

**ALWAYS STRIVE
TO BE A BETTER YOU:**

**HOW ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN LIVE
EXTRAORDINARY LIVES**

PETE HALL

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Mindy: They say everything we need to know we learned in kindergarten. Well, thank you for teaching me everything I need to know—and for being a kindergarten teacher, which I'm sure is just coincidental.

To my kids, Daniel, Indy Anna, and Peja: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to strive to do the same for you, so you can go out and make the world a better place.

To my mom, Alice; dad, Cliff; stepmom, Gay; and stepdad, Guy: Thank you for conspiring to raise a pretty well-adjusted young man, one who seeks to live a happy, virtuous, and good life.

To my lifelong pal, Dan: The day will come that I'll beat you in Egyptian Rocular. 'Til then, I'll continue to enjoy playing the hand.

And to the seven extraordinarily ordinary subjects whom I've profiled here: Thank you for being you and living your truth, so that we might all do the same.

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INTRODUCTION

Plato's asymptote and greyhounds

THE SUMMER BEFORE MY ELEVENTH BIRTHDAY, our family visited my grandparents' home in Pennsylvania on our annual East Coast trip. I always looked forward to those delightful vacations, partly because they allowed my brother and me to stay connected with family, and partly because Pennsylvania seemed like an exotic, otherworldly place, somewhere we'd experience things we really didn't get in Oregon: clay tennis courts, expansive cornfields, dripping humidity, sparkling fireflies—and late evening thunderstorms.

It was during one of the latter—a particularly aggressive series of electrical discharges with unusually violent acoustics—that I found myself huddled under a blanket in my grandfather's office, hoping the storm would pass and I could fall asleep peacefully. The rest of the family had evidently built up some kind of auditory immunity to the thunder, so I was the only person awake in the house. In between flashes and booms, I'd allow my gaze to drift up from the carpet and around the room. And that's when I found it: an encyclopedia.

What wonders this hefty compendium contained! I don't recall which volume of that anthology I stumbled upon first (my grandfather had the entire set), though I remember the joy of mining the slick pages for

nuggets about aardvarks, zygotes, and everything in between throughout the rest of our way-too-short vacation. It was divine, unearthing the facts, people, places, and dates that might have otherwise bypassed me. Information was quite literally at my fingertips, long before the Internet, in this bulky, beautiful book of all knowledge.

For millennia, we have sought to collect, understand, and archive knowledge in a central, accessible spot. The first recorded encyclopedia was comprised of the classical Greek philosopher Plato's writings and lessons from the Greek Academy, painstakingly recorded by his nephew and successor Speusippus in the 4th century B.C. Historians believe the word itself is a Latin derivation of the Greek terms *en* (in), *kyklos* (circle), and *paideia* (education), which might carry the definition "all-encompassing education," or when referring to it as a detailed compendium, as I wrote above, the "beautiful book of all knowledge."

Plato's wide influence comes into play here in more ways than a bundle of alphabetized resource books. Indeed, he borrowed much from his teacher, Socrates, and in turn adapted those teachings for the lessons he shared with his prized pupil, Aristotle. Distilling the corpus of his work, we unveil the underlying theme that, 2,400 years later, contributes to the central term in the title of this very book. To Plato, perhaps the most compelling question driving our collective inquiry was this:



How do we live a happy, virtuous, good life?

A noble question, to be sure. But who's to define happy? Or virtuous? Or good? At its core, the Greek *philosophy* of "paideia" (quite related to the *word* "paideia" defined above) is to learn as much as possible, to grow

as much as possible, to improve as much as possible, and yes, to *strive* as much as possible toward the ideal state of being: living a happy, virtuous, good life. Our goal, then, is to attain our ultimate potential.

I embraced this approach as an undergrad back in the day, wading through an introductory course in philosophy and contemplating my lot in life. It wasn't always comfortable, and many of the discussions seemed dizzyingly oblique. Even outside the classroom, I questioned the stability of the ground beneath any answer to the question about how to live a happy, virtuous, good life. Life is hard, the path is twisted and gnarly, and it's not the same for any two people. Each of us lives a unique experience, and no matter what decisions we've made, who we were in the past, or who we are in this moment, we can always strive toward our own goals.

As I thought and thought, I had the good fortune of engaging in a conversation with my best friend and roommate, Dan, during a way-too-late game of Egyptian Rocular—and I found some clarity in the philosophical murk.

"We're greyhounds," he said plainly.

Since he always beat me at cards, and I thought such a conversation might distract him and increase my odds, I felt obliged to follow up. "How do you mean?"

"What does a greyhound do at the racetrack?"

"Runs really fast."

"True. Why?" In my memory, it was all Dan could do to suppress his grin—clearly, he was just toying with me while he shuffled and dealt the cards.

"So we can bet on the winner?"

“No. That’s for humans. From the greyhound’s perspective, why does it run?”

I did a quick visualization activity to picture such an event in my mind. “It’s chasing the rabbit.”

“And?”

“That’s it.”

Now he was surely grinning. “Will it ever catch the rabbit?”

“No.”

“Neither will we. We’re forever chasing the elusive rabbit, which we’ll never reach. And it’s that chase—the pursuit—that drives us ever forward.” He said more, and at the time, I was certain the whole bit was a metaphor about how he’d always be the Egyptian Rocular champion (which he has been, by the way, despite decades of my best efforts), but the idea and the phrasing never left me.

Over the past thirty-plus years, I’ve immersed myself in the never-ending quest to understand this perspective, to validate or refute it, and to comprehend its fundamental principles. Through many different lenses, angling to obtain views beyond my own, I’ve come to a rather straightforward conclusion: Dan’s wise assertion has proven reliably true in every single situation I’ve observed.

We are greyhounds.

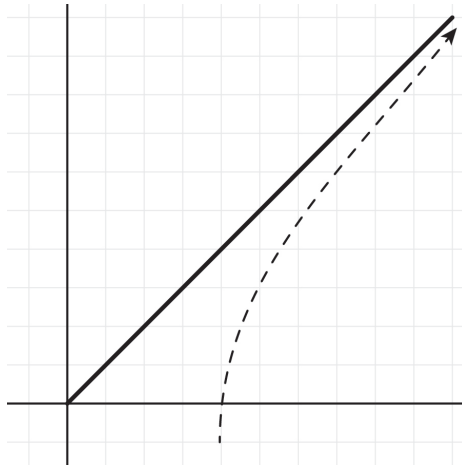
The rabbit, of course, is the ideal life. A happy, virtuous, good life. And further: When analyzing Plato’s mention of virtue, I submit that perhaps he was referring to the idea of excellence rather than morality or righteousness, as we tend to define it through our modern-day lenses.

Our rabbit is simply the manifestation of our ultimate potential. And here's why we'll never catch it:



Our potential is an asymptote.

You surely remember from high school geometry that an asymptote is a line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it. Like a greyhound that gets closer and closer to the rabbit without ever catching it, the closer we get to our potential, the more our potential expands. We can run and run, learn and learn, practice and practice, improve and improve, yet we'll never meet the upper limits of our ultimate potential—in any element of our lives.



To me, that's an exciting concept. The lack of a defined maximum value—no ceiling, no boundary—leaves us with limitless room for growth and opportunity for expansion. No matter how good we are at something, we can always get better. We can immerse ourselves in coursework and classes and apprenticeships and watch hours upon hours of YouTube

tutorials, and there's always more knowledge awaiting us. Regardless of our current situation, status, skillset, standing, or attitude, there's space above us, ahead of us, and all about us, full of rabbits, beckoning us to them.

Think of the practical applications of this mindset in every facet of life. What we're left with is the chase of improvement, continuous growth, and progress. I refer to this as *the pursuit of -er*. You know: stronger, faster, healthier, cooler, smarter, funnier, kinder—Plato himself might grin knowingly when considering a life that is happier, more virtuous (*virtuouser?*), and better. And the phrase encapsulating this idea is indeed the life approach around which this book is centered:



Always strive to be a better you.

N + 1: THE PURSUIT OF -ER

Chasing rabbits can certainly feel like a hapless pursuit. Imagine reaching for something your whole life—and then add the element of becoming conscious that you'll never, ever catch it, no matter what steps you take or how much you improve. It'll continue to lead you around in circles (or ovals), just out of reach, tantalizingly close at times, frustratingly visible and real but unable to be realized.

Or let's turn that mindset on its fluffy little head. Rather than becoming frustrated and exasperated at the unreachability of the rabbit—*what would the greyhound do to the rabbit if he caught it, anyway? There's a grisly thought*—what if the race itself is the authentic driver here? What if it's not the *attainment* of the goal, but rather the *pursuit* of it, that leads

us ever forward, just as my roommate Dan so astutely commented right before throttling me at a game of cards?

Perhaps in this context, it's the process of life—the fluidity and motion of the journey—that matters more than the product at the end. We might orient ourselves to celebrate our travels and the path rather than constantly worry that we're not good enough, healthy enough, virtuous enough, generous enough, good-looking enough, rich enough, articulate enough, or happy enough. Maybe we'd appreciate the little gains we make along the way. In mathematics, we refer to an unknown quantity as a variable—let's use n to represent that value describing our current place on the giant scale of success. Any incremental improvement (or step closer to the asymptote in pursuit of the goal) could be represented as $n + 1$. That's worth celebrating—no matter how small, how seemingly insignificant it might be, it's still a step in the right direction.

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

In my leadership and coaching work, I've endeavored to find out what makes a person successful. Happy. Virtuous. Good. At peace. Fulfilled. Content. Flourishing. In my journey, spanning continents and decades, I've seen commonalities between the most successful among us. And I do mean among *us*.

This book isn't meant to highlight the exceptional individuals whose stories are somewhat familiar, yet, for most of us, remain unrelatable. So you won't read about world-class athletes like LeBron James, Serena Williams, or Michael Phelps; you won't find anecdotes about eminent societal leaders like Nelson Mandela, Jacinda Ardern, or Mahatma Gandhi. Global influencers like Elon Musk and Oprah Winfrey, celebrities like Denzel Washington and Demi Lovato, and pioneers like Amelia Earhart and Marco Polo also aren't profiled here. Are there lessons

we could learn from these individuals? Absolutely. And while the lessons are pertinent and valuable and inspiring, the sheer magnitude of their accomplishments relegates them to a different plane. We can respect and admire and emulate them (we wear Air Jordans to “be like Mike,” contemplate dropping out of college because that’s what Bill Gates did, and wear the styles of the stars, drive the cars of the stars, and embrace the diets of the stars) to try to reach their level, but those rabbits are simply a mirage.

Instead, you’ll read about the extraordinary characteristics of your neighbors, your friends, your colleagues. The seven individuals I’ve selected to profile may not be household names, and that’s okay. In fact, that’s intentional. They weren’t endowed with superhuman characteristics that destined them for success at birth; rather, they’re comprised of regular-person DNA. They’re ordinary folk. Just like me. Just like you.

And as we’re exploring *success*, we’ll uncover an indelible truth about that term: It’s unique to each of us. Quite plainly, the ordinary individuals you’ll read about aren’t pursuing material success, they’re not chasing dollars, they’re not eager for fortune and fame. Instead, their success is measured within, in a very deeply personal, authentic, and humanly gratifying way. To truly live an extraordinary life, they show us how to eschew such hollow goals for something with more substance, greater purpose, and more influence. Something significant, fulfilling, joyous, and connected.

MEET THE (ORDINARY) SUBJECTS

The seven individuals below are all real human beings. They very much exist in real life, on social media, in their kitchens, and in their communities. Their stories, raw and sincere and candid, are true. They are but seven of the tens of thousands of people I’ve met in my journey,

and I've chosen them because they've embraced their potential and are determined to make the most of it, stretch it beyond all expectations, pursue their own greatness, and live an extraordinary life that all of us—all of us ordinary, everyday people just like them—can emulate and lean on as an inspiration. Alphabetically by first name, here are our subjects:

ANDRE



The first thing you notice upon meeting Andre Wicks is his posture. Upright, proud, and secure, his presence is larger than his physical frame. That sort of self-confidence is essential in his work life—as a school administrator, he encounters all sorts of situations on a daily basis that force him to exude a calm, cool demeanor. And as a servant leader, this allows him to focus on building others up.

Raised Black by bi-racial parents on a farm in rural Washington, Andre endured a challenging childhood and built his self-identity by assimilation, blending toil and struggles with ambition and focus. Now with four bi-racial children of his own, Andre lives a life aligned with his values, beliefs, and purpose. In his own words, “There’s no sense in walking to preach, unless your walking is your preaching. And I’m walking every minute of every day.”

Andre takes his position as an educator, a parent, and a role model as a calling to live in a way that inspires and encourages others. His past work as the director of The ZoNE Project, a collaborative neighborhood revitalization effort in an impoverished area of Spokane, Washington, shines a light on his desire to impact others’ lives in as many ways as

possible: “Quite plainly, my role on this planet is to help others become their best self. It’s that simple.”

BROOKE



One look at Brooke Knight’s résumé, and you’d be hard-pressed not to think he was destined for greatness from the get-go. As a successful small-business owner in a tough market (mortgages) and a multiple-time Australian national champion baseball coach, he must have had something special coded in his DNA, right?

“Go back 30 years, and I don’t know how many really believed there was something more ahead for me, besides my parents,” Brooke says. Undersized and only somewhat gifted athletically, he cultivated a chip on his shoulder. That’s right: cultivated. “I used the lack of expectations to drive me. I’ve always been the underdog. I’ve had to fight for nearly everything I’ve ever earned.” He set his sights high and refused to accept anything less. As a non-scholarship walk-on, he made the football team *and* the baseball team at Oregon State University . . . and earned scholarships in *both*.

The underdog mentality still exists. Driven and indefatigably persistent, Brooke insists upon one thing: a best effort—from himself and his colleagues, his players, even his family members. “When I set a goal—when *we* set a goal—we’re going to achieve it, or at least do everything within our power to get there. There’s no alternative—at least not one worth discussing.”

CHELSEA



When A.A. Milne created his beloved characters to accompany Winnie-the-Pooh and Christopher Robin in the Hundred Acre Wood, he needed one to demonstrate exuberance, pure joy, and boundless energy. Though Tigger himself says, “The most wonderful thing about Tiggers is that I’m the only one,” it’s quite possible that the human manifestation of Tigger is Chelsea Averna.

A fitness wonk in the Pacific Northwest, Chelsea spends her days in the studio teaching barre, cycling, dance, and all sorts of other exercise classes. As a cycling instructor, her primary charge is to bring energy and movement into a room full of people on stationary bicycles. And that she does! With alternating combinations of encouragement, direct challenges, flashing lights, enthusiastic screaming, thumping music, rhythmic directions, and motivational discourse, Chelsea’s Tiggerish positive energy is bouncing off the walls.

Is it an act? Nope. “That’s who I am. I needed that positive outlook when I was couch-hopping and dreaming of joining the circus.” With divorced parents, homeless, and living in a car, Chelsea could have resigned herself to struggle; instead, she channeled her mental approach toward college, made the cheer squad, and has landed professional positions that match her natural tendencies. “In order to do what I do and do it well, you’ve got to be a little crazy, a little amped-up,” she says. “And you’ve got to love it!”

DEREK



Take a moment and envision a professional athlete. For most of us, the mere idea of it conjures up images of larger-than-life figures: toned (if not bulging) muscles, human beings developed almost beyond comprehension, capable of doing near-otherworldly things with their bodies.

And then there's Derek Garcia. Five-foot-nine and 150 pounds soaking wet, Derek once struggled to run as much as three miles without taking a break, couldn't swim, and didn't own a bicycle. And now? He's a professional triathlete, regularly competing in some of the planet's most grueling Ironman courses: swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 more, and then—finally—running a complete 26.2-mile marathon. How did this transformation happen?

"Little by little," he explains. "Dedication to a goal and relentless, almost monotonous repetition of behaviors that create habits. Habits turn into strengths, and strengths combine to propel me toward my goals. Honestly, it's been a remarkable journey." Derek instills this work ethic in his three sons, knowing that it's a recipe for success in any walk of life. "I want my kids to do well in whatever their passions are," he says. "And I know they will."

JENNIFER



When Jennifer left high school in San Diego, she didn't know exactly what her future held; she just knew she loved basketball. It didn't take long, as a freshman at UC Davis, to earn the nickname "Silk" for her smooth play on the court and her quiet leadership off it. After a successful career playing overseas, she pursued her passion back in the States as a head coach.

Now, having returned to her college alma mater, she serves as the head women's basketball coach at UC Davis. After another record-setting season in 2020-21, she earned her fifth consecutive Big West Conference Coach of the Year Award. Is that what drives her? Not remotely. "I use basketball as a way to help our student-athletes develop and advance a core set of values that will help them be successful—in basketball and beyond," she says. Her coaching position is simply a platform to serve others.

Positive, enthusiastic, passionate, and caring, Jennifer has remained as humble and confident as a big-time coach as she was as a freshman distributing the ball to her teammates. Married with two children, she is committed to bringing out the best in the people around her.

MATT



When I first met Matt, it was on a golf course in Hawai'i, early in the morning before any other golfers were around. Since we had both arrived alone, we agreed to play together. I asked whether he was vacationing, and he told me he was actually there working. He said he was an actor. For the life of me, I didn't recognize him, and it took him listing several roles before I finally heard one I knew. And we golfed, just two guys on a quiet course.

I think it was his relative anonymity (to me) that made us connect. Years later, he explained: "I'm not an actor because I want fortune and fame and for people to take pictures of me. I'm an artist. I would be doing this at a local dinner theater if I had to. I was born to do this one thing."

Living in California with his wife and three kids, Matt Lillard is an authentic, genuine human being. "I'm quick to show who I am," he says. "There's no barrier between me and anger, or joy, or passion, or any emotion. All of these are valid colors of my rainbow." His commitment to the craft and to the impact it has on others is evident in his work, his love for his family, and his many other pursuits.

TAMMY



Look up “fierce” in the dictionary and you’ll be sure to see a photo of Tammy Campbell next to it. The little girl, raised by a single, teenage mom in Louisiana, is now the superintendent of a school district outside of Seattle, Washington. How did that happen?

“I had teachers who believed in me,” says Tammy. “They planted that belief in me, allowing my potential and capabilities to take hold.” Although all the indicators of her childhood pointed her in the direction of failure, she refused to accept her conditions as destiny. She dedicated herself to her schooling and became the first in her family to graduate from college. With ambitions to become a doctor, once she had children and taught them to read and learn, a new fire—to become an educator—was ignited.

Unsettled by the inequities of our school systems and the inconsistency of teaching practices, she became a teacher, a principal, and now a superintendent. “I want to lead positive change,” she explains. “The systems need leadership and direction.” By impacting the system at its core, and with relentlessness, impatience, and tenacity, Tammy is able to leverage equity, influence, and positivity for every single child within her scope. “There’s too much at stake to focus on anything else. I want to do right by students.”

A PREVIEW

Well, there they are. In the chapters that follow, I'll share the trajectories, achievements, characteristics, and lessons accompanying these seven subjects, answering this critical question:



**What led these ordinary people to
live extraordinary lives?**

They have many commonalities, to be sure, yet each is unique and has gifts to offer us. We can learn from their journeys, and we can approach our own asymptotes. In due time, we'll unpack the *je ne sais quoi* that each possesses that makes their influence so profound and replicable. Because believe it or not, folks—we've all got our own *je ne sais quoi* that can help us to achieve our goals and move us forward. Success, joy, happiness, peace, whatever it is you're looking for . . . it's not that mysterious after all.

Compiling my notes from interviews, discussions, travels, and interactions with each of the seven—which sum to 132 years of direct person-to-person observations—I've sorted what I refer to as the 13 “Key Learnings” of living a happy, virtuous, good life into four big themes, or tenets. Here are the four tenets (to honor Plato, I've given them Greek names; for the rest of us, I've added English translations) and the Key Learnings contained within each:

Tenet 1: *Gnóthi seautón* (Know thyself). We begin our exploration by looking inward, examining the very spirit and essence of ourselves. In order to begin to identify what sort of future we want for ourselves and our fellow travelers, we must truly and deeply understand our strengths, our weaknesses, our core values, our fears, and our reality.

Chapter 1: Key Learning #1: Clean your mirror

Chapter 2: Key Learning #2: Strengthen your core

Chapter 3: Key Learning #3: It's bigger than you

Chapter 4: Key Learning #4: Seek out your antelopes

Tenet 2: *Douleía gia agápi* (Work for love). With some clarity about ourselves in hand, we'll shift our focus to our ideal future—our ideal life. Defining success in great detail allows us to identify our passions and calling, formulate a goal, create a game plan, and begin to live a life with greater intentionality and purpose.

Chapter 5: Key Learning #5: Clarity precedes competence

Chapter 6: Key Learning #6: Behold the cardinal

Chapter 7: Key Learning #7: Stay out of the cornfield

Tenet 3: *Afíste to fos sas na lámpsei* (Let your light shine). Once on the path, we know we'll encounter highs and lows. Using the power of positivity, we'll reframe challenges, embrace adversity, and earnestly seek out the silver linings in every cloud. We can tackle any challenge when we bring our own energy into the arena.

Chapter 8: Key Learning #8: Let it be this time

Chapter 9: Key Learning #9: Embrace disequilibrium . . . and then reframe it

Chapter 10: Key Learning #10: Bring your own energy

Tenet 4: *Kyverníste tin iméra* (Rule the day). Pursuing our clear goals with a nimble mind gets us started. And at any given point in the journey, the reality of the moment is that's where we are—wherever we

are, doing whatever we're doing. Success over the long run dictates that we immerse ourselves in the moment—and give it our all—in each and every moment.

Chapter 11: Key Learning #11: Be there

Chapter 12: Key Learning #12: Rise up

Chapter 13: Key Learning #13: Put your feet on the floor—it's the only way to soar

Before we get into those details, though, I must ask for your indulgence with two additional steps:

FIRST, WHO AM I?

When you pick up a book off the shelf (or download it from a virtual bookcase), it's because something drew you to it. Maybe it was the title, the cover art, the idea, or a recommendation from a friend or colleague. In this case, it probably wasn't the author's name. So who is Pete Hall?

PETE



Like the seven extraordinarily ordinary people you've already met, Pete is simply a regular guy. He's a fellow traveler on this journey—a husband, father, son, brother, uncle, friend, coach, confidant, colleague. He has served as a teacher, school principal, small-business owner, personal coach, professional mentor, author, speaker, and many other roles, each with one overarching goal: the pursuit of *-er*. He's always wanted a better

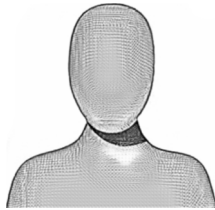
life for himself, a happier existence for those he's fortunate enough to come into contact with, and a more virtuous experience for all of us.

There was a time that he was sure he was destined to become the shortstop for the Boston Red Sox. Now he finds tremendous joy in simply being able to reach far enough to don his red socks every morning. He believes our attitude determines our altitude, which is to say that our mindset and mental approach can elevate us to greater accomplishments, a heightened sense of being, and a clearer idea of the path to joy, happiness, success . . . whatever rabbits we each, individually, pursue.

He is interested, like you are and like Plato before us was, in living a happy, virtuous, and good life. He'd like to blend passion and profession. He'd like to have an impact beyond himself. He'd like to encircle himself with joy, love, peace, and positive energy—for him, his family, his companions, you, and those who follow—perhaps even 2,400 years from now. And he'd like to do that starting right now.

SECOND, WHO ARE YOU?

You



The profiles of the seven individuals (plus the author) are each written in around 200 words. They're designed to invite you into their experience, get a sense of who they are as human beings, and convey something unique and special about them. So now it's your turn. In 200 words or so, describe yourself, your life, and/or any other element of your being that best conveys who you are as a person. Try to write it in the third person as I did, using your name and preferred pronouns.

YOUR TURN

Throughout this book, I've sprinkled little icons of “pause” buttons to encourage you to pause for a moment and reflect on an idea, a quote, a practice, or an application to your life. That's quite intentional, and if you know me personally through my work as a leadership consultant, as an executive coach, as Uncle Pete, or simply as a fellow traveler, you know it's consistent with how I operate—and it's an approach that our seven subjects have likewise taken to heart.

How we allocate our mental energy to reflect on a situation is the factor most likely to initiate change. We don't learn from our actions; we learn through self-reflection as we process, contemplate, assess, evaluate, hypothesize, and consider our actions. And in my experience, nothing generates deeper, more thorough, and more valuable reflection than a well-crafted, timely question. It's a practice that Plato employed with tremendous impact, and I'd like to follow in his footsteps in this regard.¹

Write wherever and however you choose. There are no right or wrong answers, only your own truth, so feel free to edit and revise as needed to capture your true essence.

1 During my two decades in school leadership, I dug into the topic and published five books in which self-reflection was the central theme. The big takeaway I want to share with you? Frequent, accurate, rigorous self-reflection can be a powerful driver in growth, progress, and the pursuit of a happy, virtuous, good life.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Go back and reread your profile as if you were reading about a stranger. What do you notice? What emotions do you feel as you read about yourself? If you were to revise it, what would you change? Why?

Why did you pick up this book? If you're interested in reading further, why? What calls you to continue this investigation?



As you continue your journey throughout this book, visit www.StriveSS.com/thebook for tips, tools, templates, and other resources to augment your learning and growing (and striving) experience.