

## Chapter One

# *The Message of the Boxes*

*Two roads diverged in a wood  
and I took the one less travelled by,  
and that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

One morning about fifteen years ago, I was rummaging through some old boxes packed away in a forgotten corner of my basement when I discovered a stack of poems I had written during my childhood. Shaking off the dust and cobwebs that clung to the thin, yellowing paper, I began reading.

I discovered a long-forgotten world—one that sang with romance, adventure, and mystery. It was a world of princesses, heroes, and castles, where the princess was always rescued and the dragon always slain. Each flower had a name; children flew on magic carpets; and a pot of gold glittered at the end of every rainbow.

I felt an aching sense of loss. A part of me was packed away with those poems, neatly mummified in coffins of mediocrity. Somewhere along the way, my world had begun to shrink from one that sang with unlimited possibilities to one that conformed to narrow, predictable boundaries.

For years, I was haunted by a persistent inner nagging that I had only scratched the surface of my potential. Though I had developed

some gifts and pioneered a few challenging endeavours, there were vast reservoirs of potential I had never dared explore.

A *Peanuts* comic strip depicts Charlie Brown's dog, Snoopy, struggling to balance a doghouse on his back. The caption reads, "There's nothing heavier than the burden of potential."

That's exactly how I felt—weighed down by the oppressive burden of unrealized potential. Somewhere along the way, dream thieves had skulked into my heart and captured the inner visionary, locking it up as a prisoner of war and slowly starving it until all that remained was a lifeless skeleton.

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Most of us become prey to dream thieves at one time or another. They infiltrate our hearts through failure and heartache, setbacks and tragedy, criticism, and pressure to conform to the status quo. Not every story has a happy ending. Dragons rip out our hearts and even laugh while we bleed. At the end of some rainbows are pots of despair. Pain and disappointment visit us all, some of us more frequently and fiercely.

Dream thieves will mock you from without and taunt you from within. Some are disguised in the cloaks of duty and drudgery, convincing you that it is irresponsible to pursue your passions.

Others are disguised as shame and self-condemnation, cloaking fears, unhealed emotional wounds, and a history of failures.

Many dream thieves require no disguise; they brashly swagger through the wide-open door of mediocrity that many of us allow to pervade our lives.

Finally, in my thirties, I decided I was no longer willing to be stifled in a self-imposed box. I made a commitment to evict the dream thieves and release the inner visionary from captivity. The time had come to re-envision my future in light of Jesus' words, "With God all things are possible."<sup>1</sup>

Once I made that decision, I was launched on an adventure of discovery, transformation, and growth. At times, the path led to

mountaintops of joy; at others, it twisted through dark and barren valleys of discouragement. But along the way, my inner dreamer slowly woke from slumber, shook off the grave clothes, and learned to dance again.

What about you? Do you have a passion that grips your heart, that won't let you go? Do you have a clear sense of purpose for your life? Are you living your dream?

Or have the dream thieves robbed you of your destiny? Have you limited yourself to what you believe is practical? Are you in the habit of filtering your dreams through the lens of other people's expectations and opinions? Have you disengaged from the deepest passions of your heart?


More importantly, are you tired of living in captivity? Are you ready to commit yourself to pursuing the pathway of purpose?

Helen Keller described life as "either a daring adventure or nothing." What would you prefer—a boring, unchallenging life of mediocrity or a passionate adventure in faith?


The path of mediocrity is much easier, of course. Safe and predictable, it's the path of least resistance and the road most travelled.

The pathway of purpose, on the other hand, is often difficult, dangerous, and lonely. You will be challenged to step out of your comfort zone. Fear and doubts will emerge as you break out of your box and dare to pursue your dreams. You may even lose some friendships, as some people will feel threatened by your new-found liberty.

But your life will also change in ways that you never dared imagine! God will liberate your inner dreamer from captivity, ignite vision in your heart, and release you to soar into your destiny.



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## Boxes and Boundaries

Once upon a time, we were curious, passionate, and thrilled to be alive. The world was our footstool; it offered unlimited possibilities.

We could do anything. We could become anyone we envisioned. Dreaming was as natural as breathing.

Remember when you learned to colour? I especially liked colouring with chalk. What power! The neighbourhood sidewalks were my canvas as I used every colour in my chalk collection to create childish masterpieces. (At least, I thought they were brilliant.) Best of all, no one complained or tried to stop me.

Then I went to kindergarten and learned to colour within the lines.

My colouring book was dotted with red, green, silver, and gold stars, rewarding my conscientious efforts to conform to the boundaries.

But when I thought my teacher wasn't looking, I pulled scraps of paper from my bookbag and created my own drawings, splashing the pages with the princesses and leprechauns that danced through my imagination. Instinctively, I knew I must keep these drawings hidden. One day, enraptured with my make-believe world, I didn't notice the teacher standing over my desk. Furious, she reprimanded me for my misdeed and threw my drawings in the garbage.

I'm sure she meant well. After all, she was only doing her job. Nevertheless, the sad reality is that the "message of the boxes" begins bombarding us in childhood and continues throughout life. Transmitted from many sources, this message steals creativity, paralyzes passions, and traps dreams.

The message of the boxes says, "*It can't be done.*" Nagging you to accept the status quo, it says, "*Your dreams are unrealistic.*" It taunts you about your shortcomings and reminds you of your limitations. It insists the obstacles are too great to overcome.

On a personal level, we may hear the message of the boxes from parents, teachers, friends, relatives, school counsellors, college professors, religious leaders, and others. On a societal level, it is conveyed through the media, education system, social attitudes, and popular culture.

Conformity is a common message that limits many. *Don't be different. Take the safe path. Don't rock the boat. You can't trust your desires. Don't share your uniqueness. Adventure is dangerous. Repress your dreams. Embrace security. Play it safe. Take the road most travelled.*

Those who refuse to conform are mocked and ostracized. Eventually, most people succumb to the pressure to colour within the lines, even when everything inside of them cries out to paint a

picture that has never before been envisioned.

But as Dale Carnegie has said, “The ‘sure thing’ boat never gets far from shore.”

Other negative messages are communicated through criticism, abuse, or a lack of love and affirmation; these are especially damaging in the vulnerable childhood years. Many children are subjected to a relentless barrage of negative words, attitudes, and behaviours that convey a sense of inability: *You’re a failure. You never do anything right. You’re stupid. You have no talents. You don’t measure up.*

If you were repeatedly criticized and undermined, or never affirmed and encouraged, you may have internalized these critical messages and developed a deep sense of inferiority.

Finally, another common message of the boxes—one that pervades society today—is mediocrity. Rather than exalting the virtues of excellence and hard work, popular culture and the education system encourage people to do just enough to get by. It’s far easier to blend in with the mediocrity crowd than to pursue excellence.

These are just a few examples. The message of the boxes comes in many forms and is conveyed through a variety of sources, but the end result is the same—a paradigm of living that is severely limited. Sapping courage and eroding confidence, these messages hinder you from developing your gifts and embracing opportunities. Little by little, you draw boundaries around your attitudes, thoughts, and dreams. Eventually, each area of your life reflects the message of the boxes.

You may become boxed in by other people’s opinions, trapped by fearful thoughts, such as *What if I look like a fool? What will people think? What if I fail? If I tell people my dreams, will they laugh?*

The message of the boxes may taunt you from within. Frequently, we are our own worst enemies. Self-doubt, fear, and intimidation encase hopes and dreams in a concrete shroud. Inner critics repeatedly remind us of our faults and failures. These thoughts become loudest and harshest when we begin to step out to pursue our dreams.

Over the years, I have spoken with many friends who have passions and dreams. Some dream of starting their own businesses. Others dream of writing songs, novels, or devotionals. One lady cherishes a dream of becoming an artist. Another has a dream to

establish a ministry for inner-city youth. One woman has a vision for an outreach program in her neighbourhood. Some desire to counsel abused women or start an orphanage for unwanted mentally challenged children or a prayer chain for their neighbours or co-workers. Others have secret yearnings to run for political office.

Their faces radiate passion and joy as they share these cherished longings.

Though some of these women have gone on to pursue their dreams, the sad reality is that most have not. Their secret yearnings remain trapped by the message of the boxes.

Many people are afraid to even dare imagine what their lives might become if they were to break out of their boxes. Some have lived in a box for so long that they're not sure they want to venture into a place with no boundaries. After all, life in a box is familiar, safe, and predictable.

Yet every so often, a tiny flame of hope flickers in their heart; for brief moments they wonder, *Is this all there is? Why was I born? Isn't there more to life than this? What on earth am I here for?*

I've lived both inside and outside of a box. I've known the frustration of suffocating in a box of intimidation and doubt; I've also known the joy of breaking free and living my dreams. Once I began to soar above my limitations and embrace my dreams, my only regret was that I didn't venture out of my comfort zone sooner.

What about you? Does your life reflect your deepest values and passions? Does it ring true with the person you really are, deep in your heart?

Or do you feel an inner restlessness that is often symptomatic of a lack of authenticity, of not being true to your heart? Perhaps you feel as though you are living according to the blueprints of others, rather than honouring your core values and deepest sense of calling.

Is your creativity stunted, repressed by fear or self-doubt? Have areas of your life become stagnant? Are you frustrated? Are you easily intimidated? All these are symptoms of living beneath your divine purpose.

Many people try to anesthetize these feelings with busyness and materialism. They attempt to drown out the quiet inner voice of purpose by filling their lives with the loud and tyrannical voice of the

urgent. Yet even amid the constant noise and activity, the yearning for purpose refuses to release its grip.

Imagine, for a moment, how different your life might be if you broke free of your box and followed the desires of your heart. Imagine the possibilities if you were unencumbered by fear, intimidation, and self-doubt. What would you do? Would you change occupations? Is there something you yearn to do—something that burns in your heart that you have never shared with anyone?

The first step to breaking out of your box and reaching for your dreams is to be honest with yourself. Stop pretending that everything is fine. Resist the temptation to silence the inner voice that cries out for purpose by filling your life with meaningless activity and clutter.

I suggest you take a couple of hours alone, away from your busy schedule, and think about why you have remained in a box. First evaluate the benefits of life in a box; then consider the price.

## The Benefits of Life in a Box

You may be thinking, *What possible benefits could there be to living in a box?* Well, none, of course. But there certainly are *perceived* benefits; otherwise, why would so many people live there?

One perceived benefit, for example, is predictability. Uncomfortable with change, many people like the security of a predictable life, regardless of the price they may be paying in boredom and frustration.

Protection from failure might be another perceived benefit. People who dare to think outside of the box and dream big are popular targets for criticism from the mediocrity crowd. Boxes are shields against criticism.

Another perceived benefit might be protection from failure. Life outside of the box is undeniably high risk. The

more you step out to try something new, the greater you risk failing and looking foolish in the eyes of others. This haunting fear of

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failure keeps many people from venturing out of their boxes.

Finally, there is protection from emotional pain. When you tap into your heart's desires and step out to pursue your dreams, fears and unresolved emotional issues often surface—and these must be dealt with.

Be brutally honest as you search your heart about why you have accepted the boxes.

## The Price of Life in a Box

Now evaluate the price you are paying to live in a box.

This will take some honest soul-searching, especially if you are in the habit of repressing your dreams and desires. You may have ingrained habits of living according to what you feel you *should* do, rather than ordering your life in harmony with your deepest values and sense of calling. You may be so enslaved by other people's opinions that you have not allowed yourself to consider the price you are paying for life in a box.

You may be paying the price with anger, resentment, and a lack of energy or motivation.

You may be paying the price with boredom and frustration, knowing deep in your heart that you were born for something much greater than what you are experiencing.

You may be paying in your relationship with God. Deep down you know that he has called you to develop your gifts and passions, but your dreams remain frozen in glaciers of fear.

Finally, you may be paying with agonizing regrets over wasted potential and missed opportunities.

Now weigh the benefits of living in a box against the price you are paying.

Prayerfully evaluate the choices you have made. Mark out the direction you are heading. Ask yourself if you are truly living with purpose. Compare the benefits and price of life in a box.

Ask yourself, *Are the so-called benefits worth the price I am paying?* More importantly, *Am I willing to let go of the counterfeit protection afforded by living in a box to embrace my dreams and purpose?* My prayer is that you will answer no to the first question and yes to

the second. Decide today to begin the journey of breaking free of your box to embrace your dreams.

## Your Gifts, Talents, and Resources

“A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral,” wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Flight to Arras*.

What do you see when you consider the raw materials—the talents, spiritual gifts, time, and opportunities—that God has given you? A rock pile? A cathedral? More importantly, what have you done with these resources? If you were to give an account today of how you have developed your raw materials, what would you say? Would God be pleased?


In the parable of the five talents, Jesus illustrates the importance of developing and stewarding our abilities and resources.<sup>2</sup> A businessman entrusted differing amounts of wealth, called “talents,” to three servants to manage while he went away on a long journey. (A talent of gold was equivalent to about \$29,000 or twenty years’ wages.) When he returned, he asked each servant to account for what he had done with the money.

The two individuals who had received five talents and three talents received great rewards. By wisely investing the money, they had doubled its value. Their work was crowned with success.


Similarly, when we faithfully steward the resources God has entrusted to us, our efforts are also crowned with success. The principle of multiplication goes into effect; our gifts and talents become more effective.

The third man in this parable missed out on the rewards of success, for he chose the comfortable and risk-free path of mediocrity. Choosing to bury his talent, he made no attempt to develop, improve, or invest it. Treasuring safety and security over growth and pleasing God, he did what far too many people do with their gifts and resources—absolutely nothing.

What this man failed to realize is that he never owned the talent



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in the first place. A steward is one entrusted with the responsibility of managing another person's property. Unconcerned about the prospect of one day giving an account to the owner, this man justified his inaction with the excuse "I was afraid."

Why was he so afraid? Perhaps he compared himself with those who received more talents and buried his out of intimidation. Perhaps he feared that he would fail and look bad in other people's eyes. Perhaps he was just plain lazy, lacking a sense of accountability to his master.

One of the first steps to breaking out of our boxes is to realize that we do not own our gifts and talents; God does, and he expects us to do our very best to invest them in serving God and other people.

I can think of many occasions when I held back from using a gift because I had fallen into the trap of comparing myself with others who were more talented. When I compared myself with others, intimidation followed. I responded by withdrawing and hiding my gift rather than risking rejection.

Over the years, I've learned to appreciate the wisdom in Henry Van Dyke's words, "The woods would be silent if no birds sang except those that sang best."

Fear may influence us to bury our gifts and shrink from pursuing opportunities. But, as in the parable of the talents, fear is no excuse, for God promises that he will empower us to develop the gifts he has entrusted to us.

The number of talents we receive is not the issue, nor is the magnitude of the talent. The one and only issue is what we do with what we have received. In far too many lives, gifts are buried or squandered.

In the graveyard where my baby brother Steven is buried (he was stillborn, never having a chance to develop his potential), inscriptions on the other gravestones indicate that most were blessed with long lives. I wonder how many of these people accomplished their life destinies. How many others were buried with unrealized potential—books that were never written, songs that were never sung, love that was never shared, words that were never spoken, ventures that were never risked?

You have an absolutely unique constellation of gifts and talents that you were meant to share with this world. Don't rob the world

by taking your dreams to the grave with you. Don't let the years pass by and reach the end of your life suffering agonizing regret as you look back and see nothing but unrealized potential.

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do," said Mark Twain. "So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

What you are is God's gift to you. What you do with yourself is your gift to God and the world!

Many of the world's greatest geniuses died without ever succeeding at anything. Why? It takes more than talent and good intentions to be successful. It takes boldness and faith. Most of all, it takes a deep commitment to faithfully steward the gifts, time, and opportunities God provides for each one of us.

Accepting responsibility for stewarding your dreams and resources can feel threatening, especially at first. As you take an honest look at how you have developed your potential, no doubt you'll realize—like me and like most people—that you have made some less-than-ideal choices. Perhaps you have wasted time. Perhaps you have pursued materialism over purpose, worldly success over destiny, or the accolades of others over the approval of God. Perhaps you have succumbed to fear, people-pleasing, or just plain laziness.

Don't waste more time by beating yourself up with self-condemnation. Trust in the Bible's promise: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."<sup>3</sup>

The moment we commit to pursuing the path of destiny, God takes the good, bad, and ugly parts of our lives and weaves them together into a tapestry of beauty and purpose.

The past is behind you, but the future is before you! The choices you make today will define your future.

"It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal," said Benjamin E. Mayes. "The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream."

Some people feel as though it's too late. Some feel they have wasted too much time or too many opportunities. Some feel they are too damaged, too dysfunctional. Some feel they are simply too old.

Golda Meir may have felt that way before she decided to run for political office, but she didn't let that stop her. She was seventy-one years old when she was elected prime minister of Israel.

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Grandma Moses may have felt she was getting a bit of a late start when she launched her painting career at the age of seventy-six. Arthritis had made it difficult for her to hold the needles for doing embroidery and needlework, so she took up painting. Grandma Moses especially enjoyed painting simple scenes of farm life. Before long she won national recognition, with her paintings widely reproduced through prints, greeting cards, and magazines. At the age of one hundred she illustrated

"'Twas the Night before Christmas" by Clement Moore (1962).

I know a gentleman in his seventies who recently completed law school. After retiring at the age of sixty-five, he became bored and frustrated. He began to pray that God would give him something meaningful to do in his later years. Soon his heart began to burn with a vision to defend religious freedoms in the courts. Most people, when reaching this age, wind down. This visionary, however, embarked on the most challenging and rewarding season of his life.

A friend in her fifties is taking her first writing course, finally pursuing a passion she has cherished since childhood. Another friend, whom I have known since childhood, now in her forties, has just joined a singing group—something she has always longed to do but never had the confidence to pursue until now. Others are going back to college or starting new businesses or pioneering new ministries.

Middle age challenges us to evaluate what we have accomplished with our lives. It is a time of reckoning—of realizing that life without purpose is no life at all. Many people make radical occupational changes not only in their forties and fifties but also into their sixties, seventies, and even later.

For many women, middle age is also a time of transition when children are leaving home to start their own careers and families.

Having focused their talents and energy on the noblest profession of all—motherhood—they reach a stage where their children are grown and they are ready to enter the next season of life.

One friend, who just turned forty-five, describes this season as her “second adolescence.” Though she treasured the years of parenting, her children are grown. In the past two years she has explored various avenues of creativity and just recorded her first CD.

Age is not a factor. Talent is not a factor. Intelligence is not a factor. Real or perceived emotional limitations are not factors. Money is not a factor. The one and only factor is whether or not you are willing to make a decision—starting today—that you will commit yourself to the journey of discovering and fulfilling your potential.

When a young eaglet reaches a certain level of maturity, the mother eagle must help him learn to fly. Because the eaglet wants to stay in the nest and be fed, he won’t take the initiative to leave the nest. But an eagle is not created to sit in a nest; he is destined to soar through the skies and enjoy great heights.

This doesn’t just happen, though. The mother eagle has to prod the eaglet into his destiny. The way she does this is to knock him out of the nest and let him fall. When he falls far enough, she catches him on her wings. She keeps repeating the process until the eaglet learns to spread his own wings and fly.

Like the young eaglet, we humans tend to prefer the comfort and security of our nests to the risks of charting new territory and flying to new heights. But we were never designed to stagnate in nests of mediocrity—we were created for faith and adventure.

When I sensed God beckoning me to step out of my comfort zone and envision my future based on Jesus’ words, “With God all things are possible,” a whole new world of possibilities and opportunities opened to me. I discovered for myself the reality of the Bible’s promise that God is truly able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”<sup>4</sup>

If you yearn to step out in faith and embrace all that God has for you, get ready for the most exciting journey of your life. Get ready for God to knock you out of your nest. Most importantly, get ready for the excitement of learning to fly and the joy of soaring into vast new horizons of purpose and potential.

## For Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Is there an area of your life where you feel boxed in? Describe how it has affected you.
2. What is the main source of the “message of the boxes” in your life (e.g., childhood experiences, criticism from others, pressure to accept the status quo)?
3. What is the main reason you have stayed in your box? Do you fear failure? Are you afraid of stepping out of your comfort zone?
4. Do you long for greater purpose? Are you ready to start re-envisioning your future in light of Jesus’ words, “With God all things are possible”?