The next generation's guide to a meaningful future

DR. JAMES DOBSON
This book is dedicated to those for whom it was written:

_The generation of young people currently moving out of adolescence and into the arena of adult responsibility._

_In the blink of an eye, they will inherit the businesses, institutions, and governments of the world. On their shoulders will soon rest the burdens of leadership and authority. They will pull the wagonload of humanity behind them as their families emerge and grow._

_It is to these bright and resourceful young adults that I devote the pages of this book. With it comes a prayer that they will remember and honor the heritage of faith handed down to them by previous generations and then be diligent to teach it to their children._

_There is no more noble objective in living._
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Chapter One

BLAST OFF
OR
BLOW UP?

If you are between sixteen and twenty-six years of age, this book is written specifically for you. Others are welcome to read along with us, of course, but the ideas are aimed directly at those moving through what we will call the “critical decade.”

Some of the most dramatic and permanent changes in life usually occur during those ten short years. A person is transformed from a kid who’s still living at home and eating at the parents’ table to a full-fledged adult who should be earning a living and taking complete charge of his or her life. Most of the decisions that will shape the next fifty years will be made in this era, including the choice of an occupation, perhaps the decision to marry, and the establishment of values and principles by which life will be governed.

What makes this period even more significant is the impact of early mistakes and errors in judgment. They can undermine all that is to follow. A bricklayer knows he
must be very careful to get his foundation absolutely straight; any wobble in the bricks at the bottom will create an even greater tilt as the wall goes up. So it is in life.

This momentous journey through the critical decade reminds me of a trip our family took to Kenya and Tanzania years ago. The highlight of our tour was a visit to the Serengeti, a magnificent national park where legendary African animals roam wild and free. It had rained all day before we arrived, and the unpaved roads were extremely muddy. Before we had driven fifteen miles into the park, our car slid into a ditch and bogged down to the axles in thick, African mud. We would have certainly spent the night out there on the savanna if it had not been for a native in a double-wheeled truck who gave us a hand.

Later that afternoon we came to a stretch of road that was even more torn up and muddy. There it divided and ran parallel for several hundred yards before coming back together. It was obvious that drivers earlier that day had forged the new trail to get around a mudhole, but we had no way of knowing on which side it lay. We sat there for a moment trying to decide which road to take. If we made a mistake, we would probably get stuck again and have to sleep in the car—without dinner, toothbrushes, bathroom facilities, or even water to drink.

Our seventeen-year-old son, Ryan, then volunteered to help.

"I'll run ahead and look at the road," he said. "Then I'll wave to let you know which way to go."

The missionary who was with us said, "Uhm, Ryan, I don't think that is a very good idea. You just don't know what might be out there in the tall grass."

Eventually we chose what looked like the best road and were indeed able to get through. But when we reached the place where the two trails came back together, a surprise was waiting for us. A huge male lion was crouched in the grass off to one side. He rolled his big yellow eyes toward us and dared us to take him on. Large cats like that one consider humans to be just another easy dinner. They can cover one hundred yards in less than three seconds and wouldn't hesitate to devour any city dweller who was foolish enough to tempt them.

Ryan looked at the lion and agreed that he probably ought to stay in the car!
BUT WHAT ABOUT THOSE MUDHOLES?

In a manner of speaking, our experience on the Serengeti illustrates the passage from late adolescence to young adulthood. The journey goes smoothly and uneventfully for some individuals. They drive right through without a hitch. But a surprisingly large number of us encounter unexpected “mudholes” that trap and hold us at an immature stage of development. Still others are plagued by predators lurking in the tall grass. Among them are an addiction to alcohol or drugs, marriage to the wrong person, failure to achieve a coveted dream, suicide, homicide, or various criminal offenses. It is very easy to get off the trail and into the ditch in the morning of our lives.

Early mistakes and errors in judgment... can undermine all that is to follow.

Permit me another illustration that comes to mind. I was once invited to take a three-day whitewater rafting trip down the Rogue River in Oregon. A friend and experienced rafter, Dr. Richard Hosley, said to me as we were preparing to launch the gear, “One thing you’ll soon learn is that the river is always boss.” I didn’t know what he meant then, but three days later I understood that principle very clearly.

Rather than floating on the raft for fifty miles in relative serenity and safety, I chose to paddle along behind in a plastic eight-foot canoe. And on the second afternoon, I insisted on rowing this flimsy craft into the most treacherous part of the river. It was a bad decision.

Ahead lay a section of the river known as the “Coffeepot,” so named because the narrowing of the rock-walled banks creates an unpredictable, bubbling current that has been known to suck small boats and their passengers below the surface without warning. Several men and women had drowned in that precise spot, one of them only the summer before. But ignorance is bliss, and blissful I was.

I seemed to be handling the task quite well for the first few minutes... before
everything came unraveled. Then I was caught in the current flowing around a large rock and capsized in the turbulent water. It seemed like an eternity before I came to the surface, only to find breathing impossible. A bandanna that had been around my neck was now plastered across my mouth and held there by my glasses, which were strapped to my head. Just as I clawed free and gasped for air, churning water hit me in the face and gurgled into my lungs. Again, I came up coughing and sputtering before taking another trip below the surface. By then I was desperate for air and keenly aware that the Coffeepot was only a hundred yards downstream.

A kind of panic gripped me that I had not experienced since childhood! I definitely considered the possibility that I was drowning. You see, I have a nagging little habit of breathing every few minutes and don’t cope well when prevented from doing so. I knew that getting sucked under again at that moment might be the end of the line. My family and friends watched helplessly from the raft as I bobbed through the rapids and into the narrowest section of the river. They were unable to reach me because the current had carried them farther downstream.

It is very easy to get off the trail and into the ditch in the morning of our lives.

By using his incredible rafting skill, however, Dr. Hosley managed to “hold” the raft by maneuvering it to an eddy at the side of the river. There it spun until I caught up and grabbed the rope that rims the upper exterior structure. I could not pull myself into the craft because of the rapids, my soaked clothing, and the distance of the rope above my head. That’s why I expected Dr. Hosley to help me aboard. Instead, I noticed that he was struggling with the oars and looking very concerned. I learned later what was worrying him. He feared that the large raft would be thrown against the vertical rock walls bordering the Coffeepot and that I would be crushed by its massive force.

Indeed, the raft was thrown against the wall, but I saw it coming. Using all of the
strength left within me, I pulled my feet up and sprang off the rock, propelling myself high enough on the raft to scramble on board. I then collapsed in the bottom of the craft and stayed there sucking air for about thirty minutes.

The only casualty from the experience is a matter of collegiate pride. Dr. Hosley was wearing a shirt with his beloved Stanford University named across the front. It survived the trip. But somewhere on the bottom of the Rogue River in dishonor lies a water-soaked hat bearing the logo of the University of Southern California. It was a sad moment in the historic rivalry of the two schools. At least I didn’t wind up lying on the rocky bottom clutching my USC banner!

You can probably see how this story relates to our theme. Life is like the beautiful Rogue River in some ways. There are long stretches when the water is calm and serene. You can see your reflection as you lean out of the raft. The scenery is gorgeous, and the river carries you peacefully downstream. Then without warning you are propelled into the white water. Suddenly, you’re gasping for air and struggling to keep your head above water. At the moment when you think you might be drowning, you float right into the turmoil of the Coffeepot.

Please understand that this WILL happen to you sooner or later. No one travels down the river of life without encountering turbulence. You might as well brace yourself for it. There will be moments of serenity and beauty when you lean back and take in the wonder. But there will also be times of sheer terror when you’ll be tossed out of the boat and at the mercy of the good Lord. It’s all part of the ride. That’s why it is necessary before those crises arrive to get yourself stabilized—to figure out who you are and what you will do when the pressure is on.

No one travels down the river of life without encountering turbulence.
THEY CALL IT THE “CRITICAL DECADE”

Your next ten years will pose hundreds of important questions for which secure answers may be slow in coming. I struggled with many of them when I was in college, such as, What will I do with my life? What kind of woman should I marry? Where will I find her? Will our love last a lifetime? What are my strengths and weaknesses? Should I plan to attend graduate school? Can I qualify for admission? Am I talented enough to make it professionally? And what about God? Where does He fit into my plans, and how can I know His will? I recall pondering these questions and thinking how helpful it would be to talk with someone who had a few answers—someone who understood what I was facing. But like most of my friends, I never asked for help. The years rolled on, and I gradually bobbed and weaved my way through the white water.

Of course, it was easier to go it alone when I was young. The river was less turbulent in those years. I grew up in the “Happy Days” of the fifties, when life was not as complicated. There were no drugs in my racially mixed public high school. Can you believe it? Not once did I hear of anyone selling or using illegal substances while I was a student there. And very little alcohol was consumed by today’s standards. None of my friends made a habit of drinking. In fact, I went to parties every Friday night after football games and rarely saw booze being consumed. It happened, I’m sure, but primarily among those who had a reputation for being on the wild side. There were no punkers, no skinheads, no neo-Nazis, no freaks, no witches, and no gay or lesbian activists in those days. And the music of that era was pretty tame by comparison.

No doubt, some of my classmates lost their virginity during their school years. Sex is not a recent discovery, and it was certainly on our minds in those bygone days. Obviously, some students did more than think about it. Every now and then, a girl came up pregnant (it was called being “in trouble” then), and she was immediately packed off to some secret location. I never knew where she went. Still, the idea of saving oneself for marriage made a lot of sense. Morality was fashionable. Students who slept around were disrespected by their peers. Promiscuous girls were called “sluts,” and promiscuous boys were said to be “on the make.” Couples living together
out of wedlock were “living in sin” or “shacking up.” It never occurred to us that virginity was a curse to be gotten rid of or that adults expected us to copulate like animals in heat. That wicked notion would come along in the modern era, when everyone from the school nurse to a misguided surgeon general seemed to be chanting, “Do it often. Do it right. Use a condom every night.”

*Your next ten years will pose hundreds of important questions.*

Finally, and most importantly, students in the fifties were often receptive to spiritual influences. They were not all Christians of course, but many of us were. Our faith shaped the way we behaved, too. For example, God’s name was rarely used profanely. The punctuation of speech with vulgarity and irreverence did not become fashionable for most teenagers until the late sixties, when it was popularized by decadent film and television industries. They also taught many members of your parents’ generation to engage in casual sex and to disregard the commandments of God. Many revolutionary changes occurred during the late sixties, when that generation of young adults suddenly went a little crazy. They’ve paid a big price for it, too.

My point is that the world in which you live has become much more immoral than it was just a few decades ago. It is not uncommon now for twelve-year-olds to have babies and fifteen-year-olds to shoot each other and seventeen-year-olds to be addicted to hard drugs and eighteen-year-olds to be infected with the AIDS virus. And violence has become a way of life—especially for kids living in the inner city. A child in the United States is fifteen times more likely to be killed by gunfire than a kid growing up in Northern Ireland, which has a long history of violence.1 Some children have to sleep in bathtubs at night just to be protected from drive-by shootings. Yes, our culture has gone into a kind of moral free fall that has implications for everyone who is young. Consequently, you are forced to deal with pressures and temptations that previous generations did not have to face.

One of the most important decisions to be made in the next few years will focus
on a life’s work—an occupation—or a skill you hope to develop. That choice is often extremely difficult. How can you predict what you’ll want to be doing when you’re forty or fifty or sixty years old? You’re obligated to guess, based on very limited information. You may not even know what the work is really like, yet you enroll yourself in a lengthy academic program to train for it.

Our culture has gone into a kind of moral free fall.

The decisions you make under those circumstances may lock you into something you will later hate. And there are social pressures that influence your choices. For example, many young women secretly want to be wives and mothers, but are afraid to admit it in today’s “liberated” society. Furthermore, how can a girl plan to do something that requires the participation of another person—a husband who will be worthy of loving her and living with her for the rest of her life? Marriage may or may not be in the picture for her. Yes, there’s plenty to consider in the critical decade.

I feel very fortunate to have stumbled into a profession when I was young that I have been able to do reasonably well. If I had been born in Jesus’ time and had been required to earn a living with my hands, perhaps in carpentry or stonemasonry, I would have probably starved to death. I can see myself sitting outside the temple in Jerusalem with a sign that read, “Will work for food.” Craftsmanship is just not in my nature. I earned my only high school D in woodworking class, and that was a gift from my teacher, Mr. Peterson. I spent an entire semester trying to make a box in which to store shoeshine stuff. What a waste! At least that experience helped me rule out a few occupational possibilities. Carpentry and cabinetry were two of them.
THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A PROFESSION

You’ll have to rule some things in and out, too. Indeed, to make an informed decision about a profession, you’ll need to get six essential components together, as follows:

1. It must be something you genuinely like to do. This choice requires you to identify your own strengths, weaknesses, and interests. (Some excellent psychometric tests are available to help with this need.)

2. It must be something you have the ability to do. You might want to be an attorney but lack the talent to do the academic work and pass the bar examination.

3. It must be something you can earn a living by doing. You might want to be an artist, but if people don’t buy your paintings, you could starve while sitting at your easel.

4. It must be something you are permitted to do. You might make a wonderful physician and could handle the training but can’t gain entrance to medical school. I went through a PhD program in graduate school with a fellow student who was washed out after seven years of class work. He made it to the last big exam before his professors told him, “You’re out.”

5. It must be something that brings cultural affirmation. In other words, most people need to feel some measure of respect from their contemporaries for what they do. This is one reason women have found it difficult to stay home and raise their children.

6. Most importantly for the genuine believer, it must be something that you feel God approves of. How do you determine the will of God about so personal a decision? That is a critical matter we’ll discuss presently.

What makes it so tough to choose an occupation is that all six of these requirements must be met at the same time. If you get five of them down but you don’t like
what you have selected, you’re in trouble. If you get five together but are rejected by
the required professional schools, you are blocked. If you get five lined up but you
can’t earn a living at the job of your choice, the system fails. Every link in the chain
must connect.

Given this challenge, it isn’t surprising that so many young people flounder during
the critical decade. They become immobilized for years, not knowing what to do
next. They sit around their parents’ house plunking on a guitar and waiting for a dish
to rattle in the kitchen.

So many young people flounder during the
critical decade.

Young adults in this situation remind me of rockets sitting on the launch-
pad. Their engines are roaring and belching smoke and fire, but nothing moves.
The spacecraft was made to blast its way through the stratosphere, but there it
sits as if bolted to the pad. I’ve met many men and women in their early twen-
ties whose rockets just would not lift them off the ground. And yes, I’ve known
a few whose engines blew up and scattered the debris of broken dreams all over
the launchpad.

The mission sometimes fails because an individual refuses to include God in
his lofty plans. The psalmist wrote, “Except the Lord build the house, they labour
in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain”
(Psalm 127:1, KJV). Those words offer incredible meaning for those of you who are
just getting started in life. Whatever you try to do, whether it is to build or defend,
will be useless if you do it in your own strength. That may sound very old fashioned,
but I promise you it is true. Furthermore, the Lord will not settle for second place
in your life.
LESSONS FROM MY FATHER

My father thought he would be an exception to that principle. He had his life laid out, and he needed no help from God or anyone else in fulfilling it. From his earliest childhood, Dad knew he wanted to be a great artist. Even before kindergarten, he told his family he intended to draw and paint when he grew up. This passion was not simply a choice he had made. It was in his blood. All through childhood and his teen years, he never wavered from this desire to become another Rembrandt or Michelangelo. While his five brothers were uncertain about what they wanted to be, this youngest among them was chasing a lofty dream.

Then one day, as he walked along a street during his sixteenth year, he seemed to hear the Lord speaking to him. It was not an audible voice, of course. But deep within his being he knew he had been addressed by the Almighty. It was a simple message that conveyed this thought: I want you to set aside your great ambition to be an artist and prepare for a life of service in the ministry.

The Lord will not settle for second place in your life.

My father was terrified by the experience. He replied, “No! No, Lord. You know I have my plans all made and art is my consuming interest.” He quickly argued down the impression and convinced himself that his mind had deceived him. But when he got it all resolved and laid to rest, it would reappear. Month after month, the nagging thought reverberated in his mind that God was asking—no, demanding—that he abandon his dream and become a preacher. It proved to be one of the greatest struggles of his life, but he shared it with no one.

For two years this inner battle went on. Then toward the end of his senior year in high school, the time came for him to select a college to attend in the fall. His father told him to pick out any school in the country and he would send him there. But what was he to do? If he yielded to the voice within, he would have to attend a
college that would begin preparing him for the ministry. But if he followed his dream, he would go to art school. Would he obey God, or would he have his own way? It was a terrible dilemma.

One morning a few weeks before graduation, he got out of bed to prepare for school. But the minute his feet touched the floor, my father heard the voice again. It was as if the Lord said, *Today you will have to make up your mind.* He wrestled with that issue all day at school but still shared his turmoil with no one. After his last class in mid-afternoon, he came home to an empty house. He paced back and forth in the living room, praying and struggling with this unrelenting demand of God. Finally, in an act of defiance, he suddenly turned his face upward and said, “It’s too great a price, and I won’t pay it!”

My father later described that moment as the most terrible experience of his life. He said the Spirit of the Lord seemed to leave him as one person would walk away from another. He was still shaken and pale when his mother came home a few minutes later. She could see his distress, and she asked him what was wrong.

“You won’t understand this, Mom” he said, “but God has been asking me to give up my plans to be an artist. He wants me to become a minister. I don’t want to do it. And I won’t do it. I’ve just said no to Him, and He’s gone.”

Would he obey God, or would he have his own way?

My grandmother was a very righteous woman who could always touch the heart of God in her prayers. She said, “Oh, honey, you’re just emotional. Let’s pray about it.”

They got down on their knees, and my grandmother began talking to the Lord about her son. Then she stopped in midsentence. “I don’t understand it,” she said. “Something is wrong.”

“You don’t understand it,” said my father, “but I do. I’ve just refused to obey God, and He’s gone.”
It would be seven long years before my father would hear the voice of the Lord again. You see, his love of art had become his god. It mattered more to him than anything on earth and even outranked his relationship with the Father. That's what was going on in his heart. There was nothing sinful or immoral in his love of art. The problem was that God had no place in it.

In the next few days, my father chose the Art Institute of Pittsburgh (AIP), one of the best art schools in the country. He enrolled there in the fall, and his professors immediately recognized his unusual talent. Indeed, when he graduated, he was honored as the most gifted student in his class. But as he was walking down the aisle to the platform where a big NUMBER ONE banner had been draped on his paintings, the Scripture again came into his mind: *Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.*

My father graduated and went out to begin his great career in the field of art. Unfortunately, the Great Depression was underway in the United States and in most countries around the world. That was a scary time in American history, when huge numbers of people were out of work. Businesses failed, banks closed, and opportunities were few and far between. My dad was one of the millions who couldn't find a job of any type—much less one in his chosen profession. He was finally hired at a Texaco service station to pump gas and wipe the windshields of cars. It was pretty humbling for a man who wanted to be another Leonardo da Vinci.

Here is the most incredible part of the story. Right at that moment when my dad was desperate for a career break, the president of the Art Institute of Pittsburgh wrote him a letter and offered him a job as an instructor at the unbelievable salary of three hundred dollars per month! It was precisely what he had dreamed about since childhood. But somehow that letter became lost on the president's desk. The man later found and mailed it with another note saying he had wondered why my dad hadn't even done him the courtesy of responding to his offer. But by the time the second letter came, my father had grown sick of himself and his lofty plans. He had found a place of prayer and yielded himself completely to the call of God on his life. So by the time the job offer came, he wrote back to say, “Thanks, but I'm no longer interested.”

*Blast Off or Blow Up?*
WHEN EVERYTHING TURNS ON ONE DECISION

My dad’s future, and undoubtedly mine, hung in the balance at that critical juncture. If he had received the original offer from the president of AIP, he would have been launched on a career that was obviously out of the will of God. Who knows how his life would have changed if he had “labored in vain” in the wrong vineyard? What prevented him from making the mistake of his life? Well, my grandmother was out there praying for him every day, asking the Lord to draw her youngest son back to Himself. I believe God answered her prayers by interfering with the delivery of the letter on which everything seemed to depend.

Does it seem cruel of the Lord to deprive this young man of the one thing he most wanted? Good question! Why would God give him remarkable ability and then prevent him from using it? Well, as is always the case in His dealings with us, the Lord had my father’s best interests at heart. And He took nothing away from him.

As soon as my dad yielded to the will of the Lord, his art was given back to him. He then used his talent in ministerial work all his life, and when he died he was chairman of the art department at a Christian college. He left beautiful paintings and sculptures all over the United States. More importantly, thousands of people came to know Jesus Christ through the preaching ministry of my father. They will be in heaven because of the calling that was on his life.

My dad’s future, and undoubtedly mine, hung in the balance at that critical juncture.

So the terrible struggle that occurred in my father’s teen years was not a cruel manipulation. It was a vitally important test of his commitment—a challenge to put God in first place. And because he passed that test, I am here writing to you today!

Jesus Christ will ask you to put Him in first place, too. He will be Lord of all, or not Lord at all. That does not mean you will be required to become a minister.
Your calling will be unique. But I am certain that anything done selfishly and independent of His purposes will not satisfy you and will ultimately be done “in vain.”

We’ll talk about how to interpret the will of God and recognize His purposes in a later discussion. For now, we must set about the task of thinking through the challenges you are facing. A contractor would never begin a skyscraper without detailed architectural and engineering plans to guide his work. Likewise, persons in the critical decade between age sixteen and twenty-six owe it to their future to figure out who they are and what they want out of life. Helping you do that is what this book is all about.

Jesus Christ will ask you to put Him in first place, too.

We’ll proceed with a look at one of the major “mudholes” that trap and hold the unwary traveler.