

GETTING OFF THE TREADMILL

ESCAPING THE RACE TO NOWHERE

Michael J. Lauesen



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my baseball buddy, my only son, Conor. Your courageous journey through darkness has allowed me to embrace the light of forgiveness, strength, and contribution.

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CHAPTER 1

Trapped on the Treadmill

Have you ever been trapped at an airport because flights were cancelled and you were forced to spend the night? When was the last time you were stuck in your car during rush hour with a heavy rainstorm or snowstorm pounding the roof and windows of your car?

I have lived in Chicago most of my life. Plenty of opportunities for entrapment present themselves every day. It is a busy, vibrant city that counts among its nicknames, according to former mayor Richard J. Daley, “The City That Works.” It is the city that works, but I believe we work too much.

Growing up in a home where hard work is valued was a blessing. My father, Howard Lauesen, a World War II veteran, worked two full-time jobs for many years to support his growing family. Howard and Blanche (my Mom) raised eight children on a modest income in a three-bedroom ranch home with one bathroom on a busy street. My three older sisters and older brother all worked during high school. I did the same, holding several jobs in high school. Working allowed the Lauesen kids to buy a few necessities like a pair of

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jeans, dress, or athletic shoes. As an athlete growing up, baseball was and still is my favorite sport. This book, like the rhythm of a well-played baseball game, is nine chapters. A baseball game has nine innings. I hope you enjoy the intricacies of the “game.”

Let’s start at the beginning and allow me to introduce myself. My name is Michael Lauesen, and I am happily married to my high school sweetheart, Barbara. We have four adult children. I have had several careers in my life. Starting out as a CPA with a large firm, I then became a sales professional and eventually a business founder/owner. Currently, I am a professional speaker and a coach for business owners and Chief Executives in a peer group. As a speaker, I educate, inform, and inspire people on how to find purpose and fulfillment in everyday life. I wrote *Getting off the Treadmill* because I wanted to change people’s lives for the better. My main message is, don’t live your life in a sleepwalking trance. Instead, be aware of all the joys life has to offer. As a result of these pages, my hope is you’ll find more personal insights, more life direction, more happiness, and use the tools included to improve the quality of your life. On a personal note, I am a life-long Chicago Cubs baseball fan, which obviously builds character and patience. My patience was finally rewarded with a World Series Championship in 2016.

As a fifty-nine-year-old white male who grew up in a modest Chicago suburb, I have been healthy and physically fit my entire life. At five-foot-ten-inches, with a medium, muscular build, it takes some effort

to maintain this physique. Because I want my wife to continue to think I'm good looking, I keep my gray hair short, as I have lost most of it on the top of my head. My complexion tans easily and seems to complement my blue eyes. I like to smile and laugh, yet can be very intense. Colleagues, friends, and my children have described me as understanding, open to possibilities, and sometimes too sarcastic.

Traveling has been a large part of both my business and personal life. I frequently ride the train when traveling downtown and have always enjoyed, sometimes with silly pleasure, watching folks get on and off the train.

What happens? Inevitably someone gets upset or, as I like to say, gets triggered. On the flip side, I have observed people who are not triggered or upset. They seem to be on autopilot, not observing or noticing the environment or what is going on around them. This is sleepwalking, being zoned out or numb. You may have your own descriptors.

Why is this? Why do commuters sit in the same seats every day? When people walk from the train or walk through an intersection, why are they not paying attention to where they are going? What are they doing? No one seems to *see* what is going on in front, next to, or above him or her.

Have you observed folks walking across a street in your neighborhood with their ear buds in, ignoring the sign that says "Do Not Walk," almost getting hit by a car?

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Do they see themselves the way I see them? Do they realize they are often walking through life in a daze, sleepwalking and not paying attention? Do they arrive at their destination without knowing how they got there? Folks seem to be in a race rushing to nowhere.

This reminds me of Harry Chapin, a poet and songwriter who died prematurely. He wrote these lines for his song, *Greyhound*:

First time I understood
it has got to be the going
not the getting there
that is good.

As Harry so aptly stated, do we enjoy the commute? Do we find energy dashing through the terminal at the airport? How much do we appreciate the opportunity to walk our dogs and bask in the sunlight and fresh air? I have never enjoyed walks as much as recently. My grandson, Luke, was born eleven months ago and I have the opportunity to be with him regularly. I am truly grateful I'm healthy enough to take a walk with Luke. There is nothing else to accomplish but to be present on the walk with my grandson. Do we delight and savor being by ourselves at a park? Can we quiet our minds?

Small children have not learned this numbing, sleepwalking behavior. They live in a "play" state of mind—no clock watching; they don't know or care about time. When you observe small children at play,

they are immersed in the activity they are doing. Picture a four-year-old with freckles and red hair, playing with small wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes for endless hours. Imagine two six-year-olds kicking a soccer ball back and forth in a large grassy open field until their parents call for them to come home.

Children notice the smallest things and are often in an *alpha state*.

Alpha state is a measurement of brain waves. The combination of synchronized electrical activity in the brain is called a brainwave because it is cyclic and wavelike in nature. Brain waves are divided into five different bandwidths. Delta and theta waves occur when we are sleeping or in deep meditation. They are the slowest brain waves. Alpha waves, or the alpha state, are typically created when we daydream or consciously practicing mindfulness or meditation. The alpha state can also be created during aerobic exercise. Beta waves dominate our waking state and are faster brain waves than alpha, theta, or delta. The final brain wave is gamma waves. They're the fastest of brain wave bandwidths. They relate to simultaneous processing of information from different brain areas and are associated with higher states of conscious perception.

The alpha state is focused, meditative, and includes daydreaming. Children come into the world with a *clean slate* and are not corrupted with prejudice, bias, or

judgment. I wonder why we often lose the frequency of the alpha state as we grow up? Is it because we become more socialized? Can we become like small children again? It is possible to do so, and in my opinion is critical to having a significant and fulfilling life.

How often have you seen a mom, dad, or caretaker pushing their baby or toddler in a stroller while talking on a mobile phone? I notice this many times a day in my neighborhood. It is also obvious when traveling. Before cellular devices, it was impossible to talk on a phone and push a stroller at the same time. We took a walk, pushed our baby or toddler, communicated with him or her, and took pleasure in the experience. Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, suggests smartphone use distracts us from paying attention and experiencing reflective moments in daily life. Research shows we use our smartphones up to eighty-five times a day for an average of less than thirty seconds. The total time utilized can be as high as several hours a day.

“Getting off the treadmill” means being mindful and paying attention to what is happening. When you take a walk, actually *take a walk*. When you read a book, *read the book*. When you ride your bike, *ride the bike*. There is no such thing as multitasking.

One of my favorite sayings is “When you do the dishes, do the dishes!” Contemporary Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, says the following: “To my mind, the idea that doing

dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you aren't doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to eat dessert sooner, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and that fact that I am here washing them are miracles!" Thich Nhat Hahn is not on the treadmill of life.

My Mom taught me a wonderful lesson about paying attention and staying off the treadmill of life. She was a voracious reader who always had a novel at her side. It was her time to relax and go to alpha. When I came home from school, Mom always put her book down to visit with me, as she was an active listener. She was focused on me and listened to my stories, joys, and concerns. Whatever I needed to talk about, Mom was always attentive.

As a stay-at-home Mom, she was the backbone of our family. Creative cooking was a skill she mastered because of the necessity of making meals on a meager budget. She was five-foot-six-inches and had a modest weight and frame. Mom had difficulty going up and down the basement stairs to even do laundry with the burden of her bad feet. It was seldom I didn't see her curly brown hair in curlers. The Irish curse of fair skin, easily burned in the sun, was Mom's plight. Because of

very poor eyesight, she wore “coke-bottle” eyeglasses. This made her uncomfortable driving a car. Even under these circumstances, Mom had a tremendous wit.

Mom never seemed to be in a hurry. When we visited, she had an amazing ability to make me feel like I was the most important person at that moment. When I left the room, Mom would go back to her book. When Mom died in 1991, our Pastor, Doug, spoke at her committal service at the cemetery. This is what I remember Doug saying: “Blanche traveled through her books. She had bad feet and did not have the financial means to travel. As a result, she never traveled outside the United States.” But through novels like *Shogun*, *Noble House*, *Trinity*, *Clan of the Cave Bear*, and *Aztec*, she lived and experienced places she was never able to travel to in person. Through reading, Mom also had a time machine that allowed her to experience much of what life had to offer. She only focused on one thing at a time. She was always present and in the moment. What a true gift she gave to me.

Mom was a mentor to me. Many people have coaches, mentors, and trusted advisors throughout their lives. They are from all phases of our lives. Parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, bosses at work, clergy, and even an encounter with a stranger can have a profound impact. I have had countless mentors in my life. Dad and Mom, my sisters and brothers, my wife Barbara and our children, George Thomas my college baseball coach—all mentored me in countless ways. This list could go on.

Jean Valjean, the protagonist of Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, *Les Miserables*, continues to be an impactful mentor to me. Valjean is an ordinary man attempting to live a normal life after nineteen years in prison for stealing bread to feed his sister's starving children during an economic depression. Jean Valjean's life is drastically altered by the kindness of a priest who forgives him for stealing and more importantly provides him another chance at life. He challenges him to live a life of love, compassion, and faith in God the rest of his living days. What if our life and faith journey displayed more forgiveness, love, and compassion to one another, like Jean Valjean? He was not racing to nowhere. His race was won by the life he led loving others with compassion and grace.

Another preferred quote of mine is, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I was a ready student with countless mentors. I was a grateful mentee. Mentors assist you in getting off the treadmill. Mentors have wisdom and care about you. They are ready to provide advice or just listen. They may approach you positively, with humility, or they may hit you with a two-by-four to get your attention. Both approaches are effective. Timing is the critical component.

Mentors are teachers. One theme of this book is about the lessons we learn in life. I have learned many lessons throughout my life. Stephen Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, has been a bestselling business and self-help book since its release. Covey's book contains much wisdom, many

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lessons, and healthy habits for everyday life. Habit number two is, “begin with the end in mind.” I believe this is the most important habit. Covey asks us to do a revealing exercise: Go to your own funeral. There are four speakers. One is a family member—your spouse, one of your children, a sibling, a cousin. Another is a good friend—someone who has known you for a good length of time. The third speaker is someone from your work or profession. The fourth is from your place of worship or community organization.

What would your family member say? What would he or she talk about? What would your friend say? Would he be reflective about your friendship and how you were there for each other?

My good friend Eugene (Gene) Mahoney’s family asked me to speak at his funeral after his untimely death in the summer of 2006. Other than my father’s, I had never spoken at a funeral. I talked about Gene’s friendship and how much I learned every time I spoke or was with Gene. His brilliant and thought-provoking mind was a defining characteristic. He was my personal and business attorney and I feel his influence even today. He was an amazing friend and mentor in my life.

What would the person from your church say? Were you committed to your church? Did you live a faithful life? Since my kids were toddlers, I have had a devoted relationship to my church. The last several years, I have been in a significant leadership role. I would hope someone from the church would talk about my faith,

how it blossomed and grew over time, and the impact the church was for my family and me.

What would you want each speaker to say?

This is a profound and powerful exercise. I encourage you to think hard about it. If you died today, who would the four speakers be? We will discuss this more in the next chapter.

This book entails many themes. I will share some of the countless things I've learned along the way, including how we can find meaning and uncover our purpose in life, understand the mystery of faith, the divine, and how they are interwoven regularly. You will develop your own tool kit to assist you in navigating life and to find more fulfillment, joy, and purpose in the mundane and the spiritual. I will offer practical suggestions based on values of humility, gratitude, paying attention, and daily reflection. I will share specific personal life experiences and experiences of many other people. Some folks are famous; most are ordinary like me.

In the end, this book should be read as if you are attending a baseball game. Just as there is no time limit in baseball, there is no time limit to finish the book. There is also no time limit incorporating the lessons and tools in this book.

Hopefully these lessons, stories, tools, and exercises will make you think, laugh, and even cry. Maybe they

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will empower you to change your life. Likely, my life journey has been similar to yours. There have been wonderful moments, sad moments, and times of exploring the nature of who we are and why we are here.

My goal for this book is to provide you a foundation or buttress to further your footing for a meaningful and fulfilling life allowing you a restful sleep each and every day.

We can actually live the life we want. When you are ready to get off the treadmill, a teacher will appear. You will become a student, always learning. I hope you will be my student throughout the remainder of this book. Every person we come in contact with influences us in some way. It is our choice.

It is never too late to get off the treadmill and the race to nowhere so you can realize an intentional, fulfilling, and purposeful life. Are you ready to get off the treadmill?