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# Setting Our Own Aspirations

## How We Can Become Programmed

Our natural human tendency is to think of ourselves as independent and authentic—authors of our own destinies. But that's a tall order and much tougher than it seems. Bombarded by external triggers and expectations, we can easily fall into roles and patterns established for us by other people.

Why can it be so hard to resist when someone assigns us a role and expects us to live out this role? I find it fascinating to watch this play out among professional role-players—actors. Some actors are true chameleons, morphing from one part to the next. Others seem to believe they are who they depict, developing attitudes and behaviors consistent with the characters they've played. Marlon Brando was famous for staying in role even when the cameras weren't on. William Shatner often seemed to be Captain James Kirk from *Star Trek*—even when not on the *Starship Enterprise*. Remember the famous ads, still parodied today—"I'm not a doctor, though I play one on television"—in which the actor proceeded—attired in white medical

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coat—to dispense health information? He was convincing because he began to believe in his own authority.

We often unconsciously become programmed to believe we are someone and then proceed to live our lives trying to fill that role. However, it's often the wrong role: not right for us, and sometimes even harmful.

For years people told me I should become a lawyer. In grammar school and high school I was told I argued well and debated effectively. At Rutgers, I majored in political science, a natural precursor to law school. I did well enough on the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) to earn a full scholarship to Rutgers Law.

There was only one problem. Over that summer, I realized I didn't want to be a lawyer. I never had dreams of working in criminal defense, or as a prosecutor, or settling estates, or refereeing divorces, or working for an organization's legal department. These are great aspirations—but they just weren't mine. I had different dreams, which initially didn't please those who wanted a legal career for me. My parents, who never had money, viewed law as a distinguished and high-earning profession. My teachers wanted it for me too. When I visited the dean of admissions to tell her to give the scholarship to someone else, she actually reached across the desk to try to grab my wrist! Thankfully, I didn't give into that pressure, and today I have a career I love.

A great many people follow their parents into a profession, even when they don't feel any passion for it themselves. A friend of mine followed his father into dentistry, believing it was a good way to make money in the medical field without becoming a physician. Although being a dentist is a great career for many professionals, it was not for him. Too late, he realized he essentially disliked pushing a high-speed drill an eighth of an inch from patients' tongues day in and day out. But by then his practice was paying for private school tuitions, his own educational debt, and all the trappings of an upper middle-class life. Trying another career at his age would have come at a tremendous cost. This conundrum isn't unique to dentistry, of course. Numerous professions represent a well-trodden path that is easier to follow than to leave.

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This pattern can be also be influenced by siblings. Brothers and sisters are highly influenced by their sibs, and tend to play the same sports, or become cheerleaders, or join the band (and play the same instrument)—or do just the opposite to escape the comparisons. These are roles that have been established as successful, drawing praise from others, and creating a precedent to follow or from which to flee.

Thus, unseen by the naked eye, we, without thinking about it, may do our best to become the person we were programmed to be rather than the person who, in our hearts, we want to be!

**Case Study**

I was coaching the former vice chair of a large financial institution. He loved helping people and wanted to be a consultant after his mandatory retirement. His face lit up when he discussed the possibility of being an advisor to other executives.

Surprisingly, he seemed very curious when I asked him if he would be interested if another vice chair position became available. He asked me if I knew about such a position, how much it paid, and the size of the organization.

When I reminded him of his previous discussion about being a consultant, he immediately changed course, thanked me, and mentioned that he had become so used to focusing on money and status that he had temporarily forgotten that he was already rich and wanted to spend the rest of this life doing what *he* most valued.

Some very prestigious jobs are actually a poor fit when you consider the applicant's true aspirations. Retiring executives or admirals might be flattered by offers of a college presidency, for example, something others might ooh and ah at. They may have a vision of a job that allows them to serve as the public face of a venerable institution, leading great discourse and inspiring younger generations. The actual work of a college president, however, may involve sparring with tenured faculty, negotiating the demands of students, and meeting

stringent fund-raising goals. Anyone who takes a job like that just because of the title and honorifics is likely to feel disappointed and betrayed. If a different person took the same job with a clear goal of improving higher education, though, she might find the role incredibly fulfilling.

## An Evolutionary Journey

We're talking about taking an *evolutionary journey* through life. A journey without a "there." Gertrude Stein coined the epithet "There is no *there*, there" when speaking of Oakland, California. But we mean exactly that. Your "there" is constantly migrating (we'll discuss metamorphosis and change in Chapter 3).

*The evolving you is not a moving target, but pursues a moving target.*

### Milepost

Be careful that your "there" is not created by someone else or some external force, such as Facebook. Your "there" can, and often should, be constantly moving as your experiences, successes, and perspective change. Our bar may well become higher and higher as we journey through life.

An initial question becomes: To what extent is your journey one of internal control, and to what extent one of external control? Do social and normative pressures have a legitimate role in who you are to become? Figure 1.1 illustrates these relationships.

We're using the following definitions:

*Control:* The power to influence or direct.

*Internal:* The power that is believed by the performers to be theirs; within their purview.

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*External:* The power that is believed by the performers to be wielded by others or by random events.

When we believe that both internal and external control are low (lower left), we're merely taking a random walk. (A more graphic manner to describe this quadrant is *chaos*: complete disorder and confusion.) I'm reminded of the classic story of the drunk accosted by the bartender and told to get out, who replies, "I didn't walk in here and I'm not leaving."

Many people arise each day simply awaiting what occurs, without the intention of exerting themselves on the world. We see this in circumstances where external direction has been removed advertently or inadvertently (the leader of a group suddenly dies, or is delayed in arriving, or is having a bad day) and no one chooses to step forward into the vacuum. People mill about or drift away. Nothing productive occurs. This is much rarer among entrepreneurs, who realize (and are gratified) that they must make their own plans work, must achieve their own aspirations.

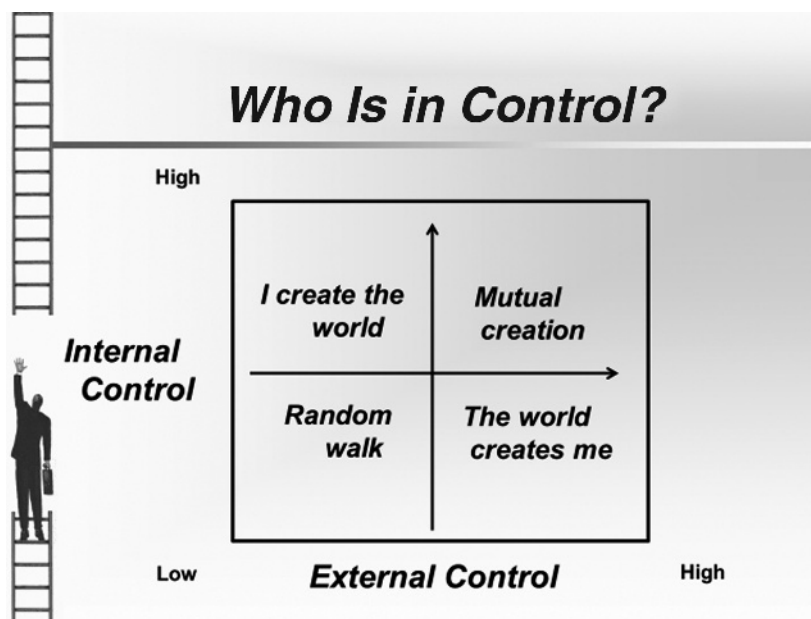


Figure 1.1 Relationship of Internal and External Control

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When internal control is seen as high and external control as low (upper left) there is the belief that “I create the world.” When carried to an extreme this can lead to narcissism and imperiousness, as well as to a false belief in one’s abilities (and to being seen by others as the proverbial empty suit, or in Texas as “big hat, no cattle”).

Another version of this belief is illustrated by the classic motivational speech in which the speaker exhorts the audience to overcome fears simply by telling themselves they can or by emulating some deeply dramatic challenge that the speaker has overcome and wrestled to the ground.

One of the funniest examples of the weakness of belief in solely internal control is Bob Newhart’s classic routine of a psychologist who charges only a dollar a minute for a maximum of five minutes because his consistent advice to any dysfunctional habit or irrational belief is: “Just stop it!”<sup>1</sup>

**Case Study**

I was once president of a company owned by a wealthy insurance magnate and financier. This man believed strongly in a positive mental attitude. He preached this philosophy as the route to success and the cause of his own fortune of over \$450 million.

I wondered if he had his etiology (cause and effect) mixed up: that he had a positive mental attitude *because* he had earned \$450 million in the insurance business, not vice versa. At one point I joked that if he wanted everyone to have a positive mental attitude he should give them all \$450 million.

I was fired not long after—which taught me that even if a positive mental attitude does not guarantee millions in riches, it does tend to help you keep your job.

<sup>1</sup> Bob Newhart, “Stop It,” YouTube video, OneTrueMedia.com, uploaded by Josh Huynh September 1, 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw).

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Today, there is a major industry dedicated to convincing people that control of their lives is totally personal and achievable. The highly paid speakers in this industry may be thriving more than their customers. If we truly had total control over our lives, none of us would choose to get sick or eventually die.

We are great believers in positive mental attitude. We believe that helping people to become more motivated about taking control of their own lives is a noble goal. We also believe that the reality of what we can control needs to be balanced with the acknowledgment of what we cannot control.

In the bottom right of Figure 1.1 we have high external control and low internal control. In other words, the world creates and directs us, a Calvinistic sort of predestination. In more modern times this condition has been represented by B. F. Skinner, the psychologist and behaviorist who believed that human behavior could be controlled and predicted. He advocated programmed learning and similar educational practices to train people to whatever ends were desired. Skinner believed that external stimulus was more powerful than individuals' internal control.

We believe Skinner's work sheds some very valuable light on human behavior, but it falls far short of explaining all of it. While our environments are powerful, so are we. I recall hearing many years ago, but can't recall who said, "We train animals, but educate people." You can teach people to perform repetitive tasks—a feature of the training industry that sprang up in response to the world wars—but you can't train people to be enthusiastic, or motivated, or have high energy. That comes from within.

If your belief is that others not only can determine but are responsible for what you become, then you are in a position of surrender. This is the professional victim, who constantly blames the system, or "them," and feels no power. Victims have no inclination to create their own change initiatives. One of the greatest expenses for any company is absenteeism and the greatest cause of absenteeism is stress, and stress is often caused by the feeling that one has no inkling of what may happen tomorrow and no influence over it.

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In the extreme case this belief is that the journey has already been mapped and the roads already paved.

This now takes us to the upper right quadrant, or high control both internally and externally—mutual creation. This quadrant represents the belief system of this book. We believe that all people can have significant influence over their own lives. We believe that we, as humans, can make a huge difference in creating our own lives, but that we are not gods. While we can make a difference in creating our lives, our environment can still play a large role in our ultimate success or failure. An innocent person being victimized by a drunk hit-and-run driver is not totally responsible for the outcome of what happened.

When we don't understand how much control we actually have in a given situation, it's easy to end up with misguided aspirations and inappropriate metrics. If we aren't careful, we can be pulled off course by going to either extreme—believing we can do everything or believing we control nothing. (For example, parents telling us that we are born winners who can do *anything* we choose—or parents telling us that we are born losers who can do *nothing* we choose.) Naively accepting their advice is forgivable in childhood, regrettable in early adulthood, and harmful in maturity.

As we become more successful, the importance of the top right quadrant grows, raising the bar still higher for responsible aspirations and metrics of improvement.

### Applying the Right Criteria

Here's a brief test on your personal metrics and norms:

1. Choose someone you consider to be a personal hero. It could be someone from personal life experience, such as a parent or teacher, or someone in the news, such as Sully Sullenberger (who landed his disabled plane in the Hudson River with no loss of life).
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2. Write the personal traits of this person that make you consider him or her to be a hero on the lines below. While you may not like everything about this person, think of at least three reasons that he or she is one of your heroes. These virtues could be patience, boldness, great use of language, and so forth.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Now return to step 1, cross off your hero's name, and write in your own name.

4. List which of the traits from step 2 you already possess and which you would like to develop.

1. Possess: \_\_\_\_\_  
Need to develop: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Possess: \_\_\_\_\_  
Need to develop: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Possess: \_\_\_\_\_  
Need to develop: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Possess: \_\_\_\_\_  
Need to develop: \_\_\_\_\_

The point of the exercise is that we can often control those traits that will make us “heroes”—emulating those we really admire for their deeds, behavior, and impact.

But we must become accustomed to an environment that we create and realize that this environment also influences us, a reciprocity of influence. Churchill, commenting on Parliament and its difficulties in taking action, said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us.”<sup>2</sup> What we're espousing is perhaps more of a

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<sup>2</sup>Winston Churchill, House of Commons speech, 1944, quoted in *Learning Architecture* (blog), May 18, 2011, <https://architectureintlprogram.wordpress.com/2011/05/18/>.

halfway house, in which we build, digest, build, digest, alter, remove, build, digest, and so on.

The preceding exercise was designed by my (Marshall's) great friend Ayse Birsal.<sup>3</sup> It changed my life. As it turns out, all of my heroes were teachers. They included amazing leaders like Frances Hesselbein (Presidential Medal of Freedom award winner and former CEO of the Girl Scouts), Alan Mulally (2011 CEO of the Year in the United States and former CEO of Ford), as well as wonderful professors such as Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis. What did my heroes have in common? Not only were they fantastic coaches and teachers, they were extremely generous! None of my heroes ever charged me for any of the countless hours of help that they graciously gave to me. Although I have always thought of myself as a generous coach and teacher, I decided that I could do better. I decided to “adopt” 15 coaches and teach them all that I know for free—with the only price being that they would agree to pay it forward and do the same for others when they grew older.

I made a short video about my idea and posted it on LinkedIn. It went viral, and well over 100,000 viewers watched it. Over 12,000 people applied for the 15 positions! I decided to expand the project to include 100 established coaches and 100 aspiring coaches. I am happy to say that this project is now a large part of my life, and I love it! (Thank you, Ayse Birsal, for this great exercise!)

## The Impossible Dream

In the hit musical show *Man of La Mancha*, there is a moment only to be found on Broadway in which the character Don Quixote walks to stage center and everyone knows what's about to happen: The actor (I was fortunate enough to see Richard Kiley in the original production and Brian Stokes Mitchell more recently in the revival) sings “The

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<sup>3</sup>Ayse Birsal, *Design the Life You Love* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2015), [www.amazon.com/Design-Life-Love-Step-Step/dp/1607748819](http://www.amazon.com/Design-Life-Love-Step-Step/dp/1607748819).

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Impossible Dream,”<sup>4</sup> a paean to the heroism of tilting at windmills. Some of the ideas expressed:

To fight those who were thought to be unbeatable  
To bear more sorrow than seems bearable  
To seek out areas where brave men don't dare tread  
To reach the most distant star

You get the idea, and it's one hell of a theatrical moment. But it's not very helpful in setting or fulfilling your aspirations! Broadway musicals, like motivational seminars, can be inspiring—their intent is to immerse you in someone else's version of reality, with the hope that you'll be moved by the theatrics and grandeur in front of you.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with an enjoyable night at the theater, or spending a day or two at a motivational seminar—if it inspires you to live a better, happier, more thoughtful life. Many smart people with excellent intentions run these seminars, and in general they do more good than harm. The problem comes when we, the audience, rely on motivational experiences to give us all the answers. The fact is that these seminars can give us a lot—but not everything. The fundamental work of changing our behavior for the better is ultimately our own responsibility.

Cervantes invented Don Quixote, a character emblematic of people who believe they can do anything because of their deep belief. While people who believe “I can do it!” are more likely to do it, we have also seen many people delude themselves into thinking that a positive attitude can replace hard work. A great example of combining positive attitude and hard work occurred when NASA scientists saved the *Challenger*. They did not give up. They had a “We will do it!” attitude. They also had the years of training, the intelligence, and the dedication to make it happen. (I heard one of those engineers

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<sup>4</sup>Mitch Leigh (composer) and Joe Darion (lyrics), “The Impossible Dream,” from *Man of La Mancha* (play), 1965. (We can't publish exact song lyrics but we think you can recognize the gist!)

speak to a small group once holding a small piece of an O-ring. Now *that* was a motivational speech.)

A standard feature in old horror movies was the buzz saw that kept getting closer and closer to the hero. Although we knew the hero would somehow escape due to ingenuity, the arrival of the cavalry, or a *deus ex machina*, we still cringed.

Today we might cringe at the spinning wheel of social media, which is constantly gaining speed. We seek to be part of the latest, but there is so much “latest” that it’s hard to stay constantly connected. We’re driven to have the attention span of a water bug. We’re immersed in an ADD world.

What has this to do with aspirations and metrics?

We may feel as if we don’t exist if we’re not a part of this spinning wheel of information. The centrifugal force threatens to throw us off, so we cling with all our might, trying to follow and be a part of a thousand issues for a second each. (Have you seen the Twitter members who “follow” 90,000 people? Try to follow even 25 daily and read their tweets, then add in the other social media platforms, and you have a full-time job.)

The inertia is bizarre: The more you get, the more you get! So we become overwhelmed with examples, advice, and claims that are never vetted, validated, or verified. At one point, people sold books and tapes through infomercials that showed how the average person could make millions by flipping houses or selling detergents. Pyramid and Ponzi schemes (sometimes politely called *multi-level marketing*) lulled people into the belief that they could make six figures by merely attracting people to become representatives of the organization selling phone cards or cleaning materials or breadboxes. Of course, the only people making real money were the authors of these schemes and the broadcasters.

Today, the phenomenon is multiplied a zillionfold with the unceasing, untiring, always increasing speed of the wheel of information that constantly spins in front of us. We don’t *really* know what makes sense and what does not, what’s real and what’s a lie. If we are not careful, instead of becoming highly skeptical of most things, we can tend to accept almost *whatever is in front of us*.

## *Life's Detours*

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As Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning behavioral economist noted, “What you see is all there is.”<sup>5</sup> After all, experienced investment firms and government regulators for years accepted the ludicrous claims of huge returns in a down market from Bernie Madoff, who operated the most notorious of contemporary Ponzi schemes, and whose operation ruined tens of thousands of lives and careers.

Thus, our aspirations and goals are seldom purely our own. They are tainted or even created by the furious pace, noise, and general uproar around us—around the spinning wheel, the buzz saw. Why else would people watch scripted “reality” shows of little consequence?

We’ve lost our sense of perspective.

## **Life's Detours**

Yogi Berra famously said that when you come to a fork in the road you should take it.<sup>6</sup> We know that’s logically impossible, but we also know that the road of life is filled with unexpected twists and turns that can be terrific opportunities or harmful detours. It’s easy to wander down interesting paths and alleys only to find that we don’t know the way back. We wind up disoriented and lost in the wilderness of our own lives. We end up in a career, a location, or a relationship that is far from ideal—and struggle to get back.

To navigate our way home again, it helps to consider these detours. What pulls us away from our well-intentioned goals?

## ***Family***

Families are our first and strongest influences. They can help us become the people we want to be, but they can also send us on

<sup>5</sup>Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), [www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0374533555/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1484684216&sr=1-1&keywords=thinking+fast+and+slow](http://www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0374533555/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1484684216&sr=1-1&keywords=thinking+fast+and+slow).

<sup>6</sup>Yogi Berra, *The Yogi Book* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1998).

detours—even when they mean well and are doing their best to help us. They model roles and behavior that we choose to adopt or reject later in life. Most of the time they have a strong influence on our education, determining where we go to school, including college. The rate at which children enter a family business or choose a parent's profession—or specifically reject it—is substantial.

Family experience also strongly influences:

- Perceptions of marriage fidelity, divorce, and relationship stability
- Use of drugs and alcohol
- Bias, prejudice, and ethics
- The sense of contribution and fairness
- Expectations of others

The same thinking can be applied to the social world outside our families. Our early exposure to social norms often determines how much attention we pay to education, authority, and responsible behavior. If we see our peers engaging in a certain behavior, we're far more likely to try it ourselves. That can be negative (when it comes to drugs or alcohol, for example) or positive (when we see peers succeeding academically or helping others).

## ***Media***

Social media presents unprecedented opportunities. It's given birth to inspiring social movements and empowered individuals to do great things. But it comes with huge challenges, too. Once, television was thought to be a dangerous influence, but it's mild compared to what we see on social media. Just as Pokémon's reality game causes traffic accidents when people pay attention only to the screen and not to the reality around them, the ongoing rush of news/gossip/video/innuendo/distraction on social media influences our choices—either from directives that are perceived (do this) or through passivity (ignoring what to do). We find ourselves in a cyclonic movement, a thrill ride, with issues and options hurtling around us along with the

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occasional chair or cow. It's hard to make sense of one direction or even to choose one.

Other digital technology surrounds us as well. Most of the time, it makes our working and our personal lives more convenient. But it also encroaches on our time. Unlike previous eras, the workday doesn't stop neatly at five o'clock for most professionals, so we're often struggling to finish up at home (and we can, thanks to technology). Combine that with the many digital distractions available to all ages, and it's hard to sit down and simply eat dinner as a family or talk over the day's events uninterrupted by electronic pinging and chirping.

Film and television still play a big role in shaping our consciousness too. With the advent of TV came a generation of kids who wanted to become astronauts, cowboys, and actors—like the heroes on their favorite shows. Today, TV is saturated with programming about how to achieve professional success in a series of glamorous careers—as chefs, fashion designers, house flippers, models, pop stars . . . and the list goes on. Our culture is obsessed with the notion that grit and big dreams are all it takes to succeed (lesson one in the school of purely internal control). Beating the odds to live a dream is such a common narrative that we all think we can do it—even when the odds are hugely stacked against the attempt. Just ask a server in any Los Angeles restaurant and he'll tell you the job is temporary until he gets his big break. A tiny percentage of these servers are right (so always tip handsomely, since you might have ordered your crème brûlée from the next George Clooney). But for the rest, every empirical piece of evidence demonstrates that they are servers who deny reality.

Given the pervasiveness of our media culture, how do you make a smart decision about what dreams and aspirations are really best for you? It can be hard to find time to stop and think.

***Religious Institutions***

While the United States remains one of the most religious countries in the world (by stated affiliation), religious participation in our country is steadily waning according to a study of 35,000 adults from

the Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life.<sup>7</sup> Scandals about child abuse in the Catholic Church—the largest single denomination in the United States—have driven people from the institution and undermined its message. The age of church attendees, based on casual observation, clearly skews close to 60. Religion is no longer the cultural bedrock it once was.

### ***Business***

There are plenty of heroes worth emulating in business today. But the business world changes so fast that knowing which successful person to follow can feel a little dizzying. Not only that, scandals in businesses from Enron to Volkswagen have undermined the role of business in creating standards and guidelines for behavior, careers, and aspirations. Too often, we see an “everyone-for-themselves” philosophy, exacerbated by business leaders doing perp walks in handcuffs to jail. (And the unanswered question: How many have gotten away with something and not been caught?)

### ***Government***

Politics, too, is an area characterized by rapid change and disruption. Just when we think we’ve got a grasp on how the system works, an election or a scandal upends our assumptions. Gone are the days of simple faith in authority. If anything is clear after the upheavals of the last few election cycles, it’s that unpredictability may be the new normal.

Our main institutions—the family, the media, religion, business, and government—are in flux. While some of those changes are good, all of this volatility makes it hard for us to set aspirations and metrics for success. Without major institutions to guide us, where can we turn? The answer may be toward each other—to our friends.

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<sup>7</sup>Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” November 3, 2015, [www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious).