

FROM THE CREATOR OF ALLGROANUP.COM

All Groan Up

**SEARCHING FOR SELF, FAITH,
AND A FREAKING JOB!**

PAUL ANGONE

PRAISE FOR ALL GROAN UP

Paul Angone offers a new voice to twentysomethings everywhere, writing honestly about one of life's biggest transitions. At turns, *All Groan Up* is hilarious, poignant, and insightful. Angone relentlessly explores who God wants us to be rather than what God wants us to do — words everyone needs to hear, whatever their stage of life.

John Ortberg, author of *The Me I Want to Be*

Powerful, honest, heartfelt, and hilarious, this book is a must-read for anyone struggling to feel at home in their “groan-up” pants. If you're a twentysomething, or if you want to help a twentysomething, you need this book.

Megan Alexander, TV correspondent, *Inside Edition*

Relatable, funny, and inspiring, *All Groan Up* is an uplifting story about the redemption of hope when things don't go as planned. This book is must-read for anyone asking “What's next?”

Mike Foster, cofounder and chief chance officer of
People of the Second Chance

This is it — the book every young person should read and every teacher and parent should have on hand. I don't think you can call yourself a grown-up without first reading this book.

Jeff Goins, author of *The Art of Work*

My twenties were like the new puberty — awkward, sweaty, weird, and life-changing, except no one warned me about them. Paul Angone's voice in *All Groan Up* is not just a warning. It is a conversation, a pep talk, wisdom mixed in with funny stories, and encouragement that not only can you survive this groan-up life; you can live it well.

Amena Brown, spoken word poet and author of
Breaking Old Rhythms

Paul Angone must live inside my house regularly filled with twentysomethings. He gets this generation like few people I know. This book is hilarious, insightful, brilliantly written, and filled with wisdom. Don't miss the opportunity to give this book to any young adult you know. They will read it because it's practical, and when they finish it, they will call it enjoyable, insightful, challenging, and even life-changing.

Jim Burns, PhD, president of HomeWord and author
of *Confident Parenting and Teenology: The Art of Raising
Great Teenagers*

Our parents told us when we were children that we could do anything we set our minds to do. Our pastors said that God had a great plan for our lives. But after college, many of us got a sinking feeling that our parents were wrong, and we suspected our pastors were too. *All Groan Up* is a funny, hopeful, honest autobiography of a generation of people who feel their lives have too much potential and not enough purpose.

Matt Appling, author of *Life after Art*

The gigantic question, “Why am I here?” is written on everyone’s heart. Fortunately for twentysomethings, this book will help answer the question and push them forward on a path of significance that will change their lives and the world around them.

Ken Coleman, author of *One Question* and host of
The Dave Ramsey Show Video Channel

Had me laughing out loud more times than I can count, sometimes literally to the point of tears! Paul Angone writes with a profundity and hilarity that feels like a nascent cross between Donald Miller and Bill Bryson. That’s a high compliment. I think his words will be prophetic to a generation that is drowning in *potential*.

Mike Yankoski, author of *Under the Overpass*

Clever, insightful, and devilishly handsome, Paul Angone offers a book reminiscent of sharing a pint with an old friend. *All Groan Up* captures the confusion of early adulthood in a beautiful blend of candor and humor. This is a must-read for anyone wondering, *Okay, what now?*

Jamie Wright, theveryworstmissionary.com

Dr. Seuss’s *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* may be the top gift at graduation, but this one should take its place. Writing with bravery and honesty, Paul Angone invites us behind his own search for purpose in a complicated world and shows us that the process is far more important than the destination. If you’re at a crossroads in your own journey, you’ll find his guide a welcome companion.

Wayne Jacobsen, author of *He Loves Me: Learning to Live in the Father’s Affection*

For anyone wrestling with the provocative questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I going to do with who I am?” *All Groan Up* is a must-read. I encourage you to join Paul in his discovery of one of life’s best-kept secrets, namely, that you can choose your future.

Raymond Rood, CEO, The Genysys Group

All Groan Up is part memoir, part real-time exploration, and part comforting coffee shop conversation with your best friend, who just happens to be a charming Italian author who has graciously offered his own missteps to help you avoid your own. Paul Angone brilliantly and honestly shares his relatable, heart-breaking, hilarious account of transitioning from frustrated graduate to faith-embracing adult. If you’re in your twenties and questioning ANYTHING, this book is for you. Paul asks the big questions and isn’t afraid to reveal his own worst fears, confessions, and lessons learned along the way. This book will lift you up when you’re down and show you that no matter how many times you fall (face-first on a gravel sidewalk), you can and will get back up.

Jenny Blake, author of *Life after College*

All Groan Up in my humble opinion has the potential to be a bestseller. Paul Angone’s blend of wit and wisdom is remarkable. He shares the lessons he has learned along life’s way with such refreshing candor and insight that he should certainly help others on this journey of life.

David C. Bicker, PhD, professor emeritus and founding chair of the Department of Communication Studies at Azusa Pacific University

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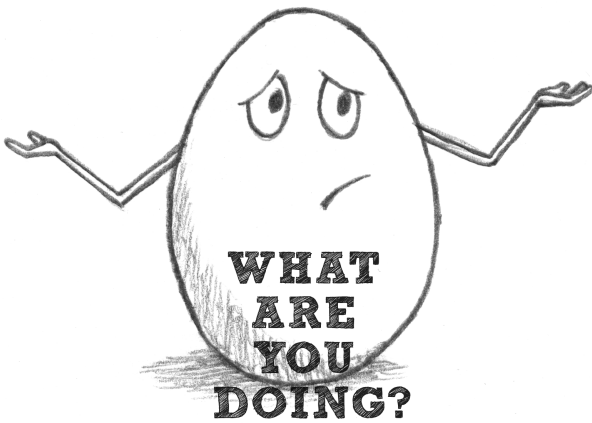
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CHAPTER ZERO





went into college graduation believing I was now trained and equipped to go change the world.

And if not to change the world, at least to make a serious difference.

And if not to make a serious difference, at least to make some serious money.

And if not any money, at least be working a job that I enjoyed.

And if a job I didn't really enjoy, at least a job that sounded *enjoyable* — something I could spin to my friends as I convinced them of my amazing life. Even if it wasn't really.

With college diploma in hand, I was ready to be used by God and man in big ways. A college diploma meant answers. A college diploma meant doors flung open, where everything is up for grabs.

So why now, years later, do my hands still feel like they're in pockets full of Super Glue?

To make matters worse, I have other friends whose hands are glueless. They started grabbing success the minute they stepped into the real world.

One of those friends (I call them friends, but secretly I loathe them just a little now) is Mike Yankoski, who purposely became homeless for five months, then wrote a life-changing and powerful book about it called *Under the Overpass*. Now he's traveling everywhere speaking about this experience. Such vision, such strength, such hope, such excitement, such purpose. Thanks,

Mike. While you're at it, can you come over and kick my little dog, BeauJo, who has to wear diapers because he can't control his bladder?

Another one of my friends, Brent, recently came back from El Salvador, where he helped start and sustain eight different businesses for the local economy. Right after he returned, he received a random call asking if he wanted to jump on a private jet and fly with influential guys like Rick Warren (author of *The Purpose Driven Life*) to Uganda to help with peace efforts and business development.

Brent told me one amazing story after another about his spur-of-the-moment trip to Africa and Switzerland (I forgot to mention this added jaunt to Switzerland). During one of their flights, Brent explained, he glanced at the computer screen of the gentleman sitting next to him, only to see him working on a speech for (then current) President Bush, which good old George W. would be giving the following Tuesday. My friend sat next to, conversed with, and bounced ideas off one of the U.S. president's inner circle whilst — *pause for effect* — flying to Switzerland in a private jet!

I remember the night Brent dropped in unexpectedly and told me about his trip. It was a cool, crisp evening. I was sitting on a brown, furry beanbag called the Lovesack that was purchased at a yard sale. As Brent told his story, a very large part of me was very excited for him as I sat on the edge of my Lovesack in awe and anticipation. A very large part of me felt very proud of my friend. A large and overwhelming part.

But then there was this small, little voice that kept popping up like an angry squirrel that believes he owns your bird feeder. Sure it was small, but it made its presence known. *Paul*, the voice asked, *what are you doing right now?*

“Well, I’m still trying to find my way. I’m doing —”

No, no, the small voice said with a chuckle. *Not what are you doing in life, but literally right at this moment — what are you doing?*

Then the joke hit me. Here my friend Brent is explaining how he’s trying to change the world in a dramatic way. Flying to Africa, chatting it up with world leaders. And what was I doing while he’s telling me all this? Eating a piece of chicken (all right, not actual chicken but chicken-flavored Top Ramen) while icing my hamstring, which I had torn during a slow-pitch softball game.

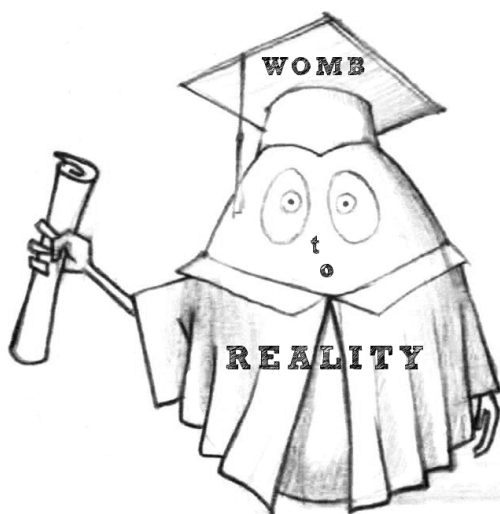
Slow-pitch softball! The “sport” that fifty-five-year-old men with a gut the size of Fort Worth, swinging a bat with beers in both hands, can excel at.


At the very least I could’ve been icing my hamstring that I’d hurt sprinting into a burning building to save a three-year-old with terminal cancer.

As Brent told his hilarious story of the plane not being able to find runway space in Zurich, I flashed back years ago to my Smug College Self, that arrogant kid who was untouchable. Thriving there in that peaceful, safe collegiate womb. Smiling, dreaming, thinking big — knowing that once I was really born, my life would be made into a movie someday. And if not a movie, at least a TV miniseries.

How I wished I could’ve gone back and just slapped that know-it-all grin off his face. I would’ve loved to tell him the truth — that someday he would be on a giant, hairy beanbag, broke and unemployed, eating his last Top Ramen while his friends did all the big things he’d always dreamed of. But there, back in the womb, would I have even listened?

CHAPTER ONE



 It was so cozy. The best La-Z-Boy on the market. Complete tranquility never to be duplicated. Our only responsibility was to set our seats to “relax.” Comfort only embryonic fluid could offer.

And for nine straight months, relax we did. How could we not? Lights dimmed to a perfect sleeping level. Never too hot, never too cold. Soundproof walls impervious to dogs barking, blenders mixing, people yelling.

And the food. Oh, the food! Delicious and delivered directly to our stomachs. None of this opening cans or reheating leftovers for us. No sir, it was seven-course cuisine in a tube.

And the best part? The only person you had to deal with was you. And not you as you are today, but a you with no wrongs.

You hadn’t yet stolen any cookies from the pantry. Hadn’t tried to look up the dress of your fourth-grade teacher. Hadn’t called your best friend stupid or told your parents you hate them. No failures, no history of disappointments, no shameful secrets, no insecurities as blaring as that zit on your nose you’d be blessed with come age fourteen.

Nope. Just ten fingers, ten toes, a couple appendages hanging off your side. Pretty simple. You had yourself pretty much figured out.

Life was sweet in the womb. A couple of posters over there, a plant or two thataway, maybe someday a flat-screen TV. You had

big plans to stay there forever. It was comfort; it was safety; it was the best five-star hotel no money could buy.

To have faith that life would end up smelling like a twelve-dozen-rose bouquet was no stretch of the imagination. It wasn't much of a leap to trust that your cocoon would shield you from all harm. That was the standard, not the exception. Everything around you said so. Until one fateful day.

What the (insert expletive here)!

But the womb was a liar, a cheat, false advertising to the extreme — a fact that every human being learns a bit too late, as tranquility turns to *what the* ... in about 5.7 seconds. Comfortably dimmed lights switch to a 250-watt medical spot lamp pointed directly in your eyes. La-Z-Boy-esque embryonic cushions violently transition to huge hands yanking on your head, turning your neck a direction you never knew it could go.

“Whoa. Hey, *hey!* Son ... of ... a ...!” Cutting, bleeding, screaming. And worst of all, when you finally make it through, you're naked. With a bunch of people staring at you. And you realize for the first time (and probably not the last) that naked you isn't all that attractive. Your body resembles less a Michelangelo and more that thing your cat found in the backyard and dragged into the middle of the family room.

Would it have killed somebody to give us a little heads-up? At least put up a couple of warning signs along the way out?

“Proceed with Caution.”

“This Might Sting a Little.”

“Severe Turbulence Ahead.”

“Swim Back Upstream! Swim for Your Life!”

“This Gets a Whole Lot Worse before It Gets Better.”

A Few Years Later

Birth is our introduction to transition. What a word that is — *transition*. It rolls off the tongue so sophisticatedly, so refined. Like an English gentleman sending his regrets.

But that's not really how *transition* should sound. Not when it brings glaring lights and screams and 180-degree neck twists.

I retell our dramatic entry into the world because I experienced another birth-like transition. In one terrifying motion, this transition ripped my comfortable little life from its slumber, leaving me crying and naked again.

So what happened on this terrifying day?

Well, this is where more esteemed authors would describe the car crash that put them in the hospital for fifteen months, or the day they learned they had cancer. And the rest of their book would unfold an uplifting story of courage and triumph.

Well, that's not me. Nope, not a speck of cancer. And my beautiful Honda Civic hatchback that I started driving during my senior year of high school is running as smoothly as ever.

No, my own life-altering transition is something commonly understood to be a cause for celebration.

It was a day that I prayed time and time again would finally come.

It was a day my parents and I spent thousands upon thousands upon thousands of dollars for. It was a day extended parts of my family came out to cheer, sporting blue and green plastic fold-up chairs and yelling embarrassing things at inopportune times.

This day, this event, this supposed rocket-launch-into-the-rest-of-my-life: college graduation!

I crossed that stage on a sunny day in May, shook a few hands,

flashed my “got everything figured out” grin, and before I could even wrap my fingers around that diploma, someone was grabbing my head, ripping me out. In an instant, I was a *gradu-what the heck do I do now?*

Who Wants Cake?

During my graduation party, I couldn’t move. The smiling faces, the excited handshakes, the sentiments of joy and congratulations. Aunts and uncles pinching me on the cheeks like they did two decades before.

Everything whipped around me so fast I couldn’t move. I felt like the deer stuck on the highway, exposed and vulnerable in the oncoming semi’s headlights of “So, Paul, what are your plans for the *future?*”

The future? Heck if I knew. Guests tossed prying questions in my face like live hand grenades.

I’d just been born, for graduation’s sake! My goal right now is to successfully balance this corner piece of cake the size of a Barcalounger on this sturdy coaster-of-a-plate, made from wet, used newspapers, while looking around my house that seven guys have been living in all year and desperately trying to see a way we could ever successfully clean this place so they’ll actually let us leave. Once I get all that straightened out, then maybe I’ll be able to block your graciously lobbed grenades with my ten-part prospectus for the years ahead.

Complications

Everything we thought we knew about ourselves and God and our role in this crazy two-sheets-to-the-wind world changed

the day we actually entered it — whether our cocoon exit came on that first day out of school or on the job or in marriage. Whatever the situation, we've all had that “*Oh, crap, so this is what real life is*” kind of moment. When everything we were so sure about quickly becomes obsolete.

Sun in our eyes. Rash on our legs. Poop that used to just float away, now stuck in the most uncomfortable places imaginable. All we can do is cry. And cry we do.

The womb apparently was not the accurate teacher of reality like we once thought. On that first day out, the hard, cold learning began for us all.

But with it came some perks of living outside our former insulation as well. Taking that first step, eating that first chocolate chip cookie, sliding down our first waterslide, petting our first dog, getting that tingly feeling the first time we really noticed that special *someone*.

So that later, if you asked us to go back into the womb, we would decline. That would be gross. Sure, life immersed in the outside can sting. A lot. But life in the womb wasn't much of a life after all. To actually live, we had to be born.

Let Life Begin

At least that's what I keep telling myself. Because I'm realizing that living on the outside is harder than I thought. And some simple, straightforward words are much more complicated now: *faith, hope, purpose, passion, paying bills, lumbar support, budgeting*, et cetera. I actually have to know something about these words now. The *future* was going to be on a test to be named later, and somehow *later* had just snuck up on me and smacked

me with the edge of that \$300 textbook I refused to sell back for \$6.33.

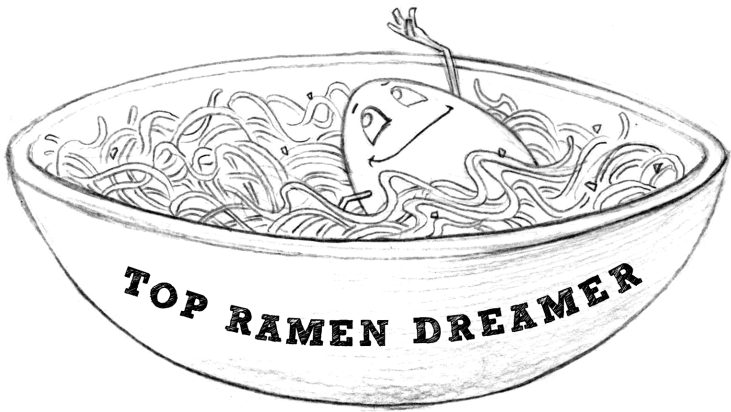
In my cocoon, lying there in gooey goodness, I grew all kinds of faith. I didn't doubt for a second I was safe. In babyese I would cry out, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!" I envisioned my words leaving the womb and traveling across the vastness of creation, over the horizon, to where God sat waiting and listening to my cry, waiting to respond.

But now that I'm out, I hear no answer. Only the echo of my cry in return. Is the problem my hearing or his voice?

So now what? Is it up to God or up to me? If it's up to God, what's he doing about it? If it's up to me ... where do I even start?

As I'm carried out of the hospital and introduced to sights my eyes have never seen, I'm exhilarated ... and terrified. The fear and excitement of a world of unknowns keep me whispering, "Got to be born to really live; got to be born to really live." Fingers crossed. *Got to be born to really live.*

CHAPTER TWO



Six months after college is a magical time for a college graduate as your friends — Stafford, Perkins, and the nice man at the bank — decide to retract their hand of grace.

Wait, I actually have to pay these loans back? I thought college loans were like Monopoly money. Someday, in a land far, far away, I'd hand over a couple of pink fives and a few blue fifties, and we'd call it even.

That or someone would slip me a "get out of jail free" card, like Bono announcing a year of loan forgiveness, *on him*, for all of us middle-class suckers whose parents somehow made enough money to not receive any financial aid, yet somehow concurrently didn't make enough money to even pay for half of first-year English.

So wait, Ms. Sallie Mae — I have to pay *how* much, for *how* long? Who knew you owned Boardwalk with a hotel and I'd apparently been a resident there these last four years? So I won't Pass Go for two decades. No big deal.

Who has money for loans anyway? Rent is my more pressing reality. Also, for some reason, it takes food to live. And people charge money for it. What's up with that?

Then there are little things like car insurance, health insurance, and the miscellaneous fun excursions to the mechanic for a blown head gasket on my aforementioned Honda Civic.

"Changing the world" has quickly jumped into the backseat

and is taking a nap, while the “reality of continued living” is taking over.

What makes it worse is that I’m still around chipper, know-it-all college students who keep asking, “Hey, Paul, what are *you* doing with your life?” With their little rosy cheeks and that quiver of excitement in their voice that *knows* they will make their first million within a year after graduation.

Another thing my professors forgot to teach me was how to lovingly reply, “Working at Starbucks,” without wanting to pull out a flask of vodka, take a swig, and then pour just a dash on their clothes and light it on fire.

Not to burn them severely, of course, but just to put the fear of God in them a little, so they know never again to ask me how “life” is. And, of course, to give me a little chuckle as I watch them stop, drop, and roll.

Silly college kids.

But just a class ago, I was one of them — eager to start my future, completely assured the red carpet would precede all my steps. I remember secretly wondering what was wrong with all those twentysomethings who were waiting tables or working boring cubicle jobs. *Come on, how hard could it be?*

I thought the only problem after college would be picking *which* amazing job offer to take, like five popular girls all asking me to go to prom. Unfortunately, just like in high school, they somehow all lost my number.

So all those premed students — the ones I mocked in school as they scurried to their labs on Friday nights — were now smiling from ear to ear as they stepped into top medical schools like Columbia, Stanford, and UCLA while I enthusiastically stepped into my local temp agency.

My Own Worst Enemy

Temp agencies are a world I would not want my worst enemies subjected to. Mainly because I envision my worst enemies working deep in the coal mines of Siberia guarded by Arctic wolves, so I figure I'd give them a pass on the whole temp agency process to land such a job. I know, full of grace I am.

If you ever feel you need a good humbling experience, spend four years of your life mastering the liberal arts, then take the incredibly challenging aptitude test at your local temp agency:

Question 1: If you have a file that begins with a Q, what drawer would you put it in?

- a. A – E
- b. F – K
- c. L – O
- d. P – T
- e. U – Z

I answered c. Purely out of spite.

My roommate, Rob, went to the same temp agency, and they placed him at a warehouse packaging nutcrackers. Big wooden Christmas nutcrackers. By himself, packing one nutcracker after another. Him and his degree in computer science keeping him company.

When Rob had seen enough nutcrackers, they placed him at a “Boob Factory” (or so we called it). It was a silicone plant where he did computer entry work. He worked there for a year. Three hundred sixty-five days gone so that women could go from a 34B to a 34D.

And when I told the temp agency I didn't want to specialize in nuts or boobs, they set me up with something even better.

I had an interview to become (*drumroll, please*) a used-airplane-parts sales assistant. Dream job, here I come!

Interview Time

Now this was my first real out-of-college interview so, understandably, I was nervous as I walked into the office. Not about messing up the interview, mind you, which is probably what a person should be worried about at their first interview. No, I was scared because I'd just realized I must have been flying around this whole time in airplanes with *used parts*.

I don't know about you, but I want the wings that are carrying my rear end thirty thousand feet above the ground to be brand-spanking-new.

But with \$67 in my checking/savings account (they were one and the same), I put those concerns aside and prayed they would just give me the chance to be the best little used-airplane-parts sales assistant this side of the Mississippi.

I spent four hours interviewing with the entire office. Shaking one hand after another, smiling with feigned excitement at the possibility of fulfilling my *childhood dream* of being a used-airplane-parts sales assistant person.

But in interview number four, I became aware of some strange similarities within this office.

First, no one ever smiled. Each interviewer's slow, monotonous voice describing the *exciting opportunities* that came with my position seemed noticeably contradictory. (Thank you, deduction skills via aforementioned liberal arts degree.)

Second, each interviewer used the exact same sentences when describing the "wonder" that was the company, the "love"

they had for working there, and the “absolute thrill” of used airplane parts.

Soon I was completely convinced — not about my future working there, but about the fact that all of them were either:

- a. terrorist alien drones sent to earth to sabotage our airline industry
- b. prisoners who had disrespected the Used-Airplane-Parts Feudal Lord of Santa Barbara and were being held captive
- c. regular people who desperately wanted to escape but were being sedated with gas through the overhead vents
- d. regular people who had become comfortable living crappily ever after

The final interviewer wasn’t much older than me — she was cute with long legs and hair that told me it wished it was outside. As she recited the Feudal Alien Lord’s mandatory brainwashed spiel, I wanted to lean over and whisper, “Let’s get out of here.”

Whether she was alien or human, it seemed inhumane to leave her caged up here.

We could bust out of this place together, jump in my Honda Civic hatchback, and fly down the highway at seventy-five miles per hour to Mexico (after seventy-five miles per hour, everything in my car begins to shake and things get a little dicey). Me and my used-airplane-parts refugee could start our new lives together, selling deep-sea fishing trips and books about her true account of survival and rescue from the Lord of Used Airplane Parts.

But I knew she wouldn’t come. She was here. She wasn’t going anywhere. And I desperately wanted to leave.

As I walked toward the front door as the hiring manager said

they'd be in touch, I began staring closely at the vents above, wondering how management pulled off pumping in so much poisonous air. Because it was either that, or everyone was, in fact, *this* miserable.

For their sakes, I prayed they were being gassed.

Here's Your Life

Two days later, the chipper lady at the temp agency called and told me the job was mine. Excitedly she started going over the paperwork, telling me they wanted me to start the next week.

As she rambled on, a strange thing began to happen. I felt a sickening sensation rising from my stomach into my chest, like the time I ate a spoonful of chunky milk thinking it was cottage cheese.

Was I really going to do this? Did I really get a college education to be the guy with a pulse who could handle this *challenging* and *rewarding* job? Was I going to devote the next six months, year, three years, my life, to used airplane parts? Was I willingly going to become their prisoner?

"I need some time to think about this," I quickly interrupted her.

"Excuse me. What was that? It's yours. You start next Monday. So come in first thing tomorrow, and we'll —"

"No, I need to think about whether I want to take the job."

"What?"

"I just don't know if I see myself as a used-airplane-parts sales assistant person."

"Paul, it's a great opportunity with a lot of *upward mobility*." A catchall phrase to make a bottom-dweller job seem worthwhile.

“Um, I just don’t think I can,” I squeaked out, not knowing if I was trying to convince her or myself.

“Well, Paul, they absolutely loved you and want you to start right away. So just come to my office — ”

“No ... no, I don’t think I can,” I said it again as my confidence and resolve grew. “Actually, I know I can’t. I’m sorry, but you’re just going to have to tell them thanks but no thanks.”

We both sat in silence for about ten seconds. Little grunts and sharp spurts of breaths pierced through the receiver like little audio daggers. I could feel my chipper little helper losing her chipperness.

“I went to a lot of trouble finding you this interview.”

“I know you did, and I’m very thankful for all your help.”

More silence. Then my friendly little elf at the temp agency did a wonderful impression of Darth Vader, with just a dash of Satan.

“Listen here, you can’t come to a temp agency, get offered a job, and then turn it down. That’s not how it works. You’re going to take this job.”

“No I’m not!”

Click.

Apparently, Darth Satan decided our conversation was over.

Prime Rib

So I turned down my one job offer. Sure, I was barely scraping by, living on a steady diet of year-old Top Ramen and water. But I would rather be a Top Ramen Dreamer than a Prime Rib Realist.

My dad, on the other hand, did not share that sentiment. When I told him I turned down the job, he didn’t applaud my

resolve. He didn't pat me on the back. He didn't chuckle at my witty little Top Ramen Dreamer, Prime Rib Realist analogy. He only sat there and listened. Then he said one thing, with the frankness that dads get paid the big bucks for: "But son, it was a job."

Thank you, Dad. I'm aware it was a job. It was a "work there and become an alcoholic in three months" job.

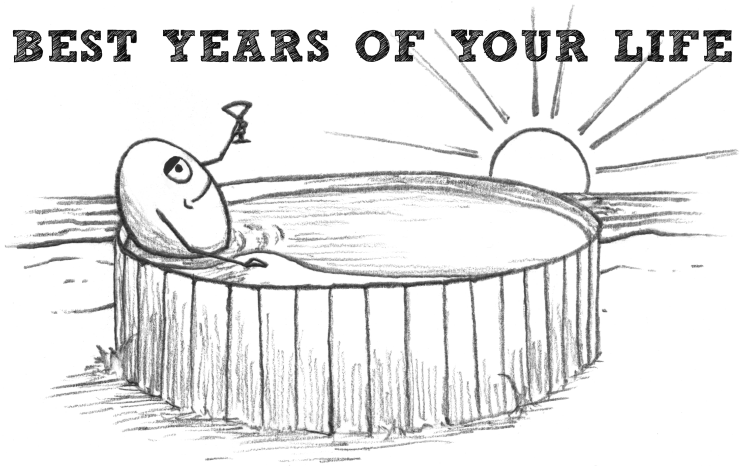
I don't want to sell airplane parts. I don't want to pack nutcrackers like my roommate Rob. And while we're on the topic, I also don't want to be a doctor. I don't want to be a lawyer. Or a teacher, farmer, pastor, actor, missionary, et cetera, et cetera. I've become quite good at pinpointing what I don't want. But what I *do* want — now that's another question.


There's the rub. There's the fact that drives me crazy. I feel like my job search after graduation was like riding in a helicopter over Rocky Mountain National Park, with the pilot telling me my dream job was down there in those trees somewhere, right before he shoved me out the door.

The fall was exhilarating, until I smacked the ground.

CHAPTER THREE

BEST YEARS OF YOUR LIFE



 think dads are paid on commission for saying certain phrases. Probably around ten cents every time they utter, “Money doesn’t grow on trees,” or “Were you raised in a barn?”

My dad definitely had his fair share of go-to clichés, which I always listened to. Really, I didn’t have any other choice.

One, my dad was a pastor of a church, so he was hearing directly from God on at least a weekly basis. Second, he looked like the Italian mobsters’ secondhand man who rose to the top for his love of hearing bones crack. And I was pretty sure the pastor thing was an elaborate ruse to hide his real “import, export” business. So disagreeing with my dad, by any account, never seemed like a wise idea.

Above all phrases, my dad has uttered one particular platitude more times than I can count. Whenever I complained or times seemed hard or life seemed boring, I could always count on his response: “Enjoy it, son; these are the best days of your life.”

Like the old pair of slippers he pulled from the guy who couldn’t pay his loan, it was his phrase that he kept slipping on, no matter how bad it smelled.

Really? The Best?

I’m always amazed how, in good conscience and with a straight face, he can seriously rattle off this statement time and

time again and mean it every time. Common sense tells me it can't always be true.

Elementary school: "Three recesses a day, no homework, Beanie Weenies in your lunch box, no complexities, no hassles. Enjoy it, Paul. These are the best years of your life."

Middle school: "Playing as many sports as you can, shaving for the first time, little to no homework. Make the most of it, Paul; it only gets harder. This is the best time in your life."

High school: "I know these football two-a-days in the heat don't seem fun right now. But the camaraderie! The sweat! The blood! Oh, man, I get goose bumps just talking about it. Soak it up, Paul — they're the best days of your life."

College: "Getting pizza at 2:00 a.m. Water-ballooning your professors. These are absolutely the best..."

Best years of your life. What a sham of a phrase. Only when they take a vote from everyone who's died and then come to a consensus, will I listen.

"What's that, Socrates? You suggest the early thirties are the best years? And you, Augustine? You're saying early teens? All right, everyone; let's vote."

Actually, as I look back, despite the neurotic and illogical way my dad kept using the phrase, I kept believing it. Never while I was actually living and breathing in that particular "best" season. No. I only believed it a couple of days before it ended, and then for a year or so afterward. Once the season was over and gone and I couldn't go back — that's when I knew it must have been the best.

Spin the Big Wheel

Take what was happening for me in middle school, for example. Eighth grade was my Acne Grand Opening, with a zit on

the tip of my nose the circumference of Cuba. It was so big that rumors spread it was actually a tumor. Which, of course, I didn't deny. Because you can make fun of the kid with a pimple but not the kid with a tumor. So I let that cancer rumor run as long as it had legs.

Then there was that fun little battle at the back of my throat. A voice that hadn't quite figured out what to be. Some days it sounded female, some days male, some days a little mixture of both. Like going through a daily sex change. Sometimes I'd go to the bathroom just to make sure everything was still there.

Puberty is the teenager's Russian roulette. We could go overnight from popular to a gangly mess. Girls and guys all had to spin the Big Wheel to see what horribly awkward thing we might get to live with for the next three years.

"Come on, thick mustache with hair nowhere else."

"Come on, teeth coming in sideways through my cheeks."

"Come on, legs that grow five times faster than the rest of my body."

"Come on, boobs that don't grow at all, giving me the nickname Bee Stings till I'm twenty-five years old."

Middle school. If God came down right now and told me he'd give the world complete peace for a thousand years if I'd just relive middle school, I would politely answer, "Thanks but no thanks. I'll take my chances with war."

I didn't like middle school then and wouldn't want to relive it now. But here's the funny thing: At one point in my life I completely convinced myself that middle school had, in fact, been my best years.

It started at the end of eighth grade, when everyone came together in a fit of nostalgia. Just weeks earlier it was, "I hate middle school because of this and that." But the day before gradu-

ation, it was, “Oh, man, I don’t know how I’ll live without this and that.”

A couple of weeks earlier, we were lighting a bag of poop on fire and putting it on Mrs. Franklin’s front porch; now we’re waiting in line for Mrs. Franklin to sign our yearbook.

It’s funny how being freaked out about the future makes you really appreciate the past.

In those middle school days, loyalties among friends lasted only as long as that zit on my nose. Yet when middle school was over, we cried as we sang, “Friends are friends forever . . .”

Infamous Back Acne

Then came those first excruciating months of high school. In the midst of that anguish, our selective memory process completely took over. Middle school really had been heaven. Now we called Mrs. Franklin every night and three times on weekends just to hear again her sweet, angelic voice.

As a freshman I still had all the awkward characteristics I dreaded in middle school, but now I had two thousand people to make fun of me for them.

I tried to sneak through the incredibly packed halls, going unnoticed with the knockoff shoes my mom bought for me at Payless. But with my every step, a man with a megaphone followed behind, yelling, “Hey, everyone! Don’t be fooled — these shoes are not cool. And he has acne! Crowd around and laugh, everybody! Yes, feel free to point!”

Even worse was the fact that my acne spread like a tropical disease, not only throughout my face, but to my back and chest as well.

Thanks, Puberty Fairy. I like your sister who specializes in teeth much better.

At least since I had no plans to be the freshman who went traipsing through the halls topless, my back acne would not be a problem. Then I saw my first class schedule:

English: 7:45 – 8:45 a.m. — Room B104

Algebra: 8:55 – 9:55 a.m. — Room D303

U.S. History: 10:05 – 11:05 a.m. — Room Good-Luck-Finding-It

Biology: 12:00 – 1:00 p.m. — Room A101

Swimming: 1:15 – Eternity — The Pool — *Enjoy!*

Swimming! No, no, *no*. This can't be. It must be some sort of typographic error or sick joke.

Mandatory swimming class for all freshmen — now there was a bright idea from the principal. Get three hundred of the most awkward-looking, self-conscious, horribly terrified people and make them take off their clothes in front of each other and jump into a freezing pool with enough chlorine to kill a small elephant. Every Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

My back acne was going to be famous.

Sophomore year didn't get much better. In football, I was placed on the dreaded Scout Team. This meant that in practice we had to go against the starting varsity offense so they could perfect their plays on a slower, weaker bunch. It was like Darwin rose from the grave and wanted to prove his theories on awkward teenagers. We were like a mixed bunch of turtles, chipmunks, and rogue ostriches taking on a team of steroid-infused rhinos.

I won the Scout Team Award that year, which I think meant I excelled at being flattened on my back better than anyone else.

Junior year got better, though high school was still a steep, rocky climb. Literally every day you could throw away three

years of image management by falling down the stairs during a passing period or throwing up in the trash can in the middle of class. That one reputation-shattering event, which forever became a nickname.

But before I knew it, I was a senior, and high school was actually enjoyable. I had some good friends, and now I was the one knocking the sophomore Scout Team guys on their backs. For the first time, middle school was remembered for what it really was — both good and bad. Mrs. Franklin retired, and I didn't even bother to go to the party. High school was now the best time ever. I went to parties, skipped classes, matured, learned. And *bam*, it was over.

Spoiled Paradise

Then college rolled around. This step was bigger; therefore, so was the fear.

The riskier the jump, the more ambulances waiting on the side.

Maybe you picked a college like I did. One of your friend's second cousin's uncle said he knew someone who went to this great school and loved it. Plus, the girl on the front of the brochure looked pretty cute. So you go there. Even though it's in the middle of Nebraska.

Then the process happened all over again. Nostalgia, anxiety, loneliness. I soon realized the cute girl on the brochure was one of the five attractive girls in all of Nebraska. Different colleges just hired her to be on their promotional pieces. (Just kidding. I wish they all could be Nebraska girls.) For a year I stuck it out in always windy, too-hot-too-cold Nebraska.

Then I heard about this college in California. So although

I loved Nebraska as much as an eye infection, I thought I just might find life a tad more enjoyable in Santa Barbara, California.

But even in Santa Barbara, the process began once more. It was hard transferring into a school as a sophomore. Everyone else had their shared freshman experience, and their friendships were pretty set. So yes, I was lonely. A little depressed. I asked God why and wondered if he really knew what was best.

Eventually I made a friend. Then another. I had an amazing class, then one more. The scales slowly fell from my eyes and the fog lifted, and I realized I was truly in paradise.

My senior year, I lived with six of my closest friends in a house with a hot tub on a deck that perfectly overlooked the Pacific Ocean. The yard was filled with avocado, lemon, and orange trees. I scheduled all my classes on Tuesday and Thursday so I always had a four-day weekend, with a Wednesday in between to catch my breath.

Spoiled paradise, utterly and completely.

Seeing a Pattern?

With every transition I've faced, I've struggled to find meaning in my new existence. I've sworn that God, this time, had finally forsaken me. This time he was off saving some kid in Romania and just flat-out forgot about me.

But I've always made it. Sure, I've been lonely and depressed. I've had zits, chemistry finals, relationships ending in heartbreak. I've had the good, the bad, the mediocre. In every transition. But I can look back and see that it always led to something better somehow.

I mean, what if with every scary transition I actually had my way and refused to move forward? I'd now be walking around

with that little elementary desk stuck to my butt. And who wants that?

The Best?

So if things progress as they always have, I'll look back someday at this postgraduation season and call it "the best years of my life." The time when I had everything up for grabs. The time when I could be whatever I wanted. The time before a mortgage and three kids.

But Dad never told me, "Get ready, son; those early adult years are the best days. The entry-level job, fifty-dollar savings account, never-ending questions, and trying to be an adult when actual *adults* know you're just playing dress-up. Yes, those were the absolute best."

Adulthood. When you're no longer able to chalk up mistakes and failures as simply part of childhood adolescence, a part of learning and growing. When the process is over and the grace to mess up is packed away with the baseball cards and Barbie dolls.

When you start back at the bottom like you're in first grade all over again, except all your classmates are in their mid-forties with 401(k)s and back problems they somehow blame on you.

No, Dad never said the process of transitioning from *growing* to *grown* was the best. He fell strangely silent at my graduation party. He just shook my hand and gave me a slight smirk.

I should've known something was the matter.

The Present

So now I sit as someone's employee, fondly remembering my most recent best years ever.

Let the cycle continue.

Because life after college is *work*. And not the summer-job “work” where you flirt with members of the opposite sex, joke with friends, and in two and a half months you’re done. No, this work lasts twelve months a year. And when you’re done with that ...

“Johnny, tell them what they’ve won!”

“Well, Alex, they’ve won *twelve more months* of monotonous, mind-numbing work!”

No week off for Thanksgiving, month off for Christmas, week off for spring break, just to somehow make it to your three-months-off summer.

Life became a perfectly designed rut. Life became a twelve-months-a-year struggle. Life became a chore, worse than cleaning the toilet after your little brother had the stomach flu.

Life became, *God help me*, a cubicle.