

Preface

It will be many months before you read these words written at 4:44 Eastern Standard Time on a cool and very dark June morning when I just could not sleep. It might have been my sixteen-year-old son and his buddies laughing like the Three Stooges in the basement at one in the morning or the fact that every day is a new adventure when it comes to being the parent of an eighteen-year-old daughter who has discovered that staying out until three-thirty in the morning is a sure way to keep her parents from getting too much sleep. Or it could be that I spent most of my Saturday with about two feet between my nose and the trillions of flowers and weeds that call my northern Michigan backyard home, which no amount of over-the-counter anything can help. But, truth be told, it was the graduation party that started all that follows in these pages.

As I sit in the den and look to my right at the table covered with volleyball trophies, framed awards, and a stand-up “picture board,” it reminds me that eighteen years have passed since my daughter arrived and sixteen years since her brother made his entrance. Nestled behind the diploma and letter of acceptance to college is a stark reminder that “Kodak Moments” are truly the stuff of life. There is the shot of my daughter just a few days old, curled up on her mother’s chest as they both slept on the couch in our first apartment . . . click . . . she is two years old and surrounded by a mountain of pumpkins for Halloween . . . click . . . the girl is a star softball player at ten (with her own trading card to prove it) and holds the bat like it’s her only time at the plate . . . click . . . thirteen has come around, and her school picture shows a gaunt face but a fierce intensity in her eyes, as it will be just months before I donate a kidney to save her life . . . click . . . she stands with three other kids in front of the lake dressed for prom and looking like a model with the words “Love Is Forever” imprinted on the photo. The images all begin to blend into one . . . time passes.

My sight is drawn to more images standing on my roll-top desk. There are Jackie and I more than ten years earlier in a somewhat uncertain embrace as I showed up where she worked, just a few moments removed from the walk I took from Upper Michigan to Chicago and back—a journey I had to take to remember who I am, but which strained our relationship far past “for better or for worse.” The frame next to it holds the image of my father on the day he graduated from high school in 1953. The look in his eyes is one of readiness, as if he were poised to seize the next moment and squeeze it for all it is worth. I was not even a thought in his mind. It has been four years since he passed and more than ten since my mother has been gone, neither of them here to be a part of the family photo taken after today’s graduation.

In preparation for putting together the “picture board,” the battered Rubbermaid container was pulled out, filled to bursting with thousands more sobering reminders that I am not the whippy-wristed, flat-bellied, “put-your-ears-back-and-go-get-’em stud muffin” I once was. While photographs can be fun to look at—and may be the most significant evidence humans have created—too many images to count prove once and for all that time is not on our side when it comes to creating a life based on inspiration, not desperation.

My steadfast writing partner, Cleo the cat, keeps a safe distance from the balloons attached to the six yellow roses commemorating the event. The balloons sway slightly in the breeze that works its way inside through the open kitchen window and offers the first fragrance of morning. My mind wanders to the previous night: I watched my daughter walk across the stage to receive her high-school diploma, looking radiant and healthy nearly five years post-kidney transplant. My mind suddenly raced further back . . . thirty years . . . to the very same moment I crossed a stage—scroll in one hand, handshake in the other—toward an uncertain tomorrow. In the roughly 11,950 days that have seemingly evaporated since that evening, I cannot help but wonder where time has gone. What have I done with the moments that have been given to me? What do I have to show for it? What lessons have I learned? What legacy will I leave behind, if any? Am I evolving or revolving? Have I squeezed the life out of the moments life has offered?

So off I go to the keyboard once again, and this time out of the literary chute flow words about the one thing we cherish the most and wish we had more of. Money? Nope. Sex . . . hmm. No again. How about education or vacations or love or sleep or a larger network of people or better seats at the ballgame or free cellphone minutes? Sorry, no to all of the above.

Let me give you a hint: It's a very simple thing, and I have already alluded to it twice before this sentence. It is often transparent and empty, waiting to be filled. It's sometimes loud and scary and exhilarating, over the top with energy and chaos. No idea yet?

Here is what the all-knowing and all-seeing Webster's Dictionary has to say about this "thing," for lack of a better term: a) the mean of the nth powers of the deviations of the observed values in a set of statistical data from a fixed value; b) the expected value of a power of the deviation of a random variable from a fixed value. Nothing yet? How about this: a) tendency or measure of tendency to produce motion especially about a point or axis; b) the product of quantity (as a force) and the distance to a particular axis or point. No? I didn't get it either. Getting irritated? Okay, here you go. This entire book is dedicated to a minute portion or point of time; a time of excellence or conspicuousness; importance in influence or effect <a matter of great moment>.

Now, that last definition must have caught your attention, at least a little. A matter of great moment . . . Great moments matter . . . and so do not-so-great moments, and small moments, and quiet moments, and life-changing moments, and shitty moments, and, of course, Kodak Moments.

As I sit in the presence of the new day, the horizon turning from deep, dark blue to lighter shades of gray, I take note of the fact that morning has once again arrived right on time and that it does so without anyone's permission. This ancient process does not happen all at once, but rather . . . in a series of moments.

But even Webster's, in all its depth, cannot accurately describe a moment. You can do something at "the spur of the moment" or have "a moment of truth" or even be asked to "wait just a moment," but these are just small words working really hard to convey a very big gift.

Moments fascinate me because we all have them. Can it be that our lives are nothing more than a "string of moments" held together by our "experience" of them? The answer is a resounding . . . maybe. I would say yes based on my lifetime, but for some reason not everyone agrees. Some people feel that life (a string of moments bound together) is a burden, something to be dragged around from one day into the next, and that the next moment holds no promise, no magic or meaning. Perhaps they have watched too many news stories that hold the spotlight on the lowest of human behavior and have concluded that it's easier to withdraw from life than to engage in it fully. The magic of life has been slowly beaten out of them by a narrow, myopic view of the world they live in.

However, more and more of us are waking up from our consumer-driven comas as our economic woes reflect our collective attempt to buy, mortgage, and invest our way into some sense of self-worth. We are starting to realize that the promises made by our techno-driven world are hollow at best, not to mention short-lived. The minute our cellphones or PDAs become "obsolete," our sense of self takes a hit, and we rush out to buy a "better" one to keep up with the rat race—only to find out we are still rats . . . with more stuff. A fellow whom I work with saw my battered, three-year-old cellphone (that works just fine) and told me I should buy a new one. When I asked why, he said, "Because yours looks outdated." With that response, I knew he had been drinking the "cool-ade."

But a small voice inside that has been long ignored beckons us to mind our own business as our billions of miles of brain circuits are drenched with the latest news of celebrities and others who have fallen off the wagon—or been run over by one. A great longing is urging us to take the road less traveled and find out the truth before the sands of life run through the hourglass of time. More than ever before, we are in search of our "true selves," which have been long covered up by all the "right" things in life, according to society's measure—houses, cars, watches, clothes, whatever. You know, all the stuff that ends up in either a garage sale or an "estate" sale, depending on how much your surviving relatives feel like spending on advertising. And be clear about one thing: the powers-that-be—those who insist on diverting our attention from the inside to the outside and do not want you to wake up and think for yourself—are not the least bit interested in you unhooking yourself from the life-support system that keeps you running like your life solely

depends on what you have. It's an amazing thing, really. The farther you get from the false promises of the world, the closer you get to the truth of who you truly are—and can be.

I offer this book as a prescription for the way out of this maze of materialism, media influence, and monetary madness. As I continue to be a keen observer of my own existence, one thing becomes crystal clear: while the journey has been one of discipline and self-examination, with some great success and even greater disappointments, my life (and I suspect yours, too) is filled with moments that changed me. They taught me something, made me stop alive in my tracks, had me catch my breath, or just plain made me glad to be alive or question my entire existence. While we can look to those moments as life altering, it is only upon further inspection that the teachings come forth, the foundation upon which we build our tomorrows.

I feel like the great author John Steinbeck when he crisscrossed America in 1960 and wrote *Travels with Charley*, his reflections on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in “new America” with his standard poodle, Charley. I was two when he wrote the book, and I have a cat named Cleo, but we do have one other thing in common besides our first name: Steinbeck took the trip because he knew he was dying and wanted to see his country one last time. Well, I have a confession to make. I, too, am dying. My days are numbered. There is a beginning date of December 29, 1958, and the expiration on this model is somewhere encoded in my physical and spiritual DNA. And so it is with you, as well. Don't get fooled into thinking that because your picture is not in today's obit page that you will get out of life alive. If you feel that way, then some serious deprogramming needs to take place, and Madison Avenue has its hooks in you deeper than I thought. Time for a little reality check: You're going to die, just like the rest of us. But the good news is that you can make an important decision right now: to really live, like only a few of us.

This seems to be the most appropriate space to make clear a few notions about this work. I tend to scribe in a circular fashion, not linear. That is to say, a few events and people I will touch on in this book have appeared in my previous book, *Living an Uncommon Life*, as I recall moments that are nudging to be noticed and be revisited once again—coming full circle, as it were. I would also like to state that these events are from my point of view. No matter how thin you slice a tomato, there are always two sides. Thus, if you are offended by something I have written or a stance I take or even take issue with the way that it's being offered, then there is a 100 percent chance that whatever is pushing your buttons is most likely that thing you need to change the most. At least, that is what this author has learned about his life experience up to this point.

On another note, there are no “follow these rules for a better life” points in this book. I am sure that my publisher and I will have a verbal tug-of-war over this, but for me the lessons, insights, or teachings need not be spelled out for you. I have left them buried within each chapter for you to discover on your own and in your own way, just as I had to extract them for myself. As it has been said, “Another may teach or tell you, but you have to do the work yourself.” Life is interesting that way. The lesson always follows the moment or event. You don't get to study in preparation prior to a life-changing moment. It's only after you have lived through it that the teaching becomes apparent.

The words of Chief Joseph were on me when I sat down to write. “It does not require many words to speak the truth.” Life is a busy place in the twenty-first century, so condensing fifty years into bite-sized bits was challenging. But if your days are like mine, this retrospective is just the right size, even if I had to chop, cut, paste, and trim to make it fit.

It didn't hurt too much.

So this, then, is a journal of moments—a sampling of times that really stung me and those that challenged me. Many defined me and still more broke me down in order to build me up. A few even changed my world forever, along with the teachings that accompanied them, just to make sure I do not spend time repeating them over and over again. I have experienced some unexpected emotions as I relived many of these moments while putting pen to paper. “God bumps,” shedding tears, and grinding my teeth in response to events that now only live in my mind tell me that while the physical moment may pass, the emotional umbilical cord to those times remains intact. We have been instructed by our

modern-day mentors to “live in the moment.” Since “now” is all that exists, then living in it is fairly simple. Staying in it, however, is a little more difficult. It’s okay to let in a little of yesterday if it enhances the moments you have today.

So as the coffee kicks in and the half-eaten sandwich to my left begs my attention, my only intention is that you put down this book (after reading it cover to cover) and realize the potent nucleus that you are. Each and every moment is like a still pond, waiting for you to become a part of it and create a ripple effect that sends concentric rings into the furthest reaches of your sacred experience of life. It starts with living as if every moment matters.