

Part I

Fables

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**No more
guilt!**

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This morning I was running late, so I grabbed the bundle of mail in my letterbox on my way out the door and just shoved it into my bag without a glance. Now I sat in my office and opened the top envelope. I felt a brief pang of anxiety as I unfolded the letter. It was the final invoice from the funeral home.

My grandmother was an amazing woman. Her energy was infectious. She was sweet but could also be a bit manipulative, though not in a bad way. She just always knew how to get her way, and even into her eighties nothing got past her. A life well lived had come full circle with this acknowledgement from the funeral home. A strange final step in a life that would live on now only in our memories.

My favourite memory of her was how she loved to dance, and she was really good at it. I was always jealous about that. I've never really felt comfortable cutting loose on the dance floor. I imagine that being able to dance really well must be the best feeling in the world.

Thoughts of my grandmother cutting up the dance floor were interrupted by a rap on my office door. It was our receptionist telling me that my 9 o'clock appointment had arrived.

Her name was Georgia and I was to interview her for a job as an external consultant to help us improve our productivity. Honestly, with family and funeral still uppermost in my mind, I really wasn't prepared for this meeting. I planned just to question her around what she did and how she thought she could help us. I guess I was winging it.

Georgia, wearing a tailored wool navy suit over a bright white shirt, exuded a sense of calm confidence. Her warm smile quickly melted the awkwardness that usually accompanies meetings between strangers. She seemed comfortable in herself, conveying a sense of knowing without a hint of arrogance. It was good.

I began to tell her about our organisation, and she listened intently. She asked if she could take a few notes and was soon writing furiously, then she stopped abruptly. I was making a point about the distractions our people were exposed to. It was something I often thought about. I tried hard to keep everyone away from office politics, game playing and general distractions. I was concerned that all this noise reduced their focus and attention.

'Tell me about the noise in your organisation. What is it exactly that distracts your people?' she asked.

I thought about it for a beat. I didn't mean it in a critical way, necessarily. It just struck me that people were often a bit scattered. There is so much to pay attention to today.

The truth was I too often felt distracted, by my phone, relentless email pop-up alerts, text messages, social media—all competing to send me off target. As I thought about it, I realised how easy it is to feel like you are ‘missing out’ if you are not always connected. Missing out on what I’m not sure, but definitely missing out.

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘I suppose I think there’s simply so much going on that sometimes it’s overwhelming for everyone. It’s not that the team have bad intent. Most of them show up every day set on doing a great job. I just worry that they lose focus on what is really important.’

As I heard myself speak, it struck home how bothered I was by this lack of focus. Personally, I often wasn’t nearly as focused as I should be. For my team, I know they are distracted. Recently politics in the organisation had reared its ugly head and taken a lot of people off their game.

‘I understand,’ she said, and somehow I felt she did. ‘That’s really what I’m here for. What I do is help organisations work out the stumbling blocks that undermine their productivity.’

I looked at her and was convinced at that moment that she was going to know exactly what she was talking about. But I wasn’t quite ready to think about my own lack of productivity this morning, and I thought a change of scenery might help me focus on this conversation.

‘Look, I haven’t had a coffee this morning. What say we get out of this office and head downstairs? There’s a great café on the corner and we can talk about distraction, stumbling blocks and how we might do things better around here.’

She smiled and agreed. I grabbed my bag and my wallet and we walked towards the elevator.

‘I’m sorry, Georgia. I actually am a bit distracted this morning,’ I said wryly, all too aware of the irony given our conversation. ‘My grandmother died last week. Her funeral was on the weekend and I was literally looking at the paperwork when you arrived. So I have to admit that I haven’t done my homework on you. Maybe we could sort of start this meeting again?’

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry about your grandmother.’

‘Well, you know, it’s not generally something that arouses a lot of sympathy. I mean, she was old, right? There’s nothing surprising about an old person passing away. She had a spark, though, you know? A real spark. And it’s like a light has been put out. It’s probably not always like that with old people. Sometimes maybe the light goes out long before the end, but it was different with her. The light was still lit; it was on, right to the end. So when it did go out, well, there was a loss there.’

As the elevator reached the ground floor I realised I was sharing a lot with this person I had only just met. I felt a twinge of embarrassment, but then I made eye contact

with her. She seemed okay with it, and it came to me in that moment that I had no one to talk to about this stuff.

‘She sounds like an amazing woman. It doesn’t matter what age people are when they leave our lives. It still hurts. We love them.’

We walked out into the buzzing Melbourne CBD, pulling our jackets close as the cold wind whipped around the building. In the café we chose a table near the window, perfect for people watching. The trendy café was loaded with character, and with ‘characters’. The sun streamed in, just clipping our table and lighting Georgia’s face as she smiled again.

‘So, Will,’ she began. ‘Thanks for seeing me. It’s clear you had a tough weekend and you were thrown this 9 o’clock meeting to start your week. I’d be happy to reschedule if you want.’

‘No, not at all. Look, Georgia, you come highly recommended. So now we are here, tell me about yourself. What is *your* story?’

‘Ha!’ she replied. ‘My story? Well, let’s see. You’ve opened up to me this morning, Will, so I’m going to do something I wouldn’t normally do in an initial business meeting. I’ll give you some background on why I do what I do.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘This is my style. Let’s lay it out on the table!’

‘Okay. Well, I was always someone who wanted to be there for other people. As a young girl, I was the one my parents relied on, and my friends too. I was probably a bit of a people pleaser, not that that’s such a bad thing. I liked to make sure other people were okay and happy.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

‘Yes and no. As a young adult, this same need to be there for everyone else showed up in my work. I have always been a perfectionist too, and I’d get a little obsessed about everything having to be just so. I would work hard to make sure everything was right and everyone was happy with my work. Mostly, this was a good thing. It meant I did good work, met deadlines and mostly got along with everyone.’

‘A perfect employee,’ I declared.

She smiled. ‘Maybe, but I also spent a lot of time focusing on things that, in the grand scheme of things, were really not that important. I became so obsessed with the little things in certain situations that I sometimes missed what was really important.’

‘Right. It’s easy to do. I think we all do it at times.’

‘It is. The problem was I often felt guilty when I couldn’t get everything done perfectly. I’d get distracted over some detail that really shouldn’t have been my focus, then I’d feel frustrated when the big picture wasn’t working out the way I wanted it to.’

As Georgia was speaking, I couldn't help but think of all the parts of my life that I might be managing better. I knew I wasn't handling things perfectly and I definitely felt guilty about not being in better control.

'I wanted to eliminate this feeling of guilt when I couldn't be perfect,' she continued. 'That's what it came down to. And I learned the valuable lesson that trying to be perfect holds us all back from having an outstanding life.'

'I mean, I did all the things that society told me I was supposed to do. I was a very lucky woman. I had a good job, met a great man, got married and had two wonderful children. I was juggling all of those things and was busier than I had ever been. I was trying to manage work, a home life, personal time, friends and trying to keep healthy and fit.'

'I don't think I'm doing any of those things as well as I could be. This really strikes a chord with me, Georgia. I sometimes feel guilty about not making the most of all of those situations.'

'Exactly,' she said. 'So one day I was listening to some of my co-workers talking. One was feeling guilty because she was working late and not spending enough time with her kids. Another said she felt bad because she didn't have enough time to go to the gym. Yet another said she felt conscience-stricken because she had not been following her diet. Then it hit me. *No more guilt!*'

‘How do you mean?’ I asked, unable to imagine how that could be possible.

She pulled in her chair, centred herself and began. ‘I became really fascinated with the concept of guilt. I learned that most people feel guilty about most aspects of their lives. Working with a lot of women, I was shocked by how many were struggling to be a corporate hotshot, the perfect mother, a wonderful partner, and a fit, healthy and attractive woman, while still finding time for themselves. It doesn’t work.

‘I mean, we live in a world in which women are expected to be all things to all people. So many women I knew were working late and feeling guilty about not being home. Feeling like they weren’t doing a good enough job for their kids. Yet when they left work early to pick up the kids, they felt guilty for not spending extra time at work.

‘Of course,’ she went on, ‘most working women also feel guilty about not being a good enough partner or friend. Most of all, though, they feel they don’t devote enough time to their health and fitness, or simply to themselves. With so many family and work obligations, they don’t have enough time to focus on meeting their own needs.’

‘Yeah!’ I chimed in. ‘You know, Georgia, this is good. We are bombarded with all these images of what we are supposed to be today. Media. Advertising. Social media. Everyone puts out this perfect image of their perfect life,

but it's not real. People post the good stuff. The media airbrush the bad stuff. The bottom line is we end up feeling bad about ourselves. I think men are not so different. We feel guilty for a lot of those same reasons.'

'It's interesting,' she said. 'Both men and women are assaulted by this internal noise that tells us we are not as good as we should be. We have been raised on this crazy idea that we have to find "balance", whatever that means. As if somehow our work and personal lives can be neatly reconciled to fit our nine-to-five timetable. For most people, there are times when work has to be a priority, and there are times when family and friends should take priority. I wanted to find an idea that would take away that guilt for both men and women. I wanted to help them cut all this noise.'

'Cut the noise. I like the sound of that,' I replied. 'So what solution did you come up with? Is there a way to do this?'

'There is. It's a technique you can use to deal with guilt. It's called "10 seconds of guilt ... move on".'

'Okay, how does that work? Tell me more about it.'

'We need to acknowledge feelings of guilt,' she explained. 'It is important to recognise when we feel guilty about some event in our lives. But the reason the 10 seconds is important is that we have to get rid of the guilt quickly so we can focus on what we really need to.'

‘Guilt is not a useful feeling, especially in the context of feeling bad about the failure to meet an unrealistic expectation. And the research backs me up on this. Studies show that when people feel guilty about an activity they are not doing, they are less effective at the activity they *are* doing. In other words, if you feel guilty because you are taking time out for yourself, you don’t maximise the value of spending that time on clearing your mind. Get rid of the guilt and you will be more effective.’

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘I think I’m with you. But guilt can sometimes be a useful emotion. For example, if you have done the wrong thing, it is important to feel guilty about it. Children need to feel guilty about poor behaviour—that’s how they learn.’

‘Of course,’ Georgia replied. ‘But this is different. This is about maximising your human potential every day. You’re right. It is important to feel guilt to learn a lesson, but there is a point beyond which it is no longer useful to continue to beat yourself up.’

‘Basically, if the guilt relates to one of two critical situations, then we should use the 10 seconds technique.’

‘What are those two situations?’

‘Well, the first is that we are feeling guilty about something we cannot or will not change. The second is that we are feeling guilty about failing to be perfect. The desire for perfection gets in the way of an outstanding life.’

‘Talk me through them both.’

‘Let’s take the first one first. If I can’t change the situation, there is no point in feeling guilty about it. For example, if I’m on a business trip and am in another city, there’s no sense in my feeling guilty about not being at home. After all, I’m not at home and nothing I can do will get me home tonight. Therefore I am better off focusing on the work I have to do in this city. Ten seconds of guilt, move on—and get the job done. Feeling guilty doesn’t help anyone. It doesn’t serve my family and doesn’t serve my client, especially if I am feeling distracted.’

‘I agree.’

‘The second one is we feel guilty about our failure to meet an unrealistic standard based on the idea that we should be perfect. It’s not normal to be perfect. It’s human to make mistakes and have imperfections. We do the best we can and learn from each experience.’

As she was talking, I couldn’t help but think about how often I would criticise myself for not doing a perfect job in some aspect of my life. All that internal noise was not productive and was certainly not useful.

‘What I do now is I help companies prioritise so they can focus on what is important. I’ve worked as a top executive, manager and partner in business. I’ve also gone through a journey on which I learned the most important lesson in business and life: I could and should *cut the noise*.’

I really liked where she was going with this idea, yet something was bothering me. ‘But how do I know what is important and what is simply noise?’

‘Simple!’ she said with a smile. ‘The circles of importance.’

‘That sounds daunting,’ I laughed.

‘It’s actually very simple. I think of it like this. There are usually six major areas of importance in people’s lives. They are family, work, friends, health, community groups and, perhaps most important, ‘me time’. Put a circle around each of those words and they become your circles of importance.

‘Now it’s simply a matter of being aware of what your desired outcome is and focusing on what you need to do to accomplish it. If what I’m doing doesn’t fit into one of my circles of importance, then it’s probably just noise. Sometimes we just have to say ‘no’ to something that does not serve our circles of importance. I want to be aware of the actions, activities and areas of my life that are going to truly make a difference.’

Georgia’s ideas had such congruency, and I realised I hadn’t listened this intensely to another person in a long time.

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘My head is ringing with alarm bells on all the things I do that I don’t think fit into my circles.’

‘It’s so easy for us to find things that don’t fit in our circles,’ she continued. ‘It’s important to learn to say no. The

ultimate message is *awareness*. The point is to be conscious. The idea that we can strike a perfect work–life balance is really just a myth. In fact, the idea actually creates needless guilt, because no one really experiences a perfect work–life balance.’

‘I agree,’ I replied, ‘but there has to be some perspective. There have been many times when I have got things out of whack, with too much time focused on one of the circles, particularly the work circle.’

‘The awareness part is everything. What is the most important thing to focus on right now? Prioritise that. Focus on that. I don’t talk so much about work–life balance. Instead I teach a concept I call *accelerated focus*. When I know I need to focus on something that is important to me right now, I am going to really focus on it. Accelerated focus on that activity will give me better results.

‘We live in a world in which we have come to celebrate the idea of multi-tasking. I hear people all the time bragging about their ability to do many things at once. But the research shows that accelerated focus—total focus on the activity for a period of time—will guarantee greater success at any task, whether it is sales prospecting, a workout at the gym or dinner with the family.’

‘That’s definitely true of my people,’ I admitted. Listening to Georgia, I thought about the differences between the two concepts and how much more productive accelerated focus must necessarily be.

I started thinking about how this related to different times of the year as well.

‘In my organisation, we have busier periods of the year when I need to be really clear about what I have to get done. I may spend less time at home, at the gym or “chilling out” than I would at other times of the year. In our more relaxed time, I can kick back a bit more. And I needn’t feel guilty about taking my foot off the pedal when I’m on leave.’

‘Right. It’s called being on holiday!’

I laughed. ‘I don’t think I always do a very good job of that either. I’m the guy on the beach with his phone pressed to his ear.’

‘We all do it,’ she assured me. ‘Remember, it’s not about perfect. Perfection gets in the way of an outstanding life. It’s about being conscious, awake to what is really important. Dial into those things and get rid of the noise in any given situation.’

‘Taking up a challenge with accelerated focus means you’ll get better results. I hear people say all the time that they have to multi-task to get everything done. I know sometimes that’s true. Sometimes we have no choice but to juggle several tasks at once. But people who multi-task constantly are being led by the events around them. People who attack a task with accelerated focus are in control of how they respond to the events around them...’

Georgia broke off her speech-making and caught my eye with a self-mocking grin.

‘Well, Georgia, we have solved half the world’s problems this morning. You know what, off the back of this conversation I’ve just realised something I am going to do. I’m going to organise a dinner for my whole family. My grandmother’s funeral was wonderful, but it was all so busy and I think most of us were pretty distracted. I want to have a little family tribute. A dinner with accelerated focus. No guilt about the past. No noise. Just a little celebration in her memory.’

Georgia had given me a lot to think about in that first meeting. I’m sure we’ll get into the detail of how she will be able to help my organisation. But even in this short space of time she had introduced some simple but powerful ideas that could make a huge difference.

Cut the noise. I suddenly felt amazingly awake and aware of all the things in my life that make me feel bad about myself and distract me. Actually, that’s it: It’s really all about just being aware of what is happening around me. Am I in control of all the noise or am I overwhelmed by it? Am I allowing irrelevant external information to get in the way of what I really should be doing? Have I given myself permission to say no to things that are just distracting me from what is really important?

Key takeaways

10 seconds of guilt ... move on!

There are two situations involving guilt in which this tool should be used. The first is when we feel guilty about something we can't control. If we can't control it or change it, then feeling guilty is not going to help us or anyone else. Take the 10 seconds to acknowledge the feeling of guilt ... then move on. In the second scenario we feel guilty about not being perfect. We are all human, and sometimes things don't work out the way we want them to. We say the wrong thing, make a mistake. Take your 10 seconds and then ask yourself, 'What did I learn?' Get clear about that and leave the guilt behind.

Cut the noise

Today we are inundated with more stimuli, information and messages than at any time in human history, from traditional media to social media, from news (fake and real) to reality television, from email pop-ups to physical meetings with real people. And we are all busier than we have ever been. The challenge lies in determining what in all this interaction and messaging is truly important and what is simply noise that diverts our thoughts, time and actions. We need to eliminate the empty noise from our life.

An outstanding life, not perfection, should be our goal

Life is not perfect. When we are bombarded on social media with everyone else's best version of themselves, it can be hard not to feel like others are doing life better than we are. When we fail in our bid for perfection it creates a sense of guilt, because we feel that our actual life falls short of the version we aspire to. Our mistake is to focus on trying to be perfect rather than on living an outstanding real life. Allow yourself to do the best you can. You can't be a perfect parent, partner, employee and friend all at the same time. You can't maintain the same physical image you had 10 years ago. Allow yourself to be who you are. Be good to yourself and create an outstanding life.

Circles of importance

Creating an outstanding life is really about knowing what is truly important to you. Most people have six areas in their life that really matter. They usually include some version of work, family, friends, health, community and 'me time'. Throw a circle around those words and they become your circles of importance. Use these circles to prioritise what is important for you to focus on and spend your time on. If what you are engaged with does not fall into one of those areas, it is very possible that you are being distracted by the noise from what is really important in your life. Often other people convince us to focus on their

agenda, which may well not serve us. It is so important that we recognise that it is okay to say no without guilt, or at least not more than 10 seconds of it! We all need to give ourselves permission to say no to things that are not working for us.

Accelerated focus

This technique will help you block out the background noise and give your current activity your full attention. Constantly assaulted by information from many different sources, and seeking to balance competing priorities, we have had to learn to do many tasks at once. But multi-tasking does not work. Determining what we need to do now and focusing on that task without distraction will deliver better results. Many teenagers today study with their phone on while participating in multiple social media conversations that can potentially involve hundreds of other students. Employees today work with email pop-ups and text messages perpetually interrupting their thought patterns. It is not possible to deliver your best work when you are constantly distracted. Accelerated focus is about being aware and in control of your focus in a world of distraction.

Food for thought

- 1 Which of these ideas resonated most with you? Why do you think that was?
- 2 What actions can you take in your life to reduce the guilt you feel about things you can't control?
- 3 What could you do in your life to reduce your need for perfection and help create an outstanding life?
- 4 Have you identified the core circles of importance in your life? Are you sometimes distracted by activity that clearly does not support those core circles?
- 5 How important is it in your life to get better at saying no to activities that do not serve you well?
- 6 We all have to multi-task to some degree, but do you often feel like you are trying to do too many things at once, and is that affecting your results? Do you sometimes feel out of control as a result?
- 7 How can you incorporate accelerated focus in your life? In what areas could you put this into practice right now?

