

# “Didn't See It Coming”

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Juxtaposing sleek office towers, luxury cars, tailored suits, and expensive lunches with chronic dissatisfaction still surprises me, but it shouldn't. Trying to help very successful people felt like trying to empty the ocean with a spoon. Cynicism begins not because you don't care but because you do care. At least **three things** happen to the human heart as it grows cynical.

1. You know too much. You've experienced the heartbreak, betrayals, and backstabbing. You understand that people let you down. Knowledge often brings sorrow because the more you know the more you see life for what it really is. You'll recognize the power plays and the selfish pursuits that make up so much of human existence. There's a gnawing hollowness that comes with success.

2. You Project the past onto the future. Cynicism grows beyond its infancy when you start to protect yourself from future hurt. Past pain will become future hurt if you let it. So you don't let it.

3. You decide to stop trusting, hoping, and believing. The problem with generalizing—applying one particular situation to all situations—is that the death of trust, hope, and belief is like a virus, infecting everything. When you read through Scripture, you want to put an asterisk beside all the promises you read, convincing yourself they don't apply to you. It's a stifling progression: from knowing too much, to projecting the past onto the future, to snuffing out trust, hope, and belief. Most of the older people I know have landed on one side or the other of the balance line. They have grown to be either happy and grateful or bitter and crotchety.

What I needed to understand is what you need to understand; cynicism is actually a choice. Cynics aren't born; they're made. Life doesn't make you a cynic; you make you a cynic. Cynics never change the world. They just tell you why the world can't change. The curious are always interested, always hopeful, and always open to new possibilities.

Here are **five keys** I've discovered to help anyone become more *curious* and stay *curious* throughout life.

1. Schedule Thinking Time. Curiosity needs time to breathe and explore. Schedule some wide-open space in your calendar and let your mind take you to new places. You can't wonder and discover when you're in a hurry.

2. Ask Open-Ended Questions. At the heart of conversation's demise is a lack of question asking. Narrow question asking is a sign you're not genuinely interested in the answer or the person. Next time, when it sounds like the other person is finishing an answer, just wait. If you listen longer than most people listen, you'll hear things most people never hear.

3. Give Fewer Answers. If you need to be the authority on everything, you'll kill conversation. Say something like, those are my thoughts, what do you think?

4. Dream More. When your life becomes focused on what you know and what you can control, dreams die.

5. Ask Two Pivotal Questions. Widen your universe when other people seem to be narrowing theirs.

The curious ask, (1) “Why?” And they ask, (2) “Why not?” Try it. Remember, the cynics are never curious, and the curious are never cynical. Imagine yourself at eighty. What's happened to you in the decades between today and then? Has your heart grown? Has it hardened? Is your mind flourishing, or have you shut it down? Are you alive and filled with wonder? Or did your passion die decades ago? That's what's at stake.

Far too many of us end up compromised. Who we are no longer lines up with who we had hoped to be. You didn't do what you should have done and you're not who you thought you'd be. The subtle compromises we make day after day—the half-truths, the rationalizations, the excuses create a gap between who we are and who we want to be. Although you haven't sold your soul to the devil, you've rented it.

A few years into my adult life, I began to notice highly competent people who became disqualified from leadership. When you start looking for the stories that never make the news, the onslaught seems endless. Highly competent people get taken out day after day. And even if they don't get taken out, their potential is still capped. So if competency doesn't determine capacity, what does? Character does. All the competency in the world can't compensate for a lack of character.

A lack of character kills careers, shatters families, ruins friendships, and destroys influence. Your competency leaves the first impression, but your character leaves the lasting one. Sure, nobody's glad she's dead, but they're not necessarily sad either. When you're no longer breathing, the legacy you'll leave will center on your character. Your character determines the kind of spouse, parent, friend, employee, and leader you are. No matter how hard you try, you can't escape you. Paul pretty much described the struggle you feel, didn't he (Romans 7)? So what are some **telltale signs you're drifting**, that you're not becoming who you intend to be?

**Here are five.**

1. There's a growing gap between your public life and private Life. Watch for any gap you see between your words and your deeds. That's what hypocrites do. They pretend to be someone they're not. We judge ourselves by our intentions and other people by their actions.
2. You're hiding things. Cover-up is almost daily fodder for newspapers because it's so common in business and politics.
3. You fail to follow through on what you've said. You justify your bad actions and decisions. You decide to stop apologizing and instead start justifying.
5. Your life has become all about you. If it's all about you, you've done more than rent your soul. Perhaps you've moved into a long-term lease. Rarely will anyone encourage you to work on your character proactively. Character development is far more painful than skill development.

### **Practical Ways to Deepen Your Character**

When I was in my late thirties, I went on my first personal retreat. Think of it as solitary confinement for the soul. I'm all for retreats and will surely do more, but if you don't have a day-to-day strategy, you'll never win the battle for your soul.

The process of changing your character from the inside out could fill this entire book, but here are **three ways to get started**.

1. Take responsibility. Every time you blame others, invent justifications, or craft a fresh excuse, you evade responsibility. As soon as you start to admit that you're the problem, you start to make progress. If you change everything in your life except your character, you still won't be the kind of person you want to be. You can change jobs. You can change careers. You can change cities. You can change spouses. But none of that changes you.
2. Make your talk match your walk. Let me tell you what happens when you are relentlessly committed to making sure your talk matches your walk; you change your walk. Of all the lies we tell, the lies we tell ourselves are the deadliest. One of the best things you can do to overcome your hypocrisy is to humble your talk and accelerate your walk.
3. Put yourself first when it comes to personal growth. You need to decide how to spend your time before everyone else decides how to spend it for you. Jesus had a very different end in mind for the spiritually mature. He didn't define maturity by how much you know. He defined it by how much you love. Competency gets you in the room. Character keeps you in the room. Solitude is a gift from God.

Isolation is not—it's a tool of the Enemy. As a culture, the more connected we've become, the more isolated we've grown. Front-porch living had given way to backyard isolation.

I've noticed the decline—perhaps the near death—of **two vital things**

1. The demise of genuine conversation. People today appear to be talking at one another more than they're talking with one another. Social media has made us all mini-broadcasters. As "social" as social media is, it's still largely a monologue.

2. The death of confession. Here's what I've realized in my life. Confession and progress are inexorably linked. You won't address what you don't confess. Blame is insidious, as it will keep showing up in your mind to convince you that nothing is your fault. As I've reflected on this over the years, I've come to see critical differences between four key concepts. Excuses, reasons, explanations, and justifications. When are your past circumstances going to stop defining your present and future? Reasons function in a similar way in the present tense. When are you going to stop focusing on what you can't control and instead start focusing on what you can control? Instead of using those experiences as excuses, try to view those pivotal moments in your life as explanations that can lead to transformation. You're using the past as a stepping-stone into the future, not as a barricade against it.

True, you didn't cause your parents' divorce, but you've chosen to hang on to the hurt long past its expiration date. Healthy people treat reasons as explanations, not justifications.

I put my phone on "do not disturb" mode all day long. This means I don't hear a ding or feel a vibration, so my conversations, thoughts, and work are not interrupted. The speed at which we travel is exciting but also problematic. The point is that the world may not be slowing down anytime soon, but that doesn't mean you can't. You really can.

John Ortberg became a close friend of theologian and author Dallas Willard. One day John asked Dallas what he should do to become more spiritually healthy. After a long pause, Dallas replied, "*You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.*"

"When the speed of change around an organization is faster than the speed of change inside the organization, the organization becomes irrelevant." The goal is to understand the culture well enough that you are able to speak into it. And that, of course, requires change and adaptation. Some people never evolve past their younger incarnations. The groove that fires the pleasure center in your brain doesn't change much with age.

They would look at me like I'd had my brain removed long before they were born. How do you fight irrelevance? Plain and simple, you keep changing, learning, and evolving. The culture keeps changing. The question becomes; Do you? Consequently change is the only thing that bridges the gap between who you are and who you need to be. Your willingness to change gives you the ability to communicate timeless truths in a way that has meaning to those who come after you. If you're not careful, you'll be the last one to figure out why your approach and skills are not resonating.

You're ready to change because the pain associated with the status quo just became greater than the pain associated with change. Irrelevance causes us to lose the ability to speak into a culture. In many ways, that's what churches and companies are doing today. We're using new technology to prop up an old model. Here are three principles that will help you understand why you resist the change you need to make to stay relevant. You aren't opposed to change, just change you didn't think of. If you crave what you already like your life is liable to keep repeating your established preferences. The brain has a bias toward what it already knows.

Here are **four insights** and strategies to make sure you stay current.

1. Love the mission more than the methods. To be successful in life, methods need to serve your mission.

2. Get Radical

3. Become a student of culture. People who don't understand today's culture will never be able to speak into it.

4. Surround yourself with younger people.

Whenever you build a team, make sure you invite and include young adults into the mix. So many people do their best work and craft their greatest contributions later in life. Their stage of life might be the very reason they add so much value to so many younger people. Their years offer wisdom that youth simply can't access. Growing older does not necessarily mean growing irrelevant. In fact, staying relevant to the culture around you may be the gateway into your best years yet.

When true transformation occurs, the person embraces the future more than the past. You'll begin to feel that "the good old days" should be left behind and that your best days are ahead of you. And that ushers in hope, excitement, and joy.

#### **Pride made me believe these things:**

- What other people think matters more than what God thinks.
- His love for me is not enough.
- His approval of me is inadequate unless I have the approval of others.
- Appearances count for a lot.
- I am what others think I am.

Pride at its heart is an obsession with self. Foolishness is simply unapplied knowledge. Is it possible that pride emerges out of a place of insecurity? Absolutely. In fact, for most of us, that's exactly where it breeds. How do you know if your insecurity—your sense that you don't measure up—is driving an unhealthy focus on yourself?

Here are **five signs** I've recognized that I hope can help you.

1. You compare yourself to others. My counselor has a great name for this: "Comparogance." It's the arrogance born of comparison.

2. Your self-worth is determined by your latest performance. One sure sign of insecurity is that your opinion of yourself rises and falls with how you perform or what others say about you. How do you know whether you've tethered your identity to your performance? As Tim Keller put it, "*When work is your identity, success goes to your head, and failure goes to your heart.*" there's a big difference between taking things seriously and taking things personally.

3. You Can't Celebrate Someone Else's Success

4. You squeeze gifted people out of your life. Ask yourself; how comfortable am I around people I think are better than me, even at the things I'm good at? That will give you a fair measure of your security. One sign of humble people is the ability to attract and keep people more gifted and competent than themselves for the sake of their team or cause.

5. You want some say in everything. You'll always want to add your little bit of knowledge, insight, or even an anecdote to everyone else's story. When you value the counsel and input of others, especially on the things you're best at, you embark on a path toward greater wisdom. Pride inoculates you from the counsel of others and the stirrings of your conscience. It makes you think that the rules don't apply to you or that you can violate them without repercussion.

What exactly does a hard heart look like? Glad you asked. There are at least **four characteristics** to watch for.

1. Superior. A proud and hardened heart makes you feel superior to others. Your pride and insecurity need you to be better than somebody—anybody. You drift toward superiority because your inferiority has taken you there.

2. Judgmental

3. Unaccountable. A hardened heart will also help you justify avoiding real accountability. You can be creative in how you do that. Alternatively, pride might have you surround yourself with people who tell you what you want to hear.

4. Isolated. A life devoted to self ultimately leaves you alone. That's exactly where pride leaves you: isolated. You and I may not be well known enough for our problems to make headlines, but our pride is making headlines in our homes and with the people closest to us. Pride convinced me I deserved more. The problem with success (even a small bit of it) is that you get addicted to all the trappings. And pride will convince you that you are entitled to it all. I suppose the easiest way would be to cultivate humility as a discipline or habit from a young age, second possible (but not desirable) way to learn humility is actually through humiliation. Humility stays only if you invite it. Even more than that, you need to submit to it, crave it, hone it, develop it, and nurture it. Otherwise it leaves, and pride returns as soon as the bruises on your knees heal. That leads us to the third and perhaps most universal way humility arrives and stays: you invite it and cultivate it. Humility is never attractive to the people who need it most.

The more you have, the easier it is to lose your gratitude. My faith tells me God has given me everything I have so I can share it and use it to benefit others. What they call luck I call providence. Gratitude fosters humility because it moves you out of the role of the star in your story. Never claim full credit for your story. Proud leaders enjoy titles, corner offices, and the praise and perks that come with a position. The proud take the high place. They always want something better and more. Unchecked, pride will blind you. You'll stop learning from anyone you deem to be beneath you or equal to you. Pride fueled by insecurity prevents an attitude of teachability and an openness to guidance. Jealousy kills learning and shuts down instructive conversations.

Humility always keeps its notebook open.

Push other people into the spotlight. Pride wants to be acknowledged, recognized, and celebrated. When you're humble, you realize the overall mission is more important than you are.

Burnout is complicated. But I do know this. In caring for others, I had not adequately cared for my own heart and soul or let others who wanted to care for me do so. I had been running hard for over a decade. Okay, maybe for three decades. Ambition tends to do that to you. I read Scripture, but I no longer sensed that Scripture was reading me. There was an abundance of insecurity, jealousy, and fear and a deep misunderstanding of identity and fulfillment. At some point in my childhood, I'd concluded that love was earned by performance. The better I did, the more loved I would be.

It doesn't matter how much water you pour in your bucket if your bucket is filled with holes. It's like burnout has become an epidemic.

I'll describe **eleven signs** and symptoms I personally experienced as I burned out.

1. Your passion fades. You no longer feel the highs or lows I just felt numb.

3. Little things make you disproportionately emotional. Treating small things like big things and big things like small things are both signs that something deeper is wrong.

4. Everybody drains you. When I burned out, nobody energized me anymore. When nobody energizes you, they're not the problem. You are.

5. You're Becoming Cynical. Cynicism never finds a home in a healthy heart.

6. Nothing Satisfies You

7. You Can't Think Straight

8. Your Productivity Is Dropping

9. You're Self-Medicating. People who are burning out almost always choose self-medication over self-care.

10. You Don't Laugh Anymore. When you're burning out, nothing seems fun or funny, and at its worst you begin to resent people who enjoy life.

11. Sleep and Time Off No Longer Refuel You. Not being refueled when you take time off is a major warning sign that you're burning out. Your unresolved past will sink your future unless you deal with it. If you work insane hours at an unsustainable pace you will see people as projects rather than relationships. I became a performance addict, and God needed to speak into that space so I could use the gifts he gave me in a healthy way. Figuring out how to live today so you will thrive tomorrow. I was learning so much about myself, but diagnosis is different from cure.

So how do you recover from burnout? Here are **factors** that helped me and many other people.

1. Tell Someone. Only humility will get you out of what pride got you into.

2. Develop a Circle Around You. You need people who believe in you when you've stopped believing in yourself.

3. Keep Leaning into God. Just because God seems silent doesn't mean he's absent.

What I've learned is that obedience is greater than my emotions. Eventually your emotions catch up to your obedience.

4. Rest. I had run so hard for so long, and the pace just wasn't sustainable. We were designed to spend about a third of our life sleeping and, on top of that, an additional one seventh of our lives resting. I've embraced naps. I've come to realize that most of us are like our phones. You start off in the morning with 100 percent charge, and at various points in the day you need to be plugged back in. Getting seven to eight hours of sleep every night has become essential for me to perform at my best. Someone once said that 70 percent of discipleship is a good night's sleep. That's about right in my view.

5. Find something to take your attention away from your pain

6. Do What You Can

7. Don't make any big decisions

8. Grieve your losses

9. Reopen your heart

10. Live today in a way that will help you thrive tomorrow. What's the point of living your life in a way that simply avoids danger? Why would you not try to thrive rather than merely survive? Nobody else is responsible for your health. You are. Pray, read your Bible, seek life-giving friendships, replenish your energy, eat right, work out, and love deeply. These things nourish your soul. If you don't do them, nobody will.

I'm a goal-driven person, and the number of page views and visitors to my blog was a subject of fascination (okay, obsession). Of course you want people to read what you wrote; otherwise you wouldn't be a writer. And I realize some of this has been driven by insecurity, which I continue to work through.

The emptiness so many people experience in life is more intense in success than it is in failure. It's quite the game. It's also a game you lose. About 70 percent of the US workforce is disengaged at their job—hate it actually. Retail therapy is another well-established way to self-medicate.

**More Work.** Workaholism is the most rewarded addiction in America today. I loved the rush of being busy, being needed, and seeing progress at our church. It's ironic how the quiet on the outside can reveal so much disquiet on the inside. "Oh, it's just a busy season." But don't fool yourself. I used to say that all the time. You know what's true about seasons? They have beginnings and endings. If your season doesn't have a beginning and ending, it's not a season, it's your life. Remember, working is healthy; overworking is not.

**All You Can Eat.** Globally, obesity now kills three times more people than malnutrition does. The potluck dinner is too often just a socialized and sanctioned form of gluttony. Food is the drug of choice for many Christians. That's what every form of self-medication does to you: it makes you crave more. The challenge with more is there's no finish line. The emptiness of life will push you to self-medication, and when you end up there, the quickest path out is self-care. What do I need to do (or not do) so I can live today in a way that will help me thrive tomorrow?

One of the reasons 70 percent of employees are disengaged at work is because people don't understand the greater purpose or mission behind what they do, and most managers and leaders never try to move people toward something greater.

Money isn't the mission. Money funds the mission. The very thing we fear most—surrendering control of our lives—is the key to life. In the process of trying to find life—to claim it as our own and to build, acquire, accumulate, succeed, find, and create in the hope of finding deep satisfaction—we lose it if the goal is self-fulfillment. God as a vending machine is bad theology, especially when you drop your dollar in and the candy bar doesn't come out. Prayer is not a button to be pushed; it's a relationship to be pursued. When you are no longer all about you—when you are over yourself and live beyond yourself—you're finally in a position for God to use you and for others to see the joy in being with you. The emptiness inside you will go away only when you decide to stop making life all about you. You need a mission bigger than you. It's so much easier to look upward or outward than it is to look inward.

Figure out what self-aware people know that others don't. In my experience, there are **four things**.

1. Their Impact on Others. The key problem I had is that I didn't realize what it was like to be on the other side of me.
2. Their weaknesses. Self-aware people understand their weaknesses and limit their activities in areas where they are not gifted. It creates space for others to shine. It allows them to spend most of their time working from their strengths.
3. Their strengths
4. Their limits