

# CHAPTER 1

## **My Own Inner Critic Experience**

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.*

—Helen Keller

As an eight-year-old boy, springtime in Salt Lake City, Utah, was particularly memorable to me. Our cherry tree was in full bloom, bursting with pink and white blossoms, and our backyard was soaked in the aroma of jasmine flowers. On the other side of the fence next to our house, the open fields looked like an artist's palette, brilliantly dotted with yellow chrysanthemums, lavender lupins, orange daisies, and softly creeping buttercups. Distant lawn mowers humming in the air created a sort of harmony as grass was cut for the first time after a long, cold winter.

Some of my favorite memories are of playing with my baby sister in the front yard on our Big Wheels. In the morning, before we headed out for those adventures, we would take in our usual dose of Saturday-morning cartoons. There I was, in my favorite red and blue Spider-Man Underoos, sitting downstairs on our brown shag carpet.

After breakfast, my little sister would bring her favorite doll downstairs, sit next to me in her beanbag chair, and ask, "What are you watching, Bee-bomb-bow?" That was how my sister would say my African name because she couldn't pronounce Odihambo.

"I'm watching that funny rabbit," I'd explain. In one episode, the main character took a trip to Africa. We laughed wildly at what seemed to be a harmless and hilarious kids' show. My imagination would then run wild in our backyard. I often took my GI Joe and Transformer toys on imaginary trips to the distant lands of Africa. They would face the mighty lion and other fierce animals of the African continent. I made a superhero cape out of my sister's baby blanket and flew to our tree house in our backyard. Up there, I imagined overlooking the landscape of the Serengeti. I envisioned the silhouettes of the acacia trees and plumes of dust from the migration of the wildebeests. I saw an enchanted land of wonder and mystery.

**Where Did I Come From?**

As a youth, I felt a burning desire deep within to understand another part of myself in relation to Africa. Into adolescence, I wanted to be proud of my heritage, but I didn't know how. I learned a little about the origins of my ancestors from TV series like *Roots* and *Shaka Zulu*. This was my first exposure to a small part of African culture, and it only piqued my interest more.

I was taught a bit about Africa in middle school and high school, but I never quite understood why learning about this vast and dynamic continent didn't play a larger role in mainstream education. Although there was little discussion or time devoted to a place that comprises one-fifth of the earth's entire land mass, I do have a clear recollection of sitting at my desk and seeing references to the "Dark Continent" in my assigned textbook. That sounded so ominous and bleak, not just mysterious and unknown, but scary even. The Study Africa was a blur. Why did we spend so little time exploring the antiquity of this intriguing country and so much time on the European empires, their colonies, and their influence on modern-day culture? Why was the Western world so highly valued and brought to light while my homeland was so neglected and cast in shadows?

All these questions left me feeling frustrated as a young American student because I got the impression that Africa and, by extension, its native peoples were insignificant. Dispensable. A commodity. A resource. Surely, there were African impacts on literature, art, poetry, technology, architecture, science, and math, not just European ones? So why weren't we being exposed to *those* influences too? It all felt deeply dismissive, frustrating, and insulting to me. When I'd leave class, I remember feeling angry and embarrassed. I didn't even want to look at my classmates because I simply felt ashamed.

## **The Birth of My Inner Critic**

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois describes a phenomenon called "double consciousness"—the fallacy of seeing and judging yourself through the eyes of another. He talks about how American Negroes would see themselves through the eyes of their white counterparts and judge themselves according to that psychological measuring tape. They could never live up to the standard they aspired to because they would be limited by the thoughts, opinions, prejudice, and bigotry of others. Du Bois goes on to discuss the splitting of the psyche:

Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

I have discovered that this phenomenon of double consciousness is universal to all humans. Think for a minute about the people *you* feel watched and judged by, how you see yourself through *their* eyes. These perceptions often give rise to various internal feelings that actually have external roots, such as anger, anxiety, depression, irritability, and confusion. In essence, you feel like you are being controlled by something outside yourself.

This double consciousness started taking hold of my thoughts and gave rise to my inner critic in several ways. Quite early in my life, many disparaging beliefs and questions began to emerge and move to the forefront of my thoughts and behaviors, among them:

- Black Americans are different.
- Black Americans were fighting a losing battle.
- Did Black Americans' unique physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual qualities have significance?
- Black Americans seemed powerless to change their fates and futures.

The frustration I felt began to affect me in more ways than one. The frustration turned into anger, and the anger gave more power to fear. As this inner storm of frustration, anger, and fear began to take shape, I developed an inferiority complex. Over time, I became aware of its destructive nature. I didn't want to contribute to it further or become a casualty of the psychological damage it was causing within.

By the time I was in my early twenties, I'd come to a crossroad and needed to make a decision about my future. In the calm that exists in the eye of a storm, I gained some clarity on what direction I wanted my life to go in, on who I wanted to be and how I wanted the world to view me. The veil began to lift, and I realized what was required to create effective change: I needed to travel to Africa, to see it for myself and feel the deep soul connection I'd always had with the continent. It was there that I would explore and hopefully reconcile the unfinished business of my inner critic. To begin the journey of silencing, or at least negating, the negative inner voice that had been steadily growing inside me throughout my youth, I knew I had to understand the meaning of my African culture, lineage, oral history, and folklore.

## **I Dream of Africa**

My father came to America in the 1970s as an eighteen-year-old foreign exchange student on a scholarship. He was from Mfangano, an island on Lake Victoria in Kenya, and my mother was from Carthage, a rural town on the east side of Texas. They met in California on the Chico State College campus and began dating after much persistence from my father. They would have three other children besides me (all younger). Unfortunately, their relationship did not last, and they parted ways when I was very young. I have some memories of my father before the breakup, but they're only bits and pieces.

During my adolescent years, I developed a strong curiosity about my father and where he came from. I knew something was missing from my self-understanding, and this sense of lack was pulling me toward a burning desire. It was almost as if a circle needed to be completed or a void within needed to be satisfied. I wanted a firm grip on my concept of "maleness," to know how to act as a young man. I was envious of my peers who had their dads there to support them at father-son events.

But I also felt drawn by something more powerful and more salient than an understanding of who my father was. It was that soul connection I've mentioned, and it went beyond just my relationship with my father. I believed then and I still believe now that his forefathers were calling me back home to Africa to discover who they were, to hear their voices, and to walk on the black sandy beaches they walked on before they set sail on their fishing excursions. It felt important for me to traverse the same mountainside my father did on his way to school, the same trail his father traveled to meet with his fellow elders to discuss the affairs of their people. My ancestors were calling me to walk the beaten paths of the beautiful island of Mfangano, and until I did, I knew, my soul would be left wanting.

My mother and my aunt Sarah (my father's cousin) were two of the greatest influences on my desire to travel to Africa. My aunt would tell me vivid stories of how brave my paternal grandfather was, how he faced a mighty boa that had attacked a young child with a makeshift spear and shield he fashioned from a rusty, abandoned car bumper. He was recruited into the English army and survived World War II. He donated land to the community for subsistence farming.

All these stories were part of the legacy he left behind, but my aunt would say that the stories could only go so far and that I needed to experience and author my own story. I needed to go claim the land my grandfather gave to me as part of my birthright. I needed to leave behind a legacy for my own children, for the people of Kenya I'd meet, and for the people I'd work with throughout my planned career as a therapist. This wouldn't be my whole story, but it would be part of my story. And it wasn't just about the land; it was about my connection to it. I needed to claim who I am as a person, my mother and Sarah always urged me—not from what I'd heard in the media or in books, but from firsthand experience.

I received my passport and my Kenyan visa in the mail. When I saw the iconic shield and spears of the Kenyan flag, I was extremely excited. I knew my lifelong dream of traveling to my homeland was going to happen. Maybe not immediately—I still needed to save up more money, which wasn't easy because I was paying my way through college at the time—but it was going to happen. When I finally had enough funds, I bought my ticket to Africa in fall of 2004.

My Kenyan family was elated when I sent them the news. They told me they were very proud of me for taking it upon myself to go there and meet the people. My grandfather especially could not wait for me to come see the birthplace of my father. I was my father's firstborn and my father was my grandfather's firstborn, and there is a special relationship that exists within African culture with the firstborn male child. I am also the firstborn of all my Kenyan cousins, so I have inherited that responsibility as well.

## **My Journey Home**

Africa has been loved, feared, and misunderstood throughout the centuries. It has been ravished by famine, war, pestilence, and intertribal conflict, and it has been conquered by imperialistic foreign countries. Many of these countries came to Africa to take the resources and the bountiful wealth that the land has to offer. The indigenous people, particularly on the east coast of Africa, were part of this bounty. To this day, Africa is controlled by governments that are not necessarily for the people. They are more interested in personal financial gain and comfort. This reality is evident by the disparity between the rich and the poor and the haves and the have-nots.

But from the sky, I couldn't see any of this. From the sky, I looked out the airplane window as we began our descent and saw only an enormous sun setting on the horizon, like

liquid gold being poured over an endless savanna. I immediately felt a sense of newness and connection that transcended all my fears. And moments later, when we touched down at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, I immediately felt at home.

Luggage in tow, I met up with my aunt Serina, who happened to work in the airport and who had arranged to come collect me. She'd been so eager for my arrival that she'd taken time off work to greet me and had been waiting for my plane to land for hours. She introduced herself with genuine affection and asked "*Ithi nade?*" (How are you doing?) in her native Luo tongue. She joyfully escorted me through the various security barriers, taking all of the stress out of the customs process for me.

Everything felt so surreal as we made our way through the airport. The language of the people all around me fell on my ears in a natural poetic cadence. It was the language of my soul, and I felt it quieting my inner critic. Why was it becoming silent? What was it about this place or my presence here that was quelling my self-doubt, the constantly murmuring negative voice I'd grown so accustomed to at the back of my mind? Was it because I'd chosen to challenge the critic with this display of courage, confidence, and faith? Because I was facing my fears and confronting my questions head-on instead of staying safe back home in America, safe in my routine, surrounded by who and what I already knew?

Looking back now, I know I was emboldened during this first pilgrimage to Africa because I was doing something by myself, for myself. It wasn't easy—I recall being afraid of the unknown and wondering if I would be truly accepted by my father's family. Thousands of miles away from all that was familiar to me, what would happen if I were stranded? If I encountered episodes of civil unrest or scenes of civil war? If I got lost or attacked? Preparing for my trip, I'd done my due diligence by studying the social climate of Kenya, but the truth is I knew very little of what to actually expect. I just took a leap of faith and trusted the draw that I'd felt within. I didn't let fear consume me or my worries alter the path toward my goal. I simply felt a calling from somewhere beyond, and I answered it. To this day, I believe that it was indeed the heeding of my soul's higher calling that marked the turning point in vanquishing the voice of my inner critic.

The next voice I heard in reality, however, was that of my uncle Ellie, my father's second-youngest brother, who'd made the fourteen-hour trip from Mfangano Island to the airport in Nairobi to pick me up. His English was good, but he wished it was better, he told me, so he

could clearly express how happy he was to see me. My uncle Kwasi, a finance director for the local government, lived in an upper-class neighborhood in Nairobi with his family, and so Ellie and I stayed at his house for a couple of days, eating the traditional African food that his wife prepared for me. Then Kwasi set up transportation for us to the island.

The trip from Nairobi to Mfangano passed through the highlands and the African savanna. Going through various small towns along the way, I had the chance to see what life was like for the native people across the land. I was bewildered by government-issued luxury cars traveling through slums and paying no mind to the suffering children. It was clear to me that greed, mismanagement of funds, and the dictatorship were influencing the affairs of the government. Society was swallowed by corruption and was in shambles. Most people were dependent on agriculture. Along the road, vendors sold fresh fruit and vegetables. Most of them were trying to make a living on the few shillings they received from tourists and locals.

Ellie and I stopped to enjoy a meal at a small restaurant in Kericho, a big town in the highlands west of the Kenyan Rift Valley. The town was known for its lush forest, agriculture, and tea plantations. Ellie ordered the same thing every time we stopped to eat: a chicken-based soup, the local staple of *ugali* (a cornmeal cake), and a Coke. I could tell it was a special treat for him to dine with his nephew from America. He took great pride in telling everyone we met about me, with his head held high and a smile plastered over his face. I loved spending time with him and was so grateful that he was my companion during my initial trek through Africa.

I was amazed by how many people he knew along the way. He was a well-loved pastor who had a meek spirit and who was very kind to his congregation. He brought a sense of comfort to people, and I could tell they trusted him. He seemed to be especially popular with college-aged kids. I learned that they would hang out around his house and ask difficult questions about life and the Bible. He had a good understanding of the welfare of the people and was well connected to the heartbeat of village life on the island. His connections fascinated me. I saw many similarities between us in our approaches to building rapport and working with others. Later in my life, when I was talking about this time with Ellie, a dear friend said something that hit me on an emotional level. He would be gone one day, she reminded me, so these memories of him should be cherished. "It was good that you gave him the opportunity to venture out with you and have those experiences with you," she went on to say, "that you took the time to enjoy those

moments with him. Because in this life, nothing lasts forever.” I learned as much as I could from him.

Finally, we approached Mbita, a small, bustling town on a small peninsula on Lake Victoria. Merchants lined the dusty streets. The murmur of commerce was mixed with the baying of goats and cattle. After my uncle haggled with the boat captain for a reasonable price for our passage, we hopped aboard a pastel-colored pink and blue boat. Sitting between a goat and a big bag of rice, I couldn’t help but feel a slight nervousness in my stomach. I knew the boat was overloaded with people and commodities, and I prayed, *Please, God, don’t let this boat break in half in the middle of the lake!* My uncle must have seen the apprehension on my face, because he looked at me, smiled, and said, “Don’t worry.” When someone tells me not to worry, it usually has the opposite effect, but here in my father’s homeland for the first time, I wasn’t my usual self. The confidence and empowerment I’d felt since arriving had stayed with me, and I managed to let go, relax, and trust Ellie’s words.

As we headed off, I was excited and curious. I was mesmerized by the sunlight that danced off the waves. The boat was slow, but it was strong and sturdy. As we passed the island Barack Obama’s father is from, we came upon a majestic scene that I could never have imagined. I’d had a picture in my head of what my father’s home would look like, but it didn’t come close to what I was now viewing with my own eyes. The giant fig trees that lined the island looked like they were from prehistoric times. Lush green foliage and exotic animals inhabited the visible spaces. Large groups of native vervet monkeys could be heard in the trees and walking down paths. Black-chested snake eagles were feeding their chicks in huge nests. Otters, weaver birds, and giant monitor lizards speckled the diverse island, making it one of the most unique ecosystems in the area.

As the boat sailed past several massive boulders with exotic birds perched on them, I saw my ancestral homeland in all its glory for the first time. It was like a religious experience. “There it is!” *Pinedala* (the motherland), the locals call it.

About fifty yards from the shoreline, I could see people waving from the beach. As we docked, a short woman in front took my hands and greeted me in her native tongue. She was my grandmother, Dani. She didn’t speak much English, but I could tell she was very pleased to see me. Still holding my hands, she said, “Welcome home.” I was next greeted by my grandfather, Janedus, my father’s youngest brother, Ogango, and several of his kids.



## Village Life

The friendly village was a small agricultural and fishing community. Tropical foliage surrounded the open plots of farmland. As we meandered down to the trails, everyone knew everyone else. I could make out some of the conversations, like Ellie saying, “He is the son of Atunda.” And the villagers would reply, “He has honored his father and grandfather by coming to see the people.”

As we traveled toward the mountainside, my uncle pointed out acres of land that belonged to the family, which my grandfather had inherited from his forefathers. We went to the east side of the island, to Kwitone, to visit the rock art there. These fantastic geometric paintings were made by Twa hunter-gatherers between two thousand and four thousand years ago. Up until the 1980s, it was a site for folklore, rain worship, and connecting to the ancestral spirits. I learned that people wanted to understand their connection to the universe and the land that they inhabited. Their form of spirituality was connected to their livelihood and survival. They depended on the seasons and the earth to provide for them and their families.

As I walked into the cave, I saw spiral shapes and images that looked like the sun and the moon. I wondered if this was a way of coping with unseen events and trying to understand profound subjects such as life, death, and God—subjects that mortal beings can never fully comprehend but can only try to preserve and portray in various art forms, like this rock painting.

The next morning, my grandmother greeted me with porridge. The simple dish was made from a sweet millet. After breakfast, she wanted to take me for a walk. We journeyed through the mountainside and down some trails. I was surprised by how strong she was. She couldn’t have been more than five foot one and was just under a hundred pounds, but she was full of life. She held my hand as we went through what seemed like an obstacle course. I remember being overtaken by her small, strong, wrinkled hands. I remember thinking that these were the same hands that held and raised my father as a child. As we trekked through the countryside, she showed me the route my father took to get to school. It just so happened that we met his teacher along the way. He and my grandmother talked about the old days and what kind of student he was. He said, “You did a good thing, Odihambo! You came back to see the people! You have made your grandfather proud!”

On the path, we also met up with my grandmother's sister. We were invited to have lunch and tea in her small dwelling. Dani was so proud to show everyone her firstborn grandson from America. Dani's sister also said, "You did a good thing coming back home to see the people!"

The next day, my grandfather took me to a plot of land next to their house. He pointed to where the plot began and ended. He told me this would be my land. I promised him that I would return to Kenya to build my traditional home on the piece of land he gave me, but for now I would build a fence around it. This excited him so much that he rose at three o'clock in the morning the following day to start burning a great portion of the shrubbery to open up the space for me.

Ellie and I took the boat ride back to Mbita to buy some cedar posts and barbed wire. I hired a college kid who was looking to earn some extra money to pay for his textbooks to help. As we began the work, my grandfather sat on a rock with his staff and watched the fence being built. I could see the pride in his eyes as he witnessed a tradition being passed down to the next generation.

## **The Story of My Lineage**

One night, my grandfather and grandmother were sitting together on one side of the wall of their home. My cousins were sitting at the opposite end of the room on a gray-colored couch with the cushion missing. I will never forget how the room was illuminated by a kerosene lamp and how our silhouettes danced on the clay walls behind us. We had just finished eating a fish stew that was pretty outstanding, after I was able to get past eating the little fish eyes staring back at me.

It seemed the perfect time to ask my uncle Ellie to ask my grandfather about our ancestors. My grandfather thought for a moment, looked intently at me, and smiled. Ellie took a couple of pages from my journal and began to write down what my grandfather was saying. He recounted our family history going back three or four hundred years in detail—all the names of my forefathers.

He began by explaining in a calm voice that our ancestors originally came from Egypt and traveled down the Nile River. They traversed through Uganda, Sudan, then into Kenya, where they eventually settled on Mfangano Island. My grandfather said, "This is where you come from, and this is the history of our people."

It was transformative for me. A quickening in my soul connected me to something that was greater than all the obstacles I had endured thus far and all the difficulties and challenges I had yet to face. It transcended all the racism I had experienced in adolescence. It gave me a sense of why I was there and that nothing I had been through was not without reason. There was purpose in the universe. I was attached to something eternal. The story of my ancestry felt like something that had been written by the hand of God, and in that moment, it became utterly essential and meaningful to me.

That evening, my inner critic became a distant memory, a forgotten whisper. My inferiority complex still tries to resurrect itself from time to time, but I gained a newfound truth between those clay walls that has never left me. The inner critic is not completely gone—no one's ever is, and for me personally, there will always be more work to do to overcome years of being told who I was—but I now had a greater understanding of my inner self, and that understanding has irreversibly changed my life.

With self-understanding—coupled with education, spiritual beliefs, and trusting in one's own capabilities—self-esteem, self-concept, and self-confidence grow. That's what happened to me, at least, and I know it can happen for anyone. I grew into the belief that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Everything suddenly made sense. I realized that those who had died in conflicts to make a better life for future generations—all the names my grandfather recited—they were a part of me, I was a part of them, not in the past, but right now in the present. I realized I am a product of people who made it through slavery, people who fought for freedom and civil rights on my mother's side, people who bestowed upon me a rich heritage on my father's side—all of which set me on the path of learning who I am.

Learning who I am ... learning who you are: what a crushing blow to the inner critic!

## **The Final Goodbye**

My first trip to Africa came and went. As profound as it had been, I had to return home to California, to my mother and siblings, to the master's program I was finishing up at the time. But then there was a second trip.

In the winter of 2015, my grandfather sent word that he wanted to see me. My grandmother had passed away. I knew I had to return to Mfangano to pay my respects. When I

arrived at his modest home, my grandfather was resting in his bedroom. Clearly, he was not as physically strong as the last time I'd seen him. After sixty years of marriage to Dani, it seemed like a part of him had gone with her. His wife had been laid to rest to be with her ancestors.

When it came time for my visit to end, I said, "Grandpa, it's time for me to go back." He looked at me and began praying. He started to cry and asked me to "stay forever." I promised him I'd be back again, just as I had before, but he continued to cry and pray. Ellie told me it was the first time he had ever seen his father show that type of emotion.

A week later, my grandfather passed away. Everyone told me how proud they were that I had fulfilled my grandfather's request before he crossed over to meet his ancestors. I had felt a calling to pull back the layers of my selfhood, to discover my origins and my ancestors, to understand how they had influenced the inner critic born in me years ago. Now, with my grandfather's passing, with all my experiences on the island, I felt equipped to carry on the legacy he had passed to me. It felt like that unfinished circle was now complete, was now whole. I felt whole.

## **Looking Back to Go Forward**

My story is uniquely mine and it has led me to where I am today, but we all have a unique story—one that is yours and only yours. We all have things that compel us, insecurities that plague us, lessons that teach us, people who shape us. Growing up as a typical American kid in the late twentieth century, I had no particular tie to Africa. Apart from the color of my skin and news of abuses and atrocities on the continent that would appall anyone, I had no particular reason to journey there early in my life, to meet family members who were virtual strangers to me, to seek out more than I already had.

And yet I was drawn to the land of my father's people with a fervor and focus I couldn't deny. I was fascinated by African history, by its array of mythology, folklore, rituals, written customs, and especially its oral traditions, passed on by elders to their progeny. It's a place where later generations still learn by listening and then by being passionately committed to preserving these teachings by handing them down to still-later generations. These powerful aspects of African culture attracted me, spoke to me, and wove together the fabric that became an understanding of my inner self.

I don't believe that my specific realization is one that everyone needs to have. Everyone's journey through self-exploration is individual unto themselves. And yet it *is* the journey that's important. For every single one of us. We must strive for insight and clarity on our inner beliefs and our outward behaviors. We may sometimes give in to struggles we are experiencing on the inside, yes, and this can cause disruptions in how we are perceived and experienced by others. But it's important to recognize that the filters erected in front of us—by our ancestors and our parents, by our life experiences and hardships, by our culture and our cultural identity—do not always allow us to see objective reality. Some of our behaviors and beliefs come from the outside—our upbringing, our family unit. But no matter where they come from, no matter where or how your inner critic was birthed, we do have the power and control to shape our own lives, to discover our own culture identity, to wipe the fog from our lenses, and to quiet the critical voice inside the mind that is really just another filter erected for our protection.

My journey to the distant lands of Africa guided me down a path that helped me discover a part of myself that affected not only my personal growth, but my professional trajectory, by strengthening my style of psychotherapy. That initial early curiosity about who my dad was led to my desire to connect with his side of the family, which in turn led me to the idea of life's meaning, the greater good, the altruistic value of helping others, and a connection to God. I knew that this connection, understanding of the inner self, and integration of people from different backgrounds all needed to exist on the landscape of my life if I was going to be fulfilled and skilled as a psychotherapist.

Where will *your* journey lead? Where is *your* life path calling you? What needs to be fulfilled within *you*? Are you allowing your inner critic to deter you from your destiny? From your wholeness? Nobody can walk the path for you; it is something you have to do yourself. But many people become afraid, and through fear, they become paralyzed by disbelief. They do not want to venture out on the quest that lies before them. This causes many difficult dilemmas that fuel unrealized dreams: complacency, mediocrity, excuses, victimization, and stagnation of the soul. And these patterns lend themselves to reoccurring themes I have seen over and over again in many of my clients: regret, anger, bitterness, uncontrolled fear, guilt, blind arrogance, and self-esteem issues—all of which make it increasingly difficult to look in the mirror. Allowing these themes to churn in your subconscious mind gives the negative inner critic psychological power over you.

The intent of this book is to help you regain that power by setting you on your own path, by working through the obstacles that are blocking it, and reprimanding and correcting the mental voice that tells you who you “should” be and what you “can’t” do. The whole point of telling you my story has been to introduce you to your own—your own one-of-a-kind narrative. We all have different perceived deficits, unfulfilled yearnings, incomplete dreams, unfinished business. Perhaps you don’t know who your parents are or were abandoned by one of them. Perhaps you’ve suffered abuse. Perhaps past trauma has stymied present growth. Perhaps you’re ruled by your inner child instead of your adult self. Perhaps you’ve been dealt some tough cards in your life and have grown weary of playing the game. Perhaps you’re just not where you want to be yet. The possibilities of life’s disappointments and challenges are literally endless. But just as your specific hurdles are uniquely yours, so too is the way you choose to confront and resolve them, to uncover an enlightening and freeing self-understanding, and to seek your own truth and find your own power.

This book is my story. You are the author of your own. The pen is in your hand. Be brave enough to start writing a story that is different from the one others have told you about yourself. Be brave enough to start right here, right now, with me. Your journey is waiting for you to discover it. Let’s embark, shall we?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Your Inner Critic: What It Is and Where It Comes From**

*A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: “Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.” When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, “The one I feed the most.”*

—George Bernard Shaw

The nature of the inner critic can be difficult to understand—where it comes from, why it’s so pervasive and elusive at the same time. Why does it seem like a whisper on the wind, a fleeting thought pattern we’d miss if we don’t pay close attention to it? And yet why does it have such an immense impact on our lives? How can a thing that can be neither seen nor touched be so powerful? And how is it able to change the course of our lives? The inner critic exists outside diagnosable mental disorders, such as schizophrenia and depression. It is not some type of psychological phenomenon that requires medication or long-term therapy to extinguish it. It is a part of us.

The inner critic is the voice we hear from time to time (some of us more often than others). It can be helpful in some ways, like when it quietly warns us that we’re about to do something foolish or when it pushes us toward excellence when our will fades. The inner critic can be the quiet guide that gently leads us. But it can also be destructive and hurtful. When it feeds on our failures and mistakes, its persistent negativity can create intense anxieties and feelings of inferiority. It can even turn us into monsters.

The negative form of the inner critic is not gentle. It preys on embarrassment, failure, unhappiness, and fear. It turns them into a dark force that can drag us under the floor—unless we take actions to stop it.

Negativity becomes a cycle when we allow the dark form of the inner critic to take precedence over the good form. One failure can become the source of several other failures: *You failed your nursing program’s final exam; therefore, you will never become a nurse. Therefore, you will never be able to achieve the level of financial and career growth you dream of. Therefore, you will never become a good mother. Therefore, you will be an average person, earn*

*an average income, and live an average life.* The failure of your final exam can be regurgitated within your subconscious, fed into your mind, and make you think and act like a *failure*.

Many people let a failure in one area of their lives lead to failures in other areas. A man who has failed in his first two business attempts and has lost investors' money will unwisely allow this failure to enter his marital life. The business failure will turn him into a bad husband and father. When we see this type of life pattern, the negative inner critic is at work in men and women.

The inner critic can influence the quality of our lives and how we view ourselves. It can be a positive influence when it pushes us toward achieving our goals and making sound life decisions. Sometimes, it motivates us and cheers us on in our life ambitions. *You can do this. Don't let that one setback at work get in the way of going after that promotion.* At other times, it holds us back and makes us fearful to pursue our dreams. *You can't do that. You're not capable of that. What makes you think you deserve that?*

The "good" voice of reason is sometimes termed the *conscience*. The conscience speaks subtly when we are about to cut in line or tell a lie. It speaks more clearly when we are unkind to others. It chides us when we spend time partying instead of studying. It speaks loudly when we take something that does not belong to us. Consequently, it lets its voice be heard whenever we're about to do something we shouldn't be doing and when we ignore something we should be doing.

A conflict is created in our minds between the voice that pushes us toward happiness and fulfillment and the voice that pushes us away from happiness and fulfillment. It's just like the caricatures we've all seen of the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. They are both telling you what to do, and both hold sway over you. Even though they are heavy influencers, the decision is ultimately yours.

This book aims to guide you toward quieting the negative aspect of the voice that criticizes and heightening the positive aspect of the voice that inspires. To accomplish that, we first need to understand where the inner voice comes from and its level of influence on your life.

## **Psychological Theories of Origin**



Theories of consciousness, subconsciousness, and unconsciousness have been discussed for ages by philosophers, mathematicians, psychologists, scientists, and more.

In *The Sophist* (360 BC), Plato argues that there are three parts of the psyche: the appetites, the spirited or hot-blooded part of the psyche, and the mind, which he calls the “nous.” The appetites are simply our desires and pleasures and the things in which we find comfort. He also refers to the appetites as the physical satisfactions that humans seek.

The spirited or hot-blooded part of the psyche is the motivator for overcoming obstacles in our lives. We see this strongly in athletes, for example. Think of Michael Jordan’s will to win at any cost or Muhammad Ali beating his opponents through psychological warfare, hard work, and raw talent. The “sweet science of boxing” gave Ali the confidence to believe that he was unstoppable and that he was the “greatest of all time.” This is the power within us to persevere through all odds. It is our willingness to take on challenges that seem insurmountable, but also the day-to-day challenges we all face.

The mind, or nous, is the conscious awareness that we have deep inside us. It is the part of us that is rational, that analyzes situations before acting upon them.

In “*Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of personality posits*”, Sigmund Freud, in his psychoanalytic theory of personality, proposes that consciousness is everything that exists inside your awareness. The subconscious (or preconscious) is the part of your mind that you are unaware of—it is information you are not actively aware of at any given moment, such as thoughts, feelings, sensations, but things that are accessible to you nonetheless with a little focus and effort. The unconscious, however, refers to the part of the mind that resides deep within you—automatic thoughts, programmed habits, urges, deep-seated emotions, traumatic and forgotten memories—that have been repressed but that heavily influence your beliefs and behaviors.

Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung both built upon and digressed from Freud’s personality theory. For Jung, the conscious mind is named the “ego,” and the unconscious has two layers: the personal unconscious, consisting of dormant and repressed memories (but closer to the surface than in Freud’s version), and the collective unconscious, a repository of shared memories from and with our ancestral and evolutionary past—the things inborn in us purely by being human.

These are very simplistic summaries of traditionally and widely accepted theories of the mind's constitution, but they all point to the underlying assumption that there are things we are and are not aware of, things we do and do not have control over, things that shape us and things that we shape. And these aren't just theories—practical applications of psychology of the mind enter into our lives every day in every way. Here's an illustration, for example, of the preconscious mind (more akin to Jung's personal unconscious) at work—the storehouse of memories that are not top of mind but that can be drawn into consciousness at will, like playing hopscotch in kindergarten or being sent to the principal's office in first grade:

I remember seeing a documentary on Tiger Woods. When he was just a young boy, his father was teaching him how to swing a golf club in the basement of their home. Little Tiger was sitting on a stool with his legs dangling as he looked intently at his father's swing. Earl swung, hitting the ball into a makeshift canvas that he had devised to capture the impact of the ball. The club did not make good contact with the ball, thus pushing the ball to the right. Earl asked Tiger what he thought of that swing. Tiger looked at him sheepishly and just smiled. Earl smiled back and said, “Yep, that was a boo-boo!” Later in his son's career, Earl would say, “You know, sometimes we don't give our best swings, and it doesn't go as planned, but in life, we have to just keep on swinging.”

Now, these particular comments by Earl are likely not in Tiger's conscious mind all the time. But whenever he makes a “boo-boo” on the course, I'd be willing to bet that he retrieves that memory and that, whenever his stroke fails him, Earl's statement reminds him to “just keep on swinging.” The voice in our mind comes even more into play the greater the stakes. When Tiger hit very rough patches in his life—episodes of infidelity, a very public divorce, career-threatening injuries—they no doubt challenged his beliefs in himself. His inner critic would have been on high alert, megaphone in hand. Surely the negative aspect of his mental voice chastised and lamented; but Earl's voice, which Tiger would have internalized after decades of his father's coaching—surely resonated as well, and louder, or Tiger would not have been able to go on to achieve what no other golfer in history ever has.

We can't all be champion players, but at some point in life, we will all face obstacles that threaten to overwhelm us. Sometimes, those obstacles come in the form of choices we must make, choices that will greatly affect our fates. This is when we will call upon the voice that has been developing inside us for all our lives; if we don't call upon it, it will call to us. There are

words and images and recollections and scenes implanted in the mind, and once planted, they cannot be erased. They can be analyzed, addressed, confronted, conformed, managed, honored, and heralded, but they cannot be eradicated from existence.

To answer the question of where the inner critic comes from, it can be argued that it stems from experiences and memories found mainly in the subconscious but also in the conscious mind. Our consciousness cannot actively store *all* the information we take in, but bits and pieces can be filed away in different levels of the preconscious—just like our social security number or mother’s birthday—can be retrieved when needed. The inner critic is one such “folder” of the mind’s filing system. We can recall a father’s words, like Tiger Woods, for decades, maybe not verbatim, but certainly the spirit of the message. And our own words, our own voices, come to the fore just as often, sometimes critical, sometimes complimentary, but all arising from one’s personal history of incoming and outgoing observations and information. The voice we hear at any particular time or in any particular circumstance not only can but does steer our decisions, actions, and inactions.

Research into the brain and the mind is wide and diverse, but it’s agreed that we all have that voice within that draws from positive and negative experiences, from relations and interactions with others, from successes and failures. To understand the impact of that voice, we must consider the different factors that influence the inner critic: (1) relationships; (2) environment; (3) communication; (4) childhood; and (5) the self. The next chapter will explore each factor in detail.

NOTE: As we venture forth in this book together, I strongly encourage you to bring a journal along. We’ll be exploring some case studies—some theoretical, some factual—all intended to lead you to your own case, where I’ll pose questions for you to ponder, situations that I hope will inspire you to contemplate your own. As you do so, record your answers and thoughts in your journal; I promise you it will serve as a valuable and enlightening companion along the way.