

**START WITH  
YOUR GIFT**

# START WITH YOUR GIFT

UNDERSTAND AND MONETIZE IT WHILE SERVING OTHERS

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**opie**  
PRESS

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## INTRODUCTION

Young athletes often look at college and professional players as talented people who have depended on God-given gifts to excel in their sport. Over the course of my playing, coaching, and teaching experience, I have observed that this is a big and bold myth! Talent on the field and in life excels in the first quarter and may endure until the second quarter. But it gives out in the second half, and the athletes with talent *and discipline* thrive, particularly in the second half of competition and life.



*That's me on the right giving teammate, Dan Pratt, a high five after scoring a goal in the 1985 NCAA Division 1 National Championship against Johns Hopkins. Hopkins went on to defeat us for the second time in a row in the finals. I would trade that goal for a national championship any day!*

## INTRODUCTION

I have seen too many talented athletes who never acquired the ingredients for success (integrity, effort, and care) and, consequently, lose out on so many great opportunities. I'm a former Syracuse University (SU) and US National Team athlete. Every time I see a college team competing on television, I think about the fact that, more than likely, I'm not seeing their best competing on the team's roster. Their best players may not even be watching from the sideline. Some of the best players in terms of talent lacked the emotional maturity and discipline to get their act together and give their best effort to make it onto the field or court. The athletes who get playing time are those who have learned how to make good choices, work hard, and care about others.

As a high school senior applying to colleges, I received one rejection letter after another, and, consequently, I became depressed. I felt like a failure. Great athletes also experience a similar depression when their playing careers come to a slow or sudden end. For the first time in decades, they have had to think about life after sports—something that great athletes often resist contemplating. When you're good, you feel invincible until you experience a career-ending injury or the powers that be decide you're overpaid or underperforming and release you.

I had to learn some hard lessons such as starting out with understanding who God created me to be and what gifts he put on the inside of me. It took a long time for me to come to that understanding, but this book, if you read it carefully, can keep you from being a wandering generality and/or great athlete focused on obtaining superficial goals such as wins, championships, and individual honors such as All-American status and inductions to Halls of Fame. If you have the genetics, work ethic, and the opportunity to play on a great team you will more than likely achieve the accolades just mentioned. However, it is not going to fill the hole in your soul that comes from the pursuit of personal gain and the myth of more—more wins, more accolades, more money, more degrees and titles, and more pleasure.

I hit my stride in life later than you should have to after I made the choice to focus on growing and maturing on a daily basis and understanding the importance of diligence, which I define as a consistent movement toward excellence. Now let me be clear: I am focused on obtaining excellence in each and everything I do in life with the understanding that I'm a human being with all kinds of frailties and imperfections. But I'm going to grow more and enjoy more as a person aiming for excellence than the person that aims for nothing or little that is excellent. If you aim for nothing you will hit it every time!

This book is my attempt to get the younger version of me to stop

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acting like normal people who are spending too much time and money on sports. In this book, I unpack my thoughts and decisions over five decades as a person who has been embedded in youth, high school, and college education and athletics. As journalists have been embedding themselves in military units in Iraq and Afghanistan, I similarly have done the same in athletics and education. We need to stop the madness and focus on first things first. That is what gift God placed in you to be of service to others and to make an income. It is the best place and space to develop your gift. I am convinced that that is the most appropriate recipe for living and giving and having a great and impacting life in the process.

I talk openly about my faith in this book because it's a central part of who I am and my journey, and it may or may not be the same with you. You don't have to be a person of faith to benefit from reading the book. In fact, I invite you to skip the sections of the book in which I share my faith as well as scriptures relevant to a point if that works for you. I don't want to force you to believe what I believe or how I believe. The best way I can explain it is you can't get into water without getting wet and I can't explain what I've learned that has led me to write this book without occasionally sharing about my faith. What I've written is a recipe book for making well-adjusted people who, I would argue, are somewhat of an endangered species. Maybe you do, but I don't know many well-adjusted people who are excelling on and off the field and don't need to abuse drugs and/or alcohol to cope with the challenges of life that come to us all. This is a recipe book for finding a vocation that feels like a vacation and one for great athletes long after their playing days are over. If you are a great athlete, enjoy the season of competition that you're in and then prepare for an even more enjoyable life thereafter. Getting released and/or fired can be a great opportunity to enter a career doing the kind of work you have been gifted to do. This is a story of how I developed this recipe first in my own life. As you will read, just like any good baker, I made lots of bad batches of cookies before I perfected the recipe. If you had success, you need to reflect and document what you did so that you can repeat the outcome as well as improve on it.

There are several themes that you'll see throughout this book. First, it's a look at the journey to developing the recipe I am sharing in this book. I invite you into the multiple locker rooms of my life, sharing some of my biggest mistakes and worst decisions so that you don't have to make them in your own life. Second, you'll get my halftime speeches so you can get your life on track to achieve what you want on and off the field or court. Third, you'll read about my car, which serves as a metaphor for my working career.

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My journey can best be described as periods in which I needed an engine overhaul, regular maintenance, roadside assistance, and realignments.

I share tips in which I sincerely hope you'll take out your pen and make notes on the page and in the margins to get the most out of what I'm sharing. I'm going to recommend books for you to read that I have gleaned from in preparing this book. Go to your local library or purchase them.

What I have written here is designed to be a recipe book to make over your life and get you to the place where you know what your gifts are, you've surrounded yourself with great mentors, you're plugged into the right type of training for using your gifts, you work the plan (including getting a great internship), and you're on the road in the vehicles/jobs that get you to the place you want to be five to ten years from now.

Once you get to the point where the recipe is producing great results in your life, I want you to live and give back like nobody else. I want you to make an impact on the world around you by paying back everything you've learned from taking a deep dive into this book and using the ingredients in the recipe. I worked the recipe and the recipe has worked for me, so it can work for you if you put it to work and trust the process. Eighty percent of the reason why successful people get ahead is the effort and focus they have in their life. The other 20 percent comes from the gifts and abilities that God gives to each of us. So, what am I saying? Focus on the 80 percent you can control and stop making excuses for failures that you're wallowing in now.

I have been on teams with losing seasons and on teams with winning seasons. Winning is a whole lot better! One of my favorite scriptures is Hosea 4:6, which tells me what you don't know can destroy you. Knowing how to do better is part of the process of winning in life: It's closely associated with choosing to learn valuable insights and apply them to one's life. But the opposite is also true. Think about it. What you don't know can destroy you, cause you to lose, and it keep you from ever getting ahead in life! That says to me that you want to put a premium on obtaining knowledge and wisdom.

What's the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Knowledge is information, and wisdom is the ability to apply it in every decision you make in life. *Life is full of decisions that can cause you to get ahead or cause you to fall behind.* A definition of wisdom that I heard Senior Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City share in a series of sermons he did on the book of Proverbs that I like is, *Wisdom is knowing how things really work and are and what to do because of those insights.*

What you're about to read will only give you the ability to make over being ignorant, which, in my book, means being unaware. You need to

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move beyond knowing the right thing to do and make a conscious decision to *do* the right thing. The rejection of knowledge is a sad thing. As Maya Angelou once said, "When you know better, you can do better."

Another one of my favorite scriptures is Romans 10:17, which tells me that *faith*—the unlimited, inexhaustible power of God—comes from hearing the word of God and hearing it over and over and over again—I can change myself for the better. I can transform my stinking thinking so that I have a renewed ability to make wise choices (see Romans 12:1-2). If I can change how I think for the better, that truly is a miracle! I can change how I view problems and situations that I don't like and focus on what I can impact instead of having a pity party about the impact of others on me. I learned that with God all things are possible, including changing the recipe I have been using to make short- and long-term decisions in my life about my career (see Matthew 19:26).

I'm an auditory learner, so I took Romans 10:17 to heart and committed to hearing the word of God day and night to build the kind of faith necessary to change my thinking and, as a result, the outcomes in my life. I'm not asking you to do the same unless you want the results you will read about in this book. The minute I hit the ground in the morning, I plug my headset into my smartphone, turn the Bible app on, and start listening to and hearing the word of God. Why? Because I believe the nugget of truth, "garbage in, garbage out" and, conversely, "*wisdom in, wisdom out.*"

I learned long ago that the Bible calls the word of God the wisdom of God. Think about that. By listening to the word of God first thing in the morning, I'm filling myself with the wisdom of the God of the universe! That's an awesome thought to me. What is the first thing you listen to when you get up? What do you fill yourself up with right *before* you go to bed? Is it uplifting or is it depressing; is it inspiring or is it discouraging? We are, in many regards, the totality of what we hear and choose to believe.

We've all had the experience of driving past a recently killed skunk. Skunks have a protective strategy—a gland that allows them to spray a terribly pungent and awful odor that repels their adversaries. When a car runs over the skunk and ruptures that gland, even if you don't drive directly over the skunk your car becomes doused with that odor, and it stinks to high heaven! Similarly, when you allow yourself to be around negative content, particularly first thing in the morning and before going to bed, your thoughts become stinking thinking. And we act based on what we think, both positively and negatively.

This recipe book is for those who want to join a special forces unit in

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life—a civilian version of the Army Rangers or the Navy SEALs. We need some folks committed to making a positive impact on the world around us, particularly in the world of sports. The image we are getting today of athletes is nuts, and the examples they're setting are contributing to the problems around us, because people follow athletes, whether we like it or not.

Follow the recipe in this cookbook if you're interested in producing better results in your life and making a difference. If not, leave this book on the shelf and give somebody else the opportunity to read it.

As you will see, I love sayings, quotes, and mantras, so here's a question to live by: *Do you want to be comfortable or do you want to be committed?*

Fred Opie  
Natick, Massachusetts  
2017

## CHAPTER 1

# Recognizing Your Gift

**Y**ou may have low self-esteem from the failure you have experienced to this point in your life, but I'm here to tell you that God doesn't make mistakes, and he has given you—yes, you!—a very special gift that makes you unique and distinctive. A gift that gives you the ability to stand out, to be outstanding. But the problem is that many of us have been wallowing around in life with that sad sack over our heads, feeling sorry for ourselves because we think we don't have a gift. You do have a gift. The fact that you haven't recognized it yet, exercised it, and developed it doesn't mean that you don't have one. I repeat: You have a gift from God that we need! Ephesians 4:8, 1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy 1:6 clearly show that God has given you a gift; however, it is up to you to activate that gift and not neglect it. We'll talk more about how to activate and develop it later in the book.

It's been my observation that athletes tend to focus on their athletic gifts and overlook nonathletic gifts. It's like the folks I see in some weight rooms who have great upper bodies but continue to focus on their upper-body muscles and neglect their lower-body muscles. Here's my theory on why athletes don't develop their nonathletic gifts: it's because, as humans, we have a need for praise. We naturally go in the direction where we receive it the most. Often, fathers are guilty for allowing this to happen in their children, particularly their male children. As Joe Ehrmann discusses in his book, *InSideOut Coaching*, men have been socialized to associate masculinity with three things—athletic ability, sexually exploiting women,

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and wealth. As Joe puts it, older men, particularly professional athletes, influence us to focus on achieving on the ball field, in the bedroom, and the billfold (a wallet full with money).<sup>1</sup> We focus on athletic performance to the neglect of other areas of our lives. It's unfortunate but true. If you don't think so, go to a middle school athletic event and then go to a middle school theater event, spelling bee, or other nonathletic event. You will see dozens of fathers attending the athletic event and predominately women at the nonathletic events. This is true of dads living in the same house with their children and dads living outside the home of their children.

Dr. Kevin Leman's book *Planet Middle School* describes a time in our life in which so many changes are happening, in addition to going through puberty.<sup>2</sup> I attended Pierre Van Cortlandt Middle School in my hometown of Croton-on-Hudson, New York, about thirty-five miles north of New York City. Middle school was tough for me. An experience that remains etched in my mind is Spanish class. I give the teacher the benefit of the doubt that he did not mean to shame me in front of my peers, time after time asking me questions that, in my view, confirmed just how little Spanish I knew, but that's what it felt like. He would ask me a question in Spanish that I did not understand and that made me feel like fleeing. As soon as I could, I dropped the class, immaturely avoiding another challenge. What's funny is that to earn a PhD in history I had to learn Spanish! I learned to love it and later became proficient.

School officials in my school district and my parents did what they thought right to help me as a child with attention deficit disorder (ADD). I received a diagnosis around 1973. At the same time, I lacked the maturity to work hard and seek help with my schoolwork, choosing instead to take the road of least resistance. As author Simon Sinek puts it, I didn't have a *why* to give me the power of purpose to plow through the difficult moments that come while completing homework assignments and exams.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, I had a love of sports that allowed me to push through and read, for example, all the content the Croton Free Library had about hockey. As I have gotten older, I've realized that one of my gifts is the ability to do research.

In middle school I started watching ice hockey during the height of Hall of Famer Bobby Orr's career with the Boston Bruins.<sup>4</sup> Watching him sparked my short-lived hockey career, which started in a house league hosted at the now-defunct Westchester Skating Rink in Hawthorne, New York. I played hockey from the sixth grade until my senior year in high school. Some of you are questioning, you grew up playing hockey? A black kid growing up playing hockey sounds just as crazy as southerner Dave

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Ramsey who also grew up playing hockey in Tennessee and both are true. The frequent 6:00 a.m. ice times that required me to get up on my own at 5:00 a.m., wake my parents up, and get my gear on and into the car instilled a self-discipline that continues to benefit me today. In addition, the eye, hand, talk, and stick skills I acquired playing hockey, I would argue, made me a better lacrosse player, particularly with ground balls. By the way, lacrosse is Canada's national sport—not hockey. The games complement each other. I still skate today but no longer play lacrosse.<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to hockey I developed excellent research and study skills! And here's the point: love for something gives us the ability to push through difficulties. As early as you can identify the things that are legal and moral that you love, learn more about them. Ultimately, my love for sports gave me the ability to work hard in college, which allowed me to remain eligible to play the game I loved. Later, after about age twenty-five, my frontal cortex became fully functional, and I had the ability to understand the importance of education. Before then, I could not have cared less for school except for the fact that it was necessary to be eligible to play lacrosse.

It's been my observation that we, as young adults, in most instances, don't lack the ability to do well in school. *Many of us lack an understanding of why we should take school seriously and give our best effort*, and we don't have the love of learning necessary to make it through the highs and lows that happen in the process of learning. Secondly, in this quick-fix culture we live in, *most of us need training to develop great work habits*. We need to understand that *constructive criticism is part of the formula of succeeding in life*. I've seen this during my twenty-plus years of teaching and coaching. In armed combat in Afghanistan or Iraq as a member of the US Armed Forces, getting shot is one of the reasons you later get medals, but we live in a world in which people want medals but don't want to get shot.

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What do you do that's off the hook and you barely break a sweat in the process? A gift is not limited to sports and entertainment. There are many other options. Can you make a meal out of virtually nothing in the refrigerator? Are you able to walk into a situation that others see as hopeless and see great opportunities? Do you have the ability to give advice to friends who are confused about what to do next in life and clearly point out the helpful path ahead? Are you a great listener? Can you organize a room in



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disarray? Do you love animals? Can you build websites? Are you great at building things with your hands or inventing things? Do you love working out and showing others how to get in shape? Do you love negotiating and/or settling disputes? Do you love giving manicures and pedicures? Can you easily take electronic gadgets apart and put them back together? Do you love designing logos? Do love travel? Do you enjoy camping and roughing it? What is it that God has gifted you to do and enjoy? When we use our gift to serve others we feel satisfaction while receiving compensation in the process.<sup>6</sup>

Here's what I've learned over the years: my job is not my gift. It is a place where I use my gift. Second, I use my gift in many aspects of my life, including in my relationships with other people. My gift has always been with me but I have not always been aware of it. It was there on my first day of school many years ago and when we moved from one community to another. It was there when I graduated from high school but I still had no clue what it was and how to monetize it. And even when I didn't understand it my gift existed because I did. My gift and your gift is bigger than a single job. My unique gift has and your gift will make room for you in numerous spaces and places.<sup>7</sup> For example, after I came to the knowledge of my gift of teaching and coaching, it started making room for me in all kinds of situation circumstances. It gave me invitations to use it in schools; at banquets and conferences; in articles, books, newspapers, and magazines; on podcast, radio, and television. When I'm on TV, I'm teaching people. When I'm coaching, I'm teaching people. When I'm in a documentary film, I'm teaching people. When I'm on a podcast, I'm teaching people. When I'm on YouTube, I'm teaching people. When I'm on the History Channel, I'm teaching people. I take my gift with me wherever I go and I use it to open doors to opportunities to serve others and earn an income. Often, I use my gift for free to serve others and have an impact on the world around me.

Ken Coleman, author of *One Question: Life-Changing Answers from Today's Leading Voices*, and Christie Wright, the author of *Business Boutique: A Woman's Guide for Making Money Doing What She Loves*, provide excellent suggestions on how to learn what your gift is. Coleman suggests that we make the following list:

1. The top three things you do best
2. Get feedback from your first list from three people who know you best
3. List what you value, talk about, and do the most
4. List three ways you can act on what you learn from your list

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Christie Wright uses five questions to help people understand their gift:

1. What do you enjoy?
2. What is effortless for you?
3. Where do you excel in relationship to other people?
4. What gives you energy?
5. What do others encourage in you?

The ability to do research easily and enjoy the process is one of my gifts. Most of us have one or two primary gifts and talents and one or two secondary gifts and talents. My second primary gift is teaching and coaching. Throughout my youth sports experience and as a high school athlete, I was never selected as a team captain. However, by my senior year in high school, my gift as a teacher began pouring out of my mouth. My high school lacrosse teammate, Ed Podhast, sarcastically gave me the nickname coach because I spent so much time during practice and games trying to instruct teammates on how to play.

Years later a roommate came home late one evening. My door was closed and the light was on in my room. From my room, he heard what sounded like I was teaching a class. When I opened the door and came out, he peeked into my room to see who was there; to his surprise, it was empty. I had created a teaching outline and had been recording content. I was putting my teaching gift in motion and visualizing that I was standing before a packed auditorium teaching people. I did that several times and still have the recordings that I listen to from time to time. Just yesterday morning, I gave such a talk in a college auditorium to a group of student athletes.

In terms of sports, early in my life I learned that I had an above-average sports aptitude that included a competitive nature, drive, eye-hand coordination, and a love of competition that made practicing against better opponents a pleasure instead of a pain. *A commitment to getting better and the drive to do so is a hallmark of gifted athletes who experience achievement beyond sandlot ball and recreation leagues.* Throughout my life, I've struggled with being too competitive when playing games and turning off my teacher speak when I'm not called on to teach. What I'm saying is that every gift and talent pushed to its extreme irritates those around us, particularly our family, friends, and teammates.

As I mentioned, I grew up in a village called Croton-on-Hudson, a beautiful suburb of New York City on the Hudson River. There were acres of woods around my house and I explored as much of them as I could before

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the land became overdeveloped with houses. These enjoyable experiences in the woods led me to think about becoming a forest ranger. As I had been in the habit of doing from a very young age, I went to our local public library and started doing research on that career. Keep in mind that I was doing this as an elementary school child. In eighth or ninth grade, I had the opportunity to work as a member of a youth conservation corps, a government program that put youth to work maintaining state parks throughout Westchester County, where I lived. The experience of working in the heat and in close proximity to hungry mosquitoes changed my mind about becoming a ranger and any career working in the great outdoors.



*Me trying to chase down Yorktown All-American midfielder, Rob Hoynes, in a 1981 high school game at Yorktown. Hoynes, a great guy, went on to play and earn All-American honors at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. We played together down in the old Freeport league on Long Island and against each other in college.*

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When I made the transition from junior to senior year in high school, the reality of graduation hit me. Sports was something I loved, and most sports came relatively easy to me. In high school, I earned All-County honors my senior year, which, considering the district I played in, was no small feat. However, I barely made a blip on the screens of college recruiters. I received two letters from Division III coaches and applied to those schools—the State University of New York at Cortland and Hobart Colleges—but failed to gain admission to either. When my mother talked to my guidance counselor about finding an appropriate school for me, the counselor suggested Herkimer County Community College (HCCC) in the Mohawk Valley, because high school teammates of mine had played lacrosse there the previous year.

*Yup, that's me in the front with hair, wearing number seven, and thinking I'm too cool for school in the spring of 1982. This was taken during my first year as a Herkimer General in front of the athletic department at Herkimer County Community College located in New York's Mohawk Valley between Albany and Syracuse.*



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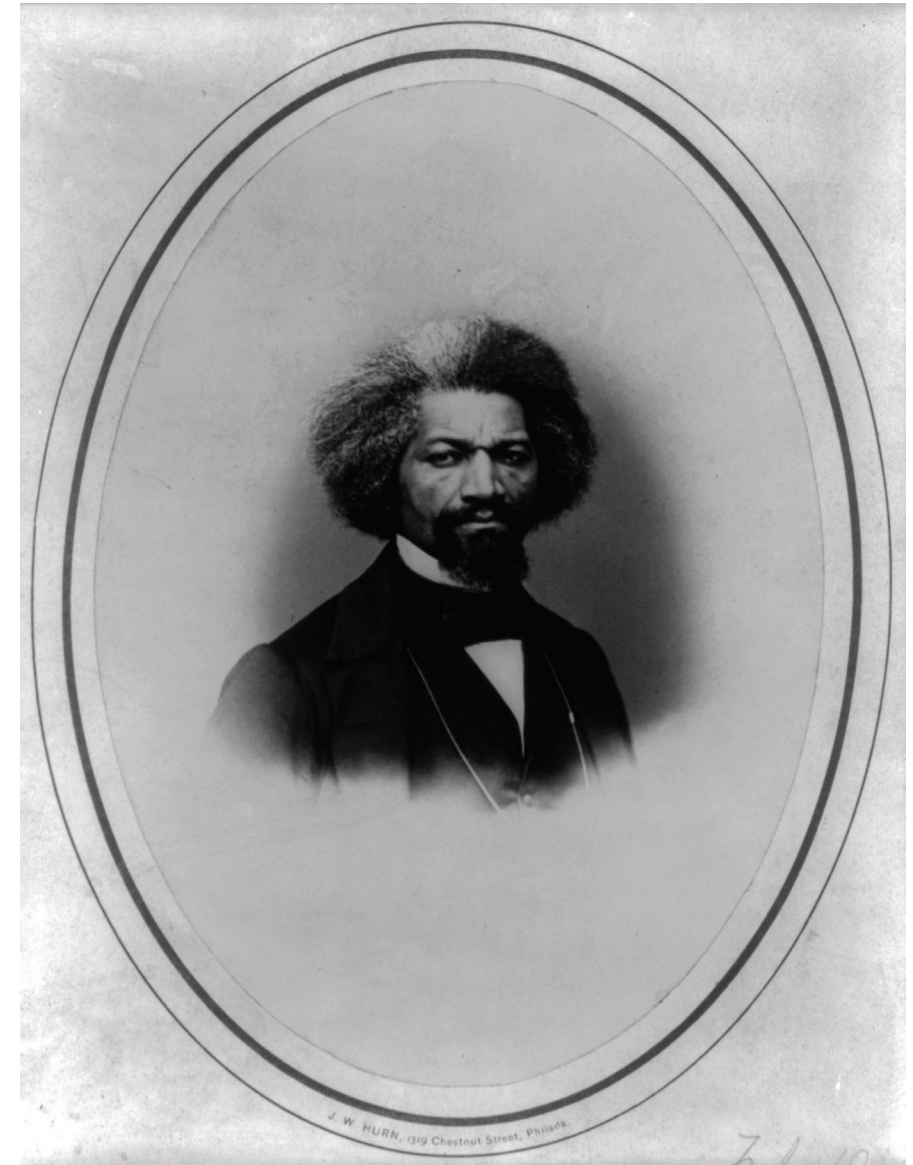
I enrolled at HCCC in the fall of 1981. At the end of the semester, the players from my high school lacrosse team had failed out of school, leaving me the last Crotonite. My many years as a college professor since then led me to think that they had not been ready to make the commitment necessary to succeed in college at the time. I've seen this happen on more than one occasion with students. College isn't for everyone. I would suggest that you not make an expensive investment in a college education until you know what your gift is. You are better off working together with professionals to find the right training space for your gift and for when you are ready to develop it. Get your gifts and talents assessed carefully. We'll talk more about this topic later in the chapter on getting the right training for your gift.

In 1988, I had been out of college for a little more than two and a half years. I was in my mid-twenties, single, living at home with my folks and paying rent to them, and working as a physical education teacher in the Danbury Public School system in Danbury, Connecticut. I needed a master's degree to meet the educational requirement to obtain tenure as a public schoolteacher, but I had no clue what to study in graduate school.

One day I saw a poster advertising a free, six-week evening career exploration course at a local public library in Westchester County. That was one of the best courses I have ever taken—and I have a high school degree, an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a PhD! I also teach courses for a living, so I know a bit about teaching and content. My classmates in the course were mostly older than me; they seemed like people who either wanted or had to do what I have come to call *a career makeover*.

During the course, we took diagnostic tests and had discussions about our gifts, talents, and abilities. All indicators showed a strong direction toward teaching history. I had started reading the history books in my parents' home after my mother had given me the autobiography of my namesake, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who was born on the Eastern Shore of Maryland about three decades before the US Civil War.<sup>8</sup> I also read the autobiography of Malcolm X, who had also undertaken a self-directed education focusing on history.<sup>9</sup> By the time the course was over, it was clear that I should be teaching history at the college level.

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*An 1862 portrait of my namesake, Frederick Douglass, courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

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*Malcolm X, right, greeting Martin Luther King, 1964, courtesy of the Library of Congress*

The second most important course that helped me identify my gifts and talents was also free. As a graduate student, I joined a church that had an extensive new member orientation. In addition to learning the essential history of the church and the ABCs of the Christian faith, the last section of the orientation focused on understanding your spiritual gifts. I learned that God has given everyone a gift to serve for the greater good of society.

But for now I want to hammer home the point that you do have a gift, and, in most instances, more than one gift. Let me give you an illustration that will help clarify this point. I live about a ten-minute drive from work. When I need time to get away and knock out some writing I will go to my office on the weekend. Last week I packed up my computer, got in the car, and headed to the office. However, when I got there I reached into my pocket for the key to the building where my office is housed and I couldn't

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find it. I looked all over my car, in my computer bag, and in all my pockets. In frustration, I returned home. I continued to look for the key to get into the office the next day. It was frustrating because I'm very intentional about being organized, which means I put my keys in the same place so that I don't lose them. After looking around the house for about thirty minutes, I gave up and started getting ready for bed. As I was getting undressed, I took off a belt that holds my smartphone when I'm exercising. The belt has a pocket for the smartphone and a smaller pocket where I keep my driver's license and school ID. There I found my office key. I had the key the entire time but forgot where I put it.

I think you know where I'm going. Many of us have a gift from God but we don't know it, and we continue to wander through life trying to discover how to enter the right career door. You will never be able to enter the right career door without discovering the gifts that God has given you. Know now that you have gifts from God that he has given you to serve others. One of Zig Ziglar's many mantras is, "You can have everything in life you want, if you will just help other people get what they want."<sup>10</sup> Think about that. If you use your God-given gifts to help others, in the process you will get what you need, want, and desire. Too many people are like the little boy Jimmy who prayed to God, "Gimme gimme gimme; my name is Jimmy." What if Jimmy had prayed, "Lord, show me what my gift is and how to use it to meet the needs of others"?

It gives me tremendous joy when I have the opportunity to use my gift of teaching others. I teach professionally and I teach pro bono, and in both scenarios I get fired up because I love teaching. As I like to say, I have a vocation that feels more like a vacation. Don't get me wrong. Your gift doesn't mean you're going to travel down the road of life without ever needing a snowplow. No, the storms of life will come, but when you stay in the lane where God has gifted you, you will learn something valuable that will be a blessing to you and others, and you will be wiser for it.

### **Passion, Talent, and Your Gift**

Passion is an intense emotion, but it's not your gift. You will develop passion for your gift when you learn more about it and perfect it over time. Your gift is not your talent. Talent can be learned, but gifts are innate.<sup>11</sup> You can use your talents, but your gift will make a way for you and put you in the presence of great people (read Proverbs 22:29).

## START WITH YOUR GIFT

Your success will be related to the gift God has given you to serve others and how you choose to use it. It will open all the mysteries of your life—and make clear your mission in life. It will give your life new meaning and direction.

### Your Gift Mark

Steve Harvey says that using your gift with your personal skills and talents is your “gift mark”—that which sets you apart when you use your gift. It’s what people come to expect when they hire you to do your thing.<sup>12</sup> People expect a well-packaged, informative, and inspiring word or lesson from me. They expect me to stay on message, speak succinctly, and keep to the schedule. People have also come to associate me with good-tasting food because they know I love to cook.

It’s important to say here that we don’t have control over the gifts that we have. We gain them as God distributes them to us. Requesting another gift if you think it’s cooler than yours is only going to frustrate you (read Romans 11:29 and James 1:17).

When I transferred to SU to continue my education and athletic career as a lacrosse player, I learned just how underdeveloped in terms of fitness conditioning I was. But strength and conditioning coach Mike Woicik used to say to me that my upper body should sue my legs for lack of support. Translation: “You don’t have well-developed leg muscles.” It didn’t become an excuse for me not to work hard in the gym doing squats, leg extensions, leg curls, or other lower-body exercises. I worked hard on my lower body. But I had to accept that no matter how hard I worked I wouldn’t have the lower body of my teammate, Hall of Famer Brad Kotz. The same is true with your gift. The Bible tells us that our gift is from the Holy Spirit and it’s distributed according to his will (read Hebrews 2:4). The sooner you accept that and move on, the better off you are going to be.

Our Creator’s expectation is that you receive your gift and use it to serve others and use it faithfully (read 1 Peter 4:10). As I said earlier, unfortunately, I didn’t learn what I’m sharing with you here until I was in my twenties. Why did it take so long? Because in part I was immature and hard-headed. And in part because I, like a lot of you, experienced some traumatic situations growing up that caused me to function like the soldier coming home from battle with PTSD who remains undiagnosed for months and sometimes years. As a child, my oldest brother, who had his own problems

## RECOGNIZING YOUR GIFT

and died early because of them, sexually molested me, which in many ways short-circuited my ability to operate as a fully functioning child of God. Instead, I stumbled along as a wounded soldier trying to tough it out in life without treating the emotional wound that I had suffered as a child. I share this with you because if something similar has caused you a great deal of pain and you don’t seek the necessary help, there’s a good chance you’re going to self-destruct and hurt others. I saw an *Oprah* show dedicated to the phenomena of men who, like me, had been molested as children. Her entire audience consisted of men who shared a similar childhood trauma as me. It made me realize that the sexual molesting of boys is more common than I had ever known. The saying is true that secrets lead to sickness and there are too many who have an emotional walking pneumonia and they need treatment just like I did.

I never talked about what happened to me until I was in my twenties and I hit a wall emotionally. I had to and I’m glad I did go get help in the form of intensive counseling and ongoing coaching. I am mindful of the importance of keeping myself healthy emotionally because of what happened. When someone acts out in a negative way that seems blown out of proportion and straight up nasty, I tell my children that hurt people hurt people. So, ask yourself, have I taken the steps necessary to heal the wounded child within me? Are people able to easily push my buttons, triggering me to say and do things that I regret when I calm down? Do I fly off the handle too often or self-medicate to make myself feel better with food, alcohol, sex, stealing, shopping, gambling, or pornography? If so, like me, you need help and you need it now.

I grew up in a home with two parents who did the best they could but they never got over traumatic situations in their own lives. My mother grew up in a home with a stepfather who had been an alcoholic and made her home life difficult to endure. Perhaps that explains why she later became so engaged as a community activist working to improve the lives of the marginalized. I don’t know the whole story but what I can piece together as an historian, her stepfather made her feel marginalized in her own home. My mother had the amazing ability to engage people and make them feel like they were special and she had been a gifted public speaker. But she, like many of us, had issues. At home, she had a contentious relationship with my father, and the two of them would disrespect each other and speak to each other in ways that had not been good for me as a young kid growing up. As I got older, my mother and I constantly got into arguments and she would say things that would destroy the

## START WITH YOUR GIFT

development of my self-confidence. She would tell others how proud she was of me but she found it difficult to say this to me directly.

My father had grown up in a home with a mother who did not shower him with love and affection, so he had a hard time doing that with his own children. As many of my high school friends said, “Your dad wasn’t a man to play with,” and that’s fairly accurate. As I said, they did the best they could, but because my parents never dealt with their own childhood issues and lacked a clear vision of their gifts, they had limitations on how much they could help me.

Here are 3 Ps that will help you better understand what you are passionate about and thereby recognize your gift. I have also provided questions and examples from the experience of individuals using their gifts that will help you identify yours. What do you enjoy reading? What do you consider the perfect gift for you? What do you create and emulate? What do you dream about and have visions of doing?

Artist Sachiko Akiyama recalls that when she was in kindergarten she remembers seeing Scotch tape for the first time. “It was around Christmas time, and I asked my parents to buy me a roll. They thought that I wanted it to wrap presents. Instead I took the tape and made a giant ball out of it. And I’ve been making art out of all kinds of materials ever since.” Babson College Chief of Police Jim Pollard says: “As young as age six, I had a passion for reading crime-solving Detective Dick Tracy comic books. Sikh broadcaster Harnarayan Singh was raised in Alberta, Canada. As a young child, he exhibited a love of ice hockey and the gifts of a broadcaster emulating play-by-play announcers he heard calling games on television. “My family realized that I was interested in the announcing side of it, so they proceeded to give me this toy microphone and a stand from RadioShack. And that for me was just the perfect toy.”<sup>13</sup>

Ask those who know you best what they see as your gifts. Don’t be surprised if they have a consensus opinion about them. What are the topics you could talk about for hours and do? Having a mentor who can help you identify your gifts or who has the same or a similar gift is critically important to making over your life for good. That’s what we turn to in the next chapter: the importance of having a mentor.

## CHAPTER 2 Get a Mentor

**T**he first ingredient in the recipe I’m sharing with you is understanding that you have a gift. The second ingredient to understand, monetize, and serve others with your gift is you must have mentors. We all need mentors who can help us understand our gift and how to develop it into a blessing. In this chapter I provide examples of mentors in my life, on and off the field. I use these short anecdotes in part as the memoir aspect of this book but also as a teaching tool to show you examples of similar mentors you could seek out for yourself.



*Behind every person who gains some degree of recognition in their chosen endeavor, there is a Steve Mabus.*

### **Steve Mabus**

Steve Mabus was a timely mentor in my life. I started playing lacrosse in eighth grade, and the summer before I entered high school Steve Mabus moved to a house three hundred yards from my family home on Batten Road in the village of Croton-on-Hudson. Steve played college lacrosse at Kutztown State in Pennsylvania. I don’t remember how it