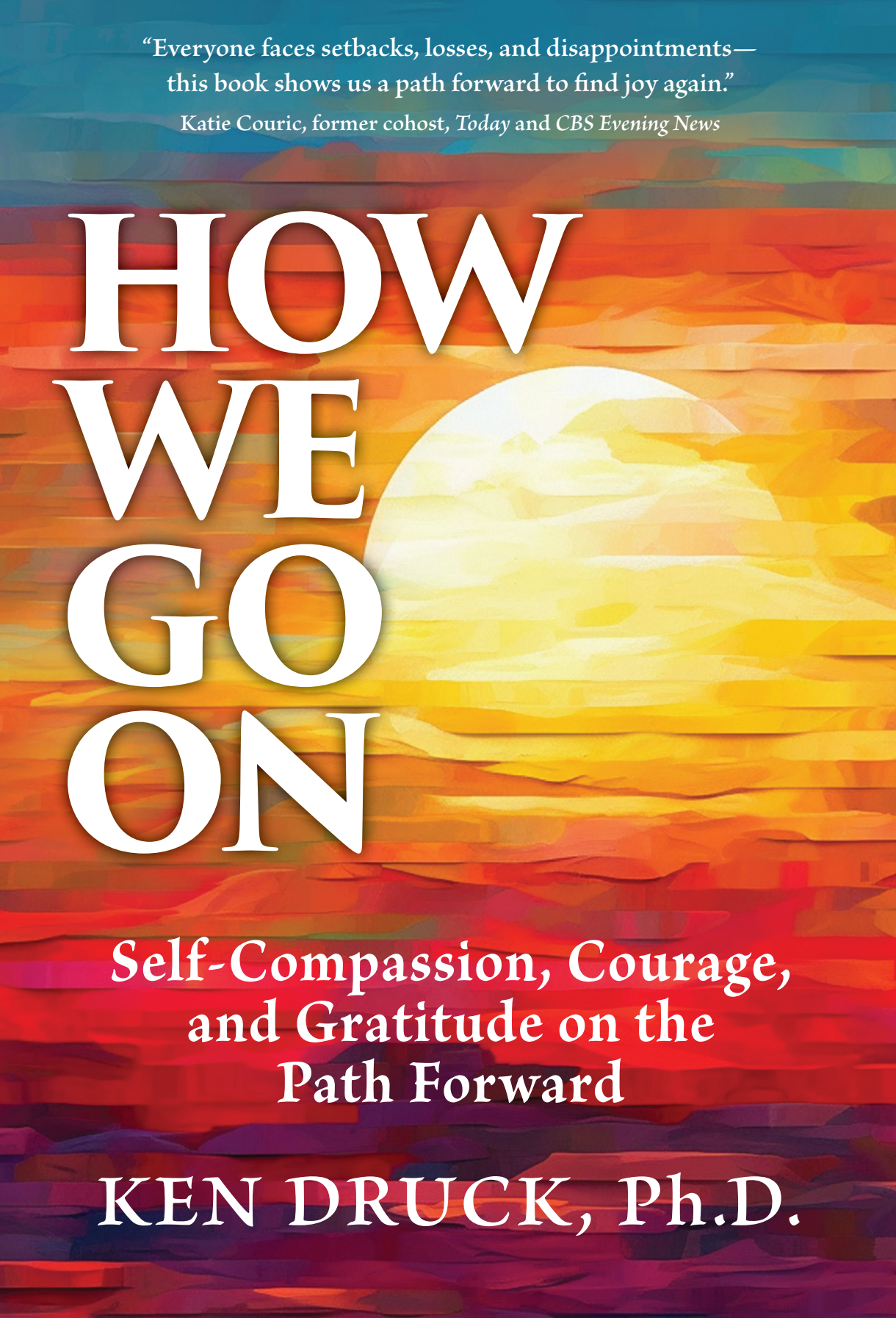


“Everyone faces setbacks, losses, and disappointments—  
this book shows us a path forward to find joy again.”

Katie Couric, former cohost, *Today* and *CBS Evening News*

# HOW WE GO ON



Self-Compassion, Courage,  
and Gratitude on the  
Path Forward

KEN DRUCK, Ph.D.

HOW WE GO ON

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and Gratitude on the  
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Ken Druck, Ph.D.

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## Praise for Dr. Ken's books...

“Straightforward and honest approach to dealing with real issues we all face as we get older.”

—Alan Horn, former President and CEO, Walt Disney Studios

“In this elegant, groundbreaking book, Ken shows us how to rise out of the ashes, turn adversity into opportunity, and transform our pain into love.”

—Jack Canfield, co-author, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series

“Ken Druck is a national treasure! A magnificent man with a huge heart and a deep well of wisdom to match. Ken's books offer us a clear path to re-envisioning our best possible futures.”

—John E. Welshons, author of *One Soul, One Love, One Heart*  
and *Awakening from Grief*

“After reading Ken Druck's fabulous new book, we bought copies for our adult children and grandchildren and inscribed them with the words, ‘Because we love you with all our hearts.’ This must-have guide belongs in every family library.”

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### Praise for Dr. Ken's books...

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—John Gray, bestselling author of  
*Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*

“I highly recommend this fine new book by Ken Druck. Put this hard-won wisdom to work for you.”

—Gay Hendricks, Ph.D., author of *Five Wishes*  
and co-author of *The First Rule of Ten*

“Ken Druck provides a clear course for finding peace.”

—Mari Smith, Facebook Marketing Expert  
and Social Media Influencer

“A precious instrument in the hands of those who are concerned about the future.”

—Dr. Abdelkader Abbadi,  
Former Deputy-Director of the United Nations Security Council

“Dr. Ken has been a Godsend for our family. Now his words will touch thousands of families.”

—Bob and Claudia Cappello, parents of Jonathan Cappello,  
lost September 11, 2001 in the World Trade Center

“A hands-on, easy-to-read, easy-to-follow guide...I found myself nodding in agreement with the turn of each page.”

—Dawn Anna, mother of slain Columbine student Lauren Townsend

“Reading this book was like having a good friend walk me into territories I dare not go alone, helping me make friends with some of the most daunting, but essential, challenges of being a parent.”

—Rachel Kessler, author, *The Soul of Education*



# INVITATION

**M**y amazing twenty-one-year-old daughter Jenna was on the adventure of a lifetime, traveling through India on the seventh week of her Semester-at-Sea study-abroad program, when she died in a bus accident on the Grand Trunk Road. Jenna was only forty-five minutes from the Taj Mahal, writing in her journal about visiting “the world’s greatest symbol of eternal love,” when her life came to a sudden end. Halfway across the world at my home in Del Mar, California, the State Department called to tell me what had happened. Every cell in my being screamed in unspeakable agony. It was a pain like no other, inescapable and overwhelming. Jenna’s death not only ended her life, but it also ended my life as I knew it. I was positive, absolutely positive, that even the simplest joy was a thing of the past.

Twenty-seven years later, my three-year-old grandson, Stone, sat on my lap tightly wrapped in a beach towel after a swim in the ocean, studying dolphin-shaped clouds passing overhead.

It was a rare moment of temporary stillness for Stone, who is usually in perpetual motion. Looking at the clouds is how I have learned to slow him down, and we make up magical stories together. I’ll ask him, “Is that a dolphin? Or maybe it’s a dragon, Stone?” On this beautiful day at the beach, love and joy washed over me like ocean waves as I played with and watched Stone and his twin brother, Andrix. At the time of Jenna’s death, I never could have imagined feeling the joy I experienced that day. I wouldn’t have thought it possible.

How we go on is a question we ask almost every day of our lives. How we go on is also one of life’s great mysteries, and the source of profound psychological, social, philosophical, religious, and spiritual inquiries throughout human history. Our choices about how to go on as we face life’s simplest and most perplexing matters shape the course and character of our personal lives, our faith, and how well we adapt to life’s many transitions. They also define

how and whether we show up as citizens/residents/members of our family, community, nation, and world.

*How We Go On* speaks to both the most consequential personal issues in our lives and the social issues of our time. The changes and challenges of growing up, forming close relationships, caring for ourselves, and conquering our biggest fears are all related to our willingness and ability to acknowledge and rise above the things that have been holding us down.

You can use this book as an inquiry into the deepest personal matters of your life. This includes how you deal with adversity; manage life's losses, changes, challenges, and transitions; give and receive love in your closest relationships; renew your sense of purpose; create newfound meaning; put your house in order as you get older; and summon the courage to deal with dying. But it is also about the social choices we make to either ignore or uphold matters of justice, equality, civility, peace, and the public good. Some of the most profound personal choices we make are, of course, also the ones we render as stewards of the future. Becoming the best version of ourselves as individuals most often leads to selflessly paying the good in our lives forward and taking social responsibility for the well-being of our families, communities, nation, world, and planet.

## **Rising Up from the Dark Nights in Our Lives**

*How We Go On* is a personal guide for the times in life when we find ourselves feeling lost, uncertain, or even terrified about the road ahead. It is based on everything I have learned rising up out of the darkness of my daughter's death; on the front lines working with families after horrific tragedies including 9/11, Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Las Vegas; and my work as an executive coach helping individuals, families, leaders, and family businesses deal with crises, transitions, and opportunities.

You may be reading this book because something terrible has happened. Your heart may have been broken, and you're feeling understandably lost. Searching for answers, relief, some sense of normalcy and direction, you have entered a time that, six centuries ago, Roman Catholic mystic San Juan de la

Cruz called “*la noche oscura del alma*”—“the dark night of the soul.” Painfully unsure, perhaps for the first time, that you can even survive the fear, uncertainty, and sorrow, you are looking for the guidance and support you need to go on. If that’s why you’re here, you’re in the right place.

Some of us are so desperate for relief after a life crisis that we’re willing to use almost any means of escape. After a series of short-lived quick fixes, we find ourselves back where we started, or worse. We know about others who have collapsed into a state of paralytic despair, questioning whether they even want to go on, and, as heartsick as we may be, we’re determined to find our way back into the light.

This book may still be exactly what you need, even if you’re not going through a crisis. Figuring out how to navigate life’s dark nights—as well as its everyday ups and downs, victories and losses, challenges and opportunities—is part of being human. Programmed to survive, we even have the audacity to ask how to go on when we’re almost certain there’s no going on. A marriage, job, physical ability, time of life, or person we love may be gone forever. We may even be living with a life-threatening illness. With only an ending in sight, we scan every corner of the universe for signs of life going on. Somehow, in some way, there must be a way to go on! Right?

Driven by hope, faith, courage, and tenacity, we search for something that I refer to as *the path forward*. Sometimes we get sidetracked looking for a “yellow brick road” with a rainbow at its end. Eventually, most of us find a way to edge forward, one step at a time, which is grounded in self-care and is sustainable over the long haul. Finding *the path forward* is a critically important theme you will find in every chapter of this book.

You will also find references to a number of roadblocks, changes, and endings that I call “Stops.” Stops are those times when things fall apart. They may come after a relationship dissolves; your financial status is threatened; you receive a negative diagnosis; or an unfamiliar incident triggers a spiritual or existential crisis. Stops make us start over. The plans we made have been derailed. Things we cherished have been tarnished or obliterated, and we find ourselves struggling. While despair and avoidance may arise, we find the

courage to regroup, recover, and recalibrate. We find the faith and strength to push the reset button. I hope this book can help you turn these Stops into “Start Agains”—this time with more knowledge and tools than you had before. This is what it means to go on.

## **A Code for Living Courageously**

In the pages to follow you will find concrete steps for becoming the smarter, better, stronger version of yourself by meeting the challenges of this moment in your life. Threaded throughout each chapter of this book is a *Code for Courageous Living* that is the basis for my life’s work. Based in honest self-assessment, a strong work ethic, a resilient spirit, a willingness to reimagine the future, and a commitment to pay the good in our lives forward, it is a guide for how to go on with integrity over the course of a lifetime.

The next few pages are for those readers who would like to drill down on the Code of Courageous Living. If that’s not you, or you’d like to come back to it later, skip ahead.

### **1: Honest Self-Assessment**

Becoming the better, stronger, smarter, and more trustworthy version of ourselves begins with taking honest inventory. Being honest, we heal, learn, and grow to our highest potential as humble, caring, and compassionate men or women of integrity.

### **2: A Strong Work Ethic for Facing Turns in the Road**

Aspiring to be the best versions of ourselves, we choose to confront, rather than turn away from, life’s difficult changes, choices, and challenges. We summon newfound courage and strength to move decisively through the defining moments, years, and seasons of our lives.

### **3: A Resilient Spirit**

True resilience comes from within when we summon courage, strength, and self-compassion to turn life’s adversities, setbacks, losses, and unwelcome changes into opportunities for personal and spiritual

growth. The kindness, patience, and understanding we show ourselves gives us what we need to prevail. As works in progress, we strive to upgrade the inner workings of our minds and hearts as times and circumstances change.

#### **4: A Willingness to Reimagine the Future**

When we time-travel through our imagination to explore new visions, insights, possibilities, and goals, we create new blueprints for serenity, joyfulness, relevance, and healing. Learning to prioritize the things that really matter, we harvest life's greatest opportunities for intimacy, prosperity, health, and well-being.

#### **5: A Grateful Heart That Pays the Good in Our Lives Forward**

Living courageously also means paying the good in our lives forward to our children, spouses, aging parents, family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and fellow human beings. We assume our share of social responsibility for leaving the world a better place while expressing our gratitude for the blessings, freedoms, and miracles in our own lives. And we become advocates for the kind of peace, justice, equality, and positive social change that will allow our children, grandchildren, and future generations to face down the ugliness, injustice, and suffering in the world and turn darkness into light.

### **The Act of Going On**

You may be drawn to this book because of a loss. Someone close to you, perhaps your husband, wife, one of your parents, or one of your children (said to be the worst loss) is dying or has died. Or you might be suffering a “living” loss: Nobody has died, but you’re going through a heart-wrenching divorce or a debilitating or life-threatening illness—yours, or that of someone you love. You may be dealing with retirement, voluntary or forced, from a job that gave you a sense of identity and purpose—or the loss, change, or challenge that has come with getting older.

Perhaps financial pressures have caused you to move out of the family home and to downsize, compelling you to let go of all your stuff, including precious heirlooms. You might be dealing with a stubbornly painful sense of disappointment because something *did not happen*, such as finding and/or keeping the job or relationship of your dreams. Watching one of your children struggle and falter, despite a promising future, is yet another reason you may have been drawn to this book.

On another front, losing your rights, freedoms, sense of security, and/or trust can also be devastating. A once-trusted spouse or business partner betrays us, thieves break into our homes or cars and rob us, leaders we voted for (or whom our family, friends, and neighbors voted for) spread anti-Semitic or racist misinformation. Some of us live in a war zone where our nation, neighborhood, school, or place of worship is under attack and our family lives in terror. Forced to adapt to, heal from, and/or work to put an end to these kinds of dangers, threats, and traumatic losses, we search for the courage and strength to go on—and to fight for change.

No matter what challenges you may be facing, it's only human to feel uncertain and to ask, "How can I go on?" Trying to piece together life's psychological, physical, and/or existential jigsaw puzzles and fight our way back into the stream of life is a noble quest. In a perfect world, we would have all the answers right away—or we could simply ask Siri. We would face our greatest challenges with the empathy and support of trusted others and with a tremendous amount of self-compassion.

In this less-than-perfect world, we may find ourselves judged and hurried with unsolicited advice, feeling utterly alone and steeped in harsh self-criticism. No matter how much support you might be giving yourself or getting from others, this book was designed to lift you up and help you clear the path forward.

## **Your Journey and the Path Forward**

It's not always clear how to go on. And that's okay! When we come upon one of life's confounding dilemmas, speed bumps, mysteries, enigmas, or contradictions, the stars just don't always line up. When we're genuinely

confused about which road to take, do we suck it up and try to power through? Or do we ask for help to think things through until we get clear about our best options? Should we talk to ourselves with impunity, condemnation, impatience, and judgment? Beat ourselves up for not having the answer? Or talk to ourselves with kindness, patience, and understanding?

The answer is often just to give ourselves support, encouragement, and permission to not always have the answer. Despite our worst losses, setbacks, illnesses, and fears, we are biologically, psychologically, and spiritually programmed to survive. I rediscovered balance, purpose, meaning, hope, and even joy in the years following my daughter's death; we humans do everything in our power to rise up to meet the moment. Our "go ons," as I call them, are those times when we find the path forward. Take a moment to recall a few of the go ons in your life when you overcame a great challenge, survived a traumatic loss, or turned a setback into a step forward. Since triumphs, accomplishments, and milestones present their own challenges, take another moment to remember a few life-altering go ons when you made the most of an opportunity, built on a notable success, or earned a special recognition.

Your past record of go ons may be based on good luck, bad luck, the choices you made, experiences you had, beliefs you held, and life lessons that your ancestors passed down to you. I come from a family of Holocaust survivors. My parents named me for my grandfather's younger brother, Kissel, who was killed by the Nazis in a mass shooting of 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar and buried in a mass grave near Kyiv. Growing up, I witnessed the tenacity with which my parents and grandparents survived Hitler's atrocities and had the *chutzpah* (audacity) to go on living. This is something I have held in awe and from which I've drawn strength over the years. My parents and grandparents passed their tenacity, courage, and resolve on to me, and I passed it on to my daughters.

I have learned that "going on" can be a social, psychological, or even religious affair, involving deeply personal, moral, familial, and ethical bases. We do our best to take personal responsibility for surviving the tough times and moving forward. We also do our best to take social responsibility for the

health, safety, and well-being of others in our community, nation, and world. Taking a stand on the personal and social issues of our time is rooted in our faith, values, beliefs, conscience, and code of ethics.

### **Social Responsibility—A Self-Audit**

Ask yourself, “To what degree do I take responsibility for the well-being of my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren? Am I doing anything to contribute to the collective good? Have I become so desensitized, indifferent, or detached that I believe it’s up to the government, fate, or God? Or have I given up, not believing that I can make a difference?”

In the visionary “Great Law of Peace,” twelfth-century Iroquois leaders weighed the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation to come. They designed this standard for making conscientious choices while they were still alive to pay forward the good for hundreds of years after they were gone. Paying forward the best in our lives by taking matters of the common good into our own hands allows parents, grandparents, forward-thinking organizations, and corporate, political, religious, environmental, and international leaders to leave a legacy of the highest order: a legacy of love, peace, and gratitude.

Taking some degree of responsibility for what the world will be like for future generations will have a big impact on how and *whether* they’ll be able to go on. We want them to have breathable air and drinkable water, not to live in fear of their homes being destroyed by floods or going up in flames. We want them to feel safe going to school, movies, houses of worship, or the mall without worrying about getting shot—not living in a world on the brink of nuclear war and violence. And finally, we want them to go on despite the uncertainties of the world their parents have left them.

At age seventy-three, I think a lot about my daughter, Stefie, and the future she and her family will face, based on the world as it is now. People are at war in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa. Oppression of ethnic and religious minorities in China, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and many other nations persists, while less deadly but still devastating expressions of hatred,



anti-Semitism, white nationalism, racism, and anti-LGBTQ sentiment are widespread around the globe. In many parts of the world, people are not just food insecure, they are starving, because their fields and water supplies are drying up and they don't have access to humanitarian aid.

Despite its many blessings, the United States has, in some ways, become a war zone. We hear of mass shootings in schools, mosques, churches, synagogues, nightclubs, movie theaters, supermarkets, and other places where people find themselves every day. I've worked directly with families—in what has been both a privilege and a source of unspeakable horror—whose hearts were shattered by the terror attacks on 9/11; school shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook; bombings over Lockerbie, Scotland, and at the Boston Marathon; and the mass murder of sixty-one people at a concert in Las Vegas. I have a firsthand, up-close-and-personal understanding of the ways that our nation and world can be more dangerous, upside down, and inside out than ever before. I know the suffering that comes with violence. We can and must do everything in our power to prevent the fears and biases that fuel racism, antisemitism, white nationalism, misogyny, homophobia, and hatred from turning our nation and world into a war zone.

Of course, there are visionary leaders, peacemakers, humanitarian organizations, and millions of their supporters working valiantly and tirelessly to bring about a safer, healthier, more just, and more equitable world. While their efforts are too often overshadowed by war, racism, poverty, greed, hatred, fear, vengeance, and the atrocities of violent terrorists, they continue to fight for peace and justice. The self-righteous anger of violent, inhumane, and uncivil people of this world may dominate the news because it lights up news networks and certain centers of our brains. But it also leaves us on edge and questioning whether we're moving back in time to the Dark Ages, back to barbaric violence and lawless savagery.

Most of us do sincerely want peace. True, we can get deeply discouraged when that seems unachievable. For reasons that are difficult to understand or change, acts of incivility that fuel violence are ignored, mistaken for strength, or sanctioned by indifference. Each of us is capable of and responsible for

bringing about peace with acts of kindness, justice, compassion, and equality. We can also elect leaders who advocate for peace and equality, follow our constitutional laws, bring people together, and expand our nationalistic view of the world with something my dear friend, author Mark Gerzon, refers to in his books, lectures, workshops, and podcasts as “global intelligence.”

We live immersed in media that will inspire us with heartwarming stories one minute and heartbreaking accounts of tragedy and disaster—called “Breaking News”—the next. No wonder so many of us are having trouble figuring out exactly how to go on in such a world. We want to make a positive difference, but it often seems impossible. Crawling into bed with a pint of Rocky Road to watch *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Love Actually*, *Something’s Got to Give*, or *Overboard* might seem like the best way to keep our sanity.

As all of this (and the COVID-19 pandemic) has been happening, we’ve also gotten a little older, possibly gained a few pounds, and made some quarantine-inspired changes in our health, lifestyle, and work habits.

After suffering the loss of several close friends and family members, I began wondering more seriously when my time on Earth might be over and what I would do differently if that time came sooner than expected. At the memorial service of an old friend, another buddy of mine, now seventy-five, jokingly explained, “Being seventy-five is the equivalent of the Hillary Step on Mount Everest . . . it’s one of the last obstacles before you reach the summit.” Thinking about how to go on during what is likely to be the last quarter of our lives can be challenging.

The kinds of decisions family members, close friends, guys in my men’s group, and clients are making as they get older also have me speculating that world leaders like Vladimir Putin (age sixty-nine when Russia invaded Ukraine) fear getting old and start wars to look and feel more powerful. Thankfully, the world does not produce murderous psychopaths like Hitler or Putin very often. But is it normal for our fears and uncertainties about aging to have a profound effect on our decisions? In the later chapters of *How We Go On*, I will be opening conversations about aging and what it

means to process our fears, put our house in order, and leave a legacy of love, not chaos or war.

You may or may not be concerned about your legacy just now. The last several chapters are about your successes and failures, the choices you made, the kind of role model you were, how you treated other people, what you stood for, and what you paid forward. Your legacy is far more than the money or property you leave behind. It is about the personal integrity, values, beliefs, and nonmaterial gifts you pass on. Will your loved ones understand that while you may not have figured out all the secrets and mysteries of life or death, you gave it your best shot? Will they understand that your love will be with them forever? And will they understand what you felt and did to make the most of your time on Earth?

## **How to Go On as You Ripen**

Several years ago, I wrote the cover story for *Costco Connection* magazine called “What time is it (in your life)?” No matter your age, life presents you with unlimited opportunities to take inventory and create your best possible future. In the early years of my eighth decade, I am blessed to be reimagining my best possible future with fewer limitations and greater emotional freedom than ever before. I may spend a morning seeing clients, recording a podcast, hiking down to the beach, giving an interview on CNN for this book, or writing another cover article for Tod Jones at *Costco Connection* magazine.

My recent reimaginings have also led me to rededicate myself to fighting for social justice, peace, and equality around the world—and to plan a trip to Rwanda to see the gorillas with my beloved Lisette. Harnessing a few opportunities for better health that came to light from my annual physical has also become a priority.

Waiting for the results of my annual physical last week and thinking about the sudden loss of my daughter Jenna, I was reminded that life can and does turn on a dime. Being a step away from the proverbial rug being pulled out from under me, or from under someone I love, is a reminder to

stay healthy and humble. The time to meet this moment in my life and to go on has arrived. Writing this book has been a big part of it.

After spending nearly a half-century coaching people who are searching for the tools, answers, and strength to go on, I also hold myself accountable for becoming the better, smarter, more honest, and more courageous version of myself. Like many of my clients, I have been to the bottom of pain, feeling lost and broken, searching for guidance on the path forward.

Since my daughter's death, I have fought my way back into the stream of life. I have honored my daughters by writing new chapters of life, but I live with the persisting pain that my daughter's life was lost to her, and that the world was robbed of her brightness. She was denied a chance to go on, and that hurts my heart in ways that have no words. When asked how I'm doing, I explain that I'm deeply grateful for the blessings in my life but that "I walk with a *limp in my heart*."

It has been an honor to have stood beside and learned from courageous men, women, and children traversing their dark night of the soul. Having guided them as they found new measures of peace and healing has been a privilege. The world can turn suddenly in the direction of boundless suffering or boundless joy. At any moment, a beautiful baby is born, couples fall in love and get married, students graduate from college and start careers, and people reach their goals and celebrate their success. Miracles great and small unfold, wars end, and wounds heal. Unimaginable joys appear, as well as heartbreaking tragedies. This is the nature of life.

"Going on," then, is part of coming to terms with the nature of life. Turning adversity into opportunity is a balancing act. We find peace by understanding and, to whatever degree possible, accepting the true nature of life. By learning to place our hand on our heart and take our foot off our throat, replacing harsh self-criticism and judgment with self-compassion and kindness, we find a way to bear the unbearable. Lyricist Joe Darion spoke of finding peace and going on in his epic song "The Impossible Dream" from *Man of La Mancha*.

If you had asked me twenty-seven years ago whether I'd ever experienced anything like the joy I felt when my daughter Jenna was alive, I would have looked away in silence. Now, however, seeing my daughter Stefie and her husband, Tony, flourishing as parents, loving each other and guiding their boys, I have found true joy to balance my sorrows.

The lessons of how to go on meeting the personal and social challenges in each season of this life await you in the pages to come.

Whatever led you to *How We Go On*, I acknowledge you for accepting my invitation and bid you a warm *aloha*. It takes courage to explore what it truly means to go on, facing into rather than running from the sorrows and discomforts that come with adversity, and harvesting life's opportunities. Poet Maya Angelou's words continued to remind us courage was "the greatest virtue."

These pages contain the distilled essence of what it means to go on, from life's beginnings to its endings. Rising out of the ashes of loss, managing life's turning points with self-compassion, and paying forward the good in our lives are all within reach.

We'll get started by looking back at where our first life lessons about how to go on were learned, but please feel free to go directly to the chapters that call to you.