

PART I

Finding Your Focus

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CHAPTER 1

David Risher, the Lost Key, and Eradicating Illiteracy Are You a Determined Optimist?

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

—Howard Thurman

“I knew at a very young age I was a reader. My mom instilled the belief in me that ‘if I don’t have reading, I have nothing.’” When David Risher was five, his parents divorced, leaving his mom to support the family. Those were not easy times growing up. Mom didn’t have much work experience, but did find a job selling encyclopedias. The money was just enough, at times barely, to support the family and, just as important to her, filled their house with encyclopedias.

David will tell you he has been a reader for as long as he can remember. So for a kid like David who loved to read, his mom's job was the perfect setup. Books on any subject were literally everywhere. When his mom ran errands, she would drop the boys off at the library. When he walked to school, it was always with a book in his hand. He was passionate about books. Reading is part of David's core self.

He was one of the first people I got to know in my new job back in 1991. I definitely didn't think "superhero" when I met him. He seemed like a regular Joe. He was a soft-spoken, never-full-of-himself kind of human being. There was a quiet confidence and a sort of sparkle in the guy's eyes. Still is.

When you sit down with him, he has this disarmingly casual, friendly, laid-back way about him. You quickly feel comfortable. Then David starts talking fast, really fast. So fast that sometimes you struggle to keep up. But you always feel like his words and ideas come from a place of authenticity and purposefulness. He's not just spouting stuff off the top of his head. He's genuine; I don't think he has an insincere bone in his body. As I got to know him, it was easy to see this guy is passionate. He is passionate about technology and education, and especially about books.

A few years ago, David and his wife, Jen, and their two daughters went on a long-term working vacation. They taught school overseas, helped build a house in Vietnam, and ended up spending several weeks helping out at an orphanage in Ecuador. His young kids carried e-readers during their travels. The technology was just hitting the mass market, and his kids brought them along to keep up on their school work.

David's passions—books, education, and technology—came crashing together at that orphanage. Walking across the grounds on a hot summer morning, he noticed a padlocked building across from the school and wondered what was in the building that had to be kept under lock and key. "That's our library," explained the orphanage's leader. David asked to see what was inside the library, but the leader admitted, "I think we've lost the key."

At that moment, no one seemed overly concerned about the unused building, except David. He noticed his kids reading voraciously on their e-readers, just a short distance from the orphaned children. He looked at his kids with their devices. He looked at the orphanage children. He looked at the inaccessible library. Back at his kids. Back at the orphaned children and the padlock. As David puts it, “There were my own kids reading on these devices, while I’m looking at these other kids, with that same drive to learn, but without even basic tools.” And David got an idea.

His mind was racing. He looked at a seemingly hopeless situation at a disadvantaged orphanage in a remote part of the world through a different lens from most others. He saw a real problem and thought he could have an answer. Most people would have seen the locked building and the bookless orphans and either failed to give them another thought or written the situation off as just another intractable social problem and walked away.

Instead, David had an aha moment: a simple and optimistic vision of bringing e-readers to parts of the world that needed them most. His mind was flooded with ideas. “I thought to myself, okay, hold on. I can step back and think, I’m going to just watch kids who are hungry to learn not have the books they need to improve their lives or I can step in and say, let’s solve this problem.” He stepped in, all the way in, during those moments in the courtyard, thousands of miles from home.

When David returned to the United States, he helped conceive and launch Worldreader (www.worldreader.org), a nonprofit that uses technology to bring reading material to areas most in need. He found a like-minded partner in Colin McElwee, and together they developed David’s kernel of an idea into a working model: Combine the extensive availability of mobile technology, the falling costs of e-readers, and the power of letting children choose which books they want to read. Ultimately, lives throughout the world could be transformed.

David was starting a new business, just like he'd done before many times in his professional life. He was very good at seeing a new opportunity and putting the plans, people, resources, and next steps together; it was almost like muscle memory to him. He wrote an action plan, and with that, Worldreader was born.

Today, David believes widespread illiteracy can be eradicated in the most heavily afflicted parts of the developing world. That is his fundamental, determined optimism. It is his *one* thing, his *can't not do* in which he firmly believes. He may not have the answer to ending gang violence or early childhood development issues; he can leave those challenges to someone else. But David knows he can help end illiteracy someday.

Let's be clear: The challenge of illiteracy is not a small one. Over the past 100 years, rates of global illiteracy have dropped from 75 percent to less than 15 percent. But according to UNESCO, that means there are still 773.5 million illiterate people in this world and 123.2 million children of primary school age who lack basic reading and writing skills.¹ Extremely low literacy rates are focused in three regions: South Asia, West Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Fifty percent of sub-Saharan schools have few or no books at all. David has done his research and knows this, but when presented with the prospect of putting an e-book into hands of an eager young reader, he has never equated daunting statistics with impossible.

"Once I came up with the idea," says David about starting Worldreader, "how could I *not*?"

When I first talked to David, Worldreader had an active presence in nine African countries, 27 worldwide through its Worldreader mobile app, and in its first four years since inception, nearly 1.8 million e-books had been read, and there were nearly 200,000 kids reading every quarter. It was real progress, but such a long journey to go, just the kind of challenge for a determined optimist. There's an update since I checked several months ago: as of March 2015, over 2.2 million e-books have been read, more than 400,000 kids in 50 countries are

reading every quarter, and the rate is accelerating (check the home page at www.worldreader.org). And why would it not in this world of multipliers and determined optimists like David? What a great example of using technology as a social multiplier.

David is fundamentally optimistic about the kids around the world that he wants to help; it's what drives his can't-not-do spirit. When I first asked him about the kids Worldreader is working with, I expected to hear how bad things were, how long the odds were. The first words out of his mouth were about how "curious, hungry to learn, and enthusiastic" these kids are; David doesn't see needy, he sees potential. "Reading is our main vaccine against poverty," he says, echoing Anne Reece's belief about education and his own experience of reading as a way out of poverty while growing up.

What's the Point?

If you're going to dive into this change-the-world business, you better believe that solving the problem at hand is possible. Can we eradicate illiteracy in the developing world (and at home)? Can we develop more and more strong leaders for the social sector? Can we create a United States in which every child shows up on the first day of kindergarten with an equal opportunity to learn? Can we dramatically reduce gang violence in our major urban areas? If a particular social problem was an easy one to solve, it's probably already been solved; so the ones that are left can feel impossible to a lot of, sometimes most, people. But not to everyone.

Like David Risher, determined optimists are people who believe a solution to a given social problem is possible. I don't use the term *determined optimist* in some airy-fairy sense. I'm talking about hardcore problem solvers who do not believe "no" is a viable answer.

I'm about 65 percent determination and 35 percent optimism; everyone is different. If I had to guess, I'd say David is the opposite from me; that's just a gut feel, it's what he exudes. I wouldn't say I'm

pessimistic, but I'm also not a naturally optimistic person, though I wish I were. I'm more of a realist who believes change is possible; there is a reason Teddy Roosevelt's "man in the arena" quote (pardon the gender skew) is my favorite of all time. I'm more of a grinder; when I get focused, I get determined, really determined, but at the end of the day you also have to have belief, enough optimism to know that change is possible, like David.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

— Teddy Roosevelt

Determined optimists see their chosen social challenge as a puzzle to be solved, not a hopelessly entrenched problem. Being a determined optimist about a single cause or area of focus is a key principle here. The world changes when enough people get focused and go deep on one challenge; cue the Margaret Mead quote again about committed people, also known as determined optimists. Note that I said "challenge," not "challenges." You don't need to feel determined optimism about many things. In fact, you only have to feel that optimistic about one thing in life. One cause. You can leave all the other problems to other people, people who are just as optimistic

about impacting those problems. What's vital is that each of us finds that one cause and commits to it for the long term.

Think about gang violence in Los Angeles. I lived there from 1985 to 1990 with my wife, Lori. She taught at an inner city school, Hoover Street Elementary, the biggest one west of the Mississippi, with well over 50 languages spoken. Ninety percent of the school's families at that time came to the United States to escape war and poverty in Central America. They were some of the most inspiring kids and families you'd ever want to meet. It was also in a neighborhood surrounded by dangerous gangs, including the Bloods and the Crips.

Gang violence permeated the news. At that time, nothing felt more intractable than gangs in L.A. And yet, as we've discussed, someone like Jeff Carr, not a superhero or a famous celebrity, viewed it as a complex human puzzle to solve. How do you reconfigure the people and conditions so the equation for gang violence sums up differently? Could it be done? Jeff and a handful of other determined optimists thought so. As we saw, they proved they were right. There's still a whole lot of work left to do, but the progress is amazing.

Optimism is a necessity for can't-not-do work because of its exceptional power to spur action, inspire others, and most important, provide the fuel to burn when the challenges seem greatest and determination is needed most. Determination and optimism fuel and reinforce each other. Daniel Kainer can shed some light on why. Dr. Kainer is the director of the Lone Star College Biotechnology Institute. He has written and spoken on a number of topics, and at a TEDx talk he spoke about the Power of Optimism.² A few of his findings are very relevant to our understanding of what determined optimism is and how it works:

- *Reality-based optimism trumps blind hope.* Optimism based on blind hope or wishful thinking can be downright dangerous. The kind of optimism we are talking about here is based on reality, what one can

honestly control and not control. There is an “eyes on the prize” determination about these people. They are able to maintain their belief in the endgame, while knowing that solving these problems brings enormous complexity and constant change. This kind of determined optimism has real power and can help get you through the tough times and inevitable failures and roadblocks.

- *Persistent optimism is highly contagious.* Genuine, reality-based optimism breeds more optimism. And as one well-known social rule says, like attracts like. Change agents understand that you have to get others fired up about a cause, inspiring that same optimism in them and then building a team that can carry that optimism further. (Also see “Can you Actively Listen?” and “Do You Believe $1 + 1 = 3$?” in later chapters.)
- *The right kind of optimism understands that the past is gone, but the future isn't here yet.* In other words, whatever conditions existed previously that resulted in an intractable problem (for example, smallpox outbreaks) have nothing to do with what can happen in the future (smallpox eradication). Determined optimists have a fundamental hopefulness and positivity. They look at a complex and entrenched problem and think, “This is hard, but a solution can be found.” This kind of determined optimism is grounded in today's reality while looking to the horizon with a great sense of possibility.

Real change never happens because of just one person. It does take a community, a village, a whole school. There is absolutely no way the Davids, Suzis, Jeffs and other determined optimists of this world can make substantial change on their own. Nevertheless, you will almost always find one brave, determined, some might say irrational, optimist who got things started. Almost by definition, some *one* has to. One person's optimism is necessary though, ultimately, not sufficient. But it is, undoubtedly, the first domino in so many cases of positive social change.

Haven't Had That "Aha" Moment?

Does every successful change agent have an aha moment, like David Risher did? Some do, but many of us go optimistically toward a cause because we learn so much about a problem over time that we come to believe it is solvable. Eric Stowe is a perfect example.

Eric was a wanderer after he graduated from high school in the early 1990s. He'll be the first to tell you he didn't have a lot of direction, like lots of kids that age, and his wandering got him into some trouble a few times along the way. For six or seven years, he travelled around the United States working various odd jobs. Eventually he went to college and did research work for a professor on the history of U.S. civil rights. He and his girlfriend, now wife, still had that wanderlust in them so they traveled to China and Russia as part of their studies. During their time there, Eric began to see an intersection between what he was studying back home, the U.S. civil rights movement, and what he was seeing abroad in the developing social justice movements of Asia. "When I got back, I called my advisor, changed my major, and ended up doing the rest of my undergrad and my graduate degree, focusing on social justice movements," Eric explained.

He related all this to me over a few cups of coffee at one of those classic Seattle coffee houses on Capitol Hill. He seems perpetually young, not just because of his baby-face looks but because of the energy he brings to his work. He's also relentlessly open to feedback; he always wants to get better at what he does and improve as a better person. This openness isn't specific to one of the seven questions, but it's a trait I see and feel frequently from can't-not-do people.

In early 2003, as Eric was finishing up his degree, he got a call from someone who ran an international adoption agency and had heard that Eric had solid Chinese language skills. The man needed short-term help with 14 families going through Chinese adoptions. "It was like a busload of people and I shepherded them through their entire

adoption process and I fell in love. Actually fell in love with the work,” said Eric. He turned down a lucrative Washington, D.C., job offer, thinking to himself, “I have to figure out how to make this adoption agency guy give me a job.” Then he spent the next three months convincing the man that he should. When he capitulated, Eric was hired and spent almost five years arranging international adoptions for abandoned and orphaned children, primarily from China, Vietnam, and Nepal. He interacted with several hundred orphanages across the globe. Eric was successful, but he couldn’t help repeatedly asking himself, “In addition to finding homes for these children, what can I do for the kids still in those institutions? What can I do that will *last*?”

Eric made inquiries, conducted audits, and fielded questionnaires to many orphanage staff, searching for what would have the greatest impact. He eventually found his answer. Although the needs were innumerable, “it boiled down,” said Eric, “to two defining things: better training for the caregivers and clean water.” And for Eric, clean water seemed a no-brainer.

Providing safe and clean drinking water meets a fundamental need. In fact, the United Nations considers access to clean water a basic human right. Yet, nearly a billion people worldwide have limited access to clean water. The orphanages Eric saw certainly lacked it. But he also noticed that many orphanages coexisted in the same cities with U.S. fast-food chains that had no trouble finding a continual supply of clean water for their customers.

There is something else to know about Eric: he is tenacious and creative. He snuck into the kitchen at a McDonald’s in China and wrote down the name of the manufacturer and the serial number for the water filtration system. If fast-food restaurants could provide clean water nearly anywhere in the world, he wanted to know why the same systems couldn’t be used in places where children really needed them. Sounds a lot like David Risher and his experience with the e-readers and the locked library at the orphanage. “That juxtaposition seemed so easy to remediate—and it was,” Eric explained.

With his employer's support, he spent a couple years contacting manufacturers of water purification equipment and getting relationships started, while raising money to install the systems at orphanages in China, Nepal, Vietnam, and Cambodia. His initiative was responsible for about 60 clean water projects at orphanages in 15 provinces in China alone. But even with this success, Eric was frustrated. "I was putting systems in, but I wasn't allowed to find out how the systems were functioning over time."

In August 2006 on a business trip to Cambodia, "over a huge beer and just pissed off," Eric wrote a 10-page manifesto detailing how one could scale his process of using water filtration systems to provide children with clean water, make the model sustainable, and build out a business for it. With this, Eric created the nonprofit A Child's Right, today renamed Splash.org, to provide water filtration systems that ensure safe water for children living at "the intersection of two streets: 'greatest degrees of poverty' and 'worst water quality conditions.'" Eric's optimism was contagious. When he returned to Seattle after laying his groundwork, he inspired a "guerilla-style cadre of volunteers who packed mountains of suitcases with pipes, filtration systems, and tools and set off for Kathmandu" and the like.³

To remind us how hard and messy this work can be, and there will be plenty of messes along the way (see Chapter 3, which focuses on hard places), Eric said he spent his first year getting his nonprofit off the ground as he continued his job in adoption, because he needed to pay rent. He worked his agency job during the day and ran the new organization at night. He describes that year as "the worst ever," but also as a catalytic year, a choice he never regrets. Just how "worst ever" did it get for him?

"Money, or lack thereof, was the first pause for me, but fear of failure undergirded those moments of hesitation at every step. Money just became an excuse to keep stalling. But honestly, the unknown didn't help either. I had a stable job, a lot of families that looked to my assistance in that role, working in international adoption, a young

family of my own, a very young son with continuous health issues, and I traveled enough to be frustrating for all, but also exciting for me, adding a whole new endeavor—a start-up that no one else had done before, meaning no road map to plagiarize. That mix seemed unreasonable, untenable, impossible. And it was. That first year I worked both jobs; I doubled my travel duties, more than 200,000 miles in that year, and operated in at least eight different time zones day in and day out. I have, and this is no lie, almost fully repressed that year from memory. My wife and I both remember very little from it.” I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted just *reading* about that year in Eric’s life.

But Eric Stowe is the quintessential determined optimist and he forged on. His vision is “a world with clean water for all children and a museum telling of when it was not so.” Can you get any more optimistic than having a museum for the problem you aim to eradicate in your vision statement? Can you sense how much determination it took, without which, all of the optimism in the world would have been squashed many times along his life journey already? In Eric’s case, maybe determination alone isn’t sufficient. Tenacity? Fearlessness? All of those.

Today Splash.org projects provide water and sanitation education to hundreds of thousands of children in Cambodia, China, Nepal, Vietnam, India, and Thailand. The amount of knowledge and experience that Eric has accumulated, much of it the hard way, over all of his journeys is immense and invaluable today and for the future. He has street smarts and street cred.

The reason Eric had the will to persevere, to be so adaptive, was because he had finally found that one thing on which to focus. He is going to leave literacy, for example, to David Risher and Los Angeles gang violence to Jeff Carr. Instead, Eric is so optimistic about solving the clean water problem that his goal is ending his organization’s work by 2030. Splash is on track to have clean water in every orphanage in China by 2016—all 1,200 orphanages in all 31 provinces. He has a

clear, realistic plan, and he has never thought of quitting. Eric says simply, “I have no desire to be anywhere else.” He can’t not do this.

Eric didn’t find the thing that he is determinedly optimistic about until he was nearly 30 years old. His cause emerged, grew, and evolved over the years. As in Eric’s case, at some point, all of what you’ve learned over time might mesh with the experiences you have gathered. A problem you see in the world may go from being a problem to more of a puzzle. And puzzles are solvable.

Eric left me with this thought: “I have always been a bit hesitant to start something without understanding the full scope/rules/guardrails/and so on first. In sports, school, and in life, once I knew the parameters I dove in and went all out, normally exceeding expectations or swan diving not so gracefully, and headfirst, into concrete. Starting Splash required being okay with knowing nothing at the outset. That trend continues to this day. While I try and safeguard the organization with as much external data and internal durability as I can, we make leaps of faith all the time without knowing what the rules are. And that has become one of our greatest strengths: *not knowing the limits, we aren’t encumbered by them.*” Those last nine words would be part of the manifesto of any determined optimist.

This Work Does Not Have to Be an Epic Endeavor

David and Eric completely reordered their lives based on their can’t not do. While their stories are inspiring and their commitment profound, for many of us this level of commitment is unachievable. Does this mean you can’t help effect change? No! I cannot stress this enough. You don’t need to start your own nonprofit. You don’t need to quit your job. You don’t need to relocate to a third-world country. Just because you cannot do this work full-time does not mean you can’t learn a heck of a lot of lessons from people who are. But

regardless, you do have to find your determined optimism about one can't not do that you believe in.

Kerry McClenahan founded and owns a communications consulting firm in Portland, Oregon, and has weathered the challenging ups and downs of the economy. The company has had booms and busts and she has overseen them all. She doesn't have a lot of extra time.

Kerry is a smart and dynamic person who readily admits that, until a few years ago, she “had no idea, *no idea*,” that over one-third of the five-year-olds in the Portland area show up their first day of kindergarten academically behind their peers by two years. She has two kids of her own, so it's not like she was new to the local school system. In her words, “The odds are stacked against you if you start way behind the first day you walk into school.” It's not insurmountable, but it's sort of like running a marathon, giving a 10-mile head start to lots of other runners, and still trying to reach the finish line—graduate high school—at the same time.

She learned all this one night in a meeting in 2010 and said, “My consciousness changed that night.” It was a “huge injustice” that she didn't know existed in her own backyard. She told me she'd never felt that kind of passion for any topic or outside interest in her life. Sometimes this stuff builds over many years; sometimes you have an epiphany one night.

When I talked to Kerry on the phone (I've met her once in person at a conference in Portland), she exuded a conviction, a purposefulness similar to Anne Reece's passion and energy. It's funny, there is a feeling I often sense when I talk with the Davids, Erics, and Kerrys of our world. I'm a little predisposed to like them, I suppose, but there is an authenticity that really comes through in all of them. They have very different personalities and causes they focus on, but the sense of their authentic selves comes across almost every time, whether it's over a cup of coffee or a phone call; Kerry was no exception.

When I asked if she believes they can meet the goal of all kids having an equal chance to learn on the first day of kindergarten, she was candid in her response. “It’s impossible . . . and I won’t stop until we reach that goal.” She won’t stop because she decided she could find a few hours a week, in between her business and kids, to become so committed. Kerry did not have to change her whole life’s trajectory. She reprioritized a few things to make room for something she found more important and rewarding. She has given a few hours a week, consistently and persistently, to Portland’s Ready for Kindergarten initiative, leveraging her marketing and communications skills to help that organization improve its community outreach and messaging.

If we look at our weekly schedules, can we find two or three hours of our lives to dedicate to a higher purpose? Nearly all of us can, including me. It requires some reprioritization and cleaving off less purposefully spent time to make space for something more meaningful and rewarding. Kerry did not embark on an epic endeavor spanning decades, like Andy, or continents, like Eric, but she is no less committed or less of a determined optimist than those who do. When I asked if Kerry would stick with her work for the long term, she said, “I couldn’t imagine not.” Could not imagine not, her exact words. It is Kerry’s can’t not do.

So What’s Mine?

My own can’t not do took some time to discover and required an embarrassing moment before I could fully embrace it. Lynann is a work colleague, a peer mentor, and a true friend. A perceptive and gifted marketer, she worked for years alongside me as an SVP partner. She tells it like it is. We were talking over a beer, one late afternoon under an August Seattle sun, and she stopped mid-sentence, out of the blue, and asked, “Do you know what you make me feel, Shoemaker?”

“Ahhh, no. What?” I asked.

“You make me feel like I matter. Yeah, you make me feel like I matter.”

I paused, not knowing how to take the comment. My first reaction was to push the statement away, reject it in show of humility, but, more honestly, because it made me uncomfortable. I said dismissively, “That’s flattering. But c’mon, can’t be that big of a deal.”

Now Lynann paused. She looked me in the eye and told me, “Damn you, Shoemaker. If you ever reject something I say like that again, after I offer something that personal from my soul, you will lose a friend.” My turn for a very long pause.

Lynann offered me an exceptionally valuable lesson that day, an insight into my own gifts, which I had yet to fully accept. Although I handled the situation poorly, Lynann’s words were a wake-up call. I had an ability, something I would now call a joy, for helping people see how they matter and can contribute in the world. We all have gifts, this happens to be one of mine. After our conversation I realized I needed to drop the insecurity, embrace my gift, own it, and put that talent to greater use for others. Not because I felt I had to, but because I wanted to. Wow, the power of a good friend who will tell you the truth and provide an invaluable lesson in the power of just listening.

What I can’t not do in my life now is be a messenger for what I’ve witnessed in order to help people—as many as I humanly can—understand that there are questions that can unlock their potential to contribute and help change the world. I have a fundamental, deep faith in the purposeful power that one person like David, Eric, or Kerry can have. Having that faith gives me enormous hope and belief that we can change and solve major social problems. I know that can sound a little naive, but my belief is not transitory, superficial, or casual. It’s a core, foundational belief in the power of the individual. Everything in this book starts from that place.

I’m also a good example of someone who isn’t so much focused on one social issue, like the environment or poverty or education, as I am on people and helping them realize their greatest potential to create

positive change in the world. That's my cause and what lights my fire most brightly and burns longest for me. I've worked side by side now with hundreds and hundreds of high-quality people, from all walks of life, to help them define a vision for themselves (to help the world, not just themselves) and a pathway to help realize it. It's one of the core things we do at SVP, and it's core to me and who I am. Let me emphasize this again: You can't not do might not be a social issue, it might be the part of the system where you feel like you can add the most value and have the biggest impact, like leadership development, team building, connecting, or convening.

One person can start a change in the world or in a neighborhood. There is no problem that one person can't start to help solve, if that individual is determined and optimistic enough. The determined optimist goes into the challenge expecting setbacks but believing an answer is out there. I love the quote by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

The moment one commits oneself, Providence moves, too. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

Be intentional about how and where you spend the "change the world" time in your life. Commit to that one thing where you have more optimism, more boldness, and begin to address it, because there is genius, power, and magic in it.

Optimism + Determination

"It completely altered my life," said Dwight Frindt, a good friend who had just hit his 70th birthday. I was casually mentioning the idea of can't not do to him over a coffee, and he told me this was his 38th year of commitment to The Hunger Project (THP). Thirty-eighth year! He had gone to listen to two people one evening in 1977 who were

creating a new organization to end hunger and poverty. “It altered the work I do, even the entire methodology of the work I do,” he said.

He was galvanized that evening by what he heard about the problem of hunger worldwide and the founders’ belief that they could conquer it. But what was most compelling to Dwight was a little white card the founders asked each person to sign if he or she wanted to support THP (www.thp.org). It said simply the following:

The Hunger Project is mine completely.

I am willing to be responsible

for making the end of starvation

an idea whose time has come.

There is so much can’t not do in those 24 words. Dwight told me, “There was no Hunger Project before I participated as I started just after it was founded in 1977. Prior to that I had volunteered for various things and made small donations. It was only when THP was launched that I saw the opportunity to change the fundamental condition in the world that leads to all of the seemingly impossible-to-alter situations like hunger, slavery, sex trade, abuse, poverty, and so on. THP was immediately exciting as it offered the possibility of altering the very condition itself rather than gesturing at the symptoms.”

Over the past 38 years, Dwight has raised a family, had a few different careers, tragically lost his first wife to a car accident, and then successfully rebuilt his career and life around his leadership philosophies. Through it all, The Hunger Project has never been his full-time job, but it has been an all-consuming calling in his life. I asked him how much time he has invested, and Dwight told me, “an occasional week for a board retreat, lots of phone calls, some fund raising, being an advocate, that kind of stuff. It probably averages out to a few hours a week. Not much,” he said. Do the math: 38 years × 2 hours × 52 weeks = nearly 4,000 hours. That’s a full-time job for two years.

That's what the determination of can't not do looks, feels, and sounds like.

Dwight's outlook also conveys a sense of starting the end of something. Dwight might not see the endgame in his lifetime, though he tells me emphatically he will, but he has put his stake in the ground. He'll tell you his work is not about "helping starving people," it's about "the end of hunger." That powerful optimism makes it doable, even inevitable, if enough people commit as deeply as and determinedly as Dwight has. The work of a change agent takes optimism plus determination. It's the combination of the two attributes that starts the process of change. And Dwight has both.

Dwight told me more about where his optimism comes from. "The thought that the circumstances are all too overwhelming and impossible to alter creeps into my mind regularly, especially when I first visit a country or villages where hunger and poverty exist. Then I start thinking I've wasted lots of money and time. After being with the villagers, I remember that this is the only thing that can work, people unleashed and owning their own lives and futures."

I'll come back to Dwight in the Conclusion, but one of my goals is to give you the sense that these people come from all walks of life and lifestyles. Having more money and time helps, but they are not the key ingredients. Dwight is 70 and is the kind of guy who looks you in the eye all the time. He is a person who makes you feel like he has figured out life, though I'm sure he'd never say that. There is, indeed, wisdom with age and Dwight exudes that quality; you really want to do a whole lot of listening when you are with him. We almost lost him to heart failure and bypass a few years ago; I'm so thankful he is still here to do more good for the world.

Do you have to be like Dwight and give 38 years to a cause to have an impact? No. But you do have to find your optimism to change a situation and be determined enough to keep at the change long enough. If you need a rule of thumb for "long enough," I'd say at least 10 years. The personal timelines of determined optimists are much

longer than other people's once they focus. They have a sort of "the heck with it, I'm gonna do this" attitude, and much of their fear and hesitation peel away and it frees up tremendous energy. There is almost a release that comes from that commitment.

= Grit

One other way to understand this whole idea is an equation: determination + optimism = grit. Pioneering psychologist Angela Lee Duckworth's work on the quality that predicts excellence more than any other centers on the notion of "grit."⁴ She explains, based on years of research, "grit is the disposition to pursue very long-term goals with passion and perseverance." I want to add emphasis to the stamina quality of grit. Grit is sticking with things over the long term and working very hard at them. That's a pretty good working definition of can't not do.

Duckworth continues, "Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint." When she measured this trait to determine the likelihood of high school students graduating, it was far more significant than family income, test scores, how safe the kids felt at school, and other factors. Grit, the students' determined optimism, mattered more than anything else. In one interview, talking about her own life, Duckworth reflected that, when she was in her mid-20s, she "realized that I wasn't going to be really good at anything unless I stuck with one thing for a long time . . . shifting, sorting every two or three years was not going to add up to what I wanted."⁵

Whether you can commit a few hours a week or commit your life's work, determined optimists like Dwight, David, Eric, and Kerry are changing our world every day. What is the challenge in your world that your friends and the media may think is intractable, but you simply do not? You know the challenge can be solved. You know it is complex, but not insurmountable. What challenge are you fundamentally optimistic about in your community, in your nation, in the

world that you can stick with for the long haul? Can you see any part of David, Eric, Kerry, or Dwight in you? Can you be a determined optimist?

Five Key Ideas from Chapter 1

1. You only need, preferably will have, one *can't not do* at a time in your life. Focus and go deep with intentionality if you want to have true, sustained impact. One.
2. There are some common attributes of determined optimists. They are very realistic, focused, flexible and adaptive, and have a resilient attitude.
3. You might find out what you are a determined optimist about as the result of a big epiphany or a significant, single event in your life. Or it might be something that emerges over many years. Everyone's pathway is unique.
4. Your endeavor doesn't have to be full-time. It doesn't have to be a full career commitment. I introduced you to Dwight and Kerry alongside David and Eric. What matters more is sustained focus over many years.
5. Just because you are not doing this can't-not-do work full-time does not mean you can't learn a heck of a lot of lessons from people who are.

