining is the assumption that there are no great reasons or solutions. If you are able to explain not just what happened but why it might have happened, you will open an exciting world of possibilities that starts you on the pathway to discovering that what seems bad is not necessarily so.

It takes twenty-one days to develop a habit. Rev. Will Bowen has used this information to initiate a program designed to help

people become habitual non-complainers. As described in his book, *A Complaint Free World*, participants wear purple bracelets and move them from one wrist to the other if they catch themselves complaining. The presence of and changing of the bracelets is a frequent reminder to try to halt complaining habits. What occurs while people are mindlessly complaining? Blaming! Yes, the process of complaining is intimately and inherently associated with blaming. It is impossible to complain without blaming something or someone. So stop complaining and start explaining.

## Believe in something

There are going to be many times when you don't have an explanation for what happened or why it happened. It may have been an "act of God." So, isn't it simpler just to blame God and get on with your life? While this is certainly possible and often occurs, the result is that your faith is destroyed and you are in the same situation that you were in earlier. Whether you believe in God or not, I encourage you to believe in something. Believe in nature. Believe in yin and yang. Believe in a universal, sustaining life force. Believe in Hindu deities or Native American gods. Believe that the journey is well worth traveling, making life well worth living. The journey is why we're here. For purposes of throwing away your copy of the Blame Game (figurative copy of the Blame Game, not this book, of course), believe that you have some kind of purpose in this life.

Reconciling the existence of suffering with a belief in God is based on a combination of trust and understanding. Rabbi Harold Kushner has spent a great deal of time indirectly dealing with the issue of blaming. Focusing his efforts on why bad things happen, he has postulated that while God created the universe, and has a good and loving nature, he has, in essence, stepped back and no longer has complete control over everything that happens. Thus, bad things are more or less random events.

The presence of a semi-potent God may not be in accordance with your world view. If you put your faith in an *omnipotent*, *omnipresent*, *omniscient*, and *omnibenevolent* power, then you can have faith in knowing that somehow, everything that happens to

you is for some greater good that you may or may not understand. If you believe that God controls all, then you should stop blaming immediately because everything that ever happens to you has been predetermined by God and is under God's control. Thus, blaming someone or something for your suffering is completely misdirected. You should be thanking them for all that they do to you and for you, since they are merely carrying out God's plan.

Suppose you believe that there is a God/creator and that he or she has given us free will. As a believer, you must still have faith that things will work out well for you in the end. Inherent in this belief is that while we retain free will and all of our actions are not micro-managed, God has an overall plan for the world. There is faith that we will end up in a good place; the journey that we take is up to us. So stop blaming God. Your path is under your control. In the Christian faith, this involves salvation and heaven after death. Implicit in this belief is that there is some purpose to my suffering—it is not random or meaningless. Labor pains would be less bearable (with a concomitant increase in the potential for blame) if not for the incredible purpose of giving birth. When my wife turned to me during childbirth and blamed me for all the pain, grabbed my lower lip and pulled it tightly over my forehead, she was really thanking me because without labor there would be no child. The pain is worthwhile when the outcome is explainable and beautiful. Not knowing the outcome is more likely to yield complaints and blames. This philosophical view is only superficially related to fatalistic thinking, wherein human beings are powerless to make changes or to control their personal destiny. This religious theology situates itself well to fully blaming God for anything that happens. Although if you concomitantly believe that God is omnibenevolent, then everything that happens would be for a good reason. Thus, rather than blaming God for everything bad that happens, it should be incumbent upon those with this belief that God should be thanked for everything that transpires and that nothing is really bad.

I am not trying to indoctrinate atheists and convince agnostics. I will try to convince you to have faith in something. I believe in belief. When you have faith and believe in something greater than

yourself, then life has more meaning and purpose. When you have faith in something, you are more likely able to forgive yourself. As pastor and best-selling author Joel Osteen has said, “You may make some mistakes, but that doesn’t make you a sinner. You’ve got the very nature of God on the inside of you.” This point of view originating in the belief of God releases you, in part, from self-blame, and if you view others as also being with and of God, you should be able to have the same compassion and lack of blame towards them.

I am not saying that you should believe in God and that will solve all your problems. There are probably more stressful situations in the world because of people’s belief in God (I don’t blame God for this). However, finding something that you are comfortable believing in does provide you with solace and an understanding in which you can explain rather than blame.

One faith that may be God-less is the belief that we are here for the journey. We may not know where that journey will take us, but we can be steadfast in our belief that our life’s purpose is to enjoy our journey, our personal voyage. Each of the challenges will be good for us because we will learn, develop, and grow from them. No matter how “bad” they seem on the surface, we will look at them with respect and understand that in the end, they will help us in our personal growth. The goal is not simply to reach the top of the mountain, but to enjoy the ascent.

Some of you reading this may be believers in the “law of attraction.” This is an old law that has been revisited and revitalized by Rhonda Byrne as *The Secret*. If you truly have faith in *The Secret*, then you know how important it is not to blame anyone for anything. According to *The Secret*, you must deeply and thoroughly envision what you most want and you will get it. If you keep thinking of something negative, that negative thing will surely find you. Blaming begins as a negative thought. Based on these principles, if you don’t achieve what you say you want, you only have yourself to blame. This is the same principle of attracting success with mind power as that described in *Creative Visualization* by Shakti Gawain. Negativity brings negatively. Blaming someone or

something brings about more blame. The journey also involves the Buddhist concept of “being here now” and living in the moment. The first popular *Be Here Now* book that set the stage and helped open the consciousness of a nation was by Jewish psychologist turned Buddhist Baba Ram Dass. Meeting Ram Dass in the early 1980s had a long-lasting and positive influence on my life and how I personally view the concept of “now.” The Buddhist monk Thich Nat Hanh has spread the concept of mindfulness meditation and the quintessential importance of attaining inner peace, emotional awareness, and psychological flexibility by being aware and mindful of all of our actions. The more that you live in the here and now, the less you compare this moment and this coffee and this weather to what it was like in the past and how great it will be in the future. The belief in the power of mindfulness is more than a New Age fad. It represents a system to which we may fundamentally base our life skills, psyche, and behaviors. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts. He has successfully brought the power of mindfulness into many medical centers and treatment programs.

Every time that we compare the now to what we think it was or will be, the more depressed we become at how bad things are currently. In several books on mindfulness, bestselling author, artist, and Harvard psychology professor Dr. Ellen Langer has clearly delineated the advantages of having a mindful outlook on life, learning, and creativity. Dr. Langer uses an evidenced-based approach to show us that when we look at life with mindless beliefs and attitudes, we give up control. Whether we do this via mindless task-processing or through blaming, we end up in the same dark lonely room. In her book *On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself Through Mindful Creativity*, Dr. Langer refers to one of her scientific studies where she gave a questionnaire to participants asking how frequently they compare themselves with others in terms of such things as wealth, attractiveness, fitness, and personality. They were also given a questionnaire that investigated how often they express negative behaviors and attitudes. There was a strong cor-

relation between those who frequently make comparisons (good or bad) and the expression of negativity. Participants who were less evaluative experienced (made fewer comparisons), blamed less and felt better about themselves. Dr. Langer has also applied these mindful concepts to health (*Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*); learning (*The Power of Mindful Learning*); and work (*Mindfulness*).

Comparing is our first step to negative thinking. When you compare the now to the past and future; when you compare the present restaurant to the one you were at last year or the one you will go to next month; when you compare this wine to the best wine you've ever had, you will most often conclude that the now is not so great. You probably complained just as much then as you are now, and compared that time to something that you thought was better in the past or will be better in the future. It's always better in your mind. Fortunately you don't live there. You live in the world of reality where things happen now. Instead of enjoying them, we compare everything to the perfect. When they are not perfect, we need to find out why, which means that there is something or someone to BLAME!

One difficulty in discussing why "bad things" happen is the definition of "bad things." People often refer to "bad things" as unpleasant. While this may be true, unpleasant does not mean bad. Staying up late to study for exams while you are also trying to hold down a job can be very unpleasant and difficult. But how lucky you are to have employment and spending money. How lucky you are that your parents taught you the value of money and education. How lucky you have the opportunity and ability to learn. How lucky you are to be close to finishing your doctorate degree. How lucky you are to be able to make this work worthwhile by giving back to the community through counseling troubled teens. This is an opportunity to give thanks, not to blame.

Similarly, with a practicing belief in mindfulness, mistakes are neither good nor bad. Dr. Langer teaches us that mistakes provoke and promote mindfulness, in addition to opening previously undisclosed doors. In social psychological studies, Dr. Langer asked par-

ticipants in two groups to draw a picture of an animal or write an essay, and subsequently “forced” them to make a mistake. A third group of participants were allowed to draw or write without interference. Subjects who were instructed to incorporate a mistake (in the first two groups) into the picture or into the essay (in contrast to being told that it was human to make a mistake), later reported the most enjoyment in the activity. In addition, the art and writing from these groups was preferred by judges, even compared to those who made no mistakes! Based on her studies, as well as her personal journey into the world of art, Dr. Langer does not tolerate mistakes, she welcomes them. So should we!

### **A coincidence?**

If a belief in God, a god-like being, a life-sustaining energy or force, or the importance of a journey doesn't appeal to you, then maybe you can try to have faith in fate. I can almost guarantee that everyone reading this book has had a “wow, it's a small world” experience. I'm referring to the kind of overwhelming life experience that at first seems like a coincidence, and once you reflect upon the odds of it happening seems so much more special. It's the kind of event that makes you realize that somehow the world is not as big as you thought it was. Maybe there is something behind the scenes directing some of these life occurrences, because it is too weird to be just a coincidence. “Synchronicity” is a term coined by Swiss Psychologist Carl Jung to describe coincidences that are just too special to be just coincidences. Your gut tells you that this is something meaningful and particularly out of the ordinary realm of coincidences. Robert Hopcke is the author of the best-selling book *There Are No Accidents*. He describes the phenomenon of synchronicity as meaningful sequences of unusual, accidental events. There is something bigger in the world with which our inner selves or psyches are in touch.

In the early 1980s I spent a few months traveling by myself in Europe. I met someone named David in a wine cellar in Salzburg, Austria. David was from Canada and lived in a town not too far from

my home in Toronto. We spoke for a short time and then parted ways. He was headed east and I was headed west. A few weeks later I was sitting near the dock in Brindisi, Italy, waiting for a boat to Greece and I noticed a familiar figure sitting on the dock near me. It was David. We resumed our previous conversation, found out that we had a lot in common and traveled together for a few weeks in Greece. After about one week of traveling, we were getting off a boat on one of the smaller islands when suddenly a tall, young, bearded man who was also getting off the boat approached us and asked if we would mind if he looked for a hotel with us. We told him that would be fine. This new traveling companion, Keith, told us that he had just come to Greece from Israel where he had been visiting for six months. It turned out that Keith was from Canada and we let him know that we were both Canadians. Keith told us that he was from Ontario. What a coincidence, David and I were both from Ontario. Keith was from Toronto. I was from Toronto and David was from London, Ontario. I asked Keith where in the city he was from and he said, "The middle of the city." I was from the North End. "Where in the middle?" I inquired. "From the Forest Hill area," he replied. "Where in the Forest Hill area?" I continued. "Near Bathurst and Eglinton," he said. "Where around Bathurst and Eglinton?" I persisted. "On Elm Ridge," he said. "What number Elm Ridge?" I finally asked. "Number forty-three," he answered slowly, looking at me now with a little nervousness. "You live next to my grandparents!" I exclaimed. "They live at number forty-one." He told me that he knew my grandparents well. It turned out that we had worked at the same camp, but missed each other by one year; he was dating my cousin and we had many friends in common. Was it just a coincidence that on this remote Greek island we met for the first time? Possibly.

I told my uncle this story and he relayed to me that he was in the Grand Caymans on vacation and was lying on the beach when he decided to go for a swim. In the water he met a gentleman with whom he struck up a conversation. The man that he met was from Toronto. They spoke about Toronto for a while and when my uncle delved further into where in the city this other fellow lived,

they went through the same back and forth conversation that I had had with Keith. “Forest Hill,” “Bathurst and Eglinton,” “Elm Ridge,” and “Number forty-one.” This man, it turns out, was living in my uncle’s old house (when he used to live with his parents - my grandparents)! Is this small street in Toronto just that popular? Coincidence? Possibly. These things happen to all of us throughout our lives. Maybe they are all coincidences. But maybe they are not. Maybe life is more exciting and meaningful than the occurrence of mere coincidences suggest.

You’re going on a business trip to London. You’ve just left a meeting in New York and are not going to have much time to get to the airport. There is a big traffic jam and by the time you get to the airport, they won’t let you on the airplane. You have to fly out the next day. You are furious. You blame the people at work for not ending the meeting earlier. You blame the people in the parking garage at work for not allowing you to get your car out faster. You blame the people in New York for not taking the subway. You blame those poor people who were involved in the traffic accident. You blame the airline for not letting you get on even though the plane had not taken off. You blame the business people in London for scheduling the meeting for tomorrow. You blame your wife for not being able to drive you to the airport and her boss for not being more approachable so that she could get part of the day off to drive you. You blame your parents for not talking you out of being a businessman and you blame your in-laws for living in New York and causing you to live in this city. It seems everyone is to blame but you. As businessman Robert Half has stated, “The search for someone to blame is always successful.”

On your drive home from the airport, you hear on the radio that a plane bound for London was just the victim of a bomb scare and was turning around making an emergency landing in New York. Your first thought, “Thank God I didn’t get on that plane.” Now, do you go back to thank all those people that you just blamed for you not getting on that plane?

How often do things happen to us that we initially interpret as being bad and later reinterpret as being good? Several years ago I

was practicing martial arts and training some students in padded weaponry. I was working out with one of my top students when I was struck in the eye and began having double vision out of that eye. I blamed myself for the incident because I was not following my own rules and wearing a helmet. The next morning I saw an ophthalmologist and found out that I had incurred a corneal laceration that would take a few days to resolve. While I was in the office, he noted something peculiar during the exam. He sent me upstairs to see another specialist who performed a series of tests and diagnosed me with glaucoma. This second eye doctor informed me of how lucky it was that I came in because I had already lost some vision from the glaucoma and would have lost more if I hadn't been diagnosed. I went back to my martial arts class and thanked the student that hit me. By hitting me in the eye, he actually saved my vision. Bad things may not always be bad things. It depends on how you look at it, and the final outcome.

We're not always aware of what the final outcome will be. So try to assume that things happen for the good and not just by coincidence. You will have fewer things and people to blame and will get to spend more time having people to thank.