

## *The Write Place at the Write Time*

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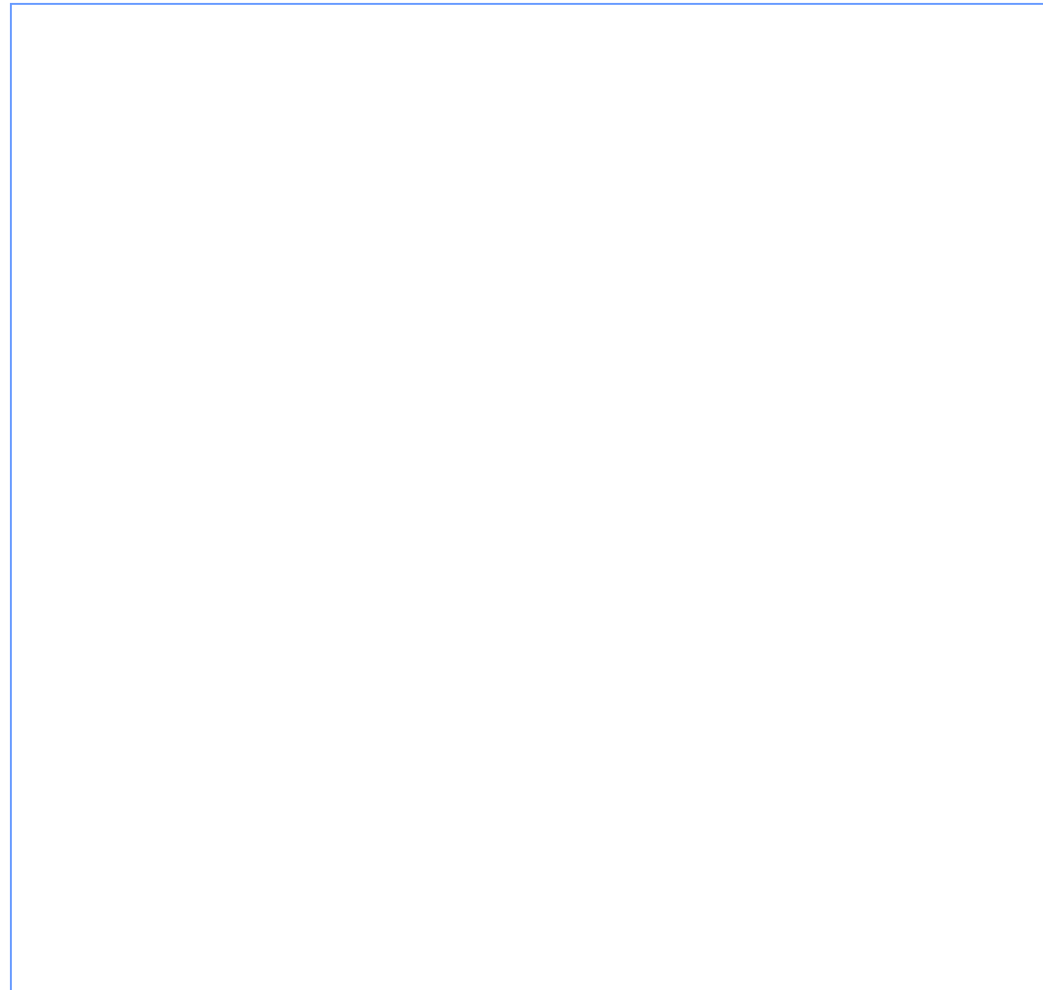
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"Soaring Above" by C. Michelle Olson; <https://www.instagram.com/carlamolson7/>

**About this image:** "During a hike overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I observed a paraglider who seemed to be freely floating every which way, in whatever direction he desired. Being in the sky, life demands nothing. Pure peace. It made me think, we all need to take time away from the busyness of the world to do what makes us truly happy." —C. Michelle Olson

## *Interview with Marc Lesser*

*Know Yourself, Forget Yourself is a book that found me in Newport, a coastal city of New England, after I had stood with my father on a wall overlooking the water to cast stones into the sea, and speak tender words of farewell to the man who had raised him. It was our way—our chosen private ritual. We found out later that this spot had been where my grandfather had originally thought he might like to have his ashes scattered. Though we might drift in different directions on the tides of life, there is something unnamed within us that draws us back to the same places. Whatever it was that brought us to Newport that day, encouraged me to seek solace in one of the temples that I, as a writer and editor, regard as sacred: a house of books.*

*With its cover portraying stepping stones across water leading to light on the horizon, I gravitated toward this book with the need of one strongly relying on those solid steps to guide them over emotional depths. Turning it over, I saw the bulleted point of getting beyond "story," citing the example of a "man who revised his relationship with his dying father." It was one of those moments when you can almost hear the click of pieces fitting into place. I made the decision to buy it for my father, but couldn't have known then how its truths and paradoxes would affect me in my reading of it. There are books of a somewhat related nature that I have loved that have certainly influenced me, but it is rare to say and to see that one actually changed me.*

*In various ways, in the everyday, I am, at once, both different and more familiar. Having had my thinking stretched beyond traditional borders and remolded around intricate concepts pertaining to the personal, professional, and spiritual, I'm beginning to find the openings that are the present, that are simply myself. I have a long way to go on my journey as we all do, but in that seaside city, in the gray mist of loss, I discovered a trail of stones to follow into the sun.*

In this interview, we meet Marc Lesser—author, Zen teacher, businessman, and professional consultant—in the meditative space where mind and spirit converge. In the pursuit of authenticity, we are called to be awake and aware, taking stock of what is to understand what we want to be or where we wish to go in our lives. We are reminded of the necessity of being present as we travel the path. With pen acting as sword, we cut through to the true heart of storytelling that breathes through us in every word we feel, think, and act. There is an invitation to discover the transformative

influence of improvisation on life's stage. In being cognizant of the adaptive merits of our survival instinct, we find liberation amongst former limitations. We take comfort in the assertion that we are not alone. Unlearning our learning, we come to realize how not knowing becomes a gateway to openness, love, and confidence. Finally, we find there is comfort, genuineness, and a clarity beyond clarity in the apparent contradictions that surround us.

Marc Lesser is the author of *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself, Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less*, *Z.B.A.: Zen of Business Administration—How Zen Practice Can Transform Your Work and Your Life*. He has served as an executive coach to business leaders of corporations—including Google, Twitter, Facebook, and Genentech—as well as non-profit organizations across the country and around the world. He is a Zen teacher and cofounder of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute where he is presently a master-level teacher and consultant. His numerous experiences in the roles of founder and CEO inform his coaching, consulting, and writing. Lesser received his MBA from New York University, and from Rutgers University, he received his undergraduate degree in psychology.

#### Interview with Marc Lesser by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) Our last magazine issue was a response, a reaction, reflecting on all that happened in the course of a few months to change the way we view a nation, a world, one another. It was meant to encourage expression and discussion across varied viewpoints to come together for the higher good of all. We emphasized the power of words as well as our role in forging a new chapter in the larger story, the "collective" human narrative, the text of our time. This issue, however, is about our individual stories because, as we've conveyed to our readership, that's where the real work, the constructive action starts. There is a quote by George Bernard Shaw that reads: "Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything." To expand our outer influence, we have to attain alignment of our inner lives.

In a period when many around the world, coming from different vantage points, feel little is in their control, it would seem an opportune season to look within at what we can control. A season of self. As you articulate in *Less: Accomplishing More by Doing Less*, "[B]y becoming more peaceful and at peace with yourself, you will spread that into the world, which will become that much more peaceful and sane as a result."

In *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*, you describe how "the Way-seeking mind" is "proactive," "predicated on the need for change, within and without," and follows "a path that embraces both change and acceptance" which inform one another. You continue by describing how we become more effective at leadership (drawing out the greatness in others) and improving the world by first focusing on self-improvement, and then "having the freedom, insight, and skill to embody both [acceptance and change] at once in order to act appropriately in each moment."

How might we go about calibrating our internal intuitive instruments so that they are able (automatically, instinctively) to accurately interpret the present and determine the best measures of acceptance and change right in the moment so that whether individually or collectively, we might hardwire an adaptive awareness that creates a "better now" leading to a "better future"? In other words, with our minds pulled in so many directions (the average adult makes approx. 35,000 relatively conscious decisions each day) how do we train ourselves at a subconscious level to determine the degree of acceptance and change in life's present moments and obstacles, seeking solutions while also not getting stuck in anticipating difficulty (active vs. reactive balance)?

**Fight for change, and accept what is [referring to one of the "five core truths" in *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*] beautifully expresses the path and practice of creating a better now and a better future. It's uncomfortable, annoying, impossible—and yet, what choice do we have?**

**Change begins by seeing more clearly and opening to feeling with more intensity—the best one can—what is and what changes are needed. In Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* he asserts that "creative tension" may be the most important skill that a leader can cultivate. It is being able to stay in that place between acceptance and change, that place where we are moving from where we are now to where we want to be. This tension can be caused by the desire to meet budgets or goals, or can be the result of wanting to cultivate more courage or joy or calmness in our lives. Or more broadly, this tension is stepping into our lives as they are, this place where change and movement are the only constant. And this tension can be the result of enabling or**

**awakening our “Way-seeking Mind”—the mind that seeks to live a truly authentic life.**

**“Way-seeking mind” is a beautiful phrase and powerful aspiration. Seeking, without a gaining idea, with the intention of living an authentic life is a potent form of calibration. The “Way” is more like a path than a destination—the path of being a full human being. It is the path of awareness, of curiosity and warm-heartedness. It is the path of freedom—emotional and spiritual freedom. And it is the path of radical acceptance of what is, intertwined with the aspiration to live a life of vow, instead of a life of karma—to live a life of consciousness and love, instead of a life of habit and protection.**

2) In past interviews, we've discussed how human beings are "structured for storytelling." This concept is echoed in your Foreword to *What Would Buddha Say?* where you remark that your "scientist colleagues are fond of saying that our brains are story-telling machines, weaving our thoughts, story after story." You discuss how we can become more mindful of these stories through "deep listening." When pondering the book's title, you also share an image of a seated figure with one hand to the earth (connoting a link to peace and compassion) and the other hand wielding a symbolic sword (cutting through to truth). The idea of the figurative sword made me think of a sword's association with a pen and the purpose of discovering truth in writing.

Toward this end, I was particularly drawn to the concept of journaling in both *Less* and *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*, as it implies that an examination of patterns, a dissecting of detailed life questions can, through "deep listening" to our dialogues, introduce flexibility to the seeming solidity of self story or identity. In the Epilogue to *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*, you write: "I love how the process of writing is itself a dance of knowing and forgetting myself, recalling and weaving stories and emotions while getting out of my own way as I search for the right words, the perfect words, and simultaneously let go or at least reduce my own judgments." You compare the practice to mindfulness and meditation, involving "opening, searching, sometimes holding on, sometimes letting go."

Different philosophical, spiritual, and self-improvement books advocate varied takes on journaling. Some recommend using them as a vessel for

letting the negative out and leaving it on the page; some recommend the opposite, insisting on all-positive with the idea that "what you focus on expands" and "like attracts like."

What do you feel is the balance between writing authentically enough about what is (challenges and triumphs) to observe our patterns, note our beliefs, and become cognizant of what self stories do not serve us, and writing to empower, opening doors of opportunity, drawing more of what we wish to focus on (whether gratitude for the present or goals for the future)?

**The process of writing, for me, is a form of *Tonglen* practice, the Buddhist practice of “giving and receiving.” It is the practice of expressing our most positive wishes for peace and well-being and sending them out to our loved ones, our friends, and to those we find difficult or annoying or are in conflict with. It is sending these wishes of peace and well-being to ourselves. And it is also the practice of feeling the pain and suffering of others and breathing them in, as a way of opening and expanding our hearts.**

**I took a writing and improv class a few years ago, with Ann Randolph, who teaches writing and improv around the world. We met when we were both teaching classes at Esalen. She came to my Accomplishing More by Doing Less workshop and I later attended one of her several-day workshops. At the time I was feeling stuck in my writing. I fell into the trap of feeling like my writing needed to be “good” or “book-worthy.” Taking Ann’s class freed me. She provided a choice of prompts and the instructions were to just write for twelve minutes. The larger framework for Ann’s class was storytelling. In particular, it was a way to open doors to telling your life story and performing it as a one-person show. This was not my aspiration, but I loved the combination of writing and improv.**

**I loved the writing but felt intimidated by the improv portion of the class. I tended to sit in the back of the room, hoping I could avoid getting on stage. Your question provokes one improv “scene” that I did during this class. One day, Ann called on me. “Marc, please come up to the front of the room. I think it’s your turn.” I did my best to be enthusiastic, despite my fear and reluctance. I stood facing our group of about fifteen men and**

women. Ann looked at me and said, "Try saying this: I hate!" I was surprised, but I followed her instructions. Then she had me say it again, and again, stomping one foot on the floor, working me up to a state where I was filled with emotion. Then she said "go" creating an open space for me to step into and begin speaking. I was surprised by the words and feelings that followed.

I blurted out, "I hate high school graduation, where they lined us up in height order and I was the first boy in line." I don't remember the content of what I said next. I remember staying with what I hated for a minute or two, and how something transformed within me. Hate turned into what I was fond of and then transformed into love, a deep and powerful love of my life, that included hate, and a good deal of humor. This was a memorable and physical experience of the transformative power of storytelling and the intermingling of a wide and mysterious range of my emotions—the power of not leaving anything out.

3) I wanted to bring up something of a recurrent theme I've noticed with writers that I've worked with whether through the magazine or my separate manuscript editing practice. It's been enough of a theme that for this empowerment issue, I had a long, deep discussion with a contributor and assigned an essay in another section to touch upon elements of this, but when I also discovered it validatingly articulated in one of your books, I wanted to tackle it head-on here as well. For a number of others I've observed and for myself personally, there seems to be a phenomenon of achievement amnesia, where the writing, sometimes even the thinking, shies away from recollections or acknowledgments of the gains made on the journey thus far.

You mention in *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself* that "studies have shown that our attention is much more drawn to negative events than to positive events." You talk more about this in a later chapter where you precisely portray the issue many of us face, by noticing the peculiarity of how natural it is to focus on limitations or regrets vs. "success and satisfaction." This common propensity would seem to have an "inverse relationship to actual accomplishment." Often, as the chapter suggests, as accomplishments rise, so too does the volume of the voice of the inner critic, all but drowning out strides made.



This question isn't about relabeling our perceptions or altering them, but rather, claiming the unclaimed, that which sits to the side under dust but is already and has always been our own. There is a good deal of language out there about responsibly "owning" our decisions, actions, short-comings, or mistakes, but what of victories? We tend to hear many warnings against ego and self-idolatry, but those with a proclivity toward such don't fear it, and the warnings ironically reach the ears of the ones who are on the opposite end of the spectrum who contract smaller still. Out of constricting humility, belief, background, trauma, or emotion, I've seen writers avoid sharing defining moments of their "story." These nourishing nuggets are soul sustenance and so many are starving for them in the quest to lead full lives.

These aren't portions needing to be written in a positive light, but whole, existing positive parts of fact that go missing or get swept under the rug, camouflaged in context. Listing, talking, doesn't engrave the omitted on the psyche.

Why do you think many of us have a predisposition toward this and what small steps or exercises might you suggest so we can better internalize and integrate our full stories?

**One of my Google scientist friends is fond of saying, “We are descendants of the nervous apes. The apes that were chill, they didn’t survive, but were eaten by predators.” Thus the human condition is that we are constantly scanning for threats. We are wired to survive. This wiring is meant to keep us safe, to keep us alive. Without sabre-tooth tigers to respond to, our bodies respond to cars cutting us off while driving, unpleasant emails, or angry facial expressions from our family members or co-workers.**

**He is pointing to what psychologists call our “negativity bias.” Humans seem to be hardwired to not only scan our environment for threats but to feel negative events more strongly than those events deserve. Some psychologists say that negative events are like Velcro, sticking to us with unexpected power and positive events are like Teflon, in that we hardly feel them.**

**I believe that this tendency of scanning for threats helps explain the power and constancy of our inner critic—that ongoing inner judge of ourselves and events. Though this inner voice can be**

**loud and at times mean-spirited, its primary intention is to keep us safe. This can be difficult to remember.**

**What to do? I think just understanding that this is our predicament and that this is our common humanity is an important first step. We are not alone in the depths of our negative emotions and self-judging. Whatever our particular version of suffering is, we can be sure that millions of other people around the world share in our pain. I find it strangely comforting, just knowing that I am not alone; it's not just me contending with these difficult emotions and critical inner voice.**

**I also find it useful to cultivate habits and strategies for seeing more realistically and to give attention that is due to what is working in my life and in the world. For example, right now I'm okay. I'm not in pain (other than a few sore muscles here and there...) and I'm safe, not being threatened in any way. Right now, I can simply appreciate my condition of being here and being alive.**

**Here I am writing, answering questions that you have posed. I can stop and appreciate that you took the time to write these thoughtful questions and that you chose to ask me to answer them.**

**Right now, literally as I'm writing this, a young man just drove his red Honda Civic in front of my home and threw today's *New York Times* out of his car window into my driveway. Amazing! Now this is something worthy of noticing and celebrating. Or I could put attention on all the tasks I have to do today and how little time I have to read the *New York Times*. But, really, who is creating my schedule? (I sometimes say that I should fire the person who creates my schedule, though that would be me.) What really are my choices? Right now I'm choosing to notice and appreciate that a newspaper was delivered to my home. I'm more than okay.**

4) The Zen teaching, "Not knowing is most intimate," struck me as being mind-expanding and profoundly true.

a) In terms of how we view others, it can be an invitation to openness and tender curiosity—knowing that we don't know, we wish to get to know, to learn. It's similar to how easily and innocently children connect without complication. I believe that's particularly important for the world right now in shedding labels, exclusionary beliefs, false assumptions, bias, and combating prejudice. There is more of an opportunity for closeness and connection when we are aware that we are unaware of all the answers. *In Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*, it states: "Just as you are constantly changing and evolving, the people around you are changing and evolving, and the circumstances you find yourself in are shifting even now."

Despite some of the division and seemingly chaotic complexities of the current world climate, do you feel that through these shifting circumstances, individuals are being presented with what could ultimately be a necessary and welcome challenge to take a hard look at what, in the words of Anaïs Nin, "can be altered if we have the courage to examine how it formed us," and can we indeed "alter the chemistry provided we have the courage to dissect the elements"? Furthermore, can these shifting circumstances provide individuals with opportunities for deeper levels of closeness within their inner circles as well?

b) In the chapter entitled "Be Confidant, Question Everything," you have the sub-heading, Not Knowing as Business Strategy, and tell the story of how you launched Brush Dance—what would become a multimillion-dollar publishing company of inspirational products utilizing environmentally friendly materials. You applied passion, belief, knowledge of a focal area, and dove into the deep having never manufactured paper, run a business, or come across "an identified market" for what you felt would garner a growing interest. It's an ideal example for the empowerment issue because it illustrates a balanced approach to impulse. You have maintained, in all of your ventures, past and present, that same balance between confidence and questioning that seizes the twin momentums of the known and the unknown.

Typically people tend to crave certainty to the point where they revoke permission to pursue their passions, placing it in the hands of others to give or deny. We do this in our art, sometimes stifling our voice in consideration of an absent audience. You advocate self-awareness as "the first step in developing confidence" which is a key to keeping mindful and balanced when facing possibility and uncertainty, loosening "the somewhat hardened or rusted parts of our thinking" as you indicate in *Less*. Referring back to

the Zen teaching, we never know ourselves so well as when we don't know, when we're up against new territory, when we take risks, when we forge a new path. The quote by Goethe at the beginning of the "Be Confidant..." chapter captures the spirit we try to impart to our creative community for their own paths: "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."

Do you feel that this essential boldness can be found in not knowing, the very opposite of "analysis paralysis" where knowing too much can douse the fire?

**I've heard many people say that in long-term relationships, the more we know someone the more of a mystery they become. This is my experience, being in a long-term relationship of nearly 40 years. My wife and I met, literally, on a pile of horse manure at Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm. My work at the time was to develop the possibility of farming with horses. I was on top of a flatbed truck, holding a pitchfork, tossing manure into a large compost pile. I noticed a young woman walking down the farm path, who appeared to be needing work, and I invited her to join me. I pointed to the shed where the pitchforks were. She happily grabbed one and joined me. We were married three years later, in the Green Gulch meditation hall, formerly a cow barn. She continues to be more and more of a mystery to me and our intimacy continues to grow.**

**I believe that confidence and questioning everything are skills, or "ways of being" that we can cultivate in our daily lives. I'm in the midst, right now, of stepping into my own confidence and questioning. I recently stepped down from my role as CEO of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, an organization I co-founded in 2012. I helped develop the core mindfulness and emotional intelligence Search Inside Yourself program at Google starting in 2007.**

**I'm grieving the loss of my team and struggling with this change in my identity. I'm not sure what is next for me—a terrific opportunity to practice confidence and questioning. I feel both, confidence and questioning, really strongly. I'm confident that I will find my way. Of course, I have my moments of doubt, times**

of not wanting to question and just jump right into what presents itself, without exploring the more difficult questions of what I most want to do. It helps me a lot that others are confident in me, and that others depend on me. It helps me to have a daily meditation practice—spending time each morning, just breathing, not knowing what will happen, stepping into not knowing with each exhale.

During the entire process of writing the book *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself* the working title was *Be Confident, Question Everything*. I have a slight regret for not staying with the original title. I don't think the world is quite ready for self-forgetting. Or, at least it is not quite understood or appreciated. Confidence and questioning are much easier, on the surface, to relate to. It can be difficult, perhaps impossible, I think, to get it just right—the right title, the right decision, the right job, right relationship. Too much confidence can be dangerous, too much questioning can be debilitating. And yet, what choice is there but to make decisions—to act—with confidence and humility.

Three days ago I gave a keynote talk to 500 doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers at a Compassion in Action conference in Boston. I find the practice of speaking to audiences, of doing talks and workshops, a terrific practice of confidence and questioning. For me, what cuts through paradox is caring and love. One of my favorite quotes on this topic is from Pablo Casals, a preeminent Spanish cellist from the first part of the 20th century. When asked if he would ever get nervous playing his instrument in front of royalty, he responded, "Nervous, why would I get nervous? All I'm thinking about is how can I love my audience." Before speaking or teaching in front of audiences I do everything I can to channel Casals's message of loving my audience, and getting out of my own way.

5) Lastly, we'd like to discuss the omnipresent power of paradox in your works, in this issue, and at large: finding balance through imbalance, taking "a break for a breakthrough," finding personal and spiritual growth through business and vice versa, embracing change to maintain stability, "accomplishing more by doing less," focusing on the self to best serve others, "integrating effort with a feeling of effortlessness," and

disconnecting to reconnect (as with a poem in this issue where a hawk sits outside a family's candlelit Manhattan apartment for the length of a Friday evening portion of Shabbat). Psychologist Carl R. Rogers had said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." Paradox is an unavoidable part of life's mystery that asks as many questions as it answers.

When discussing Joseph's Campbell's "hero's journey" in *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself*, you share seven stages that you emphasize and in the first, "The Calling," you state that "the nature of our purpose may reveal the nature of any difficulties we are facing."

When called upon, is understanding paradox pivotal to understanding our purpose so that we can expect the unexpected and let the difficulties lead us by the hand to who we really are and what we really want?

**Ah, paradox. My favorite and most surprising part of writing *Know Yourself, Forget Yourself* was when I became annoyed, frustrated, and impatient with paradox. I burst out with, in my writing—I hate paradox. I don't want paradox. I want clarity! Then, surprising myself, I went on to write that perhaps paradox is more clear than clarity. Clarity can be partial or one-sided. Paradox is wider, deeper, and more truthful. Paradox cuts through my attachments and biases. I am confident and questioning. I do fight for change and accept what is. Benefitting others benefits me, and taking care of myself helps take care of others.**

**Mañjuśrī represents wisdom and compassion—with a sword in one hand, cutting through greed, hatred, and delusion, and the other hand connected to the earth, connected to the needs and cries of the world, representing compassion.**

**The burning question for most of my life has been: What does it mean to live an authentic life?**

**For some reason, beyond my comprehension, I'm often asked to provide career guidance—for executives in transition, for friends and family, and at times for friend's children or their spouses. I don't generally provide advice. I listen as fully and deeply as I**

**can and ask many clarifying questions with the intention of opening doors that were either closed or not previously perceived. I attempt to build confidence—confidence to explore and experiment, confidence to move beyond old habits and limiting beliefs.**

**The only real guidance I give is my firm contention that there is really only one career—it is the work of seeing more clearly and helping others. Seeing more clearly means to build self-awareness and emotional intelligence. It means becoming aware of inner resources as well as blind spots. Helping others means being in “relationship” in a way that helps others live with more safety, more ease, and more meaning. This one career could be characterized as living a more wise and compassionate life—the aspiration to cut through our delusions and to help others. This is the art of living by vow instead of living on autopilot.**

\*Here we would like to thank featured past and present subjects for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss life, literature, and art with them.

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