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## About this Book

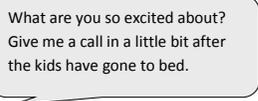
All characters in this book are real except for Amelia O'Connor, Michele DiFranco and Aara Parkour. Their characters are real; their names are not. All events in this book are actual events.

This book uses certain graphic conventions to indicate different modes of communication and the variety of ways Steven attempts to capture the details of his life. These conventions are described here.



I AM SO EXCITED!!

Text message Steven sends.



What are you so excited about?  
Give me a call in a little bit after  
the kids have gone to bed.

Text message Steven receives.



Indicates music, lyrics, or a song Steven uses to influence his mood or explain what he is thinking or feeling.



Livescribe® notebook. The Livescribe® pen is a device that records sound and associates it with what is written when the sound occurs.



Logitech® wireless headset. Allows for speech to text recognition for book dictation, listening to music, Skyping® with friends while doing household chores.



This icon indicates the “Coaching Prep Form” Steven completes before each coaching session.



Fitbit®. A device that tracks your daily steps and syncs wirelessly to various fitness apps. Used in the book to indicate Steven’s exercise progress.



## Introduction

Do you have fading dreams, or dreams you don't dare yourself to dream? Are you over forty or over forty-five and you believe the best years of your life are behind you? Is your life filled with naysayers, people telling you all the reasons you can't do something, that the best years of your life are behind you? If so, you are not alone: for a long time this was my life, too.

Maybe you jumped from career to career, industry to industry without ever being passionate about what you do for work. Or perhaps you want to change careers or re-enter the workforce after raising a family. Do you know exactly what you need to do, but are unable to motivate yourself to do it?

Before I began writing this book, I found myself with no structure in my life. I had no accountability. I had no dreams. There was nothing I enjoyed, and on many levels, I didn't care if I lived or died. I believed the best years of my life were behind me and the trajectory of my life was on the decline. I had this unarticulated dream of writing a book, but I didn't know how to write it. All I had was my *Steven Typical Playlist*, a collection of my all-time favorite songs that soothed me when I didn't know I needed soothing, that kept me company when I didn't realize I was alone, that centered me when I didn't know I was askew. These songs, these friends of mine, were as dependable as death and gravity and taxes.

This book tells the story of a guy who actually does the things he suggests you do to change your life. He changed his life and so can you.

This book is about me pursuing my dream of being a published author and reclaiming the athletic, in-shape body I had for most of my adult life. It's also about building the support network to help me do it. I

discuss the techniques I employed, the things I stopped doing, the new thoughts I inserted into my waking consciousness, and the new behaviors I forced myself to adopt. Having something to look forward to, even if it never happens, is HUGE, and is the gist of *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl. In one of the twentieth century's most influential books in the field of psychology, Frankl proposes that the will to find meaning in life is the primordial, most driving force in humans. Writing this book can be seen as my will to find meaning.

*Forty-five is the New Twenty-five* teaches you how to make the things you dream about happen. If you are reading this book, written by this forty-five-year-old no one, you will likely see some of yourself in me, and that in some way or another you have struggled with the same things in which I have struggled.

One day recently, I came across a blog post by a guy named Nick Chiles. He writes, "I know that sometimes the most important thing I can do to spark my daughters' ambition is to simply tell them that they are capable."<sup>1</sup> Chiles' blog post recounts the journey of Phillis Wheatley, a slave who was eventually freed. In the 1770s, the family that owned Wheatley taught her to read and write English. She never let her origins or her past experiences constrain what she could become; Wheatley went on to become the first published African-American, female poet.

Jordin Sparks, a former "American Idol" winner, shares the same story Chiles references. "When I hear Wheatley's story and all she was able to accomplish during slavery, I am completely inspired. She was unaware that someone like herself was not supposed to read, let alone write a book. Her vision for her life was limitless and full of possibilities. Nothing stopped her from telling her story."

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Chiles. MyBrownBaby blog, July 18, 2013. <http://mybrownbaby.com/2013/07/the-kinsey-collection-jordin-sparks-introduces-black-girls-to-the-fierce-courage-of-phillis-wheatley/>

I, too, am inspired by the story of Phillis Wheatley. Despite all of the falsely-constructed "differences" that supposedly exist between you and me, we are, in fact, not that different: this is something *I know to be true*. We are all the embodiment of an illiterate, enslaved Phillis Wheatley in one way or another. My struggles are your struggles, and your struggles are my struggles. The techniques that have worked for me to overcome the challenges I have faced *will* work for you. You just have to do them. You can't lie in bed ignoring the silent, inaudible reminders to behave differently that travel into your consciousness from a probable you that exists only in your dreams.

I have realized the simplest choices, the smallest actions—to go and start the shower, to make my bed, to put on an upbeat playlist, to water my plants, to fold my clothes, to put one foot in front of the other, to write down the things I dream about—are choices we make to live or not. "I Want To Live!" Susan Hayward, playing a woman convicted of murder and facing execution, proclaimed in the classic film noir named for her character's well-known line.

And I, too, want to live.



Steven stops writing his Introduction and gets up from the sofa in his TV room, walks over to the Lenovo touchscreen he uses to manage his iTunes, and selects "Stronger" by Kelly Clarkson. What doesn't kill us makes us...makes us what we are today.



# **SECTION 1**

## **Starting My Book**

You don't have to be great to start. You just have to start to be great.

—Zig Zigler



## Chapter 1

### Lost

In ABC's television series, *Lost*, one of the show's main plots pits the characters of Jack Shephard and John Locke against one another. Shephard, a medical doctor, represents rational skepticism. Locke, a wheelchair-bound "everyman," has his ability to walk restored after Oceanic Flight 815 crash lands onto the mysterious island. Locke represents an informed, blind faith of sorts and believes the island they are stranded on has some sort of mystical purpose for him and for all of the survivors of Oceanic Flight 815.

Rational skepticism and faith battle throughout the series. The rational skeptic would say a forty-five-year-old no one, who has not taken the steps to write regularly and/or to blog, cannot become an influential thought leader and published author. A more faith-based individual knows that anything is possible. The ideas inside this book will challenge the rational skeptics within us. They will challenge the voices we have in our heads that tell us we can't do something, and they are based on the non-physical laws of the universe that determine what we become. These laws should strengthen our blind faith to achieve our dreams, provided we are willing to write them down, and move toward them methodically and consistently.

The Livescribe® pen records all conversations during business meetings. The technology allows you to return to the dialogue at a later date. It "records everything you write, hear or say and allows you to replay your meetings simply by tapping on your notes." Steven does not use his pen for this, however. *I can barely sit through most meetings the first time. Why would I return to them?* Steven thinks to himself. Instead, he uses his pen to learn to be a better writer. It's like seeing a movie more than once. Like the countless times he has watched *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *The Way We Were*, or *It's a*

*Wonderful Life*. On subsequent viewings, you see, hear, and notice things you didn't the first time.

The pen is the same. You get to pay attention to the layers beneath the surface of the main plot.



Writing room at home  
Sunday, September 30, 2012, 1:06 p.m.

*Writing your own book and reading a book someone else has written is the difference between hosting a party and attending someone else's party. Hosting a party is lots of hard work, lots of planning and preparation, lots of logistics and communication. Attending a party is passive, while hosting a party is active.*

Steven can't exactly describe the last five to eight years of his life as a party. No. It was probably much closer to a life of quiet desperation. In hindsight, without his *Steven Typical Playlist*, it was most definitely a life of quiet desperation. His was an existence camouflaged by the veneers we all use to cover the essence of who we are: a successful career, money, material things, close "friends," an enviable social life.

*A while ago, I became obsessed with J.J. Abrams, the executive producer of Lost. I found myself speed-watching six seasons of Lost on Netflix, determined to get to the end of the series so I could begin writing my book again. Every hour I sat engrossed in this television series, wondering what was going to happen next, I realized I was attending J.J. Abrams' party. I was distracting myself from the quiet desperation, transporting myself into someone else's world.*

In fact, research shows most Americans are as obsessed with watching television as Steven was watching *Lost*. Americans spend anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-four hours per week watching television.<sup>2</sup>

Steven wonders how many others watch television to distract themselves from lives of quiet desperation. *I am finally ready to realize the J.J. Abrams inside of me*, Steven declares to himself. *I can host my own party. I can create my own world others will get lost in, rather than getting lost in someone else's world. First, I need to turn the TV off!* Steven thinks.



A live version of Adele's "Make You Feel My Love" begins. Next is "Because of You" by Kelly Clarkson. Steven stares at the ceiling as Kelly sings, "My heart can't possibly break when it wasn't even whole to start with."

*I want to write about the things I liked about the television show, Lost, and the eighteen-minute TEDtalk I watched J.J. Abrams deliver on YouTube. In his TEDtalk, J.J. Abrams talked about the concept of a "mystery box," and the idea that mystery can be more important than knowledge. "The mystery box represents infinite possibility; it represents hope; it represents potential," J.J. explained. In the show, the writers would introduce the audience to a situation, a thing, a person (the black rock, Danielle, Juliet), and the reader or the audience is drawn in and wants to know more about the mystery. What is the black rock? Who is Danielle? Who is Juliet?*

Steven's mind wanders to two characters in his life and their mysteries. Who is Michele? Will my best friend be able to re-enter the workforce after raising her children? Can she prove her naysayers

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<sup>2</sup>Hinckley, David. "Americans spend 34 hours a week watching TV, according to Nielsen numbers." New York Daily News, September 19, 2012. <http://www.nydailynews.com/>

wrong? Or have her naysayers always been right about her? Can someone really start a new career at forty-five-years-old? Is age just a number?

And he thinks of himself: Who is Steven? Can he overcome his struggles with discipline and depression? Is he delusional to think he can achieve his dreams at forty-five years old? Can he do the things he knows he needs to do to look and feel like he did when he was twenty-five? Will Steven always be just a frustrated dreamer?

*One of the things done particularly well in Lost was the portrayal of the duality that existed in its main characters. Is Shephard good because he seeks to save everyone, when in so many ways it is he who needs to be saved? Is Locke crazy? A desperate, lonely man running from the idea that he is just an ordinary man, determined to stay on the island where he can live under the delusion that he is special?*

Is this book my island, a milieu, where I am as delusional as John Locke? Is the real me some shackled, middle-aged no one who is invisible to the world-at-large around him? As I write this future for myself, is it just that, a *written* future? A me that exists only on these pages? Or, are the things I write about capable of impacting the me who is not in this book, a 45-year-old instructional designer who has failed repeatedly to write a cohesive, interesting, gripping work of nonfiction? On my island, can anyone be whatever he wants to be, the antithesis of everything he ever was?

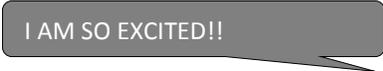
*People are not their résumés: They are more than the jobs they have held and not limited by the work experience they have already accrued. They have the option to create their own reality, as I am doing inside and outside of this book.*

*Lost* seems to be ultimately about redemption and love. About the multidimensional, magical, transcendent qualities one can tap into by loving another human being wholly and completely.

Steven thinks of Michele again. *Does she have to find the strength within herself to rise above her circumstances? Perhaps she can piggyback on my strength until she develops the muscles she needs to stand on her own. Is love a force powerful enough to transcend time, circumstance, geography, language, intention, motivation, choice, and even fate itself? Or is fate just that, fate? Whatever will happen, will happen?*

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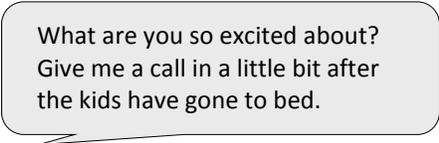
Steven takes out his iPhone and sends a text.



I AM SO EXCITED!!

Steven intentionally uses all caps in his text message to Michele because he truly is genuinely excited. *Michele isn't technologically-savvy enough to think, 'Why is Steven screaming at me?'* Steven chuckles to himself, full of that snarky attitude everyone loves about him. *I can't wait to tell Michele I have started my book again.*

Yet again, he is convinced his lifelong dream is about to come true, challenging his fate that he would never be more than “just a frustrated dreamer.” When Steven was on his quest to discover the meaning of life in his mid- to late twenties, he was convinced he would always have all of these grandiose dreams, but never be able to achieve them in reality. He had accepted that the magical moments he would experience in this life would come when he was transported out of this world into the world of his imagination. In his twenties, he was convinced he would never, ever be more than a frustrated dreamer.



What are you so excited about?  
Give me a call in a little bit after  
the kids have gone to bed.

Michele DiFranco (her maiden name, not her married name), has been Steven Sharp's best friend since they were five years old in Bloomfield, New Jersey. They went to grammar school, junior high, and high school together.

Michele's family is Steven's second family, and her mother is like a mother to him. Her family is the epitome of a New Jersey Italian-American family: loud, big Sunday family dinners, amazing dry meatballs. They still place a huge piece of plywood on their dining room table with a brightly-colored tablecloth over it so more people can squeeze around the table for holidays and family dinners. Steven, with his light brown hair and WASP heritage, always savored these big family dinners on Sundays at the DiFranco's. He'd sit at the table as if he belonged with Michele and her extended family.

*She will always be DiFranco to me*, he mused as he imagines what Michele's mother, Anna, must have sounded like with her impossibly-thick, complete New Jersey-Italian accent when she announced at the dinner table one evening, "Michelllle, Stayven is gonna' be gaaay, ya know?"

*Glad I wasn't there for that one*, Steven thinks to himself.

To this day, Steven loves to make Michele imitate her mother's voice, not that he exactly has to twist her arm. When they are on the phone together and Michele is upset about the topic du jour, Steven will interrupt Michele and ask her, "What would Anna say?"

Michele will immediately switch voices to sound like her mother. "Djayyysus Chrissst, Michelllle ...that SonofaBetcch. I don't know why you put up with it, Michelllle?"

Next thing you know Steven is cracking up and usually Michele too, depending on how upset she is at the time.

I STARTED WRITING MY BOOK AGAIN!!  
I am very proud of you for getting your resume together and fixing your printer by yourself. Have a great evening and good night!!

Thank you Steven! Your kind supportive words are very nice to hear :) And that is awesome about your book!! I can't wait to hear more about it.

*He's writing his book again? I wonder what it's about this time...*  
Michele thinks as she types a supportive response.

A couple of days later, Steven is pulling a handful of his fat away from his abdomen while taking a side profile selfie of his huge gut when he receives a text message from Michele.

Hi steven... I'm really upset right now n I need to talk to you about something

Steven switches from his photos app so he can reply to Michele's text.

OK, I'll call in a sec.

OK

OK. I am going to call you from Skype.

K

Having to upgrade software it'll take a second or two. Hold tight:-)

Hope it doesn't take as long as my printer driver update... good luck!



Logitech® Wireless Headsets and calling from Skype

“Michele? Hey it’s me! What’s up?” Steven reaches under his kitchen sink and grabs the can of stainless steel cleaner.

“I just took the kids by myself to IHOP because it’s ‘kids-eat-free-night’ and they always have a character there to entertain them.”

“What do you mean ‘a character?’” Steven hoses down his refrigerator with a thick coat of the milky white, creamy cleaner.

“Well, they are not real characters because that would cost too much money, so tonight they had *Mouse Girl*, but it is really Minnie Mouse...Last week they had *The Sponge Guy*, but it was really Sponge Bob.”

Steven bursts out in hysterical laughter as he grabs a thick wad of paper towels. "Wait a minute; they have fake Disney characters to lure families with kids? Does it work?"

"Apparently. We were there," Michele's laugh starts with a giggle and erupts into a few seconds of release. *I wish Michele had a webcam so I could see her laughing.* "So anyway...the kids are all wild, and I have to get them ready for bed soon."

"So what are you so upset about?" Steven starts polishing the top right corner of his side-by-side KitchenAid, moving his right arm in a circular motion.

"I don't know if you remember that awhile back I applied for these grants that would allow me to go back and complete some courses I need for my education specialist degree?"

"Yes. Of course I remember."

"Well I got put on this waiting list and every few weeks I would call and talk to my counselor to see if my name came up to receive the grant. The counselor would always tell me that I could look up the status of my application online, but I could never figure out how to do it."

As he is getting down on his knees to polish the bottom right side of the refrigerator, Steven braces himself against the doors, staring through them, willing this story to have a different ending than all of Michele's other stories.

"Every time I called, I was told that there were tons of applicants and not that many grants available each quarter. So...of course everyone in my negative, non-supportive family thought I was nuts for calling each month, and they wanted me to give it up, and they wouldn't even listen to me if I tried to talk about it. But I was hopeful, because they pay for your whole schooling and you don't have to pay it back."

“How long did you stay on the waiting list?” Steven kneels motionlessly in front of his refrigerator.

“Three years.”

*Nope. This story is going to end like all the other ones. There is a moment of audible silence before they erupt into uncontrollable laughter, maybe tinged with a little bit of nervousness. Why did she put all of her eggs in this one basket?*

“So of course all of the naysayers in my family were proven right.”

“When was the last time you called?” He stands up, moving to the left side.

“I called a couple of weeks ago and my counselor told me the list expired and my name was no longer on the list, and I would have to reapply...So of course I am going to reapply; a part of me feels like I’m going to go through the same cycle again, and it’s going to be another three years wasted and I’m going to be dropped off the waiting list and still be exactly where I am now. The worst part about it is...if this happens, all of the naysayers will be right. It just reminds me of when I was a little girl. I always had all of these ideas and never had ANY support from any one in my family.”

Michele changes her naturally funny, sweet tone and affects a biting, derogatory, belittling tone, most likely imitating her father this time, “‘Whattaya’ want to do that for, Michele? That’s so stupid. Don’t even go there Michele, you’ll make a fool out of yourself.’” Michele switches back to her natural tone. “I decided to apply again...I have to go down for a meeting and since Ava is not in school yet, I needed someone to watch the kids, so I asked Patrick if he could watch the kids,” Michele switches tones again, imitating her husband, Patrick, this time. “‘You don’t think you’re doing that, do ya?’ Patrick said to me with this real exasperated, nasty tone in his voice. So then I called

Sharon and asked her if she could watch Ava so I could go in and apply.” Sharon is Michele’s oldest sister.

“Sharon said, ‘You’re crazy, Michele. You’re forty-five years old. You should be thinking about retiring, not going back to school.’ Steven, I just sat there dumbfounded. She told me she and her husband are thinking of buying a place in Florida soon and moving. As I listened to Sharon and her thoughts of retiring at forty-seven, I thought that I could work for another twenty-five years. I don’t know what upset me more: the way she talked...talks to me, or that she believes her life is on the downhill. I just wish for once I could have my family’s full support; that they would think I am smart, rather than the joke of the family.”

“Michele, you have to earn their support. Forty-five is the new twenty-five, ya know. Don’t listen to your fucking family.”

“What did you say?”

“Don’t listen to your fucking family?”

Michele laughs out loud. “No not that. The thing about forty-five.”

“Forty-five is the new twenty-five...I’ll help you prove the naysayers wrong!”

“You really think I can prove the naysayers wrong?”

“Yes, I really do.”

“Thanks, Steven! You always make me feel better.”

As he and Michele say their goodbyes, Steven notices the shadow of his silhouette as he admires his perfectly polished refrigerator. He removes his headset somewhat robotically as he moves over to the dishwasher.



## Chapter 2

### Forty-five is the New Twenty-five?

*Forty-five is the new twenty-five?* Steven ponders this play on the commonly-used “\_\_\_\_\_ is the new black” expression. *What does that mean?* Steven thinks, and immediately an answer forms in his mind. *I don’t know, but it would be a great title for a book.*

At twenty-five, most people are just starting their careers. They believe their whole lives are still ahead of them, that they can do anything they set their minds to do, like Phillis Wheatley did<sup>3</sup>. She didn’t know she wasn’t supposed to learn how to read. She put her mind to it and she did it. At forty-five, Michele is trying to start her career after raising three children. Steven is trying to become a published author. *Can we put our minds to it and do it? Do other people struggle with this?*

*Hmmmmmm, Steven thinks. Maybe there is a lost generation of people trapped in unfulfilling careers, with unrealized, fading dreams, who believe their lives have passed them by. Maybe there are a bunch of Stevens out there who are happy in their careers, but have dreams they don’t dare themselves to dream anymore.*

In fact there are. Recent studies show that anywhere from 70-80 percent of workers are not engaged in the work they perform, and therefore, not happy in their career. So why do people stay? People stay because they need the paycheck: they have children and families to support, student loans to pay off, and retirement to save for. In most cases, people construct a life based on what they can “afford” at their current income levels. What an individual makes determines where he lives, what he drives, if he can afford to eat out or take a vacation, and whether he shops in discount or retail stores. How we

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<sup>3</sup> Nick Chiles. MyBrownBaby blog, July 18, 2013. <http://mybrownbaby.com/2013/07/the-kinsey-collection-jordin-sparks-introduces-black-girls-to-the-fierce-courage-of-phillis-wheatley/>

spend money becomes entrenched in who we are, making it difficult to change.

People also stay in unfulfilling careers because the experience and skills they have obtained have value. If we have invested years of our lives earning a doctorate degree, why would we abandon the security and prestige of a \$95,000 per year job as a clinical psychologist to accept an entry-level position as a corporate recruiter, even though that's what we want to do? We invest years of our lives and spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars earning advanced degrees. Our educations, the job skills and experience we gain as we support ourselves—coupled with how we spend and budget money—shackles us to unfulfilling, unrewarding careers. We stay in unsatisfactory careers because we don't know how to leave, we know leaving would be hard and we are scared.

People in their sixties, seventies, and eighties generally worked in one job or industry for their entire careers and then retired; however, today's generations are different. It is not uncommon to have three, four, or more careers in one's working life. According to Carl Bialik in the September 2, 2010, *Wall Street Journal* article "Seven Careers in a Lifetime? Think Twice, Researchers Say," "...the average U.S. worker will have many careers—seven is the most widely cited number—in his or her lifetime."

Steven ponders the title of his book some more. What if forty-five could really be the new twenty-five? That people's futures are not determined by the jobs they have had in the past, that people are not their résumés. That who they can become is not determined by the things they have already accomplished, but instead by the things they hope to accomplish.

What are the practical, doable things people can do to change jobs? What obstacles must they overcome? How can they convince a

potential employer to give them a chance when they no longer have youth on their side?

Steven takes a break and peruses Facebook® for a few moments. He comes across a post from Stephanie Thomson who worked for Steven as an instructional design intern over the summer:

#### Stephanie Thomson

There is a story in the book of Luke where Jesus talks about giving a banquet. He says that when you give a banquet, do not invite your friends, brothers or sisters, relatives, or rich neighbors, for they can all pay you back. But invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, for none of them can give you anything in return. Bless them, for they cannot bless you back.

Steven stares at the screen, thinking about this parable from the Bible and his friend Stephanie. If one were to scroll through Stephanie's Facebook timeline, you would see a faith-based senior at Auburn University, pictures of her family and lots of friends getting married.



Dan Chase stops at Steven's desk, interrupting his train of thought.

"How do you feel after our run?" asks Dan.

It takes Steven a moment to process what Dan has asked him. "Out of shape. Sore. Mad at myself for getting so out of shape," Steven responds honestly, grimacing slightly.

"Just take it slowly, Steven. Let's go get some coffee," Dan suggests. "Stick with it. It'll get easier."

Dan Chase works with Steven in the training center of their company, and is in top-notch shape. On Twitter he describes himself as a “Princess Syndrome Enabler” and “Gentleman Raiser.” These labels reference his two beautiful children he has with his wife Kristen. They went running one day, and Steven enrolled Dan in being his workout partner. Steven will frequently joke that Dan burns more calories every day convincing him to get to the gym than they actually burn while working out!

Steven and Dan walk over to Human Resources to get their coffees, and they overhear Amelia O’Connor talking about a period in her life when she had an existential epiphany. Amelia is a brunette with bright expressive eyes, a genuine smile, and a spontaneous immediacy to her laugh.

Steven can’t believe what he is hearing: Amelia’s existential epiphany is related to changing careers, months shy of a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. What are the chances that Amelia would be talking about this at the coffee machine as Steven and Dan approached?

*The universe is supporting this book I am writing, Steven thinks. I’ll have to follow up with her.*