

**DON'T WAIT FOR YOUR
SHIP TO COME IN ...
SWIM OUT TO MEET IT**

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR POSITIVE LASTING CHANGE

Dr Gary Wood



CAPSTONE

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Dedicated to 10 November 2001

and 'Both Sides, Now', Republic Street and LP.

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THE INTRO

Ah! One's reach should exceed one's grasp, or what's a heaven for?

Robert Browning

How is it that we journey to wonder at the might of the mountains, the surge of the seas, the roaming of the rivers, the awesomeness of the oceans, and the circling of the stars ... while we pass ourselves by, without ever noticing?

St Augustine

Ideals are like stars: you will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the ocean desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them, you reach your destiny.

Carl Schurz

MAKING A SPLASH

Splish! There goes that coin in the wishing well. Splosh! There goes that message in a bottle! It's a start, but what next? Do I splash out on another lottery ticket? You too might have uttered the immortal phrase 'one day my numbers will come up' or 'one day my ship will come in'. Meanwhile, what do you do? In truth, we are all in the same boat as, more than

ever before, we face a bewildering array of choices and decisions in our lives. Some of us may dream of a better income or better communication skills. Others may dream of a more satisfying job – or maybe just the ability to relax; or perhaps a healthy lifestyle, or to meet more friends. For some, it's the opportunity to make a contribution, whilst others may simply have a vague sense that things could be better. Whether you're feeling overwhelmed by opportunity or underwhelmed by routine, both feelings point to a need for change. We may know what we wish for, but what often eludes us is knowing exactly how and where to make a start. We all need a plan. Of course, sometimes it seems easier simply to wait and see what happens, trusting it all to the cosmic order and the fickle hand of fate. However, *Don't Wait For Your Ship to Come In ... Swim Out To Meet It!* is all about giving things a helping hand and, at the very heart of it, is the challenge:

It's your life, so take it personally!

Not surprisingly, as a psychologist, I figure that for real changes in the real lives of real people the answer lies in real psychology. By that I mean the vast body of evidence-based insights into what makes us tick and how we can tap into our inner pool of resources. This book offers a complete course – a personal development programme – guided by the three interweaving themes of *insight*, *ownership* and *action*. It contains all the essential tools and techniques, which will enable you to 'make a splash' and swim *with* the current rather than *against* it.

These themes – insight, ownership and action – are captured in the title *Don't Wait for Your Ship to Come In ... Swim Out To Meet It!*

- *Don't Wait* represents INSIGHT. Insight is the recognition that change is needed and that passively lying back and thinking of the cosmos is not the answer. This is based on deeper insights into what makes humans tick and, more specifically, insight into our personal values and strengths. Our ability to reflect on our present situation is a crucial part of how we learn.
- *It's Your Ship* represents OWNERSHIP. The logical step from recognizing that things must change is the mindset of taking things personally. The image of our ship coming in is another way of visualizing the achievement of our dreams and goals. Taking it personally emphasizes that it's not any old ship, it's the 'Owner Ship'! It's your cargo and your destination, which means it's time to take stock and plot your course.
- *Swim Out to Meet It* represents ACTION. 'Swimming out' is a metaphor for reaching out to your chosen goals. If you truly take your life personally, you will take action. 'Doing' is another crucial way in which we learn. We take action and we get feedback. Sometimes it's just what we expect, sometimes it's better, sometimes worse. However, a result is a result no matter what. With the new insights the feedback gives us, we can adjust course and steer ourselves in the direction of our goals.

You are undoubtedly your own ship's captain or your own life-guard, and this book is intended as a lifeline – the training manual to help you become more effective in taking control. The themes of insight, ownership and action are the guiding lights by which you can transform mere wishful thinking into

well-formed goals and, in turn, into manageable plans for concrete action. This will lead to positive outcomes and lasting change.

So let's consider what's different about this approach.

POSITIVE OUTCOME PSYCHOLOGY

Deep 'psy' diving

Don't wait ... Swim Out ...! distils the essential ingredients from the field of personal development, backed by evidence-based psychology, learning theory, teaching practice and coaching.

In bookshops, psychology titles are shelved in two sections: one for pop psychology and one for academic psychology. The academic ones often seem impenetrable to the average reader – you practically need an interpreter! There may be treasures to be found – but boy do you have to wade through a load of silt to get to them. On the other hand, the pop psychology titles are usually very accessible (hence their popularity) but frequently state the obvious or simply retread the same old ground – the psychological content is so diluted it's positively homeopathic! Both approaches can learn a lot from each other. Academic psychology would benefit from a bit of sparkle and it would certainly help if pop psychology had more depth.

What drives me as a social psychologist and a personal coach is the need to uncover those little psychological gems that can enrich our lives. I suppose that makes me a professional psychological treasure hunter – a dedicated deep 'psy' diver! Indeed, my research for this book involved wading through innumerable self-help books and immersing myself in personal development courses and self-help tapes, with a discerning,

professional, psychological eye constantly on the lookout for those elusive pearls of wisdom.

You are holding the results in your hands. This book aims to put the ‘pop’ back into popular psychology coupled with insights from the academic world. It’s a manual of P.O.P., that is, *Positive Outcome Psychology*. At the heart of it is the recognition that each of us has our own treasure chest of personal resources. We all gather information about the world and process it in pretty much the same way. Where we differ is in how we make sense of that information as we put our own individual spin on it. So it’s true to say: each of us is unique – just like everyone else! At school we were crammed with facts and figures but rarely did anyone help us learn how to learn. Learning how we learn is a crucial aspect of personal development and is also at the heart of this book.

Beyond wishful thinking

The *positive outcome psychology* approach puts the emphasis on personal control over our lives. *Don’t Wait ... Swim Out ...!* is all about being goal-led and action-focused, and the by-products of this ongoing process of development are increased self-esteem and self-confidence. This book is about the journey from abstract wishful thinking to concrete action – and ultimately to the successful realization of our goals – using the *psychological order* rather than the *cosmic order!*

Cosmic ordering is a self-help approach, like a non-religious form of prayer, that involves putting words and images out into the universe. If we do it right then our ‘prayers’ are answered. It’s been around a long time in various guises and, in many ways, it’s a good start. It recognizes the need for change

(insight). Unfortunately it doesn't provide us with the tools to follow through (ownership and action). It's true that every act of creation begins with a thought but it is the act itself that gets us there, otherwise it's just wishful thinking. Waiting for promises from the stars merely instils a greater sense of helplessness. This book is about personal empowerment. For things to change, we have to do something!

I'd like to share a brief personal story and then consider two possible explanations for the results, the cosmic view and the psychological view.

RISE AND SHINE

Do you face the challenge each day to rise and shine when it's more tempting to stay in that warm bed? Rising is often a struggle we can manage but shining is maybe a step too far. To shine is to excel, to stand out from the crowd or maybe just to radiate an inner joy and appreciation for life itself. What? *Every day?*

My own challenge to rise and shine came as I neared the end of a particularly demanding term of teaching. As the end of the final week approached I pictured lying in bed on Saturday morning of the holiday sending out cosmic wishes and hoping the negativity would slip away. But, as the saying goes, 'a change is as good as a rest', so instead I decided to take ownership and choose some form of affirmative action to break the pattern. Call it an experiment; I just knew that I had to do something. So I made a few phone calls the night before and dragged myself out of bed at 5.30 a.m. on that cold Saturday morning and onto a train to London to attend a personal development course on creative visualization, *The Silva Method*.

Now, even though I had chosen to do it, I still felt vaguely resentful. However, as I settled in on that early morning ‘ghost train’ I experienced a change in perception. Although the coffee wasn’t the greatest I still felt kind of grateful to be drinking it, even lucky. At that very moment as I looked out of the window I saw the sun begin to peek out from over the horizon. It somehow seemed significant that my change in attitude from resentment to gratitude heralded a brand new day, a new perspective on things. The sun rose at the very moment I began to shine! The knock-on effect was amazing. My writer’s block shifted and I immediately began scribbling down these words. By the time I got to London, I felt like a different person. With my change in perception a burden became an opportunity. Without that change I would have missed the sunrise. So, what have you missed lately because ‘your world’ blocked your view?

By chance, during that same weekend, I discovered the book *Hidden Messages in Water* by Masuru Emoto. This wonderful book is a collection of photographs of frozen water crystals accompanied by the theory that water reflects emotions and intentions. The most beautiful photograph is of a frozen water crystal that has been exposed to the words ‘love and gratitude’. Although the science doesn’t hold water, the book served both as the inspiration for my New Year’s card and as a great metaphor for how we live our lives: *take stock of what we have, and make a positive contribution*. Over that weekend I had turned things around by taking time to appreciate the small stuff and then taking action. My shift from resentment to gratitude helped change my perspective and made me more likely to see opportunities. After searching for a guiding metaphor for the book, I knew that I had found it: water.

It wasn't the cosmic order that turned things around for me. The answer is very down to earth: *insight, ownership and action.*

A VOYAGE ROUND YOUR MAP OF THE WORLD

Don't Wait ... Swim Out ...! mirrors the approach I use as a personal development coach. It's a partnership in which you provide the personal material to work on and I provide the strategy. So, let me explain a little about the layout of the book since information sinks in more easily if we know the context. Think of the times that you reach for the TV guide to get an idea of what an unfamiliar film is about. As soon as you know it stars Bruce Willis you immediately think 'Ah! It's a guns and vests movie'. You don't have to strain to work things out. In a similar way, the layout of this book represents the map and route for your personal voyage of discovery. Once you are familiar with the layout, you can focus on your issues.

The map

To gain the greatest benefit from this journey it will help if you 'suspend your disbelief' and work through it from beginning to end. Each chapter begins with a few quotations and a brief preview (dipping a toe) to set the scene. The main body of each chapter often includes exercises and quizzes, which should be tackled as you encounter them. Apart from these, there are a number of small 'personal experiments' throughout. These are, essentially, low-threat opportunities for you to test the water. As with any experiment there's no such thing as failure; you just receive feedback from the results. It's then up to you to apply these insights. To help you keep track of these experiments, I suggest you keep a learning journal, a

bit like a captain's log. Anything can go in here from notes about exercises, things you've tried, things you've read, things that worked and things that didn't. It's your own personal account of your learning. There are no right and wrong answers and it will be different for each of us. It's just about reflecting on what works for you, what doesn't work and why. To help out with this, each chapter concludes with an opportunity for reflection (think: *refl-action*), using the principles on *insight*, *ownership* and *action*.

So, if you haven't done so already, have a quick flick through the book to familiarize yourself with the layout. And now, let's look at the various ports of call in our voyage.

The route

Our journey is organized into three main parts to take on board the themes of insight, ownership and action. *Part One: From Insight to Ownership* contains four chapters with a theoretical emphasis as the groundwork for the practical tools and techniques. These chapters cover perception (Chapter One); learning (Chapter Two); values and attitudes (Chapter Three) and personal strengths (Chapter Four). Together they provide a good outline of how we process information, how we learn, how we make sense of the world, and insight into personal strengths and resources. In this way, you are set up for action.

Part Two: From Ownership to Action has an emphasis on practical tools and techniques. The four chapters in this section form a series of interlinking ideas, tools and techniques designed to help you change perceptions and take action with a series of personal experiments. Taking our lives personally inevitably involves making decisions and that is far easier from a position of calm rather than stress. Therefore, the first series

of tools and techniques centres on the ability to relax (Chapter Five). From a position of calm we then take a look at goals (Chapter Six) and how we can transform the sketchiest of ideas into effective plans for concrete action and positive lasting change. The next two chapters focus on how we can support goal setting with the creative, strategic use of our imagination (Chapter Seven). In short, we concentrate on creating positive mental pictures to support goals and help develop skills. Having taken control of our mental pictures, we round off with *self-talk*. This is the running commentary that goes through our heads. Sometimes the things we say to ourselves can grind us down. In this chapter (Chapter Eight) we'll find out how to create language that is more supportive of our goals in life.

At this point, we have a balance of theoretical (part one) and practical knowledge (part two) using the themes of *insight*, *ownership* and *action* to create your own personal development *tour de force*.

Part Three: Less Distraction, More Action contains two chapters to round off this voyage. Chapter Nine is a trouble-shooting chapter, which explores the subject of self-sabotage. It considers our self-imposed obstacles and relates them back to the material covered in the previous chapters. Finally, thinking of our actions as ever-expanding ripples in a pool, Chapter Ten takes a leap to consider how we can make a difference to others and the implications affecting us.

The book offers conclusions and a list of learning resources to deepen the understanding gained from this journey.

Metaphors for positive, lasting change

For a guiding metaphor in reading and working through this book, think of the image of a stream. You will notice that a

stream finds a way around obstacles. Sometimes it goes round the rock and occasionally, in time, it makes a hole and goes right the way through it. Think also about swimming through a pool strewn with obstacles. To get across we don't focus on the obstacles but on the spaces in-between and the way ahead. We are aware of the obstacles, but they are not our primary focus. The lesson, as each of us works on our personal development, is to have an understanding of the problem and an awareness of the obstacles but to focus on the solutions. We tend to follow our eyes. In short, we look where we want to go. You've probably seen a film with a scene involving someone dangling over the edge of a cliff. The rescue invariably shouts 'Don't look down! Grab my hand'. In this situation, focusing on the helping hand makes pretty good sense! So it's either oblivion or onwards and upwards, just like the mountaineer who focuses on the peak experience. I'm tempted to burst into a chorus of *River Deep, Mountain High* at this point. I'll resist.

Don't Wait ... Swim Out ...! won't leave you on hold, high and dry and waiting for change to mysteriously percolate through. Our wishful thinking provides the insight to reach our own positive outcomes, but our actions help us to grasp them! However, before we begin, let's indulge in a little wishful thinking.

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Close your eyes and, in your imagination, write out your goals, dreams, wishes and ambitions on separate pieces of paper. Imagine rolling up these pieces of paper and stuffing them inside empty glass bottles. Still in your imagination push corks in the necks of the bottles, take them all to the edge of the ocean and

thrown them in, one by one. Watch them drift out on the tide. Now go home and wait for the cosmos to grant your wishes.

Now, while you're waiting consider this: imagine that during the night, while you are asleep, all of your wishes are granted. You wake up tomorrow unaware that this has happened overnight. What are the first tiny signs that something has changed in your life? How will you go about testing your suspicions that something has changed? What will you be doing, saying or thinking differently? How will things be different if you implement one of those tiny changes right now? What do you think will happen if you help the change process along? That's what we intend to find out!

Gary Wood

part one:

FROM INSIGHT TO OWNERSHIP

Chapter One

NEW EYES: NEW LANDSCAPES

You, the viewing and the doing

If the doors of perception were to be cleansed everything would appear to [humankind] as it is, infinite.

William Blake

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

In the field of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind.

Louis Pasteur

DIPPING A TOE

Preview: In this chapter we ponder the basic principles of how we make sense of the world through the way in which we process information. Inevitably, how we view the world influences what we do in the world and vice versa. We consider the relationship between perception and experience and how we can use this as a basis for creating positive change.

SENDING OUT AN SOS

Our hopes, dreams and wishes are the compass readings for our ideal destinations. Knowing where we want to go is half the battle. The only thing we have to work out is the means to get there! The SOS message in the bottle is passive: 'save our souls'. We sit in hope and wait. But this is too important to trust to fate. So how different would things be if we decided to 'save our selves' by 'supporting our strengths' and 'seeking out solutions'?

At the close of the introduction I asked you to imagine that some magical changes had taken place in your life. So, what will those changes be? This deceptively powerful technique is a variation of *miracle question* used in solution-focused counseling. The aim is to engage our imagination in order to shift perceptions and concentrate attention on positive outcomes. This chapter is all about exploring your perceptions and the impact they have on the way you view the world, the way you live your life and how you learn.

Often we take for granted the complex mix of psychological processes which we use to go about our everyday lives. We all share a basic psychology of how we make sense of the world. There are certain principles to which we all adhere. On top of this we overlay our individual take on the world. As you read these words you are using your attention, your memory, perception and ability to make sense of language. At the same time as you tune into the words on the page you are filtering out unwanted noise and distractions. So, in order to make sense of things, our attention needs to be selective. In short we have a filtering system that is a mixture of shared values and individual perceptions. Our view of the world and of ourselves

is shaped by what we pay attention to, what we allow to filter through and what we filter out.

Self-help books often pose the question: ‘are we what we focus on?’ This is another way of asking, ‘are our lives shaped by attention and perception?’ *Insight* into these basic processes will help you take *ownership* of the way you view the world and lead to *action* in support of your goals. This chapter aims to answer this question and will form the basis for exploring your own personal psychology in subsequent chapters of this section (learning style, values and strengths). So, let’s begin by considering this process of selective attention.

**YOU ONLY HEAR WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR;
YOU ONLY SEE WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE**

The words of William Blake, in the opening quotation, suggest that we can change our view of the world if we clean up our perceptions. Everyday we filter our experience of the world by selectively tuning in and switching off. To get a better idea of this process, let’s start by having a party.

The cocktail party phenomenon

Let’s imagine you’re on that ship you’ve been waiting for and you’re having the time of your life. Picture a glamorous cocktail party and you’re enjoying the most enthralling conversation with someone. You’re laughing and joking and feel that you’ve known this person for years. You’re totally at ease and absolutely oblivious to everything else going on around you. Amidst the cacophony of voices and the strains of an inebriated pianist, who sounds like he’s playing the cracks, you are able to focus only on the sound of that silky, sensuous voice.

Those honeyed tones are simply music to your ears, which is more than can be said for that pianist! Oh yes, and if that wasn't enough, this person is drop-dead gorgeous, and flirting. You just know it's leading somewhere and you love every minute of it! Suddenly someone across the room just barely whispers your name. What happens next?

More than likely at the mention of your name your undivided attention will be more than divided. You will totally switch your concentration, cutting the drop-dead gorgeous one dead in mid-sentence and turning around to see who's talking about you. And you wonder why you always strike out at cocktail parties! Don't worry; you're not alone. Chances are, we'd all do the same!

First discussed by cognitive psychologist Colin Cherry in the 1950s, it's known as the *cocktail party phenomenon*. It shows our attention is selective and that we filter information based on personal relevance. Names have a high priority. Just the mere mention of ours can make us switch, even if we're having fun and flirting. So what are you switching off right now?

Exercise: background noise

Pause for a moment and tune in to the sounds and sensations that you are filtering out.

- *Look around and just focus on the ordinary things.* Scrutinize your environment. What can you see that you have overlooked before? Have you spotted something that needs painting or cleaning? What about an interesting pattern in the wallpaper you've never noticed before? Look at a clock. Are there people around you hadn't noticed? What else?