

THE
POWER OF
LOSING
CONTROL



*Finding Strength,
Meaning, and Happiness in an
Out-of-Control World*

*"Changing one's perspective can be the key to enhancing personal and corporate performance. This book will help you enrich your personal life and unlock new opportunities when guiding the growth of companies in this fast paced and ever changing business climate."
— PAUL BISARO, CEO and President, Watson Pharmaceuticals*

JOE CARUSO

THE POWER OF LOSING CONTROL

*Finding Strength,
Meaning, and Happiness in an
Out-of-Control World*

by

Joe Caruso

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This revised electronic version of the best selling book, *The Power of Losing Control*, available in five languages in dozens of countries, is a newly edited version of the book previously published by Gotham Books, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., in a hardcover edition (ISBN 1-592-40003-5) and a paperback edition (ISBN 978-1-885671-16-5). To obtain autographed copies, contact info@carsusoleadership.com.

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What Readers Are Saying About The Power of Losing Control

“Joe Caruso’s concept about The Power of Losing Control absolutely establishes the basis for individual and organizational transformation. I believe Caruso is on the brink of leading corporate America through a shift in approach that hasn’t been seen since the ‘7 Habits.’”

— Rick Vlastic, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, O/E Learning

“The Power of Losing Control is a wonderful reference guide for those in search of a better life! I strongly recommend this book to all who wish to benefit from Joe’s insight and wisdom.”

— David Brandon, former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer,
Domino’s Pizza. (Currently Director of Intercollegiate Athletics at
University of Michigan)

“Life altering! The Power of Losing Control is probably the most influential book I have read in my adult quest for balancing life and management challenges. It completely changed the way I interacted with others. It helped focus my energy so I could become more understanding of life’s dynamics and ultimately become more organizationally effective. This book should be on everyone’s Top 10 read list.”

—L.R. Hering Sr., RADM, USN, Retired

“Joe’s message is universal. CEOs should make it required reading for all their employees.”

—George Gorno, Former Chairman and CEO, Gorno Ford

“The Power of Losing Control carries a message that never goes out of style. From my first encounter with Joe Caruso in 1996, I have been asking him to share his story with all management levels within Hyatt Hotels Corporation. The stories and personal experiences are told with such passion and sincerity that he is sure to capture the attention of any

audience. I find myself relating business and personal situations to specific chapters of the book. A great read and as important an even better re-read!!”

— Gus Vonderheide, Vice President Sales, Hyatt Hotels Corporation

“This extraordinary book speaks to the soul of the human endeavor and from the heart of an extraordinary survivor, human being and friend. We should all learn how to lose control and reap the benefits. Thank you Joe for sharing your life with us!”

— Michael A. Giorgione, Energy Market Leader, RBF Consulting (RADM, USN, Retired)

“Joe Caruso’s story in the Power of Losing Control is inspirational on a personal level and transformative from a professional perspective. Joe lays out a compelling case that says the way we view the world around us and how we respond to our perceptions are deeply intertwined with achieving personal fulfillment and success in business. People and organizations that can adapt and change, thrive in today’s complex world. The Power of Losing Control is a personal GPS to navigate that complexity. This book is a must read for anyone interested in personal and professional growth.”

— Chuck Amos, CEO, The Amos Group, LLC

“Absolutely life changing!”

— Marilyn Bannon, World Heritage Foundation

“Joe provides a simple and compelling approach to finding our real power in a world we can’t control. The powerful combination of his personal story and corporate insights can drive sustainable change throughout an organization. This is a true road map for anyone seeking transformational change in their personal and professional lives.”

— Barbara Beck, Executive Vice President, North America, Manpower, Inc.

“Changing one’s perspective can be the key to enhancing personal and corporate performance. This book will help you enrich your personal life

and unlock new opportunities when guiding the growth of companies in this fast paced and ever changing business climate.”

— Paul Bisaro, President & CEO, Watson Pharmaceuticals, Inc.

“The biggest challenge in helping an organization make a transition is getting the top people to transition themselves. I’ve watched Joe Caruso get high powered, successful, smart and self-assured people to listen and even change their minds. This makes him a CEO’s greatest asset.”

— Alex Burkulas, CEO, Cygnus Systems

“The simplicity of what Joe teaches makes it seem almost magical. I have never seen such dramatic, long-lasting results achieved in such a short time. Had I not experienced it myself, I would have thought it impossible.”

— Bennett Derman, President, The GTS Companies, Inc.

“I heard Joe speak to the Michigan Society of Association Executives...His themes included the ideas that “Nobody likes me. They like themselves when they’re with me” and “Everybody is always right.” Those two simple concepts have affected of all my relationships every day since I heard them.”

— Sharlan Douglas, Marketing & Public Relations Consultant, Douglas Communications Group

“Almost five years ago I purchased a copy of Joe’s book translated to Portuguese. Since then I have been practicing his guidelines day by day and I have been giving Joe’s book as a “gift” for my friends, colleagues and family.”

— E.G., Sao Paulo, Brazil

“Solid, doable stuff that really works!”

— George Helmstead, Metro Detroit Convention & Visitors Bureau

“Joe has helped us not just change as a culture, but truly transition. He’s also been instrumental in helping key individuals make drastic changes in their lives and in their work—including me. When I first met Joe, I was the

biggest cynic in the company. After seeing what Joe's done here, I can't believe there is an organization he can't help."

— John Jaensch, CEO, The GTS Companies

"Joe Caruso offers powerful insights that are straightforward and easy to put to work in our everyday life to create meaningful change."

— Gerald G. Jampolsky, author of *Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All and Love Is Letting Go of Fear*

"As a former Vice President of Human Resources for a major automotive supplier, training and culture changes were a big part of my job. I've studied Joe Caruso and his techniques. I've interviewed and worked with his clients. And I've personally employed his methods and concepts. When it comes to culture change, I'm convinced there's no better guy in the country than Joe Caruso."

—Marilyn Opdyke, President of The Opdyke Group

"I want to thank you for your message and book (which I am savoring). I was able to recommend your book to a young testicular cancer patient and he was so appreciative. Thank you for sharing your gifts with us, thus helping us to better serve our patients. Keep up the good work."

—Nancy Oliver, Oncology Nursing Society Event Participant

"This book is enjoyable, thought-provoking and touching. Joe Caruso has been a consultant and advisor to the leadership team at Village Green Companies for years. I fully endorse Joe, his work and especially this book."

—George Quay, President / COO Village Green Companies

"The Power of Losing Control" has served as a great platform for years for us at the bank. From the executive VP's to the part-time tellers, you've helped my people define what they can control, let go of what they can't, and find their power in the process. I get excited and a little proud every time I hear that another member of YPO has brought you in to work with their organization. I really believe that 'The Power of Losing Control' will put you in the leagues of Steven Covey."

—Bob Taylor, Former CEO/President, Charter Bank

“As a mother of a blended family with seven children as well as a dynamic career in education technology and publishing, I understand what it means to feel out of control. Joe Caruso has given me the most practical advice on how to understand, accept and manage myself. I’ll never forget, ‘I have power in it, but no control over it.’ Great stuff that just works ... “

—Christine Willig, Senior Vice President, STEM, McGraw-Hill Education Group

“The Power of Losing Control” is essential reading for CEO’s who want to thrive in our age of geometric growth. After reading Joe’s book and spending a brief amount of time with him I modified my life’s purpose. I realized that my approach was a byproduct of being educated and influenced in “industrial era” thinking and represented a bygone paradigm of thinking. Joe has given me the insight and tools to begin to truly understand what matters most to my clients, family, and friends.

John D. Anderson, co-founder of The CEO Advantage and founder of the Entrepreneurs Organization, Detroit Chapter

“This book shifted my perspective about “Control”. It’s one of those books that I come across once in a while that makes an impact on how I work, think and live.”

—Ivan Chew, Librarian, Singapore (RamblingLibrarian.blogspot.com)

*I dedicate this book to the memory of my father,
Mickey Caruso.*

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Executive Summary

The following overview is designed for readers who want to quickly preview the contents of the book and determine which areas they would like to learn more about so they can customize their reading and learning experience.

This reprint not only provides a new executive summary, but also gives direct links to specifically designed web pages that will further explain ideas and concepts. Here's how it works:

When you see this symbol throughout the book, you will be given a link to a page that provides one or more of the following:

- More information about the concept
- Exercises and ideas of how to utilize the concept
- Supplemental readings and supporting materials including audio, video, webinars, and more

We have also designed pages with information specifically applicable to businesses and organizations. When you see this symbol in the book and visit the link, you will find the following:

- Information of how to apply the concept in business or organizations
- Information specifically designed for leaders and CEO's on how to use the concepts to help your organization
- Supplemental readings and supporting materials including audio, video, webinars, and more
- How to apply the concepts in areas of business such as leadership, sales, operations, dealing with change, improving effectiveness, innovative thinking and more

Caruso Leadership will continually add information and resources to these web pages in order to provide greater value and understanding for the

reader.

The Power of Losing Control is the result of over 25 years of research. It has become a bestseller, an eBook, and is available in five languages. The information is delivered with real-life examples and interesting stories wherever possible to make the ideas and concepts easier to understand, apply and remember. While we encourage the reader to read this book from the beginning in order to maximize the understanding of the concepts, this overview is designed to help the reader decide which sections of the book might be most applicable to them by giving a preview of some of the main concepts and ideas. The sections listed below are what hundreds of CEO's, business leaders and individuals have told us were of greatest benefit to them.

Again, please keep in mind that while we list the facts and ideas below, we encourage going to the chapter to help create a fuller, richer and more exact understanding of how to apply them.

Concept 1: Power-based understanding vs. victim-based understanding.

Chapter 1

We are all susceptible to defining a situation in a manner that limits the power we have in it. While the world provides us with countless out of control situations, we can always find power. Energy isn't power. Energy is capacity. Power is energy expressed. Power can be negatively or positively expressed. Likewise our definitions, thoughts and behaviors can have positive or negative results. Learning how to create power-based understandings, assessments and definitions helps us to create positive thoughts and behaviors in order to then generate positive outcomes. This process is critical for leaders trying to help others contextualize and solve problems and challenges.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/power-based-understanding

Concept 2: Primary vs. secondary world

Chapter 2, Chapter 3

There are two worlds in the human experience—your individual world, and that of everyone else. While this may seem like a very basic concept it is

critical to the entire theme of the book. Your world is called your primary world. The occupants of your world are you and you alone. No one else can get into it no matter how close the relationship. Your world is largely determined by how your mind understands yourself. All other understanding—that of everything in the secondary world—is based in some way on this self-understanding. This concept applies to organizations and businesses as well.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/primary-secondary-world

Everyone besides you lives in a secondary world. This distinction allows you to understand that some concepts don't apply or translate well to the secondary world. One of the most crucial of these is the concept of Control.

Concept 3: Influence vs. control

Chapter 1

Control is an all or nothing concept. You can't "kind of" or "pretty much" control anything. Therefore, if it doesn't pertain to your primary existence, the concept of control doesn't apply. You can't control the way your friends, spouse, partner, children, students, co-workers, employees, board members or customers think, nor can you control how they behave. At best, you can *influence* their thoughts and behaviors. Realistically, this is the limit of your *control*. Until you let go of any fantasies about being able to exert control in the secondary world, you can't begin to find your true potential of your power to influence.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/influence-vs-control

Concept 4: Control vs. Power

Chapters 1, 2, 4

Once you understand that control is a concept that necessitates a total or complete element and can't exist in partial terms, you can understand that you have no control in the secondary world. This frees you from wasting your energy trying to do so.

● www.carusoleadership.com/control-vs-power

Now you can focus all of your energy on the part of you that has the most impact in everyone and everything in the secondary world...your power of

influence. It's only when you let go of trying to control that you can stop wasting your limited energies (thoughts, emotions and actions) on trying to control people and outcomes. It is truly a waste of energy, and because energy is the very essence of life, it is literally a waste of life. The next step is to learn how people are influenced—whether they are aware of it or not.

Concept 5: The Power of Connection and Story

Chapter 2

As human beings, we need a story for everything. Every CEO I've ever worked with has learned, "In the absence of information, people will make stuff up." In ancient Egypt when they watched a scarab beetle appear from under the sand—where they knew nothing could grow—they had to try to understand why. So, they created a story. They decided that the scarab beetle must be the origin of all life. Today, ancient Egyptian museums around the world feature ancient jewelry—necklaces, rings, earrings, etc. celebrating the Egyptian story of how life originates by depicting the scarab beetle. Stories are that powerful...even when we make them up.

Socially, molecularly, biologically, chemically, and neurologically, we need to make connections. It is how we sustain life and create and find meaning. A story is merely a device that helps connect various concepts, identities, etc. into a narrative that makes sense to us. In other words, a story connects ideas so we can find meaning.

To truly understand and develop our power of influence (the most power we have to all those who occupy the secondary world) we need to develop our understanding of story. It's been said that we are the stories we tell ourselves we are. This is more true than most of us want to believe. In fact, your personal history isn't actually a factual account of what has occurred in your life. It's your version of it. It's how you've formulated your concept of your past based on your story. Your past, as you know it, is more accurately merely your version of your past. It isn't an objective, pristine record of events, but rather a subjective, imperfect memory and interpretation of events.

The understanding of the self-narrative or self-story is also critical to business. Many businesses have impeccable plans and highly-measured, tightly-run operations that still face market challenges that they can't seem

to conquer. Chances are, their problem and their answer lies in uncovering the myths of their sense of self-understanding.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/learn-more-today

Story, Influence and Organizations

In order to stop trying to control people and instead influence them in a manner that is appealing and compelling to them, you don't have to innately know their story. You merely have to know the four rules of engagement.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/four-rules-of-engagement

Organizations Are A Culture Unto Themselves

Leaders—it is important to know that all organizations are a culture unto themselves. All cultures are determined by the stories they commonly believe. In order to effectively lead an organization's general thinking, you need to learn how to appeal to their sensibilities and drive what is called the over-riding foundational mythology.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/culture-and-business

Concept 6: The Four Rules of Engagement

Chapter 4

Originally a military term used to delineate when troops could engage in combat, I have borrowed this term because it so aptly describes the four rules that are always in play when attempting to make connections (or engaging) with our secondary world. The Four Rules of Engagement have a tremendous impact on our ability to create meaningful relationships, connect with others successfully, or even close a sale or conduct a business negotiation. They are absolutely and quintessentially the foundation of influence.

The Four Rules of Engagement state that:

1. Everyone is always right.
2. Everyone's greatest desire is to be right.
3. You can't change another person's mind.
4. You *can* help people shift their perspective.

Understanding and applying these rules is the key to successful communication.

The Four Rules of Engagement may sound reasonable and straightforward, but understanding the strategies behind putting them to work for you may require some additional reading, thought, and practice. Learn more about how the four rules of engagement apply specifically to sales, leadership, and parenting.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/four-rules-of-engagement

Concept 7: The Power of Letting Go

Chapter 5

Many of the barriers to our own success and happiness lie in our willingness (or unwillingness) to examine what it is that is holding us back. Letting go of bad self-definitions, bad ideas, ineffective practices, unnecessary thoughts and actions and bad attitudes frees us to create a new self-definition that actually serves us and creates vast opportunities for growth. Before we can let go of a bad habit, an unhealthy relationship, or a dead-end job, we first have to let go of a specific thought, concept or idea that keeps us wanting to hold on.

While there are an endless number of things preventing us from achieving the success and happiness that we seek, I have found the following ten to be the most common and most debilitating, and therefore, the most impactful:

● www.carusoleadership.com/power-of-letting-go

1. Regret
2. Anger
3. Blame
4. Guilt
5. Pride and Ego
6. Insecurity
7. Jealousy
8. “What If” Scenarios

9. Debilitating Myths

10. Debilitating Definitions

Notice that the first chapter focuses on needing to let go of the concept that you can in any way control others, and that Chapter two deals with needing to let go of bad or debilitating myths or stories—both personally and organizationally. Letting go of ideas that don't serve you is an essential first step to being able to attach your mind to new ideas that will serve you well.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/power-of-letting-go-biz

Concept 8: Learning How We Learn

Chapter 7

We may know a lot, but our knowledge is only useful if we are willing to put it into action. Just as power is energy expressed, wisdom is knowledge put into action. Wisdom actually occurs in stages, and practicing the five steps to wisdom puts us on a path to profit from our knowledge in a meaningful way—not just for ourselves, but also for those around us.

The Five Steps to Wisdom:

1. Awareness
2. Consideration
3. Experimentation
4. Experience
5. Commitment

In short, you can't know anything you're not **aware** of. You can't figure out how that thought might relate to you until you **consider** yourself against the new thought, idea, concept or reality. You can't **experience** without experimenting. You can't be **wise** without the deep sense of knowing, which can only come from knowledge over time, or the result of consistent commitment.

Every new idea, whether new to you or new to others, must go through these steps on its way to becoming understood and realized. Effective

leaders need to know this and be sure to apply these five steps with the introduction of new processes.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/five-steps-to-wisdom-biz

Parents and teachers can also benefit from applying The Five Steps to Wisdom.

● www.carusoleadership.com/five-steps-to-wisdom

Concept 9: Be Undeniable

Chapter 10

To be undeniable means that others simply can't deny you. When this concept is understood on a personal level, it can inspire the kind of creativity and extra efforts that increase your chances of succeeding in any endeavor.

● www.carusoleadership.com/success-strategies

When it is applied in the business world it can be the key to closing sales, creating more effective management, and higher productivity.

▲ www.carusoleadership.com/success-strategies-biz

Many of the lessons and stories I share in this book are my attempt to take the knowledge I have applied in my own life, and subsequently, shared with my friends, loved ones, and clients, and make them available to a larger audience. The success strategies I communicate and share with others, such as the importance of being undeniable, are conceptual tools that have helped positively influence millions of people around the world.

I hope you enjoy *The Power of Losing Control* in its entirety. To share *The Power of Losing Control* with your group or organization, contact us about seminars, training sessions, webinars or retreats that can be customized to your specific group. Mention the book and get a 20% discount on your next event with Caruso Leadership.

To reserve a copy of the upcoming audio version of *The Power of Losing Control*, contact us by emailing ebooks@carusoleadership.com. In the meantime, you can listen to more of these concepts in our highly acclaimed Nightingale-Conant audio book *The Principles of Authentic Power*, available for purchase in our store at www.carusoleadership.com/products.

Thanks for reading,
Joe

Introduction

Like the bumper sticker says, change happens. Things *will* happen—both good things and bad things—and we really have no control over either. People defy our plans and let us down. Circumstances bring us to our knees. Planes fly into buildings. And it all happens without our permission. Once you realize that, and stop wasting your energy trying to control things that you can't, you'll be able to find the one power you do have, which lies in learning to respond to both the good and the bad in a way that will serve you and help to enhance the meaning of your life by bringing you more happiness, peace, and success.

We live in a world we can't control. Socio-politically, the world is increasingly dramatic and changing faster than ever before. Markets are roiling and unpredictable. Technologies are driving change faster than most businesses are able to respond. The old strategies of “banking on the future” or “getting ahead of the curve” are becoming nearly impossible in the face of such dramatic change and uncertainty. We have cell phones, voice mail, e-mail, personal computers, and every timesaving, life-organizing device imaginable—yet we've never felt so out of control and out of time. We're stressed out, scared to death of life, closing in on death, and trying to “find ourselves” in the meantime. It seems the more we try to control all the elements in our lives, the more out of control life becomes.

The chances of turning fifty years old without ever being confronted by an “out-of-control” experience are slim to none. Issues such as a forced job change, the loss of a loved one, a sudden serious illness, a teenager on the brink, a bad marriage, or simply the realization and recognition of the physical problems that come with aging can leave us feeling out of control. And while all this is happening, our relative sense of time gives us the feeling that each year is passing more quickly than the last. So our desire for peace, purpose, and meaning becomes even more urgent. *The Power of Losing Control* confronts this human paradox by explaining how to stop wasting our precious and finite energy on what we can't control. Once we learn to bring all of that misdirected energy to what we *can* control, and learn to respond to both the good and the bad in a way that serves us, the

meaning of our lives is enhanced and we find greater power, peace, and success in our lives.

The fact is that stress and anxiety are control-related issues. The degree of stress or worry we feel can be directly related to how strongly we feel that if we can't control something or someone, something "bad" will happen either to us or to someone we love.

I began studying this subject in earnest in 1978. My motivation was highly personal and very compelling. I was facing a life-threatening illness and had a very limited amount of the strength and energy I would need to fight for my life. For the first time in my life I didn't have the luxury of wasting energy. But in order not to waste it, I first needed to become highly aware of what I could affect, what I could control, and what I couldn't afford to worry about because it was out of my power to control it.

I began reading and studying what the most noted psychologists, philosophers, mystics, and masters had to say about how our psychology drives our behavior. I became fascinated by the realization that our fears and fantasies never even have to come true in order to impact us in life-changing ways. The more I studied, learned, and personally experimented, the more fascinated I became by how we think, feel, and act, and how and why those thoughts, feelings, and actions affect our actual experiences.


When we understand that our essence as humans is grounded in our personally created myths or stories (as Madeleine L'Engle says, "Stories help us claim our meaning"), and that our myths drive our behavior, we begin to perceive the power of congruency and transition. Just as all businesses have a culture that is driven by their corporate myths, all individuals are micro-cultures driven by their personal myths. In this way, myth, while not necessarily true, is actually greater than truth, because it determines thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Understanding this helped me realize how to transform the way I thought and felt in my own life in a way that may have saved my life. As a result of more than thirty years of personal study, I'm considered a leading expert on the subject of helping people change the way they think, feel, and behave. I'm called upon as a speaker at association and sales meetings, at conferences and at conventions. I also consult with CEOs and senior-level managers about how to improve the ways their companies and their employees function. I've been fortunate to work with such great

organizations as American Express, Ford Motor Company, and The American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. What I say to them, however, is as applicable to private life as it is to any corporate culture.

Note to Organizational and Business Leaders

By applying the Principles I've studied and that are encapsulated in this book, I have been able to help organizations fix problems formerly defined as unfixable, help start-ups become industry leaders, turn companies that were stagnant and failing into vibrant, healthy organizations, and create more new millionaires through the years than I can count.

 Look for the triangle symbol throughout this book for links to pages on our website dedicated to organizational and business applications, examples, and contexts of specific principles for use in your business or organization. These pages are continually populated with the latest information, audio, video and webinar content designed to help your organization better understand, learn and apply the concepts.

What I speak about is both personal and universal, or, as a client once put it to me, “There are many people out there who claim to be experts on one thing or another they’ve never personally experienced. And there are also plenty of people who’ve survived many challenges but have never figured out how to use their experiences to find a better meaning for themselves, let alone how to communicate that understanding to others. You, however, are like an expert on the subject of the *Titanic* who’s also a survivor of the shipwreck.”

When I’m called upon to meet with corporate executives and staff, I may not know anything about their specific business, and I certainly wouldn’t consider myself qualified to tell them how to run it. What I can do, however, is to help them *see* and *think* about themselves differently within the framework or context of their business and their markets.

One basic truth I’ve learned is that none of us can stand in another person’s shoes or view the world through another person’s eyes. We all see our world reflected in ourselves and ourselves as a reflection of our world. And so, by shifting the perspective from which we view the world, we’ll also be seeing ourselves differently. My role is to facilitate that change in

perspective. I help people to see differently, which will automatically allow them to respond differently to what they see.

I've learned that most people believe that learning and growth come from looking at something new and seeing the familiar in it, but it's the opposite that's actually true. When we see the familiar world differently, we will behave differently in it because it simply isn't possible to respond in a way that isn't congruent with what we see and still remain sane. If you've tried to change your behavior without first changing your perspective, you've probably met with some form of failure.

While we're all unique and individual, we are all human, and as humans we are all subject to the ways our thoughts and emotions affect our behaviors. When we're unaware of why we're feeling, thinking, or acting in ways that don't serve us, we're driven by a need to validate and justify our thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than change them. The better we understand *why* we think, feel, and act the way we do, the better we can use that knowledge to our advantage by making those processes work for us rather than against us.

I rarely speak at events that are open to the public, so the executives and CEOs of the companies that hire me have, until now, effectively determined and limited the number of people who are able to hear what I have to say. For the first time, with this book, I am able to share what I've learned with a much wider audience and act as a kind of personal consultant to each and every reader.

I don't know if what I've written will be motivating for you, because I don't know what motivates you. But I do know that what you'll find in these pages is information and advice that's been tested in "real life" circumstances and that has helped me personally, as well as my clients, to find power in a world that's beyond our control.

In this book, I'll be sharing some stories from my own life and from my professional experience as I explain how we can learn to rewrite the myths that shape our lives. If I could summarize in a nutshell the wisdom I've gained from my life's study and my work, it's simply this: We live in an out-of-control world, and there's nothing we can do to change that fact. But the success and happiness we all seek isn't out of our control. And the key to finding it lies in our ability to know how to accept what we can't control

and bring all of our energy to what we can. This is when our energy turns to power. It's *The Power of Losing Control*.

❧ Chapter One

You Have Power in It, but No Control Over It

“The happiness which we receive from ourselves is greater than that which we obtain from our surroundings...The world in which a man lives shapes itself chiefly by the way in which he looks at it.”

—Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Ideas

If you'd asked me to describe myself in 1978, I'd probably have told you I was a pretty regular—if somewhat shorter than average—guy. I'd grown up in a working class family with three brothers, a dog of unknown origin who looked more like a Westie than anything else, a mother who wouldn't let us eat in the living room, and a father who worked six days a week at Ford Motor Company and was the smartest guy I knew. I'd gone through the usual adolescent angst and come out the other side no worse for the wear than anyone else.

I was, in what turned out to be the most horrible and yet the most transforming year of my life, a sophomore at Central Michigan University, living away from home for the first time, and feeling pretty good about myself. I had a girlfriend, a 3.4 grade point average, and a seat in the honors wind ensemble playing clarinet. And then, in November, my world turned upside down.

For about three months I'd been walking around with a painfully swollen left testicle, which was, as you might imagine, for an eighteen-year-old male, both an embarrassment and a source of some concern. When I finally consulted a doctor, however, he didn't seem too worried and simply prescribed a course of antibiotics. When those didn't cure me, he decided I must have a cyst and scheduled me for surgery to have it removed. I remember thinking, at the time, that the surgery was really going to cut into my social life and put me behind in my class work. But again, my doctor didn't express any real concern, and so, even though this was my first

surgery, I was mostly preoccupied with thinking about the size of the scar it might leave.



When I opened my eyes for the first time after the operation, I was still groggy from the anesthetic. I remember seeing both my parents standing at the foot of my bed, and then I dozed off again. When I woke up the second time, they were still there, and I could tell by the look in their eyes that something must be very wrong.

“Can you hear me?” my dad asked, patting my hand.

“Sure,” I said, making a feeble attempt at humor. “They didn’t operate on my ears.”

And then he gave me the news that would change my life forever. “They had to remove your left testicle,” he said, struggling valiantly to control his emotions. “You had a tumor that turned out to be malignant.”

I don’t think I really processed what he was saying right away. I know that I never associated the word “malignant” with cancer. The idea that I might have cancer never crossed my mind, even when the doctors at the local community hospital where I’d had my surgery told me they were transferring me to the University of Michigan hospital for further tests. But the seven doctors lined up against the wall of my room just days after my transfer would clarify the situation soon enough.

One of them, who introduced himself as the oncologist, stepped forward and announced that I had a four-inch tumor in my abdomen, two tumors in my right lung, and one in my left lung, and that the cancer had already spread to my lymph nodes. They weren’t sure whether or not it had also reached my brain. He also informed me, in no uncertain terms, that my cancer was incurable and I would die within a year.

The wave of nausea that came over me as I listened to those words was just a prelude to the total physical debilitation I’d be living with for the next two years, but at that moment, I couldn’t know that. What I did know was that the idea of dying at the age of eighteen was completely unfathomable to me. *I can’t be dying*, I wanted to scream at them. *I feel perfectly healthy!* Nevertheless, the doctor didn’t mince words. In 1978 metastasized testicular cancer was a death sentence. The cure rate for my type of cancer

at such an advanced stage was absolute zero. I can joke about it now, but at that time there were no cancer survivor groups for the simple reason that there wouldn't have been anyone to attend.

The only course of treatment the oncologist and his team had to offer me sounded worse than no treatment at all—participation in a national study involving an experimental protocol that included both chemotherapy and surgery. At that time, chemotherapy was in its infancy; the doctors had very little knowledge of what it would or wouldn't do, and even less ability to control it. They told me I'd be receiving five chemotherapy treatments in the course of a week. They'd then wait three weeks and give me the next round of treatments. There would be four rounds of chemo in all, over a period of four months. It could, I was told, destroy my lungs, my liver, my kidneys, and my hearing. The doctors in charge of the study projected that no more than three percent of patients would survive as long as four months, but if by chance I made it through the chemo, they'd then remove what remained of my tumors in a series of three surgeries that would take place over six weeks. If I survived all of that, they'd consider the experiment a success, and then they'd just sit back and observe me, waiting to see what happened. I'd be volunteering to act as a guinea pig, and yet the doctors, despite their bleak prognosis, clearly wanted me to say yes.

My two choices appeared to be to die more slowly, in pain, or sooner, in pain and bald from the chemo. It seemed like an insane choice. And how could they be asking me to choose how I wanted to die? I didn't want to die at all. I wasn't *supposed* to die before I'd even had a chance to live! I was angry, terrified, and definitely in shock, but when they explained that by agreeing to participate in their experiment I might be providing them with the information they'd need to be able to cure some other person some time in the future, I didn't think I had the right to deny them that chance. And, while I myself had no hope of survival, I couldn't just lay back and allow my parents to watch me die without at least trying whatever treatment there was available.



Being diagnosed with incurable cancer would probably be at the top of just about everyone's list of worst fears, but whatever particular fears are on

your list, they're no doubt as terrifying to you as my cancer was to me. We live in a world where any one of our most feared events or experiences can strike without warning at any moment, causing us to spin completely out of control, and the stress of living with that reality on a daily basis is too much for any of us to bear. As a result, we respond by creating an elaborate set of constructs and behaviors that give us the *illusion* of control. I, for example, had been pretty sure that my own life was completely under control. As I've said, I was doing well in school, I had a girlfriend, and it had certainly never occurred to me in my wildest dreams that my health would betray me in such a life-shattering way. I was still very young, however, and I hadn't yet had much first-hand experience with the many ways our illusions of control can be put to the test. But the longer we live, the more we come to understand how fragile our control can be, the more fearful we become of losing it, and the more we begin to clutch and grab for whatever little control we've convinced ourselves we have. The problem, of course, is that there's no such thing as being a little bit in control. If we're not in complete control of something—whatever it is—then we really have no control over it at all. And how many things can any of us claim to control in that way?

Think about someone or something you *believe* you can control—your spouse, your child, your health, your income, your dog, or whatever makes sense to you. Can you control whatever it is you've chosen absolutely, forever, in every conceivable circumstance? I truly doubt it. Your spouse might run off to Tahiti with the secretary or boss, your child might throw a tantrum in the supermarket or decide to drop out of college against your wishes and develop a drug habit, your dog might get run over; your company might lay you off, and your health—no matter how well you “take care of yourself”—might fail you as mine did. But I'm sure you already knew that all along, which means that whatever you thought you were controlling, you must also have understood on some level that it could go out of control at any minute, when you least expected it, without your wishing it, and, as a result of that understanding, you've been constantly expending your energies in an ultimately futile effort to ensure that didn't happen. And you've probably been thinking that *if only* you had *more* control, every other aspect of your life would be better.

My own youthful illusions of control were destroyed the moment those doctors handed me their diagnosis, and with virtually no hope of survival, I

grasped at the one thing about my situation I felt I *could* still control—I began to plan my own funeral. I told my parents I didn’t want everyone sitting around bawling. I wanted them to have a party where people could eat and drink and listen to some of the music *I* liked, which, at the time, was Elvis Costello, the Beatles, Sinatra, and also the big band sound. I don’t think I actually planned the menu. My mind wasn’t really on the details. I just thought that if I let my parents know I had come to terms with my death and was “okay” with it, they would be, too. And the only way I knew to make them understand that I was comfortable with my fate was to talk about my death, which meant talking about my funeral. Crazy as that now sounds, even to me, it seemed at the time to be perfectly logical, and I really thought I was doing something kind and loving for them. In retrospect, of course, I can see that I was not only being the ultimate control freak—who else, after all, would even try to dictate what other people did *after his death?*—but also that my “loving gift” was actually causing them tremendous pain. Although they never said so to me, my planning was just tearing my parents up inside, and after a while they poured out the heartache they were feeling to one of my nurses.



I’d been going through several days of testing before the doctors could begin my chemotherapy treatments and had just returned to my room after a chest X ray when Jeannie, my oncology nurse asked if we could talk.

I’d have been happy to talk to Jeannie any time. She was the “cool” nurse, a five-foot tall bundle of energy who was always smiling and always had time for everyone. I couldn’t imagine how she remained so upbeat when she must have known that nearly every one of her patients would die. On this occasion, however, she wasn’t smiling, and her voice sounded both serious and urgent.

“What are you doing talking to your parents about your funeral arrangements as if you were going to die right away?” she asked.

She’d never spoken to me like that before, and I must have been a bit startled. “Because the doctors told me I would,” I responded defensively. “They said my cancer was fast-growing and incurable, and that my chances of surviving the chemotherapy were about three percent.”

“You’re partially right about that,” she admitted, her tone softening a bit, “but I want you to listen to me. Right now, your cancer *is* fast-growing and it *is* incurable, but what your doctors told you is that they believe three percent of those in the program *will live* through the chemotherapy.”

“That’s exactly what I said,” I answered stonily.

“No it isn’t!” she insisted. “Think about it. What if *you* just happened to be among that three percent? What would your chances of surviving the chemotherapy treatments and the surgeries be then?”

“I guess one hundred percent,” I admitted reluctantly, still a bit confused by her logic.

“Right,” she congratulated me, as if I’d just given a correct answer in class. “And if you survive the treatment, you might be in remission for a while, isn’t that so?”

“Well, I guess so. But they also told me that no one with my cancer has ever gone into remission. And, in any case, it would still be incurable. I’d still be going to die.” How was she going to get around that one, I wondered, eager to hear anything she had to say that might commute my life sentence. But Jeannie didn’t seem the least bit challenged.

“Joe, let me ask you a question,” she went on after taking a deep breath. “Why did you decide to take part in this program?”

“Well, the doctors told me it might help them to learn something that could lead to their finding a cure for my kind of cancer.”

I could see her eyes light up. “So,” she said softly. “You do think that some day *someone* is going to be the first person ever cured of this cancer?”

“Well, yes, I guess so. Someone would have to be the first.”

“Then why couldn’t that someone be you?” she asked, her blue eyes staring right at me.

I was silent for a moment, before venturing tentatively, “Are you telling me I could live? That the first person to be cured could be me?” The idea that someone might actually be offering me a ray of hope was almost more than I could comprehend.

“I can’t tell you that, Joe,” she admitted. “But I can tell you that if you’ve already decided it *won’t* be you, it definitely won’t. If you’ve already decided you’re going to die, there’s nothing anyone can do to help you.” And, without waiting for a reply, she left the room.



Twenty-five years ago, the idea that the mind could influence the body was still something of a new thought. Norman Cousins' seminal book *Anatomy of an Illness*, which discussed how powerful a weapon the mind can be in the war against disease, would not be published until the following year. Deepak Chopra would not come on the scene for quite some time. Although some hospital personnel—usually not the doctors—might discuss basic visualization techniques, “the mind-body connection,” and “spirituality” were terms generally confined to religious institutions and the counterculture. Most cancer patients were looked upon as the walking dead, and any form of cancer was more likely to be whispered about behind closed doors than discussed in any kind of open forum.

Nevertheless, Jeannie's words made sense to me. If I were already planning to die, I probably would. But what was I *supposed* to be thinking about, if not my impending death. The answer, obviously, was life, but living was something I hadn't even considered since my diagnosis. How would I go about doing that? Clearly, I wasn't going to be visiting Disney World or surfing the big waves off Waikiki any time soon, since the ordeal I still had ahead of me obviously precluded those options, or any others remotely like them.

If you've just realized in the most urgent way possible that you're going to die, you need an equally urgent reason to concentrate on living—or at least I did. I needed a reason to fight for my life. I began to think about what life was all about, what is the purpose of living—more specifically, what is the purpose of *my* life? It seemed to me, the more I thought about it, that life must be about physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional growth—because what we all do, consciously and unconsciously from the moment we're born until the moment we die, is to grow. One of the surest ways to grow, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, is by achieving greater understanding. At that point I knew I couldn't control the physical growth of my body—the cancer and the chemicals they'd soon be pouring into me had denied me that ability. But I could still control my mental and emotional growth, and, if I weren't going to live long enough to accumulate the wisdom and understanding that usually comes with age, the only way I could think of to grow and understand was to study the thinking of those

who had, and to find out what they had come to understand about life and living. At least then, if by some chance I did survive, I would have gained something positive to take with me for the rest of my life.

Although I certainly hadn't read Aldous Huxley when I began my studies, I later found in his introduction to *The Perennial Philosophy* the strongest possible validation there could be for what I was going to be doing: "If one is not oneself a sage or saint," Huxley wrote, "the best thing one can do, in the field of metaphysics [the study of the essential nature of reality], is to study the words of those who were, and who, because they had modified their merely human mode of being were capable of a more than merely human kind and amount of knowledge." In other words, the surest way to attain wisdom, if one isn't already wise oneself, is to read—and try to assimilate and apply—the teachings of those who have. And that's what I set out to do.



While I understood on some level, even then, that the conversation I'd had with Jeannie that day contributed to saving my life, I now see that what she did for me was both simple and at the same time profound. She didn't just *tell* me that planning my funeral was wrong. She didn't try to argue me out of what I was doing. And she certainly didn't give me false hope. Instead, she expressed her thoughts in a way that allowed me to connect with what she was saying and find a new way of defining myself with relation to my disease. In other words, through that one conversation she was able to provide me with the tools I needed to gain a different perspective on my circumstances in the world and see that there was a different course of action available to me.

In effect, she helped me to shift the context within which I was viewing my illness. According to the *Random House College Dictionary*, the word *context* means "the parts of a written or spoken word or statement that precede or follow a specific word or passage, usually influencing its meaning or effect," or "the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc." In other words, the context is *the general that gives meaning to the specific*. If we see a particular word or phrase, or witness a particular event, we can't really know that we've understood its

specific meaning until we've read it or viewed it in *context*. If we see a man running down the street, for example, we can't really understand the meaning of his action until we become aware of its context. He might be running from a mugger, or because he'd just snatched someone's purse, or because he saw someone being hit by a car and was running to get help.

The importance of context was brought home to me in a way that actually made me laugh one evening when I was traveling on business and having dinner alone in one of those revolving restaurants that seem to be so popular with certain hotels. As I glanced up from studying the menu, a couple got off the elevator and was led to a table close to mine. I noticed them particularly because the distinguished-looking gentleman was wearing an ascot, and I thought to myself how unusual that was these days. Shortly afterwards, another guy, this one in a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt, emerged from the same elevator and, spotting the first couple, yelled clear across the dining room, loud enough for everyone to hear, "So, how'd you like that bitch this afternoon?" I couldn't quite believe my ears, and I was also embarrassed for the ascotted gentleman and his companion. I turned away, not wanting to be caught staring, and looked out the window. Just at that moment the revolving restaurant presented me with a view of the convention center across the street from the hotel and of the large sign welcoming visitors to the event being held there—an international dog show. Obviously, in that context, the word *bitch* took on a different meaning

Understanding the power of context in any specific circumstance is one of the most profoundly important aspects of all human experience. My specific circumstance on the day I had that talk with Jeannie was my cancer, a condition over which I had absolutely no control. Our conversation didn't change that, but it did allow me to understand that I had the power to shift the context within which I viewed that condition, which would, in turn, change the meaning it had for me. Before our conversation, I was devoting my energies to maintaining some illusion of control—and I say illusion because, clearly, no matter how carefully I planned for my own funeral, I'd have no way to be sure that, after my death, those plans were actually carried out. And, in any case, how could it possibly benefit me to try to control something I wouldn't even be around to witness?

After that conversation, however, I somehow understood that the only control I actually had lay in the way I chose to respond to my situation. I

had the power to decide what I would think about and how I would think about it—that is, the power to decide what I would do with my life for whatever time I had left.



Shifting your context isn't something that can be accomplished simply through the power of positive thinking or reciting affirmations. It requires that you arrive at a radically new way of understanding your situation, a way you can believe in and that meets your specific needs, because only when the new way works better for you than the old way will you truly commit to it. When that happens, you will be experiencing a true epiphany that can actually change the entire course of your life, as it did mine.

My decision to study life rather than plan for my death provided the positive context I needed in that moment, in my specific set of circumstances. To further define and clarify the reasons for what I'd decided to do, I developed what people now might call a "mission statement," even though the term hadn't even been coined at the time, and I probably wouldn't have known what it meant, in any case. My personal "mission statement" was (and still is) to devote my life to learning all I could about life and to developing myself to the best of my abilities to help other people, in and beyond my lifetime—and (I added three years later) to enjoy it.

Luckily, as it turned out, I'd been primed even before my illness to appreciate the wisdom that could be achieved by studying the wisdom of others. For my Introduction to Philosophy course at college, I was blessed to be taught by one of the most inspiring and challenging teachers I've ever encountered, a man whose brilliance inspired me to try to learn how to think better myself. The way I'd decided to do that was by studying those who were universally acknowledged to be the great thinkers of the past, and to that end I'd already begun to read Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*. Now I recommitted myself to reading and studying five hours a day, five days a week for whatever time there was left for me.



My commitment notwithstanding, however, this new context within which I was approaching my illness would soon be put to the most difficult test I'd ever had to take.

My chemotherapy treatments were to be given intravenously in the evening, and after the first one I was given medication to help me sleep. I awakened in the middle of the night, still groggy, freezing cold, horribly nauseated, and startled by a persistent banging sound. In my confused condition, it took me a moment or two to figure out that the banging was coming from the headboard of my bed. I was shivering so violently that my body was actually causing the metal headboard to bang against the wall.

I stumbled toward the bathroom, dragging my IV pole and feeling as if I were about to explode from both ends. This wasn't a nightmare; it was really happening. I couldn't believe it was possible to go from feeling relatively healthy one day, to being sicker than I'd ever imagined anyone could be. And I knew it wasn't just going to be a matter of getting through this night. The doctors had already told me that I'd feel worse with each successive dose of chemotherapy, and at that moment, I was too sick to summon up the energy to imagine any end to the torture, which would, to greater or lesser degree continue for the next two years.

I spent the first week of each of the next four months in the hospital receiving my nightly chemotherapy. And at the end of that week I went home to "recover." My recovery consisted of two weeks of intestinal torture followed by a week of trying to eat whatever I could in order to regain enough strength to return to the hospital for the next round of chemo. By the end of the first four months there was not a hair left on my body, I was so thin I couldn't even sit in a chair without a pillow, and the nerves in my fingers were so inflamed I couldn't turn a doorknob—but I was alive. And since I was alive, the doctors still needed to remove what was left of my tumors. After the first surgery they told me I'd be ready for the second at the point where I had enough strength to walk the length of my parents' driveway and back (a grand total distance of about forty feet), so you can imagine how weak I must have been. By the end I was totally debilitated and covered in raw surgical scars, and I still had a second round of "maintenance" chemo to go through. In fact, it would be two and a half years before the doctors told me, on one of my by-then-routine follow-up visits, that the odds of my cancer's recurring were somewhat better than the

odds I'd be hit by lightning. And even then, they never said I was "cured;" I've been in "remission" now for more than thirty years.



Despite all of that, I somehow managed to cling to the one truth I'd taken away from my conversation with Jeannie. I *could* still direct whatever energy I had toward choosing how I would live whatever life I had left. While I might not have any control *over* my situation, I could still have power *in* it by choosing how I would respond to whatever was happening to me.

My choices were twofold—to continue to live as normally as I could as much of the time as I could, and not to abandon the commitment I'd made to my studies and my context. The first part wasn't so easy in the beginning, while I was living with the horribly debilitating effects of first the chemotherapy and then the surgeries, but as I began to feel better over the course of the next two years, I did my best, between visits to the hospital for periodic blood tests, X rays, and ultrasounds, to follow my father's always sage advice to be as "normal" as I could, because, as he told me, "You need to stay as close to normal as possible. Adjust your behavior to the part that's well, not the part that's sick. If you can get up and get dressed, do it. And if you can't do it every day, that's okay, too." In fact, it wasn't too difficult to do what he suggested because, by that time, cancer had become "normal" to me and I could no longer imagine life without it.

But if the physical effects of my treatments meant that living life as usual wasn't really an option for me, being so sick also meant that I couldn't be tempted away from my books by the offer of a game of hoops with my brothers or a jog around the park. During those short periods when I wasn't either throwing up or moaning in pain, there wasn't much I could do *but* read. As it was, the value of reading had been imbued in me by my parents from the time I was a small child. I still remember the day when my mother asked me to carry something out to the car for my aunt Wanda, who'd been visiting with Mom in the kitchen. As I opened the rear door to put in whatever it was (and *that* I can't remember), I saw three paperback books on the back seat. And I remember teasing my aunt because they were all romance novels. But I also recall her response: "I read everything. You can

learn something even from a bad book.” To this day, I think of reading as studying, and I never sit down with a book without a pencil and pad next to me.

Like most working-class families of the time, we didn’t have many books in the house, but my father did have a shelf of about twenty volumes, including *Peace of Mind* by Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman and *The Will to Live* by Arnold A. Hutschnecker, a medical doctor ahead of his time who, in 1951, was already writing about the dynamic interaction between body and mind. I started reading those books by the time I was about eleven and still have them with me today. So now, with my so-called mission statement firmly in mind, I determined to finish *The Story of Philosophy* and then move on to reading the works of some of the philosophers Durant had written about. Working my way through Plato, Kant, and Schopenhauer wasn’t easy, and I certainly wasn’t speed-reading. There were days when I was so sick I couldn’t even concentrate for more than five minutes at a time. But I never abandoned my commitment.

During those years, and over the years since, I’ve read not only the philosophers I started out with, but also the writings of Ken Wilber and Joseph Campbell, and *As A Man Thinketh* by James Allen. I’ve read psychology ranging from Victor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* to Carl Jung’s *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. I’ve read books on spirituality that took me from Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* to Thomas Merton’s *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Cleary’s *The Essential Confucius*, and, more recently, Karen Armstrong’s *Buddha*. And I’ve looked at the human experience from the point of view of scientists like Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, and Werner Heisenberg. The more I read, the more I realized that all of these wise people shared the same desire—to find some truth greater than themselves with which they could connect and thus elevate the meaning of their lives. To do this is everyone’s greatest wish.



And so, by following my plan, I not only found in my readings information I could use for elevating the meaning of my own life, but I also discovered the source of my power in a situation that was completely beyond my control. Finding power in a situation where you feel you’ve lost all control

is a paradox—an apparently self-contradictory statement or situation, or two opposite truths that, rather than canceling one another out, actually lead to a greater truth. The great poet John Donne used the power of paradox often to point to a truth that could be expressed no other way, as in these lines from his “Holy Sonnet 140” in which he addresses God:

*Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

A simpler example might be the statement “less is more.” Or, to put it in modern parlance, a paradox simply expresses a truth that’s “counterintuitive.” To think about how two apparently contradictory statements or thoughts can lead to a higher truth, just visualize a triangle. The bottom two angles of the triangle lie at either end of the bottom line. Label them “power” and “losing control,” respectively. If you follow those two angles (or concepts) up the sides of the triangle to the point where they come together at the top, they ultimately connect. It was Aristotle who said, “The knowledge of opposites is one,” meaning that by considering two apparently contradictory truths we can arrive at a higher or more meaningful kind of truth.

In this case, power and loss of control, considered separately, do seem like contradictory concepts. But if you look at the triangle, you can see that the more you are able to accept what you can’t control (moving up the right side of the triangle), the more previously wasted energy you will have to bring to those things you can (moving up the left side), until the two come together at the top to create greater power and peace for yourself, or, a higher meaning for your life.

I define “higher meaning” as understanding ourselves and the world around us in a way that makes it easier to create the happiness we seek. It’s a kind of understanding that allows us to define the events, circumstances, and outcomes in our lives in a way that makes us feel powerful rather than victimized and helpless. The idea of losing control might at first seem very frightening because, after all, you’ve spent your entire life establishing an elaborate construct for the very purpose of feeling in control. You might think that if you gave that up, your whole world would come crashing down

around your ears. But if your control is only an illusion created to ward off your fears, wouldn't you simply be giving up a mistaken idea rather than control itself?

What Can You Control?

Draw a vertical line down the center of a piece of paper creating two columns. At the top of the left hand column write the words "Can Control." At the top of the right hand column write the words "Can't Control." Now consider the things in your life that you think you can control, such as your spouse, your child, your friends, your co-workers, your parents, even your health, and list them in the left-hand column. Look at that list again. Can you actually, totally control the way they think, what they do, how they behave? Can you actually control your health? Can you give yourself a heart attack at the count of three? Can you make yourself stop breathing? While you might be able to hold your breath, you can't make yourself stop breathing. Can you stop your heart from beating? If you're truly being candid with yourself, you will determine that all the things I've asked you to consider actually belong in the right hand column under "Can't Control."



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Consider the enormous amounts of energy you waste in the average day, week, and year trying to maintain your illusion of control. Couldn't you have used that energy more positively in other ways?

I learned, in a terrible and sudden way, how futile it is to waste that precious energy in the moment my cancer was diagnosed. But you don't have to wait to be diagnosed with a terminal illness in order to give up your illusion of control. You can begin right now by re-examining your life within a more powerful and edifying context.

In his book *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley says, "A true saint finds the crisis in every moment." We tend to think of the word *crisis* as denoting something negative, but its actual definition, according to *The Random House College Dictionary* (revised edition) is "a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events is determined; a turning point." If we think of crisis in that context, it becomes clear that

what Huxley is saying is that, in every moment of our lives, there is the opportunity for true transition, for improving all our outcomes in the future. I think of this concept quite often and I am often reminded of its truth. I was having lunch with a gentleman named Steve, who had heard me speak five years before. During lunch, he told me that, while he couldn't remember everything I'd said, (I'd have been shocked if he could), the one thing that struck him in a way he'd never forget was that, at eighteen years old, I'd had a life experience that gave me a sense of my own mortality. He was thirty-eight at the time, and until that day, he said, he'd never really considered that his own life had a timeline and that it would end. He'd just sort of thought that, in some way, he'd be around for most of forever. Considering the "now" of his life in the context of his inevitable death, he said, had led him to a more profound understanding of what it means to be alive and to the realization that he could approach his life each day in a way that would bring him greater happiness.



I'm sure that right now, if you wanted to, you could come up with a number of outcomes, people, or events in your life that you feel a need to control. I suggest, however, that much of that sense of need is driven by fear—the fear that if you don't control these things, something bad will happen to you. Just for fun, try to stop thinking about those things and consider something different—that within the context of your own life, time is relative, and each passing year will be shorter than the last. Time itself is immutable. A minute in 1895 consisted of 60 seconds and that year consisted of 365 days, just as this year will (considering that neither falls in a leap year). Your *version* of time, however, the version that is your life, is unavoidably relative to your perception of it. When you were five years old, one year was an entire fifth of your life. When you were ten, one year was an entire tenth of your life. So the passing of a year seemed to you a relatively long time. But today, one year is a much smaller percentage of your life. That's why each year seems to go by more quickly for us as we get older. However old you are as you're reading this, consider that this will be the longest year of your life, for the rest of your life. And each successive year will appear to pass more quickly than the last.

You can decide to use this context to depress you or to empower you. Steve used it to reconsider how and what he decided to focus his energies on each day as he chose between his fears and his goals. It helped him to let go of things he couldn't control and begin to bring all of his energy to what he could...himself. Not in the future, not in the past, but in the now. Instead of using his energy to grab frantically at control, which is like trying like trying to grab a fistful of water, Steve shifted the context within which he viewed his life. And, by doing that, he was able to begin harnessing the power of losing control for himself—without having to face a life-threatening disease as I did.



If you were asked to choose between control and happiness, is there any doubt in your mind what that choice would be? I don't think so. But what you have to realize is that these two concepts are by their very nature mutually exclusive. Nearly everything you do to maintain control—or the illusion of control—is driven by your fear of the unknown, of not being prepared for every possible contingency. And it stands to reason that anything you do out of fear simply cannot lead to happiness. If, however, you are willing to shift your context so that fear is no longer motivating your behavior, you can *choose* a different motivation. You can know, with a deep certainty, that whatever life throws your way, you can choose how to respond to it—you can have *power* in that situation. You can choose happiness. You can choose love.

One example of the relationships among control, fear, and love—and one you, too, might relate to—springs from my mother's attempt to control the behavior of four exuberant, rambunctious sons. One cardinal rule in our house was that the living room was off-limits to all of us except on those rare, carefully monitored occasions when we had special "company." The living room housed the "good" furniture, including the stereo, the glass coffee table, and the couch we weren't allowed to lie on. In effect, my mother had complete control of the living room; it was always neat, organized, and perfectly clean. It was always "visitor ready." But as I look back on my life, I realize that not much living actually went on in that room. The living happened in the kitchen, where friends and family usually

congregated to be fed both emotionally and physically. It's not that the kitchen wasn't neat—in fact, it was very orderly—it's just that my mother didn't feel the need to control either the room or the behavior of everyone in the room. As a result, that's where we found our nourishment and love.

My mother's need to control the living room stemmed from her fear that one of us boys would spill something, break something, or otherwise defile its pristine perfection; and while there's nothing wrong with a parent's wanting to keep one room in the house free of the havoc children can wreak, I'm simply using this example to illustrate that when we try to control things out of fear, we might lose out on living in the process.



I can't say that I understood all of this intellectually with a sudden flash of insight at the time of my conversation with Jeannie, or even for years afterward, but what I did understand on some gut level was that it would serve me better to devote whatever time I was allotted to living the best life I could than it would to lie down and just prepare to die. And I did understand that how I chose to use that time was about the only power I had in the situation, although sometimes I didn't even have that. Sometimes my emotions or thoughts were in themselves beyond my control. But even then I still had the power to continue engaging in the *process* of *trying* to better understand, accept, and manage myself. I could take myself in hand as if I were walking a little puppy on a leash, and each time I started to zig or zag or wander off course, I could gently pull myself back and ask myself whether what I was thinking or feeling or doing was really the most useful or positive thing I could think or feel or do in that situation, in that moment. And the more I practiced doing that, the better I got at it. I'm still doing it, because, as I've already said, growth is a process that begins at birth and continues for the rest of our lives. And, over the years, I've been fortunate enough to have found a way to share what I've learned with others in order to help them achieve the kind of peace, love, and happiness I've found for myself.



During a talk I gave recently to members of the Young Presidents' Organization in Washington, D.C., I spoke about my cancer and explained how shifting my context and acknowledging my lack of control had allowed me to get through the most trying experience of my life. During the question-and-answer period afterwards, a gentleman in the back of the room raised his hand and asked me point-blank whether I now considered my illness a blessing or a curse. His question caught me off-guard because, strange as it may seem, no one had ever asked it before. So I took a few minutes, during which I fought my urge to give the easy answer that I knew would impress my audience and assembled the most thoughtful and honest response I could give, which was that, in fact, it had been both. While it was certainly the most difficult and worst time of my life, I said, it had also created the impetus for me to commit to the studies that had led to my life's work, and so, in that sense, it was also my greatest gift.

At the end of the program, I was signing some books when I noticed that the man who'd asked the question seemed to be waiting to speak with me. Finally, when we were the only two people still in the room, he approached. I could see that he was tense, barely in control of his emotions, and his voice trembled as he looked me in the eye and said, "My cancer..."

As he paused to regain his composure, a million thoughts raced through my mind. *He'd been diagnosed with incurable cancer, but for him there was no experimental protocol, no miracle cure...* and then I told myself to stop making up his story for him and just wait to hear what he had to say.

"My cancer," he said again, "was my son's physical disability. Today you taught me that it's also my gift." We both had tears in our eyes as he gave me a quick one-armed hug and left the room.

Somehow, I'd found the words that had allowed him to re-examine the context of his life, and I was humbled to think that even though I had absolutely no control either over him or over his son's condition, I'd somehow had the *power* to influence him through what I'd said as well as through my living example. In that moment I'd made a powerful connection and perhaps changed a life. No sense of control could have brought me that kind of happiness.



At this point I want to make perfectly clear what exactly it is you can look forward to if you're willing to give up your illusions and discover the power of losing control. There's an old song entitled, "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden." Well, you could say life is like that song. For all its joys, it is also full of challenges you can't simply opt out of accepting. The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said, "Struggle is the law of growth." And, at the risk of appearing presumptuous, I'd like to add to that statement three of my own:

- Sometimes pain is a choice.
- The nature of the struggle is up to us.
- We don't have to let fear control us.

Have you ever been lying in bed, perfectly comfortable, thinking to yourself that you never want to move? And then your hip or your leg begins to bother you and you know you have to move. The act of moving or rolling over is going to cause you some temporary discomfort, but in the end, you'll have arrived at a state of *greater* comfort. That's the way life is—in order to reach a higher level of comfort we have to go through some discomfort. But I'm suggesting that sometimes we put ourselves in more discomfort than we need to because we've chosen to engage in a struggle that isn't necessary, or that it isn't possible to win (such as the struggle to control that which we can't), and I further suggest that we do that out of fear.



How many times have you seen a mother distraught because her child was caught smoking or drinking? How often has a college student been reduced to tears because his professor gave him a lower grade than he thought he deserved? How many employees begin to lose their self-esteem the minute they lose their job or get passed over for the promotion they expected?

These types of things happen all the time. And for people who live with illusions of control, they can have devastating effects. The mother who thinks she can control her son or daughter will experience great emotional distress when reality proves otherwise. The student who thinks his hard

work will “control” the grade his professor assigns him will be crushed when reality proves him wrong. And the employee who feels that her loyalty and hard work will control her employer’s treatment of her will have trouble recovering from the realization that her employer is not subject to her control.

I’m not saying that these folks should not try as hard as they can to effect the best outcomes for themselves. I’m merely saying that if they believe their efforts can control those outcomes, they are living with an illusion that will only serve to make them vulnerable to severe emotional distress.

The power of losing control is about learning how to let go of trying to control the uncontrollable outcomes and circumstances in our lives. To do anything else is a blueprint for living a life that is driven by stress, fear, and disappointment. I’m not suggesting that we shouldn’t do everything we can to make our dreams and desires come true. But letting go of the illusion that we have complete control over our outcomes will free us from our fears, allow us to bring more of ourselves to the work we need to do, and enable us to find happiness and power no matter what life brings our way.

In the following chapters I provide you with specific tools and strategies for learning to move past your fears and give up your unnecessary struggle for control. When you do that, you’ll be able to move through your challenges more quickly, with less pain, and instead of being a victim of your fears, you’ll be able to reclaim your power in any situation. That is the true promise of *The Power of Losing Control*.

About the Author

Joe Caruso is a best-selling author, columnist, international speaker, business advisor, and founder of Caruso Leadership, which specializes in helping individuals and organizations use transformational thinking in order to create better outcomes in their lives and their work.

He specializes in training and advising CEOs, senior-level managers, and military leadership, and also brings his proven outcome-focused approach to the business of communication, service, team-building, management, leadership, and sales. Joe travels the world more than 200 days per year, and is often a featured keynote speaker at national association meetings and corporate events. Joe has appeared in major newspapers, magazines, and television specials.

When Joe is not traveling the world, he resides with his wife Carol in Grosse Ile, Michigan. For a list of additional learning tools, booking information, and more about Joe Caruso and Caruso Leadership, visit Joe's website at www.carusoleadership.com.