YOUR GENIUS MIND

WHY YOU DON’T NEED TO BE A COLLEGE GRADUATE
BUT YOU DO NEED TO THINK LIKE ONE
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Everyone is a genius.

But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend the rest of its life thinking it’s stupid.

—Matthew Kelly

Let me begin with a question. When you look at your life, are you happy with what you see? If the answer is no or you’re struggling to come up with an answer, be encouraged. You’re not alone. It’s a sad curse of adulthood that we’re expected to prove we know the secret to a successful life in front of an audience. On any other stage, performers have a chance to practice, but life seems to push each of us onto the grandstand before we’re quite ready. And we often seem to follow someone whose performance looks better than our own. It’s not you. (Okay, it is you, but not for the reasons you think.)

Life used to be much simpler than it is now. In the United States, you go to school until the age of 16
whether you want to or not. After that, it used to be that most people followed one of three paths with fairly predictable results:

1. Drop out of school, find a hustle and try to stay out of jail;
2. Graduate from high school and get a job; or
3. Stay in school, graduate from college and get a better job.

On average, people who took the second path did better than people who took the first and people who took the third path did better than the other two. You had a script to read from, a playbook to follow, and when it was your turn to step into the spotlight, you could feel confident that you knew what to do. But the paths aren’t so predictable anymore. These days, people are dropping out of school and creating billion-dollar companies (see the story of the guy who invented Tumblr) and college graduates are either finding hustles, making fast money and going to jail for 150 years (shout-out to Bernie Madoff), or asking you if you want to supersize your burger meal. The script is missing some pages and the plays in the playbook aren’t working.

The truth is that the rules of the game have changed. Welcome to life in a knowledge society. Call it the Bill Gates lie, the Steve Jobs lie, the Mark Zuckerberg lie, the Henry Ford lie or name it after any other successful entrepreneur who never graduated from college. The success of these individuals and others like them seems to imply that college is irrelevant. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The need has never been greater for high-quality thinkers, with or without a degree. All their success shows us is that there are other ways to develop college-level thinking skills. In fact, college doesn’t really develop those skills. It refines them. And make no mistake, a college or university is still the best place to go to make that happen. But there’s a catch. The colleges that live up to their missions all assume that entering students are already thinking at the college level when they arrive at their doorsteps. If you read the biographies of any of the entrepreneurs I just mentioned, you’ll find plenty of proof that they already possessed these skills in abundance long before they started their businesses.

All successful entrepreneurs share the same characteristic—they’re better than others at thinking about ways to solve problems. That’s the core of every good business idea. Identify a problem or a need that you can solve better than anyone else so that customers will pay you for your solution. In the pages that follow, I’ll show you how
these traits equate to the first three elements of genius—as I define it. That is, geniuses can generate extraordinary solutions that fulfill what others need. But here’s something you may not know. The most valuable college classes aren’t the ones that relate to a professional skill. They’re the liberal arts courses students often complain about having to take, like philosophy, ethics and literature. Those courses force you to write, which, in turn, challenges you to think. Courses that lend themselves to multiple-choice exams prepare you to choose from solutions that are already in front of you. Entrepreneurs create solutions that others haven’t thought of yet. Living a successful life in a knowledge society requires developing the mindset of an entrepreneur, even if you never start a business of your own.

This is a book for those without a college degree, but it’s also a book for those who have a college degree but not a college education. And this is a book for anyone and everyone who has ever believed in the potential of someone who did not see potential in themselves. I know that’s a big audience, but we’re not talking about a game or a performance anymore. This is a battle, and battles need an army. More than that, the pages that follow are intended to chart a journey, because this book isn’t so much a brochure for the value of a college education as it is a treasure map. I’ll have more to say about that shortly. First, I want to tell you a story.

It’s early May, 2006. I have a college degree but I don’t have a job. The reasons for my unemployment aren’t important except to explain that at this particular moment in my life, I really needed an emotional pick-me-up. And I got one. It was a surprise visit from my globe-trotting brother-from-another-mother, Derrick. When he appeared on my doorstep this time, Derrick was living in Dubai, and in 2006, Dubai was a name-dropper’s paradise. It was glossy with stories about the world’s tallest ‘this’ and most expensive ‘that’, and being able to say “sorry, I can’t, I’ll be in Dubai,” was a great way to end a conversation. So when Derrick invited me to come for a visit, I jumped at the chance.

But five minutes after we said goodbye, my feet started to chill. Someone inviting you to stay with them if you’re “ever in the neighborhood” is the polite thing to do, but 6,850 miles is a long way to travel to find out that they didn’t really mean it. I needed to make sure Derrick was really willing to play host. I must have emailed him

1. If you’re interested in the gory details, I wrote all about it in my first book Leaving Legacies: Reflections from the Prickly Path to Leadership.
Chapter 2
YOUR GENIUS BACKPACK

There is nothing like training and preparation.
You have to train your mind as much as your body.
— Venus Williams

We pack swimsuits and suntan lotion for trips to the beach, thermal underwear for trips to the ski slopes and sleeping bags for camping trips to the great outdoors. The journey to find your genius mind is no different. Each of the lessons we learned in the previous chapter, I have converted into a tool to carry with you in your genius backpack. I call them the five Cs:

1. To unlearn what you have learned, you will need Curiosity;
2. To meet other Jedis who will help you find your inner Yoda, you need Community;
3. To become your own interpreter, you need to master Communication;
Chapter 2: Your GENIUS Backpack

4. To stay focused and committed to the journey requires **Control**; and

5. Using these tools to find your genius is ultimately a matter of **Choice**.

Think of the five Cs in your genius backpack as a go-cart that you’ll drive on your genius journey. Curiosity is the windshield you see through, community is the cart that holds you and communication is your steering wheel. Control is how you steer and choice is how you accelerate. Our success in life is directly affected by how we think about our choices, whether it’s who we choose to spend time with, how we choose to communicate, or ultimately, whether we choose to do anything about our current circumstances.

Everything about your genius mind—whether you seek it, whether you develop it, whether you even believe you have one—is a choice. Embarking upon this genius journey will change your life. I know this because I’ve taught countless students who have allowed their education to do for them what a good education does for everyone who’s been exposed to one. It transformed them and if you let it, it will do the same for you. That can be both exciting and frightening. Choosing to change yourself means taking risks. It means exposing the weaknesses in yourself and in your relationships, but ultimately the choice to find your genius mind will rest on this question: When you look at your life now, is it a choice you can afford not to make?

I’ve structured this book around the five Cs in your genius backpack. Each has its own chapter that will explain in detail how they relate to each element of your genius. I’ll define the elements of GENIUS in the next chapter. But before we embark, there’s something else we need to take on our journey. Even the best-supplied traveler will get lost without directions. To make sure that doesn’t happen to us, we need a map.

**Your GPS (Genius Positioning System)**

Thanks to technology, our cars and phones come equipped with a GPS that shows us not only where we want to go but also where we are in relation to our destination. We’ll need a GPS for this journey as well, but instead of a Global Positioning System, our GPS is a Genius Positioning System. The GPS that comes in our cars and smartphones relies on a series of satellites that orbit the earth. Because we know with certainty where these satellites are, the receiver in our GPS can calculate where we are based on our distance from the satellites, but it takes readings from multiple satellites to provide an exact
location because of a process called trilateration.\footnote{This is how it works.}

Let’s imagine that I wake up one day on a bench in Manhattan but I have no idea where. I can’t see any street signs but there are people walking by so I call out to them. “Excuse me, where am I?” I ask.

The first person to answer as they pass (without even looking at me, because this is New York, after all) shouts back, “You’re five blocks south of 54th Street.”

Thanks, buddy. That tells me I’m on 49th Street, but where on 49th? If I ask again and the next New Yorker tells me that I’m six and a half blocks east of 12th Avenue, I have a better idea of where I am, but I still won’t know my exact location. But if a third person tells me that I’m one block west of 5th Avenue and a fourth person tells me that I’m also ten feet in front of an ice skating rink then—eureka! I know exactly where I am. I am at Rockefeller Center. Because I know where each of the locations being shouted at me are, knowing where I am in relation to all of them at the same time allows me to slowly eliminate all other possible locations. But none of that information would be helpful to me if I knew nothing about the streets of New York. I am definitely oversimplifying how GPS actually works, but you get the idea.

We’re going to use our Genius Positioning System the same way. In the next chapter, I’m going to describe each of your genius “satellites” and how they converge to help you find your genius. Then, in each of the chapters that follow, we’ll focus on one tool in the genius backpack. The purpose is to show you how to use them to find your genius mind so that it can lead you to a successful life. And like any good GPS, I’ll offer you more than one route to your destination. One route will guide you through college. The other route will show you how to apply your genius once you graduate so that you can connect what you learn in college to what will serve you in life. Before we get started, however, I need to tell you more about the treasure you’re going after.

The dictionary defines treasure as something valuable that is hidden or kept in a safe place. If your goal is to improve the quality of your thinking, then your quest is to find the place where your thinking comes from, and that place is the mind. Your genius, then, comes from your genius mind. That is your treasure. Your inner Yoda is sitting in a distant cave, waiting for you to find it. You must go to Dagobah. When Luke first arrived, he didn’t know Yoda when he saw him, and his impatience and arrogance almost ended his journey before it started. Let’s make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to you.
for a job would like, there are still plenty of employers who can’t find employees to fill their jobs. That is a lesson in price matching. What I find most instructive, however, are layoffs. During any difficult period, large companies will eliminate thousands of jobs from the workforce. Those numbers get all the headlines, but what we should be paying attention to is the list of people who didn’t receive a pink slip, because they can teach us something about value matching.

Unless a company is closing its doors, whenever there are layoffs, no matter how massive, not only are there employees who aren’t let go, there are employees in the company who are never even considered for the layoff list. These are the employees who are highly valued by the company, and you will find these people at every level of an organization. They bring something to their position that decision-makers value so highly that they will pay a higher price not to have to replace it. That is the secret formula to success.

**Your value must always exceed your price.**

In other words, what you contribute must always be more important to those you are seeking payment from than what it’s costing them to get it from you. This doesn’t just apply to a job, it also applies to life. What you force people to put up with to be a part of your life is a cost to them. When relationships end, it’s a way of saying the cost of being around you became higher than it was worth. But this isn’t a relationship book (that comes later in the series), this is a book about the value of finding your genius mind. Pay close attention to the five Cs as they relate to being need-fulfilling, because this satellite can be tricky.

**I is for Intentional**

*If you don’t give anything, don’t expect anything.*

*Success is not coming to you, you must come to it.*

—Marva Collins

Is it your intention to be a slave? We’ve arrived at the location of our last satellite, so I’m taking the gloves off for the few stragglers who still haven’t fully committed to this journey. There is probably no place on the planet that has not engaged in slavery at some point in its history. Some enslaved those who looked different, while others enslaved those they defeated in battle. Whatever the reason and no matter where they happened, all of these episodes of mass bondage share a common theme—slaves were trained to be better servants to their masters, but they were never allowed to be educated.
The Three Basic Needs

Autonomy

Competence

Relatedness

We can only feel competent about actions over which we have some autonomy—actions that we control—but we rely on the people to whom we are closest to judge how competent we are when we engage in those actions. When we receive any sort of disapproval at an early age, our young minds often interpret that as a lack of competence, so we begin to focus on how to avoid feeling incompetent again, and that eventually takes priority over our curiosity. After all, that’s what got us into trouble in the first place.

Thinking is simply the mind following its instinct to be curious. Now that you’re old enough to keep yourself safe from harm, there’s no reason not to follow it. You still have the fire of curiosity within you. Even the 10%
Chapter 5
BUILDING GENIUS COMMUNITIES

I’m a reflection of the community.
—Tupac Shakur

We are all a reflection of the communities we belong to. This is an important mile marker on the genius journey because when the people we’re closest to—family members, friends, teachers—cause us to question our competence, they make it unsafe to be curious. We respond by being less willing to exercise our autonomy in that direction. In other words, tell me I can’t sing and I’ll probably quit the choir. But it’s not just what others tell us. When we say to ourselves “I’m not good at math,” and there’s no one around to encourage us to stick with it, we’ll find ourselves at the same stop sign. The very nature of learning means to identify something that we’re not competent at—yet. But with
I had completely forgotten about my dad’s novel brand of thought conditioning until my sister mentioned it recently, and that’s when it occurred to me. I’d forgotten about it because my dad hasn’t used that phrase in years. Once we gave it more thought, we realized that he had stopped asking us if something we’d done made sense before each of us turned thirteen. We were blessed to have two parents who truly understood that their role was to protect us from harm but beyond that to treat our mistakes like the learning opportunities they were. When it’s safe to be curious, it’s safe to ask the questions that allow us to think our way through whatever challenge awaits us. The more practice we have, the more confident we will be in our ability to do so. Because we were part of a family that nurtured our curiosity, the minds we brought to school had experienced plenty of practice thinking. That kind of support from our familial community gave us the confidence to push through the subjects we weren’t good at. If you weren’t blessed with those kinds of communities growing up, you’ll have to create your own. The great thing about being an adult is that you don’t have to rely on someone else to create those communities for you. You can go out and build them for yourself. Keep reading and I’ll show you how.

**Generative Community**

Every member of your generative community should be committed to their own personal and professional growth, but being part of a generative community means that every member wants every other member to grow as well. Take an inventory of the people in your life. What do they want for themselves? What do they want for you? More importantly, do they operate from a growth mindset or a fixed mindset? Author and University of Southern California professor Dave Logan1 gives us a guide for evaluating these communities, which he calls tribes, according to five stages of belief.

**Stage I** tribes believe life sucks. They believe that life is inherently unfair and that the only way to get ahead is to take advantage of others before they take advantage of you. These tribes are the opposite of generative. In fact, they are very often destructive. Needless to say, there is no room for Stage I tribe members in your generative community.

**Stage II** tribes believe that their lives suck. They may not be destructive to society at large but that kind of thinking is personally destructive. Your generative community can’t accommodate these types of tribe members either. You can’t get tomato juice from an orange. A person...
to focus on your safety and survival, you must address that before you can even consider starting the journey to find your genius. Survival requires short-term thinking because you're living from moment to moment. The genius journey takes a long-term commitment and that takes self-control.

**Genius Choices**

The moment of decision has come. The GPS has signaled that we have arrived at our destination. Here is where your journey begins. Will you choose to be a hero or will you choose to be a genius? Every one of us is on one path or the other and there will be times when the lanes will merge in ways that make it difficult to know which path you're on. At those times, all you need to know is that your intentions matter.

All of the choices you've learned to make throughout this book—the communities you choose to belong to, the standards of performance you choose to hold yourself to, whether or not you choose to use your talents to serve others—all of it creates a reinforcing circle of support that will keep you on whichever path you commit to. Sticking with your hero mind is not wrong, but by now you should be starting to feel like it's not enough. That's certainly my hope for you.

There are so many other ways you could have arrived on this planet—a rock, a plant, a braying ass, a dung beetle! But you arrived as none of these. You are a thinking, feeling person, capable of contributing something magnificent to the world. With that knowledge and your genius
I want your journey to be a successful one so I’ve organized additional resources for you to use. To make sure you always have the latest and best information, I’ve placed these resources on our Growing Genius Minds website so that they can be updated as necessary. If you visited the links at the end of each chapter, you’ve already seen many of them. However, links to all of those resources can also be found below. They’re listed as “pit stops”. These resources are free for you to use, enjoy and share. All you’ll be asked for in return is your email address so that our team can share updates with you as they occur. You can sign up to be part of our Growing Genius Minds movement on that site. Your email address
Dr. K. Candis Best is a passionate advocate of getting people to use their minds to find their genius. An inspiring thought leader in higher education, she has focused her attention on creating a movement around growing genius. Candis has helped hundreds of students and professionals to use their genius minds to leave a legacy through self-leadership and service. She is this creator of the Holistic Leadership model, which she used to found Learningateway, a social learning platform for non-traditional students who are at-risk for not completing their academic goals. In her first book, Leaving Legacies: Reflections from the Prickly Path to Leadership, she offered a glimpse into where her passion for helping others began. In many ways, Your Genius Mind is the next step on that journey. Candis’ perspectives on transforming education have made her an in-demand speaker and expert in crafting educational solutions. But she isn’t just a spokesperson
for post-secondary education she’s also an enthusiastic consumer. She holds a law degree from Villanova University and is licensed to practice law in the States of New York and New Jersey and before the federal courts of the Eastern District of New York. In addition, she holds masters degrees in business administration and psychology and a Ph.D. in social welfare research and policy development. She holds board certifications in Healthcare Management and as a Human Services Practitioner and is a fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives. She currently serves as an Associate Professor and the Brooklyn campus chairperson for the departments of Human Services and General Studies at St. Joseph’s College. She resides in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn, New York.

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