

# Executive Excellence

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## Navigating the Sidewalks of Life

Forest Gump taught us that, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you'll get." Metaphors like this are useful tools that express and illuminate life's little mysteries and complexities.

Portia Nelson's poem titled, "*There's a hole in my sidewalk*" is another great metaphor about life in five short chapters.

### Chapter One

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

### Chapter Two

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend that I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in this same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes forever to find a way out.

### Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit ... but my eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is *my* fault.  
I get out immediately.

### Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

### Chapter Five

I walk down a different street!

I suppose the poem resonates with me because it reminds me of the comical Bill Murray movie "Groundhog Day" and matches my experience of life. The purpose of this piece is to explore the challenges of life and learn how to navigate them better.



**CHAPTER ONE** – I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost...I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

Is this similar to anything that's happened in your life? What has been your experience?

- Have you ever fallen in to one a hole in the sidewalk?
- Have you found yourself in a pit of frustration, anger, anxiety or resentment?
- Have you been an innocent bystander minding your own business when the bottom fell out?

Chapter one illustrates how you can sometimes wind up in a deep hole that is not your fault. For example:

- You live on the coast during hurricane season the winds and rains may have come along and damaged your house.
- The company you work for goes bankrupt and you lost your job.
- You return to your car in the mall parking lot and find that someone has smashed your fender.
- You realize that your closest relationship is unraveling.

Any of these events can surprise you and create fear, anger, loss, and more. You didn't have anything to do with creating the problem but you have to deal with the consequences.



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This is the nature of life. Some things are out of your control. Unexpected events happen. If you fall into a hole you find a way out and journey on. Hopefully, you grow from the experience and are able to cope with other pitfalls.

**CHAPTER TWO** – I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. *I pretend that I don't see it.* I fall in again. I can't believe I am in this same place. But, it isn't my fault. It still takes forever to find a way out.

Have you ever found yourself in exactly the same hole more than once?

- Are you in the same bad relationship with a different person for the twentieth time? Do you wonder how all of these jerks *find* you?
- How is it that you always get into the same type of conflict with the boss? He/she is so negative and critical and always expects so much. He/she makes you feel miserable.
- Maybe you are in the midst of another "word for word" argument with your spouse for the ten thousandth time. He/she says *this* and you say *that* just like you always do.
- Your son, mother, sister, or brother does that thing that always drives you nuts.

You can't believe that *they're* doing it again! You ask, "Why does this always happen to me? Why do *they* always do this to me? When will *they* ever stop? Why can't *they* understand what *they* make me do?"

You say to yourself, "My life would be so much happier if other people would just change." You fall into a mind trap called, "Let's fix *you*". You know in your heart of heart that it doesn't solve anything and just shifts the blame and, but you play it anyway.

Couples and parents and children play this game all the time. One spouse shows up at the counselor's office claiming that their mate is the problem. Parents bring in children saying their behavior needs to change.

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Children blame their parents for making them act this way. Employees blame the insensitive boss. The overworked boss criticizes the ungrateful employees. It is the proverbial 'circular firing squad' and no one takes responsibility for anything.

**CHAPTER THREE** – I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I still fall in—it's a habit—but my eyes are open. I know where I am. It is *my* fault. I get out immediately.

Chapter Three is our 'wake up' call. Fall into the same hole often enough and you come to realize there is only one person that can change things, and that's you. For most of us, it is a sobering moment.

The next time you fall into one of your familiar holes, ask yourself, "What am I pretending not to know or notice?" Also, ask yourself, "How did I do to get here? Why did I allow myself to fall into this hole again?"

When you're honest with yourself and admit that you fell in the hole again because it part of your

pattern you are ready to forge ahead and change your life.

**CHAPTER FOUR** – I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

Here's where you start a new chapter in your life. Once you've accepted responsibility for your life you can change. You begin by avoiding the holes. You know your pattern and can see what is coming. This gives you control and you respond in a different manner. A different response gives new possibilities.

For example, let's say you have a habit of running late. You consider it an innocent practice, but it irritates your friends. In Chapter Four, you recognize that it is inconsiderate to make others wait and you commit to changing your behavior. Imagine you have a date, and your friend has been waiting patiently for you to go out to dinner. When you arrive late he/she says, "Well, you are late again!" Your old response might have been, "Must you always complain?"



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Now, when you recognize your pattern and a bad evening looming, you realize that your friend has a legitimate complaint. Your tone changes and you say, "I apologize. I know I'm late. Thank you for waiting, and I won't do it again." No excuses. Your choice validates your friend's frustration and concern, and smoothes the way for an enjoyable evening. You've broken the cycle and taken responsibility.

## CHAPTER FIVE – I walk down a different street!

Chapter Five is a new day. Finally, you change streets. You change your pattern so that your old behavior is gone. Once on the new street, realize that this street has holes you've never seen before. But now you know the rules about "holes" in the sidewalk. The first time that you fall into one you ask yourself, "Am I responsible?" If you are *not* responsible move on. If you are, fix it. The sooner you ask this question, the sooner you can take back responsibility for your life.

The sidewalks and paths of our lives do not go in a straight line. They go side to side, up and down, and sometimes even double back. The one thing you can count on is that the path will change in ways you can't imagine. You can't prepare the path for yourself, *but you can prepare yourself for the path.*

### Get On With It!

In our practice we recommend four steps to change your behavior.

1. *Acknowledge Reality* – I have a problem.
2. *"Own it"* – It's my life, and I have to change it.
3. *Find solutions* – I will employ new behaviors that make me happy.
4. *Get on with it!* – Start your plan and stick to it.

Getting on with it is a simple solution. However, simple doesn't mean easy. The decision to change your life may be difficult. Secondhand stores are littered with castaway self-help books that people bought as 'instant' cures. They usually don't work because change requires discipline and commitment for the long haul.

Discipline and commitment are critical to changing our behavior. They require continuous effort and practice. You probably have heard the old adage, "Practice makes perfect." But, in reality it should say, "Good practice makes perfect."

Doing something half-hearted won't get the job done. Intentional daily effort is essential. One way to stay on track is to focus on the only person who can make it happen—you.

One of my colleagues once said, "*You always do what you want to do, and if you don't you didn't.*" In short, if you don't make the progress you want, you didn't want to. You will find a way if you really want to change.

Another thing to keep in mind on your journey is the "Serenity Prayer." It has been a source of strength and inspiration for thousands of people seeking to balance their lives. As you may recall it reads:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things  
I cannot change;  
the courage to change the things I can;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

While the serenity prayer helps you deal with **external** change, making some minor edits will help you deal with your **internal** change. See if you can spot the differences:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the people  
I cannot change;  
the courage to change the person that I can;  
and the wisdom to know it is me.*

Yes, in the final analysis, it all comes down to the simple fact that the only person you can ever really change is yourself. Inner peace begins when you accept responsibility for your own happiness.

When it comes to changing others Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see." You might be surprised what happens when others see the positive changes you make in your life. Example is a powerful motivator.



John Brady is founder of Brady & Associates, a consulting firm specializing in leadership and organizational development. John came to consulting after over twenty years as a senior executive in Fortune 500 companies, and has been a close, trusted advisor and coach to top executives in major corporations internationally for two decades. Brady holds an MBA in organizational systems development and a PhD in organizational psychology. According to one client, "Brady is the Yoda of organizational change."