

# Introduction

I guarantee this book will improve your life.

**H**ow can I be so sure? It's because this book is based on solid scientific evidence. Evidence is what the FBI uses to convict criminals, and clear the innocent. Evidence is what doctors use to make life or death decisions. Evidence is the gold standard because opinions and experience can be wrong or misleading.

For decades, doctors believed that stomach ulcers were caused by stress, spicy foods, and too much acid. Gastroenterologists and drug companies made millions of dollars performing endoscopies and prescribing pills. In 1982, this cozy arrangement was disrupted when Australian scientists Robin Warren and Barry Marshall discovered that ulcers were actually caused by a bacterium named *Helicobacter pylori*. This meant that patients could be cured with a short course of inexpensive antibiotics.

Unfortunately, their groundbreaking results contradicted expert opinion, and prompted a backlash from the medical establishment. Warren and Marshall were criticized and attacked. In desperation, Marshall deliberately infected himself with *H. pylori* and showed that it caused ulcers in his stomach. This evidence proved the connection between *H. pylori* and ulcers. For their courageous work, Warren and Marshall received the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 2005.

*So much of what we hear and what we're taught turns out to be false on closer scrutiny. Whether it is expert advice, what you read in the paper, or what your mother told you, if it is important, take the time to figure out for yourself whether it is really true.*

-Steven D. Levitt

### **Scientific Self Improvement**

Opinions are nice, evidence is better. As Gil Grissom says in *Crime Scene Investigation*, "I tend not to believe people. People lie. The evidence doesn't lie." The challenge is sorting through the mountain of evidence, and putting the pieces together. Every year, scientists publish hundreds of thousands of studies. Most of it is not very useful. Someone has to dig through the dirt and find the gold.

Today is your lucky day. I've been digging for more than 5 years to find the best science for living your best life. According to the Pareto Principle, 80 percent of the results come from 20 percent of the actions. When it comes to self improvement, just a few nuggets of knowledge can dramatically improve your life.

*We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.*

-E.O. Wilson

### **Hierarchy of Needs**

This book is organized into five sections: *Smart*, *Healthy*, *Wealthy*, *Social*, and *Happy*. It starts with *Smart* because being smarter will help you master the other sections faster.

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed that people are motivated by a Hierarchy of Needs. Lower physical needs must be satisfied before higher personal growth needs. It's hard to meditate on the meaning of life if you're hungry and homeless. Following Maslow, the sections on *Healthy* and *Wealthy* come before *Social* and *Happy*. Full references are listed in the back if you'd like to look up the evidence for yourself.

## Principles and Practice

Each section is organized around two questions:

1. Why are things the way they are?
2. How can you apply what you've learned to improve your life?

Regarding the "Why?" it usually boils down to human nature. Just as lions and tigers have evolved to eat red meat, life is better when you live the way you're designed to live. Regarding the "How?" each section contains practical exercises that provide step-by-step instructions for learning by doing.

*Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed.*

-Abraham Lincoln

## A Walk in the Park

Manuel Antonio is a national park on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The sandy beaches are shaded by lush rainforest. Hermit crabs scurry by as the waves lap at your feet. As you hike through the park, you see spiny-tailed iguanas sunning themselves by the beach, and howler monkeys swinging through the trees.

But the best way to see the park is with a guide. With his trusty telescope, a guide shows you all sorts of things you might miss on your own—three-toed sloths hidden in the leaves, red-and-blue land crabs, and the elusive quetzal bird. Your guide also adds to your appreciation of nature by explaining the life cycles of the animals and the forest, and their relationships with each other.

Life is like hiking through Manuel Antonio. Once with a guide is worth 10 times on your own. This book is your personal guide to getting the most out of life. Read it. Act on it. And live your best life.

*For the first time in human history, the genius of the human race is available for all to harvest.*

-Jean Houston