What You're Made For

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Powerful Lessons from a Life in Sports

George Raveling
and **Ryan Holiday**

Foreword by Michael Jordan

Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States by Portfolio,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

Book design by Alissa Rose Theodor

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN 978 1 80522 401 3
eISBN 978 1 80522 403 7

This book is dedicated to my wife, Delores Akins, my son, Mark, my daughter, Litisha, and to Kimati Ramsey.

Contents

Foreword

George Raveling is an unsung hero in my life. Our relationship goes back forty years and he's truly been a mentor and a friend to me since our paths first crossed.

I met George when I was twenty-one years old, when he was an assistant coach for the Olympic men's basketball team and I was a skinny junior at the University of North Carolina, about to turn pro and trying out for the team that would compete at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. George was a bridge between us players and Coach Bobby Knight. Right away, George was a comfort—a coach who knew how to relate to players and knew the game of basketball inside and out. He smoothed the path for my Olympic teammates on our way to a gold medal. George was the glue that held the team together and he doesn't get the credit he deserves.

Then there's the origin of my partnership with Nike. There are all kinds of stories out there, but George is truly the reason I signed with Nike. As I've said before, I was all in for Adidas. George preached for Nike, and I listened—reluctantly at first. George is the one who convinced me to take what is now an infamous meeting at Tony Roma's in Los Angeles and, well, the rest is history. My relationship with George is what made me feel comfortable signing with Nike. If not for George, there would be no Air Jordan.

In just three months, George was there for two life-changing moments for me—winning my first Olympic gold and signing my first shoe deal with Nike.

Over the years, while I was playing in the NBA, I stayed in close touch with George. He not only made a tremendous impact on me as a coach with his knowledge of the game but also with his ability to listen and be a good sounding board. I've gotten a lot of great, important advice from George. When I started my Michael Jordan Flight School basketball camp, which we held in Santa Barbara for years, George was the obvious choice for me to bring on board as the director. He wouldn't sign on until he was sure we'd be doing the camp the right way—and that I would be there every day. Later, we did a camp for adults—Senior Flight School—and George was instrumental in making that a success too.

What an amazing life George has led and what a role model he is. As the first Black coach in the ACC, the first Black head coach in the then Pac-8, and a founder of the Black Coaches Association, George paved the way and, again, does not get the credit that I feel he deserves.

He's been so influential to so many—including me—and seen

the best and the worst of this world during his incredible life. I'm proud to call George a mentor and a friend. And I'm glad he's telling his story and sharing his life lessons. We can all learn from him.

Michael Jordan

Introduction

Often a very old man has no other proof
of his long life than his age.

—SENECA

In 1937, the year I was born, the life expectancy of a Black male was just forty-eight years.

It was a world of stark contrasts—of groundbreaking innovation and entrenched inequality. As I took my first breath, a thirty-five-year-old cartoonist named Walt Disney was releasing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the world's first full-length animated feature film. Across the Atlantic, a terrible war was breaking out and Pablo Picasso was putting the finishing touches on his haunting, heartbreaking anti-war mural, *Guernica*. In sports, Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber," became the heavyweight champion of the world, one of the few victories in an age of setbacks for Black people.

The Golden Gate Bridge had just opened, a marvel of engineering towering over the San Francisco skyline. Meanwhile, inventors were shaping the future: Chester Carlson was pioneering

the photocopier, László Bíró was perfecting the ballpoint pen, Edwin H. Land was laying the foundation for the Polaroid camera, and Henry W. Altorfer had just invented and patented the electric clothes dryer, an advancement that would replace hand-cranked dryers and forever change the rhythm of household chores.

But for African Americans, it was a world of segregation and discrimination; the odds were stacked against a kid like me from day one. We faced systemic barriers in every aspect of life: education, employment, housing, health care, voting. We lived apart. We were made to use different facilities. We were denied basic rights and dignities. The bleak stage was set: a life of poverty, hardship, and struggle, one cut short by the harsh realities of racism and inequality.

Not that I was thinking about any of this as a child.

But it was in the air.

The hushed whispers and somber faces delivering news of what happened to a neighbor or some extended family member. So were the air raid sirens, blackout curtains, and duck-and-cover drills at school, daily reminders of a world at war. The echoes of the tolling church bells, the beautiful funeral hymns, and the slow-moving processions; the well-dressed men and women, dignified despite it all; artistic flourishes on a life that was fleeting, cruel, over in an instant.

The dark shadow of mortality had always loomed large, but when I was nine, it came right up to our doorstep. My dad—a man of his era, confined by the societal and racial constraints that defined our existence—died of a heart attack when he was forty-nine years old, a tragically ordinary fate for Black men in those days. He had worked hard to support us. He was a groom for wealthy horse owners, often sleeping in the stables among the horses he tended because he couldn't afford to commute to and from the track every day.

His passing marked the first time I truly understood the fragility of life. The suddenness of it, the way a life so central to mine could be extinguished in an instant, haunted me. It was a lesson in mortality that would stay with me, shaping how I viewed every subsequent challenge.

It was then just my mom and me in a small apartment at the corner of New Jersey and Florida Avenues in Washington, D.C., above a store called Shep's Market. On the second floor, there were three apartments. We had a kitchen, a little living room, and one bedroom with a bed we both slept in. Everyone in the building shared one bathroom, with a bathtub, sink, and toilet. We had to figure out how to share it, but we managed.

In those days, Washington, D.C., was 73 percent Black. That's how it eventually got the nickname Chocolate City. Most of these folks had fled the even harsher conditions of the Deep South, seeking a better life. In the nation's capital, they could make a decent living in the shadows of institutions like the White House and the Capitol, providing the cheap yet indispensable labor that kept the governmental machinery running. The irony: we were integral to the city's functioning, yet marginal in its society.

The vibrancy of the neighborhood was a sharp contrast to the stark inequalities that defined our daily existence. Yet within it there was an undeniable sense of community—a shared struggle that bound us together, even as we navigated the harsh realities of segregation.

My mom, like many others, juggled three jobs to make ends meet. She would walk four miles to get downtown, and her parting words to me each day, "Don't you leave this building," were not just instructions but a plea for safety in a world that was not kind to little Black boys.

The intersection of New Jersey and Florida Avenues was a busy one, teeming with life and the rhythmic flow of city traffic. From my window, I would spend countless hours observing the world outside. The street below bustled with cars honking and streetcars clanging as they made their way through the city. The streetcars moved with a mechanical certainty that fascinated me. Each had its own unique number, a detail that caught my interest and that I tracked in a small notebook. Whenever a streetcar glided past, I'd write down its number and the time of day. When that streetcar came back around, I'd note the return time. This routine was my little way of engaging with the outside world, a way to order the chaos that often surrounded me.

One day when I was thirteen years old, I walked into the kitchen and my mom was pouring a bag of sugar down the drain. That bag of sugar could have lasted us two or three months. I told my grandma—we called her "Dear"—about it, and she'd noticed my mom was doing a lot of strange stuff too. I can't exactly recall what the breaking point was, but one day my mom just disappeared. Nobody knew where she went. Nobody thought to explain anything to me. Finally, they tracked her down and she was up in Boston. She had been committed to St. Elizabeth Mental Institution, where she remained for the rest of her life.

Despite these circumstances, which had made me, on top of everything else, effectively an orphan, despite the despair that loomed over my childhood, despite the bleak statistics and low expectations—I survived. Though the universe seemed to deal me a losing hand in a rigged, short game, I stand here at eighty-seven at the time of this writing, still playing, with multiple lifetimes' worth of experiences and accomplishments.

I was the first person in my family to go to college, receiving a

basketball scholarship to Villanova University, where I was just the second Black player in the program's history.

I met several U.S. presidents: Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Harry S. Truman, who gave me a signed copy of his autobiography.

I was Wilt Chamberlain's right-hand man for one incredible summer. I shook hands with Muhammad Ali. I walked up to the great Sammy Davis Jr. in a restaurant once and started to introduce myself. Before I could get a word out, he looked up at me—all five feet, five inches of him—and said, "George Raveling!" To this day, I do not know how he could have possibly known who I was.

I stood alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington, and after he delivered his historic "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King handed me his typewritten notes, which I've preserved (much more on this in the chapter "To Keep Hope Alive").

I was the first Black basketball coach at Villanova, the University of Maryland, Washington State University, and the University of Iowa.

I've coached Olympic gold medal teams and Hall of Fame players.

I played against Jerry West before the NBA logo was his silhouette, traveled to Peking before it was called Beijing, worked with Phil Knight before Nike had a stock price, and coached Michael Jordan before he had a signature shoe.

There are coaches who have won more than I have. There are coaches who were more highly paid—a *lot* more highly paid. There are coaches who became celebrities. Still, I've been inducted into both the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and

the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame. That was never what motivated me, never what I thought my job was. In fact, the door of my office never read "Head Basketball Coach." It read, at my direction:

GEORGE RAVELING.
EDUCATOR.

I never expected that they'd end up making a movie about me, but they did, and it was nominated for multiple Golden Globes. In fact, the Oscar-winning actor and filmmaker Ben Affleck tells the story of flying to meet Michael Jordan to get his blessing to make the movie *Air*, about his journey to signing with Nike in 1984. Michael had two conditions: Viola Davis had to play his mom, and "George Raveling needs to be included in the story. He's vital. I wouldn't be at Nike without him."

Today, when I see him or other players (some I coached, many I never did) like Charles Barkley, Patrick Ewing, or Dirk Nowitzki; when I get a call from coaches like John Calipari, Doc Rivers, or Shaka Smart; or when I hear from readers of a newsletter I started, *The Daily Coach*, we don't just talk about basketball. We talk about life. We talk about history.

And, boy, have I lived through some history.

In my lifetime, President Franklin D. Roosevelt steered the nation through the Great Depression, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and most of World War II. President Harry S. Truman made the decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Civil Rights Movement gained momentum during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. The assassination of John F. Kennedy shocked the nation. Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights

Act and the Voting Rights Act into law. Richard Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal. And Barack Obama became the first African American president of the United States.

I've lived through the Korean War and Vietnam (I served two years in the army), the fall of the Berlin Wall on television, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic boom and the political scandals of the Clinton years, and the tumultuous presidency of George W. Bush, defined by the 9/11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I've seen the entire space age unfold, from the launch of the first satellite into orbit when I was twenty years old, to humans walking on the moon, to the construction of the International Space Station. There's been major health crises like the crack epidemic, polio, the Asian flu pandemic, the AIDS crisis, and COVID-19. The rise of television, air travel, the interstate highway system, suburbs, and fast food. The invention of the internet, mobile phones, credit cards, email, personal computers, GPS, and Wi-Fi.

I have lived not one life, but many. At the age of fifty-seven, I was blindsided in a two-car collision that left me with a broken pelvis, nine broken ribs, a broken clavicle, a collapsed lung, and bleeding in my chest. Doctors told me 95 percent of people in similar accidents die. Once again, I survived. Once again, I defied death and probability.

I lived another life since that accident, a bonus life, as I've come to see it. I retired from coaching basketball after a twenty-two-year career. I guess I could have lived out my twilight years in a comfortable chair. Instead, I joined Nike as the director of international basketball and brought together the top high school players from around the world, discovering and bringing international

stars like Yao Ming and Dirk Nowitzki to the NBA. I would serve as an adviser to the Los Angeles Clippers for over a decade and consult with the 2008 Redeem Team, which won a gold medal in Beijing. To this day, I'm writing and coaching and educating because it keeps me going, it gives me purpose, and it's fun.

It would be impossible for a person to experience all that I have and not become a little philosophical. By *philosophical*, I don't mean abstract or esoteric. I mean it in the practical, reflective sense. At some point, it hit me that the sweep of history I'd experienced was as vast as the books and biographies I've always loved to read. That I had lived a life far bigger than the imagination of that kid staring out the window over New Jersey and Florida Avenues. That I would become older than pretty much everyone I ever met. And at some point—not unlike the way it was impossible as a child to get away from the sense that life is short—I couldn't help but ask questions like:

Why me?

Why was I spared when so many others weren't?

Why was I gifted with this extra time?

And what do I do with this gift?

This kind of introspection isn't merely a luxury of age; it's a necessity, a way to reconcile the randomness of existence with the purpose I sought. I realized that the answers weren't in the grand events, but in the quiet moments, in the decisions made when no one was watching, in the way I chose to face each new day.

Of course, you don't have to have a life like mine to ask these sorts of questions. These might be questions that you've asked yourself at some point. Maybe not in those exact words. But in quiet moments or in the face of life's challenges and triumphs, you've probably asked yourself questions like: Why am I here?

What is my purpose? What unique contribution am I meant to make in this world?

For me, these questions—and their answers—didn't come all at once. For a while, they lurked somewhere pretty far in the back of my mind. But slowly, over a couple of decades, they came to the forefront. And eventually, they merged into a single, all-encompassing question. I still have the notebook in which I first wrote it down:

What was I made for?

From the harsh streets of Chocolate City to the hallowed halls of the Basketball Hall of Fame and beyond, my life has been an improbable series of unexpected opportunities, hard-fought battles, and lessons learned.

This book is not a memoir. I was never interested in writing one of those. It is an exploration of purpose and meaning. It is stories and lessons to inspire, to challenge, and to provoke thought about the roles we are each called to play in this complex, beautiful life.

This is not just my story, but a quest to understand the essence of what it means to be made for something more, to defy the odds, and to carve out a destiny that transcends all expectations and limitations.

It is a call to reflect on your own path, to question the arbitrary limitations placed upon you, and to dare to dream of a life beyond statistics and societal expectations.

As you turn these pages, I invite you to confront the whys of your existence, to question what it means to live a life of intention and meaning, to ask . . .

What was I made for?

This is not a question with a simple answer, nor is it one that

can be answered for you by anyone else. It is a deeply personal inquiry. It is a lifelong quest that requires introspection, an examination of your talents, your interests, your values, and your experiences. It requires courage, a willingness to step into the unknown and beyond the limits and expectations that have been set for you. The stereotypes and statistics that may be placed upon you, your race, your gender, your background, or your circumstances.

You have to be willing to dream big. You have to allow yourself to believe that you were made for something special, something unique, something that only you can bring into this world. You have to let yourself hear that still, quiet voice within, the one that whispers of a higher calling, a greater contribution.

In the pages that follow, you'll discover how to carve out your own unique path, even when conventional wisdom or societal expectations push you in a different direction. We'll delve into the art of maintaining optimism and inspiring others, especially when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds.

The book will reveal how the simple act of listening—truly listening—can unlock doors you never knew existed, in both your personal and professional lives. You'll learn how small, daily victories can compound into life-changing achievements, and how serving others often leads to your own greatest successes.

We'll explore strategies for finding clarity and purpose amid life's inevitable chaos, and for building relationships that stand the test of time. You'll gain insights into how to continually push your boundaries, growing and evolving long after others might have settled.

The chapters will guide you through the nuances of mentorship—both as a mentee and as a mentor—showing how this reciprocal relationship can create ripples of positive change far beyond your

immediate circle. Ultimately, we'll tackle the big questions of legacy, purpose, and fulfillment, providing you with tools not just to navigate life but to live it with intention and impact.

Through these lessons, drawn from decades of experience across various fields, you'll gain practical wisdom to help you navigate your own journey, overcome obstacles, build meaningful connections, and achieve success as you define it. This book offers insights applicable at any stage of life, helping you align your actions with your deepest values and aspirations.

This is the invitation I extend to you: to join me in grappling with the big questions and exploring answers through the stories and wisdom of the many teachers and mentors I have met, both in real life and in the pages of books. I can't tell you where your path will lead, but I can tell you it begins by asking . . .

What was I made for?

Turn the page, and let's find out together.

What You're Made For

To Be a Trailblazer

Faith is taking the first step even
when you don't see the whole staircase.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

After my mom was institutionalized, nobody knew what to do with me.

My grandma—as I said, we called her "Dear"—had five jobs at the time, and one of them was working for this white family in Georgetown. She cleaned the house, made meals, baked, and all that stuff. One day Dear told the lady of the house about my mom and how she was trying to figure out what to do.

"Maybe Catherine can help," the woman suggested.

Catherine, it turned out, was the head of one of the branches of Catholic Charities. She was able to get Catholic Charities to pay to send me to a boarding school in Pennsylvania. It was a school for boys from broken homes called St. Michael's.

St. Michael's was founded in 1916 by Bishop Michael J. Hoban. He wanted to do more than feed and house boys without

homes; he wanted to educate them and teach them practical skills they could use to make a living.

The boarding school sat on four hundred acres. Surrounded by woods and fields, it was the opposite of urban D.C. in every way, and there was plenty to do. When I woke up in the morning, it wasn't the clanging of street cars or vendors I heard, it was roosters. Here, the nuns and priests did the teaching and the students did the chores. I cleaned coops, baled hay, picked apples, scrubbed floors. I did whatever they asked me. I was just happy to be somewhere other than that little apartment.

Why did they pick me out of all the charity cases? I'll never know. Maybe they saw something in me. Maybe it was just luck, just a random act of kindness. In life, it doesn't really matter *why* you get an opportunity, only what you do with it.

I decided I wouldn't let this one pass me by.

It was here that I met Jerome Nadine, who would become a pivotal figure in my life. He was a trailblazer. He had been at St. Michael's before me, and as a Black student and basketball player, he had paved the way for someone like me. And after his time at the school, he'd been called to the priesthood, but his success and achievements in sports gave him credibility, and he used that to advocate for me.

Jerome kept pushing me to play basketball, mainly because I was so tall and a decent athlete. The basketball team, Father Nadine told me, travels all over the state to play games. I was looking for a way to occasionally get off campus for a little while and see the wider world, so I started wanting to play basketball. But I wasn't any good. Miraculously, I made the varsity team as a freshman. Years later, I found out that Jerome went to the basketball coach, Gene Villa, and said, "Hey, I think George is going to be

really a good basketball player. Don't cut him. Keep him on the team. He's not ready right now, but keep him on the team."

How did he know? Again, what did he see in me? I have no idea, but to that request I owe the rest of my life. Gene promised to keep me on the team, and each year I got better and better.

But basketball was just part of the story. At St. Michael's, I found myself surrounded by a group of nuns who invested an enormous amount of time in me as a person and a student. Most of them couldn't tell you the rules of basketball, but they saw potential in me and set about helping me realize something I didn't even know existed.

There was one nun in particular, Sister Delora, who took a special interest in my basketball development. She'd get the keys to the gym, come and get me, and I'd shoot for an hour under her watchful eye. It was through the dedication of people like Sister Delora and Father Nadine that I began to believe I could become something.

It was also at St. Michael's that I converted to Catholicism, and Jerome became my godfather. This wasn't just a formal title; it represented a deep spiritual and personal connection that would last a lifetime. Father Nadine went on to serve as a chaplain at various military institutions. I visited him in San Diego a couple of months before he passed away, a final meeting with the man who had been such a crucial part of my journey. You don't have to believe in God, but there is such thing as angels in this world—people like Father Nadine are the real thing.

By my senior year, all this support and hard work paid off. I became the leading scorer in the state, somewhat of a spectacle. People filled the gym to watch me play, and college coaches started to take notice. After a game in which I scored thirty points and

something like twenty rebounds against St. Rose of Carbondale, I walked out of the locker room, and as I was walking to the team bus, I heard someone say, "George!"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"My name is Jack Ramsay," he said, handing me his card. "I'm the head coach at Saint Joe's College in Philadelphia. We've been following you. We're planning to offer you a scholarship, and I just wanted to introduce myself because you're going to see me at a lot of games this season."

He shook my hand and told me, "Keep playing good." I'll never forget that. It was so simple: *Keep playing good.*

Simple isn't the same as easy, but it was worthy of a motto, one I would try to follow the rest of my life.

When I got on the bus, my coach asked me who I was talking to. I handed him the card, and once he looked at the name, immediately, my coach's demeanor changed.

"What did he say to you?" my coach asked.

"He said he's been watching me play and he's going to offer me a scholarship," I said.

Coach gave me a knowing nod and I had the sense that he was proud of me.

So I said, "Coach, let me ask you something."

"Sure," he said.

"What's a scholarship?"

I had no idea. I had no idea that a school would pay for your education, and in return, you play on their basketball team.

I was pretty excited to tell Dear, and I assumed she'd be excited and proud. It turns out, she was even more in the dark than I'd been. "I thought I raised you better than that," she said after I gave her the news.

"What do you mean?" I said. "I think you've done a great job in raising me." She had. There wasn't a day that went by that I hadn't done my best to live up to her example and tried to follow what she had taught me.

"Well, I'm disappointed in myself because I can't believe that you're naive enough to think that some white people are gonna pay for you to go to college just so you can play basketball," she told me. "It makes no sense. They're tricking you."

I couldn't help but laugh, but I also understood her skepticism. Given what she had experienced, Dear had every reason to be wary. Her reaction was a powerful reminder of how our past experiences can shape—and sometimes limit—our perception of future opportunities.

In many ways, Dear was a product of her history. She had survived hard years without experiencing much generosity or selflessness from white people. Even though my schooling up to that point had already been taken care of by a charity, it just didn't make sense to her that *sports* could be a way into higher education, let alone a free one!

Civil rights activist and author James Baldwin would talk about how we carry history with us; in fact, we're unconsciously controlled by it. Dear's reaction was a living example of this truth. Her history—our history—was present in that moment, shaping her interpretation of what seemed to me like an incredible opportunity. It was just beyond her comprehension—and to be honest, it was barely within mine. The idea that playing a game could open the door to a college education seemed almost too good to be true. But sometimes, the path forward requires us to see beyond the limitations of our past experiences, to imagine possibilities that our history might tell us are impossible.

Fortunately, the nuns were able to explain that this wasn't, in fact, too good to be true and that it was the opportunity of a lifetime, a path to a better future. Their perspective, less burdened by the specific history that shaped Dear's view, allowed them to see the scholarship for what it was: a chance for me to blaze a trail that neither Dear nor I had known existed.

They started making me stay after school every day to work on my studies. I didn't know it, but they were preparing me for the college entrance exams. Back then, each college had their own entrance exam. During a visit to Villanova, the head coach, Al Severance, said he was thinking about offering me a scholarship too, but first, I needed to take the entrance exam.

Needless to say, my early education in D.C. had not been great—"separate but equal" had always been a heinous lie—but through the grace of God and the grace of those dedicated nuns, I was able to make up for lost time. I ended up scoring so high, coach Severance offered me a scholarship on the spot. We called one of the nuns, Sister Evelina, to make sure that she approved of Villanova. She did, of course, because Villanova is a Catholic school. The next day, I accepted the scholarship to attend the university.

Like my transition from New Jersey and Florida Avenues to St. Michael's in Pennsylvania, when I got to Villanova, I was once again thrust into a world I knew very little about. I don't think I realized I was poor until I got to Villanova. I had hardly ever heard anyone talk about race until I got to Villanova.

It's important to understand the context of the time. I arrived at the university in the late 1950s, just a few years after the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*

had declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The country was still grappling with desegregation, and many institutions, particularly in the South, were resisting these changes. The riots that preceded James Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi were still years away.

Villanova, a private Catholic university, was relatively progressive for its time, guided by its Augustinian values of social justice and inclusion. But that didn't mean it was easy being one of the very few Black students on campus. In 1959, Villanova's student enrollment was approximately three thousand. The exact number of Black students wasn't well documented, but it was likely in the single or low double digits.

Suddenly, I found myself in a sea of faces that didn't look like mine, navigating a world of privilege and opportunity that I had never experienced before. It was a stark contrast to my life in Washington, D.C., and even to St. Michael's, where at least there had been a handful of other Black students.

This transition wasn't just about academics or basketball. It was about learning to succeed in a world that was still in the early stages of integration, where my presence was both novel and, to some, challenging. The weight of being one of the few Black students on campus wasn't just a social burden; it was an intellectual one. I felt the pressure to represent my community, to excel not just for myself but for those who had never been given the chance. It was a constant balancing act—navigating the academic challenges while also confronting the subtle and overt racism that permeated every aspect of life. I was not just a student or an athlete. I was, whether I liked it or not, a pioneer.

This idea of forging your own path, of being a trailblazer, is

beautifully illustrated in an old Arthurian legend, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, written by an anonymous monk in the thirteenth century. In the story, the knights of the Round Table are inspired to seek the Holy Grail after it briefly appears before them. But instead of setting out together, they make a profound choice. As the text reads, "They thought it would be a disgrace to go forth in a group. Each entered the Forest Adventurous at that point which he himself had chosen, where it was darkest and there was no way or path."

The renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell often cited this tale as a powerful metaphor for the individual's journey through life. To Campbell, it captured the essence of having the courage to follow your own path and find what truly fulfills you. "Where there's a way or a path," Campbell writes, "it is someone else's path."

What Campbell means here is profound: The well-trodden paths in life—the ones that are clear and easy to follow—have already been carved out by others. These paths represent conventional wisdom, societal expectations, or traditional routes to success. But true fulfillment, Campbell suggests, comes from forging your own way.

This doesn't mean that every individual has a predetermined, unique path waiting for them. Rather, it's an encouragement to venture into the unknown, to make choices based on your own values and aspirations rather than simply following in others' footsteps. It's about having the courage to step off the beaten track and create your own journey, even if that means facing uncertainty and challenges.

This ancient story resonates deeply with what it means to be a trailblazer. Just as each knight chose to enter the forest at its darkest

point, where no path existed, I found myself venturing into unknown territory at Villanova. The campus was my Forest Adventurous, full of challenges and opportunities that I had to navigate on my own.

This is what an adventurous life is defined by—new environments, new groups, new cultures, new practices. Life as you know it is the work of men and women throughout history who had the courage and determination to blaze new trails forward.

And, of course, we're all pioneers of sorts, roaming into new frontiers of experience and opportunity. We're all put in front of paths never before traveled. Everyone has to be the pioneer, the first explorer, in their own story.

This is not easy. It is easy to default to a well-worn path. To fall in line behind what everyone else is doing, saying, and thinking.

Being a trailblazer is difficult. It's the road less traveled for a reason. It's filled with doubt, discomfort, detours, and dead ends. Lined with naysayers, puzzled looks, and unsolicited advice from those stuck on the beaten path. And only scattered with subtle signs that you're on the right path.

"It will be hard," Baldwin would write to his nephew. "You come from sturdy peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, 'The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.'"

I had to adapt and change, nowhere more than on the basketball court, where I was quickly confronted with the fact that I wasn't as good as I thought. I was no longer the biggest guy on the

court. I could no longer rely on my size to score like I did in high school. To earn a starting spot, I needed to find a way to stand out, a path to getting some playing time.

I started to look around at my teammates. I looked at what the starters excelled at. I looked at what areas of the game guys focused on improving. We had great shooters and great passers. We had guys who stayed after practice to work on their ball handling. In practice, we spent a lot of time on defensive schemes. But nobody seemed to be a great rebounder. No one was staying after practice to work on their rebounding. No practice ever included a rebounding drill.

So I decided to become a rebounding specialist. If I got great at rebounding, I thought, the coaches would play me. There's no way that they're not going to play a guy who secures more possessions for the team. And, of course, my shooting, ball handling, passing, and defending would continue to improve through the work of typical practices. So if nothing else, I'd be a more well-rounded player.

I started staying after practice just to work on rebounding. In many ways, this approach to finding a unique path wasn't just about basketball; it was about life. It was about understanding that true success doesn't come from following the crowd, but from daring to be different, to see opportunities where others see obstacles. It was a lesson that would serve me well beyond the court.

I created drills to improve my reaction time, footwork, and body positioning. By my senior year, I had developed ten daily drills to refine my skills. I studied film to recognize patterns of rebound trajectories based on shot distance. In the weight room, I focused on things that would help me jump higher and exercises that would strengthen my lower body so that I was immovable under the basket.

Pretty soon, I was the rebounding guy. Coach once saw me doing one of my drills and asked, "Who showed you that?" Nobody. I made it up. It gave me a little bit of status among my teammates because I was the best at something. And the work paid off on the court. I went on to set single-game and season rebounding records in my time at Villanova, still eleventh on the all-time list.

At the time, I wouldn't have thought of it as a strategy, but that's exactly what it was. And it's a strategy that works in any field: find something that's underappreciated, not being addressed, or being overlooked, and get really good at it.

This philosophy of finding your niche and excelling in it reminds me of a poem I've always loved, "Be the Best of Whatever You Are," by Douglas Malloch. It speaks to the heart of what it means to be a trailblazer:

If you can't be the sun be a star;
. . . . . .
Be the best of whatever you are!

These lines encapsulate a profound truth: Success isn't about comparing yourself to others or trying to be something you're not. It's about finding your unique path, your special contribution, and giving it your all. Whether you're blazing a new trail or illuminating the way as a guiding star, what matters is that you're doing it to the best of your ability.

Later, when I got into coaching, the legendary Bob Knight gave me this advice: "George," he said, "if you're going to survive in this profession, you have to become the foremost expert in some phase of the game." When people early in their careers come to me for advice, I often tell them something similar: Be a trailblazer.

Find an untrodden path and blaze a trail. Find a void and fill it. Find a critical skill or area that most people are overlooking and become the foremost expert.

Whatever it is—a skill, a service, a demographic that's underserved, a phase of the game that's overlooked—if you become the foremost expert at something, you make yourself indispensable. You set yourself up not just for personal success but also for creating new possibilities for those who come behind you. For the kind of pioneering impact that can change another person's life, an industry, or even the world.

But this is not just a strategy for professional success. It's a fundamental aspect of being part of the human race. Where would we be if Harriet Tubman hadn't forged a path to freedom for hundreds of enslaved people through the Underground Railroad when most saw no way out? If Rosa Parks hadn't sparked the Montgomery bus boycott and Civil Rights Movement by refusing to give up her seat, courageously defying unjust segregation laws? If Mahatma Gandhi hadn't led the nonviolent resistance movement against British colonial rule in India, inspiring millions to fight for independence peacefully?

Being a trailblazer often means venturing into the unknown, where the way forward isn't always clear. You'll encounter dead ends, false starts, and paths that seem promising but ultimately lead nowhere. This is all part of the journey. Each setback and wrong turn is not a failure, but a lesson that brings you closer to finding your true path. The key is to keep moving, keep exploring, and to learn from every experience along the way.

While your specific path will feel at times like a deserted wilderness, you have plenty of company. Take heart: You are not alone. The pioneers, the innovators, the outcasts, the people who

dared to be the first, to break from convention, to hope and dream of a better future and beat down the path to get there—it is a long and profound lineage of trailblazers you are joining.

So, yes, know that it won't be an easy path.

But also keep in mind that it will be uniquely yours.

That with each step, you take your place in the long line of trailblazers who have paved the path of history.

That you come from sturdy trailblazer stock.

That you were made to be a trailblazer.

To Listen and Learn

When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.

—DALAI LAMA

As a young boy growing up in the 1940s, I spent countless hours at the feet of wise women. In those days, the well-worn adage was that children were to be seen and not heard. So when Dear, who raised me, would bring me along on visits to "my lady friends," as she would say, I sat quietly as the neighborhood ladies gossiped, swapped stories, and dissected the latest church sermon.

At first, I didn't pay close attention. But these outings weren't just social calls, and I wasn't just a tagalong. Grandma had a reason for her going and me being there. On the walk home, she would quiz me: "George, what's something Miss Jenkins said that you found interesting?" "Did you learn anything from Miss Simmons's story about her son?"

She was turning on my young ears. In her gentle yet deliberate way, she was revising that old adage, making sure that I not only

saw but heard the ladies. Her concern wasn't that I was silent and invisible. It was that I was present, attentive, and ready to catch the nuggets of wisdom that the ladies were dropping. And it was that I was taught that listening is an active, not a passive, act. "The best way to participate in a conversation," she would say, "is by listening."

Looking back, I realize now that my grandmother and her friends were my first audiobook. She didn't just bring me along to listen; she curated experiences and conversations that would shape my understanding of the world. Through her, I learned not just facts and stories, but how to learn, how to listen actively, and how to distill wisdom from everyday conversations.

Maya Angelou, who was born a few years before I was, talked about feeling like "a giant ear" in her childhood. She didn't talk much, but she *listened.* She loved *voices.* She absorbed everything around her, trying to make sense of the incomprehensible world.

I learned that there was a time to listen and a time to speak. I learned to pocket a few questions and takeaways for those walks home. Initially, it was mostly a passive act—it was because I knew Grandma was going to quiz me, and I wanted to make sure I was ready. But soon, it became active—it was because I knew there was a nugget of wisdom in something Miss Jenkins said, and I wanted to make sure I caught it correctly.

I began to look for any opportunity to listen and learn. At home, we couldn't afford a TV, but we got a radio when I was eleven years old. The family would huddle around for Friday Night Fights, listening intently as the announcer described the jabs, hooks, and uppercuts thrown by boxing legends like Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, and Sugar Ray Robinson. We'd gather for the latest *Amos 'n' Andy* episodes, laughing along with the antics and adventures

of the comedy duo. There were news broadcasts, game shows, soap operas, detective thrillers, gospel hymns, live church sermons, weather forecasts, interviews, and educational programs.

In every case, you had to listen closely. To follow the action in the boxing ring, to get the joke, the plot twists, or the insights in a sermon, you couldn't let your mind wander. You had to be fully present, fully engaged, fully attuned to the subtle details and layers beneath the surface of words—a skill that extends far beyond the living room.

This early training in active listening served me well throughout my life, but it wasn't until I got to college that I truly began to appreciate its value. At Villanova, I found myself surrounded by people who had so much to teach me—if only I was willing to listen. The nuns who had invested so much time in me at St. Michael's had prepared me well for this. They had instilled in me a hunger for knowledge and a respect for wisdom, regardless of its source.

My coaches too became invaluable sources of learning. Coach Al Severance, who had offered me the scholarship, was a wealth of basketball knowledge. But more than that, he taught me about life, about perseverance, about rising to challenges. I made it a point to absorb everything I could from him, not just his words, but his actions, his decisions, the way he carried himself.

Even my teammates became my teachers. Coming from a different background, many of them had experiences and perspectives that were entirely new to me. By listening to their stories, their jokes, their concerns, I began to understand the wider world in ways I never had before.

But perhaps one of my greatest teachers came from outside the college environment. I first met Wilt Chamberlain when he was a

senior at Overbrook High School in West Philadelphia. At that time, Overbrook was the basketball school in the city, mainly because of Wilt. I was older, in college, but we met on the playgrounds, and we just clicked. We'd sit on the sidelines, waiting for the next game, talking about basketball, life, whatever came to mind. One day, Wilt picked me for his team because he knew I had led the country in rebounding in college. That's how our friendship started.

Little did I know that this connection would lead to one of the most enlightening summers of my young life. One day, I went over to Wilt's house, and we were heading up to the playground together. On the way, he told me he was getting a lot of requests to speak at kids' camps in the Catskill Mountains during the summer. Then, he surprised me by saying, "I'll hire you to be my chauffeur. I'll pay you a hundred dollars a day." I agreed right away. Wilt had this purple Bentley convertible, so I'd drive him around the mountains to these different children's camps. These weren't basketball camps; they were just regular camps, mostly attended by kids from Jewish families.

At first, we'd just put on a show, doing all kinds of dunks, and we'd take pictures with the kids. But as I observed and listened to the interactions, I saw an opportunity to add more value. I suggested we create a little more structure, like a short lecture on offense and defense. Wilt liked the idea, so we incorporated that into our routine. This experience taught me the value of not just participating, but actively seeking ways to improve and add depth to any situation.

Spending so much time with Wilt that summer, I learned more than just basketball skills. There is something about champions that is just *different*. How they carry themselves. What they notice. What they expect. What they think is possible.

I observed his dedication to his craft, his interactions with fans, and his approach to his growing fame. Wilt wasn't just a basketball player; he was an all-around athlete. He ran on the mile relay team at the University of Kansas, he high-jumped, and he even started a pro volleyball team. People didn't believe me when I said that, but it was true. Watching Wilt, I learned the importance of versatility and pushing beyond perceived limitations.

Perhaps the most striking lesson came from observing the stark difference between Wilt's approach to the game and my own. Wilt had this incredible drive to dominate every time he played. For him, it wasn't just about winning; it was about embarrassing his opponents. He had a hunger for perfection and greatness, and he held himself to the highest standards. This killer instinct, shared by players like Michael Jordan, was something you couldn't teach. It was just in them.

I knew at some level that I just didn't have that.

I was smart enough to know that if I ever played against them, I had to be careful. After the game, we'd go out for pizza or a beer, but on the court, I knew better than to try and guard either one of them. This taught me a valuable lesson about recognizing and respecting different approaches to excellence, even if they differed from my own.

In those days, scouting other teams was difficult. Unlike today, where coaches and players can access detailed game footage, statistical analyses, and advanced scouting reports with ease, the methods of scouting back then were rudimentary and relied heavily on word of mouth and personal observation.

As a player at Villanova, when our coach would verbally share whatever he knew about an upcoming opponent, it was like I was back at Miss Jenkins's or on the floor next to the radio. Within the

coach's words, I knew, were insights that could make the difference between me having a good game and a bad game, between the team winning and losing, between success and failure.

Later, when I became a coach, I made it a point to ensure my players knew I wanted to hear their observations and insights. During time-outs, I would often ask, "What are you seeing out there?" I asked that constantly. It gives the player the sense that they have a stake in the team's strategy and decision-making process, which sends a powerful message about their value and role on the team. But it also gives the coach information that is hard to get otherwise. The subtleties in the opponents' schemes, adjustments, player tendencies—critical insights like these can often be obvious on the court but hard to perceive from the sidelines.

Of course, I wouldn't blindly act on every piece of information shared. Sometimes, a player's observation can be something that shifts the game plan and turns the tide of the game. But other times, it can be something that does not consider broader tactical implications, is colored by their emotions, or applies only within their specific individual matchup. The good coach, just like the good listener, filters the information and catches only the most relevant and actionable insights.

This ability to filter, to discern, to sift the signal from the noise—I got to witness this skill at the highest level through working with Nike cofounder Phil Knight, a true master of the art.

I remember one particular meeting that was true to form, perfectly illustrating Knight's ability to cut through clutter and get straight to the core of an issue or idea. Our marketing team had prepared an extensive and elaborate presentation to address declining sales in one of our basketball product lines. The room was filled with detailed charts, sophisticated financial projections, and complex

strategies. With a flair of fancy jargon, the team presented a meticulously crafted narrative that danced around the supposed need for a significant financial injection. Knight listened silently, intently, patiently, with an unvarying facial expression that made it impossible to tell if he was impressed, confused, bored, excited, or annoyed.

When the team finally finished the presentation, Knight leaned back in his chair, still without giving away any hint of his thoughts or feelings, then said, "Throwing money at a problem is rarely the solution."

I'll never forget him saying that: *Throwing money at a problem is rarely the solution.* Nine words that got straight to the bottom of layers and layers of complexity. That carried more weight and wisdom than a hundred presentation slides or a thousand data points. It didn't dismiss the team's hard work or the complexity of the issue at hand, but instead urged them to go deeper, to dive beneath their surface understanding of the problem, and to think more creatively about potential solutions.

In today's world, the art of listening seems to be under threat. Social media has trained us to believe that what matters most is what we have to say. We're talking more than ever, broadcasting our thoughts to the world with every post, tweet, and status update. But in this cacophony of voices, it often seems like nobody is truly hearing each other.

We've become so focused on crafting our next response, our next witty comment, that we've forgotten how to listen. We skim, we scan, we scroll, but we rarely stop to absorb and consider what others are saying. We're more connected than ever, yet in many ways, we're more isolated, trapped in echo chambers of our own making.

This is why the skill of listening—real, active, engaged listening—is more crucial than ever. It's a skill that can set you apart in a world where everyone is clamoring to be heard. It's a skill that can open doors, build relationships, and lead to insights and opportunities that you might otherwise miss.

Today, at eighty-seven, I'm still working to sharpen my listening skills. Before I walk into any meeting, I write down at the top of my notepad a ratio for how much I want to talk versus listen (talk 20 percent, listen 80 percent). You'd think I'd have it down by this point in my life, but no, it's still a struggle and a matter of discipline. If I think of a question or a comment, instead of interrupting, I write it down, pocketing it just like I would when I was to be seen and not heard by Grandma and her ladies.

I make sure to keep myself around people I want to listen to and learn from, and I make sure to ask them, just as I used to ask my players, "What are you seeing out there?" "What are you hearing?" "What's been interesting to you lately?" "Read anything good recently?"

In this age of information overload, I've found that these simple questions can lead to the most enlightening conversations. They cut through the noise and get to the heart of what people are truly thinking and experiencing.

In my journey, I've come to embrace a truth that Ralph Waldo Emerson once expressed: everyone is better than us at something—even if it's a little thing. If we want to keep growing and improving, we should focus on finding and learning from these strengths in others. This mindset turns every interaction into an opportunity for growth.

And after a day full of listening, I review my notes and try to distill what I've learned into nuggets of wisdom, core insights,

pithy Knight-like one-liners. This practice of reflection is crucial. It's not enough to just hear words; we need to process them, to let them sink in, to consider how they apply to our lives and our understanding of the world.

In a world that seems to value noise over substance, where the loudest voice often gets the most attention, I believe we need to rediscover the power of listening. We need to remember that wisdom often comes in whispers, not shouts. That the most profound insights often come from unexpected sources. That sometimes, the most important thing we can say is nothing at all.

We have two ears and one mouth.

We were made to talk less than we listen.

We were made to participate in conversations mostly by listening.

We were made to listen and learn.

And in doing so, we open ourselves up to a world of wisdom, understanding, and connection that we might otherwise miss. In a world that's constantly telling us to speak up, to stand out, to make ourselves heard, perhaps the most revolutionary act is to be quiet, to listen, and to learn.

To Seek Out Wisdom

Wisdom is not a product of schooling but
of the lifelong attempt to acquire it.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

In life, wisdom rarely falls into our laps. Unlike the apples in Newton's apocryphal story, it rarely bonks us on the head while we're resting in the shade. It's not something we stumble upon by chance while going about our daily routines. It doesn't automatically come with age, education, or position.

No, wisdom demands that we seek it out. It requires effort, curiosity, and a willingness to step out of our comfort zones, to engage deeply with new ideas, and to actively pursue knowledge from a variety of sources. Wisdom isn't something handed down by institutions or represented by degrees—it's earned through exploration, reflection, and a relentless openness to learning from the world around us.

A few years ago, I was reading a book when the word *mastermind* caught my eye. I'd never heard that term. As was my habit, I circled it and made a note to look it up later. When I dove into

researching the concept online, I was fascinated by what I found—the idea of a group of like-minded individuals coming together to share knowledge, challenge each other, and accelerate their personal and professional growth. Among other things, I came across an article about an event called Mastermind Dinners, which I shared with a few friends.

Wisdom, like life, is a team sport. It turns out, one of the friends I had sent the article to had attended one of those dinners and offered to connect me. "Go for it!" I replied back over email.

I soon found myself with an invitation to a conference in Ojai, California, and what turned out to be a wonderful and transformative experience. At eighty-three!

I've been to countless events in my life, but there at the Ojai Valley Inn, I was overwhelmed.

Every night, I went to bed with a headache—not from stress or frustration, but from the sheer volume of new information crammed into my brain. It was exhilarating. I took at least fifty pages of notes each day, staying up until midnight just to capture all the insights and ideas swirling in my head.

But it wasn't just about the information. It was about the people and the new ways of thinking and being they introduced me to. The mastermind event was a melting pot of minds from all walks of life. There were tech entrepreneurs fresh from Silicon Valley, entertainment moguls from Hollywood, seasoned executives from Wall Street, and everything in between. The age range spanned from ambitious twentysomethings to wise octogenarians. Some had come from humble beginnings, others from privilege, but all were there with the same purpose: to learn and grow.

What struck me most was how this diverse group was unified by an insatiable curiosity and drive to seek out wisdom. Here I

was, a former basketball coach from another era, rubbing shoulders with young tech wizards and veteran CEOs alike. The conversations were electric, jumping from topics like artificial intelligence to ancient philosophy, from the latest business trends to timeless life lessons.

I vividly remember sitting at a lunch table with about eight or nine people—a young app developer, a bestselling author, a retired general, and a cutting-edge scientist among them. Despite our vastly different backgrounds, we found common ground in our hunger for knowledge. They peppered me with questions about my experiences in sports and civil rights, while I eagerly soaked up their insights on technology and current global trends.

It struck me as I was sitting there that this idea of a "mastermind" was not as unfamiliar to me as I had once thought. I was reminded of my time with the Black Coaches Association (BCA), an organization a few of us founded in 1988 in the wake of Proposition 42, an NCAA ruling that denied athletic scholarships to freshmen who didn't meet certain academic criteria. The policy disproportionately affected Black athletes from underprivileged backgrounds, preventing them from playing sports even if they were qualified. Many of us saw it as a thinly veiled attempt to limit opportunities for young Black men, who we knew were deserving of an education and we knew we could help.

What I found curious was that people would frequently ask, "Well, why do you have to have a Black Coaches Association?" In fact, it was one of the differences of opinion Bob Knight and I had. Around the time we started the BCA, Bob said to me, "George, help me understand. What is the necessity for a Black Coaches Association? Why do you need a Black Coaches Association? We don't have a White Coaches Association. We don't have

a Puerto Rican Coaches Association. We don't have an Italian Coaches Association." And I said, "Bob, do me a favor. I'm not going to answer that question until you think about it for a week. And if you still don't understand, come back and we'll talk about it." He never said another word to me about it.

Anyone who takes a close look at America can see that, more than any other nation, it's built on special interest groups. The Black Coaches Association was no different than the movements for women's rights, religious rights, or LGBTQ+ rights. Special interest groups are born from frustration—when voices go unheard, they band together to amplify their message.

The BCA wasn't just a group fighting against discrimination—it was a community of like-minded individuals who came together to share ideas, support each other, and amplify our voices. I remember appearing on *Charlie Rose* alongside John Chaney, Nolan Richardson, and Rudy Washington. We took our fight to Capitol Hill, met with the Congressional Black Caucus, and challenged the NCAA's discriminatory policies. Just like in a mastermind, we recognized that even though we were technically competitors—each leading different teams, fighting for the same small number of jobs and endorsements—we were stronger together. Our unity became our greatest weapon, and it allowed us to effect real, lasting change.

The idea is that even competitors can help each other. Because in the end, we are not so much competing against each other as we are trying to beat the odds, trying to wrest something away from powerful interests, trying to make the world better.

Although our association back in the 1980s and '90s was in part based on our identities, one of the things I appreciated most about this recent event was the diversity of thought it brought to-

gether. If you're in an environment where everyone thinks just like you, it can get really boring really fast. But at the mastermind event, every conversation was an opportunity to step into a new world, to see things from a completely different perspective. It reinforced something I've always believed: wisdom doesn't always come to you—you have to seek it out, sometimes in the most unlikely of places.

I recall thinking to myself, "This is what growth looks like." It's not about surrounding yourself with people who think exactly like you do. It's about seeking out those who can challenge your assumptions, expand your horizons, and push you to think in new ways. It's about putting yourself in situations where you're not the most knowledgeable person in the room, where you can discover wisdom you never knew existed.

One evening, I found myself in a deep discussion with a young entrepreneur about the parallels between building a successful team in sports and in business. Despite our age difference and disparate fields, we found so many common principles that we could both learn from and apply in our respective areas.

This experience reinforced another belief I've long held: if you and I agree on everything, one of us is unnecessary. The real value comes from diversity—not just in terms of race or gender, but in experiences, in ways of thinking, in approaches to problem-solving. But this value is only realized if we actively seek it out, if we deliberately put ourselves in the path of new and challenging ideas.

The mastermind event wasn't just about networking. It was about creating a space where wisdom could flow freely, where each person's unique experiences and insights contributed to a greater pool of knowledge that we could all draw from. It was a vivid reminder that wisdom doesn't discriminate—it can come from the

youngest start-up founder or the most seasoned industry veteran. The key is to remain open, curious, and always ready to learn. And to recognize that while wisdom might sometimes fall into your lap, more often than not, you have to seek it out.

That mastermind event changed my life. It opened my eyes to how much there was still to learn, still to discover. I couldn't wait to get up each morning and start absorbing more. It was a moment when I realized there was so much more out there to learn that I didn't know, and I was mentally excited every day. It taught me that the pursuit of wisdom is an active endeavor, one that requires us to go out into the world and find it.

But here's the thing: you don't need to attend an exclusive event to have this kind of transformative experience. The great masterminds of all time are waiting for you in places that are much more accessible: your local bookstores and libraries. After all, it was in a book that I learned that term in the first place!

I go to bookstores six to eight times a week. There's a Barnes & Noble in El Segundo, California, where I stop every morning to pick up my newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Daily Breeze*. I also frequent the Barnes & Noble in Marina del Rey about five times a week. For a long time, there was an incredible Black-owned independent bookstore in the Leimert Park section of Los Angeles—*The New York Times* even recognized it as the number one bookstore in America. While it was in business, not a month went by that I didn't visit.

At each of these bookstores, I know every cashier, every manager, and where every book is located. They're like a second home to me. Walking through the aisles, greeting familiar faces, and losing myself in the pages of a good book are as much a part of my

daily routine as anything else. These places aren't just stores—they're sanctuaries, where I connect with the wisdom of the world and the people who help make it accessible. And they remind me that wisdom can be found anywhere—sometimes you just have to go looking for it.

In her book about the 1986 Los Angeles Public Library fire, Susan Orlean beautifully captures what these places mean: "A library is a good place to soften solitude; a place where you feel part of a conversation that has gone on for hundreds and hundreds of years even when you're all alone. The library is a whispering post. You don't need to take a book off a shelf to know there is a voice inside that is waiting to speak to you, and behind that was someone who truly believed that if he or she spoke, someone would listen."

Books, in this way, are wonderful friends. They are always there. They speak wisdom, but offer their advice quietly. They have an unlimited capacity for listening. They offer so much and ask for essentially nothing in return. But they won't come to you—you have to go out and find them, open their pages, and let their wisdom into your life.

I've always believed in what I call the Three Wise Men theory: always come bearing gifts. And my gifts are always books.

I learned this lesson early, studying the story of the three wise men who brought gifts to the newborn Jesus. I decided that whenever I go somewhere, I should come bearing gifts too. And what better gift than the gift of knowledge?

Over the years, people have told me that the books I've given them have changed their lives. It's incredibly rewarding to know that by sharing a book, you're potentially opening up a whole new world for someone.

But I've also made an interesting observation about giving away books. If I notice that someone doesn't read the books I give them, I stop. To me, an unread book on a shelf is an assassination—it's the death of potential wisdom and growth. Why would I give someone a book I know they're not going to read when I could give it to somebody who will benefit from it, grow, and discover more about who they are?

In my house, much to my wife's dismay, we have a dedicated library with over twenty-five hundred books. I've even bought mobile book racks—the kind you find in libraries and bookstores—that hold seventy-five books each. I bought four of those because I had books stacked up on the floor and it was driving my wife nuts. Then there's my office, with probably another two hundred books on the shelves.

I have strategic reading points throughout the house too. On my side of the bed, I keep eight books and about four stenographer pads. Every night before bed, I spend at least thirty minutes reading.

So, whether it's at a mastermind event, in the aisles of your local bookstore, during quiet moments of reflection with a thought-provoking book, or when a word or idea catches your attention and prompts you to dive deeper into research, wisdom is out there waiting for you. All you have to do is seek it out. Just as we discussed the importance of being a trailblazer earlier, seeking out wisdom often requires us to venture into unfamiliar territory, to blaze new trails in our pursuit of knowledge.

Because that's what we're made for—to learn, to grow, to connect with the great minds of past and present through the written word. But don't wait for it to come to you—go out and find it. Wisdom is out there, waiting for those who seek it.

We are living in the greatest time in history right now. Every day, our lives are filled with insurmountable opportunities for personal growth. These opportunities are everywhere—we just need to reach out and embrace them, make them part of our lives. If you don't go to that event, you don't meet that person who becomes a lifelong friend. If you don't pick up that book, you miss out on knowledge that could change your life forever.

I've learned that being in environments where everyone thinks alike and agrees on everything stifles growth. Seek out diverse perspectives, challenge your assumptions, and never stop learning. And above all, actively seek out wisdom in all its forms—it won't always find you, but if you look, you'll find it.

We're made to seek out wisdom, wherever it may be found. Make it a priority.

Spend time each day between the pages of a good book and in the quiet corners of a library.

Go down rabbit holes.

Let your curiosity lead you from one discovery to the next. Look up words you don't know.

Share what you're learning with others—you never know what might come of it.

Build relationships with people who share your love of knowledge—booksellers, librarians, fellow readers, mentors, and curious minds.

Linger in the stacks.

Surround yourself with books.

Explore ideas relentlessly, and let your curiosity take you to places you never imagined.

Engage deeply with what you find, and watch as your world expands with each discovery.

Every day is an opportunity to expand your mind, challenge your beliefs, and grow in ways you never thought possible. Wisdom doesn't come to those who wait—it comes to those who actively pursue it, who immerse themselves in learning, and who engage with the world around them with curiosity and passion.

So go, seek wisdom, and embrace the journey of discovery—that's what you're made for.

To Struggle

One day, in retrospect, the years of
struggle will strike you as the most beautiful.

—SIGMUND FREUD

January 26, 1980. That date is etched in my memory forever. But to understand why, we need to go back a few years.

When I became the head coach at Washington State University in 1972, the Cougars hadn't beaten UCLA in over a decade. And in the twenty-three-season rivalry, we'd never won in Los Angeles. UCLA, under the legendary coach John Wooden, was the gold standard of college basketball, a dynasty that had steamrolled nearly every opponent that dared to challenge them. They had won seven national championships, six of which were consecutive, and recently finished their third undefeated season under Wooden.

My first game against UCLA as head coach was a brutal introduction to that reality. On February 10, 1973, we lost 88–50, to what some college basketball historians rate as the best team ever. They were an absolute juggernaut, loaded with six future NBA players. Bill Walton would go on to become one of the greatest