

**How to
(Hu)MAN UP
in Modern
Society**

How to (Hu)MAN UP in Modern Society

HEAL YOURSELF &
SAVE THE WORLD

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How to (Hu)Man Up in Modern Society: Heal Yourself & Save the World

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DEDICATION

It was only after my grandfather's death that I learned he was rescued from the concentration camps by Oscar Schindler, a German citizen who was the focus of an Emmy Award-winning movie in 1994 called *Schindler's List*.¹ He rarely spoke of daily life during the Holocaust, but there were plenty of stories about growing up on a small farm in Poland during the 1930s while the political tension mounted, leading up to both of his parents and six of his seven siblings being killed in the concentration camps by Hitler and the Nazis.

I grew up on the same street as my grandfather "Sam"—six houses down the road to be exact—where my own family lived in Atlanta, Georgia. The Jewish household where I was raised looked warm and inviting from the outside, but inside was unpredictable and sometimes unsafe. There were many days that I would avoid going directly home after the walk back from school; instead, stopping at my grandfather's house to spend as much time as possible. At first, this daily stop at my grandfather's house was for the sole purpose of avoiding the chaos of my home life. As I grew older and we became more comfortable with each other personally, the stories of World War II, surviving the Holocaust, and beginning his life in America began to flow more readily.

We talked about other things of course—his German shepherd "Rex" that was the trusted breed of the Nazis due to their combination of fierceness and intelligence; his love of the Oprah Winfrey Show as a sign that like him, people can overcome the odds by surviving horrible conditions to thrive;

¹ An Amblin Entertainment production. (1994). *Schindler's list*. Universal City, Calif.: MCA Universal Home Video.

and last, but not least, the importance of community service. The last topic of community service was rarely one of direct conversation but was modeled each time we went on one of our frequent outings in downtown Atlanta.

Atlanta, Georgia, was an interesting place to grow up in the 1980s and 1990s. The city's population exploded after the completion of an international airport in 1980, but the crack-cocaine epidemic hit Atlanta hard, and the homeless population became notorious for a persistent—even aggressive style of panhandling that made tourists and even some locals nervous. Sam never blinked an eye when he was the target of a hostile approach by a panhandler. He knew they were hungry and as a Holocaust Survivor who almost starved to death on a few occasions himself, he could only feel compassion for these malnourished human beings.

Sam would never avoid them in the streets, no matter how dirty they happened to be or how aggressively they would beg, and would always listen to their stories until there was a pause where he could ask, "Are you hungry?" I never heard anyone say "No."

From there, we would all walk together to a local restaurant, where Sam would approach the cashier to instruct them to take the homeless person's order and prepare whatever food was requested. At this point Sam would pay the tab, then he and I would continue on our planned outing in the city.

I soaked up these stories of grit and unending determination from the Holocaust, as well as the personal experiences of watching Sam serve the vulnerable members of his community with compassion and humanity. I didn't realize it at the time, but these experiences would become invaluable as an adult—even forming the foundation for a natural sense of the intimate

connections between freedom, accountability, love, resilience, and community.

I come to you not only as the author of this book but also as the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, and a man whose life has been made possible—both directly and indirectly—by a German citizen and registered member of the Nazi party named Oscar Schindler who broke free from the political brainwashing of his time. There are occasions in life where it is very difficult to figure out the “right thing” to do. Sometimes, there is even a heavy price to pay for doing the “right thing,” which can make this *right thing* seem like a relatively heavy burden to carry. But I want you to come to personally understand that even in the face of the greatest adversity and oppression, the power of love can still prevail over the love of power.

Loss, pain, and violence are scary and extremely painful in their own right. These are powerful experiences and I would never intentionally minimize them or diminish the cost involved in coping with them. With that being said, I beg of you to *refuse* to let your fear and/or the love of power win. Instead, by doing the *right thing* out of the power of love—rather than the love of power—we can heal ourselves in this lifetime, as well as empower the lives of many other community members—some who we might not even know personally. Some of these people, myself included at the time of Oscar Schindler’s famous deeds of goodwill, might not have even been born yet!

Beyond material success and winning in competition, this is how a person creates a true legacy—a legend that will live on forever. Because while heroes are remembered, legends never die.

This one is for you, Mr. Schindler.

CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AS THE KEY TO HEALTH, HAPPINESS & SUCCESS

As the grandson of an Auschwitz survivor who was on *Schindler's List*, I found it intuitive that serving our more vulnerable community members is a process that very literally creates life and healing for both parties. I grew up with firsthand stories of gritty survival through community effort in the concentration camps. Then later, as a young boy, I watched examples of my grandfather continuing to embody these same values. As an adult, I came to understand the confusion in Oscar Schindler's voice during interviews as he received praise and adoration for his rescue efforts after World War II, repeatedly coming back to the phrase, "I should have saved more. I could have saved more..."

In many ways, a mere 1,200 Jews saved compared to the 6,000,000 Jews killed is a drop in the bucket. At only 0.02% of the total number killed, it can seem barely noteworthy in the face of that much annihilation. But it made a difference to my grandfather, and in the end, gave him a chance to empower himself to live a full life and start a family. Now as you read these words, I get to be here telling you about it. It is my only hope that this will in turn light a fire in your own heart and mind to start on this sacred journey of leadership by serving our community with whatever it is you have to offer.

This book is about "human empowerment"—teaching people to fish so they may continue serving their community for generations to come—and how it relates to "service"—an intentional act of generosity that empowers those served. This

is opposed to “servitude,” whereby you create a relationship of dependency by giving people resources until they rely on handouts, also known as “enabling.” Even in the face of unspeakable pain and evil, every bit of service we do makes a difference in this life and the next. This is where the power of love will win against the love of power *every time*.

While growing up in a Jewish family in Atlanta, Georgia—a hustling metropolitan area nestled in the heart of the Deep South—I was also familiar with the practices and narratives of the Evangelical Christian community. I heard the stories of Jesus Christ being reborn and quickly observed the similarities of a life dedicated to service as practicing the power of love in a world that has become obsessed with the love of power—as both Jesus Christ and Buddha did—and the resulting healing for both the servant and community members served through this process as being central to Evangelical values.

Along my own life journey, first as a public servant in wilderness therapy settings with at-risk youth, and later working in community mental health, I developed a personal mission statement to aid in difficult decision-making when there was no “perfect solution,” but I also had a responsibility to make the best decision possible for the people I was serving. Somewhere along the way, the phrase “What would Schindler do?” became my own means of evaluating personal decision-making to make sure I was serving adequately in a way that empowered others and at least avoided active participation in doing harm.

The knowledge that healing comes out of serving our community is an old one not only in faith-based settings, but also for the evolution of human beings as a species. The communities of our ancestors have enjoyed grassroots involvement with their tribes and communities for hundreds of thousands of years throughout the evolution of humankind.

Every person had an important role that was valued and interdependently woven into the daily rhythms of community life from our early beginnings as nomadic hunter/gatherer communities. It was not until the Industrial Revolution began only 250 years ago that human beings started a transition into a more global and interconnected community now characteristic of modern society, where traditional roles are now under pressure to evolve with the changing times.

Modern infrastructure can seem attractive and convenient, but this has in many ways separated human beings from experiencing an authentic level of personal value—or *purpose*—as a meaningful community member participating in urban life now driven by corporate interests, rather than human values.

In modern times, people must now create their *own* sense of purpose in life that is separate from the more rigid interpretation of traditional roles commonly used to measure personal success and happiness. Many people get caught up in self-identification with their job, the car they drive or the clothes they wear as markers of social prestige or personal success. However, these are merely material things that have very little bearing on quality of life.

Instead, a life driven by our own *unique* purpose—intentionally using our gifts and passions through decision-making driven by our core values shared meaningfully with others in important relationships—not only makes people happier and more productive, but also *physically healthier*. This dynamic balance is health promoting because it stimulates the “parasympathetic nervous system,” the body’s natural tool for healing and recovery.

The *parasympathetic nervous system* cannot be seen by the naked eye, but it is silently responsible for organizing the body’s

natural healing properties, also called “rest, recover, and digest,” while the “sympathetic nervous system” rings the alarm bells for survival of an immediate threat, also called “fight, flight or freeze.” These two systems of the body work off of each other to prioritize how energy will be used by the body. The fight/flight/freeze response of the body’s sympathetic nervous system gets the blood pumping *out* of our major organs and into our arms and legs to maximize energy for surviving an immediate threat (i.e. fighting, running or “playing dead”), while the rest/recover/digest response of the parasympathetic nervous system brings blood flow back into our major organs so the available nutrients can promote healing, recovery, and critical thought.

Most people have an idea of the fight/flight/freeze response characteristic of panic or outrage of the *sympathetic nervous system*, but the relaxation and healing function of the *parasympathetic nervous system* is usually not as obvious. Even so, this state of relaxation for our nervous system is essential for *all* of the central healing systems of the body and without it, people literally fall apart on a very physical level. Symptoms of poor sympathetic response include suffering from chronic high blood pressure that puts more “wear and tear” on the heart (men are already three times more likely to have cardiovascular disease), disruption of immune function (even making it attack *itself* with “autoimmune disease”), poor digestion and gut health that blocks needed nutrient absorption,² poor critical thinking skills and even faster aging.³

2 McCorry L. K. (2007). Physiology of the autonomic nervous system. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 71(4), 78. <https://doi.org/10.5688/aj710478>

3 Lavretsky, H., and Newhouse, P. A. (2012). Stress, inflammation, and aging. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry : Official Journal of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry*, 20(9), 729–733. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JGP.0b013e31826573cf>

There are many different chemicals that interact with each other to make these shifts occur to meet the demands of our immediate environment, but perhaps the most notable chemical involved is the stress hormone “cortisol” that is spilled into our bloodstream in bulk during the fight/flight/freeze response known as the sympathetic nervous system. Cortisol is a naturally occurring chemical as part of the normal stress response of the human body. When there is *too* much of it as the result of an *ongoing* stress response, as is quite typical of the overstimulation found in modern society, these unchecked levels of stress hormone will wreak havoc on the body and mind! Studies have shown clear connections between elevated levels of cortisol and faster aging, as well as lower testosterone levels that result in lower confidence and self-esteem, a decrease in physical strength, and lowered “serotonin” associated with depression and anxiety symptoms—even killing sex drive.⁴

If an accelerated aging process didn’t catch your attention, that last sentence probably did! You are probably also wondering: “*How did the human body and mind get wired like this? And how can I use these natural forces, rather than let it to wear me down?*”

This may not come as a surprise, but the human body has *always* been this way since our early ancestors left the trees of the forest to compete against powerful predators at the top of the food chain. Human beings became successful because of our ability to solve problems dynamically as a community, meaning the more diversity that exists in our ranks, the more complicated problems a given group is capable of solving to secure mastery

⁴ Conradt, E., Abar, B., Lester, B. M., LaGasse, L. L., Shankaran, S., Bada, H., Bauer, C. R., Whitaker, T. M., and Hammond, J. A. (2014). Cortisol reactivity to social stress as a mediator of early adversity on risk and adaptive outcomes. *Child Development*, 85(6), 2279–2298. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12316>

over the environment.⁵ This power of group collaboration is evident in most of the major human feats through history, whether hunting mastodons to successfully access enormous amounts of meat for our tribe, building pyramids that have stood the test of time, or landing on the moon. The use of group efforts to successfully manage our environment and *thrive* is what human beings do!

Research studies have also shown clear links between higher levels of compliance for individual community members when they have a *shared/community-driven* sense of purpose for task completion, rather than a more individual focus. A study in a hospital setting in 2007 showed that staff were more likely to complete health-promoting tasks when behaviors had the goal of avoiding negative consequences for a patient, rather than their *own* well-being. When hospital workers were asked to wash their hands for their own sanitation and protection, there were poor outcomes for compliance, but when hospital workers were asked to wash hands to protect *patients*, there was a 45% increase in compliance with safety measures.⁶

That statistic might seem surprising at first, that people are naturally more driven to look out for the well-being of other community members before their own. However, this has always been a part of human programming since our early ancestors relied on community-driven goals to survive. We are literally *programmed* on a biological level to “feel good/satisfied/motivated” to look out for our affiliated community

5 Naem, S., Chazdon, R., Duffy, J. E., Prager, C., and Worm, B. (2016). Biodiversity and human well-being: an essential link for sustainable development. *Proceedings. Biological Sciences*, 283(1844), 20162091. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2016.2091>

6 Shigayeva, A., Green, K., Raboud, J.M. (2007). Factors associated with critical-care healthcare workers' adherence to recommended barrier precautions during the Toronto severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak. *Infectious Control and Hospital Epidemiology*; 28:1275–1283.

members. Research also shows it feels even *better* if we believe we are looking out for those who are less able to access resources themselves (“less fortunate”) and realistically, this is *why* it “feels good” to donate food/money/etc. to those who are in need.⁷

A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that individuals who did *not* have a strong sense of their own purpose in daily life were *more than twice as likely to die* from health complications, especially those with cardiovascular issues.⁸

This strong association between a low level of purpose and higher risk of death for the participants of this study remained true regardless of how rich or poor they were and separate from any indicators of gender, race, or education level. In fact, researchers found this association to be so powerful that a life of purpose appeared to be more important for decreasing risk of death than more obviously unhealthy behaviors like *drinking, smoking, or a sedentary lifestyle* without regular exercise. These positive outcomes were largely linked to a *decrease in blood pressure and hormonal changes* that come with the body entering the *parasympathetic resting state*—allowing the natural systems of the mind and body to access their potential for self-healing and recovery.

Modern medicine has a lot of *chemicals* and *action points* to suggest and *prescribe*, but it is most important that people are able to function in their daily lives according to the design of our

7 Aknin, L. B., Dunn, E. W., and Norton, M. I. (2012). Happiness runs in a circular motion: Evidence for a positive feedback loop between prosocial spending and happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13, 347–355. doi:10.1007/s10902-011-9267-5

8 Alimujiang, A., Wiensch, A., Boss, J. (2019). Association Between Life Purpose and Mortality Among US Adults Older Than 50 Years. *Journal of American Medicine Association*; 2(5):e194270. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.4270

DNA—to invest personal meaning into a daily life that satisfies a sense of life’s purpose *with* and/or *for* others with whom we share our community.

The tricky part in modern society is to achieve a personal sense of life satisfaction that can be shared with other people *within* the experiences *themselves* in a way that creates meaningful connection between community members. This basic need could be met in the more traditional gender roles of provider and protector for most men up until recent history. But the corporate missions that have largely taken the place of human values no longer provide adequate connection between community members to meet this basic human need.

As the famous line from the movie *Fight Club* goes—“You’re not your job. You’re not how much money you have in the bank. You’re not the car you drive. You’re not the contents of your wallet. You’re not your fucking khakis.”⁹ Many people are realizing this today in one way or another. No matter how much material resources a person consumes, this will not create a personal sense of happiness, nor will it create meaningful connection with others for a species that depends on social cohesion for quality of life and personal health.

This is where a concept of “purpose” comes into play for this book. Every person has their *own* unique reason for being alive, their *own* unique gifts to offer their community, and as a result, everyone is a bit *different*—having their own *interests*, *value systems* and *talents/resources* that should all play their own role in collaborative and dynamic group problem-solving. The more people think about themselves as social beings whose job it is to align with a sense of *purpose* as the source of intentional

9 Fincher, D., Linson, A., Chaffin, C., Bell, R. G., Uhls, J., Pitt, B., Norton, E.,... Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, Inc. (2000). *Fight Club*. Beverly Hills, Calif: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.

decision-making in meaningful relationships, the easier it becomes to remain focused in serving our community with everything we have to offer in a way that also does no harm, as modeled by both Buddha and Jesus Christ alike. This is not only an ideal position for leadership, but also meets the health and well-being needs of mind and body—free from the pitfalls of “lifestyle creep” that turn people into obsessive “consumers” to fuel sales, rather than supporting functional community and healthy human beings.

