

## INTRODUCTION

# BREAKING THE ASPHALT

I almost missed it as I walked—a tiny green sprout pushing through the asphalt on the path below me. I stopped in my tracks and knelt to take a closer look. Could a plant seedling so small really break through asphalt pavement? I inspected it from many angles and tried to understand what I was seeing. It could have happened no other way. This little seed hadn't fallen into an existing hole or crack. It had made its own and lifted a patch of asphalt as if it were a manhole cover on the street. Somehow, against all odds, it was growing into its potential. Effortlessly, it was expressing its nature and doing what seemed impossible. Something in me shifted in that moment.

The seedling could easily have given up beneath the unyielding pavement or twisted sidewalk, searching for softer ground at the edges. But it didn't. Whether by choice or necessity, it faced the harder path directly, pushing relentlessly upward toward the sunlight. That determination sparked something within me, a realization of the choices we all face. How often do you shy away from your hardest but most meaningful paths, opting instead for comfort and safety? If a tiny plant

could defy such impossible odds, then maybe I could, too. Perhaps we all could.

Many times in my own life, I've felt the pull of easier paths and safer choices. The allure of comfort, approval, and clear definitions of success almost led me away from what I truly desired and needed. The seedling reminded me of the resilience and determination within all of us. If this plant could break through asphalt to live its purpose, so could I. So could anyone. That moment inspired me to write this book.

**I built this book around a simple truth: alignment matters more to a life well-lived than achievement.**

I define alignment as the deep congruence between your abilities, talents, temperament, interests, values, and passions with how you live and work. You can hit every target set for yourself and still feel lost. The problem isn't effort, it's direction. Alignment is how you ensure you're putting your energy into the right things.

This isn't a memoir, and it's not a productivity book. It's a guide for change. What you'll find here is a structured, practical way to reconnect with who you are and build a life that genuinely fits.

My experience with the seedling on the path brought into sharp focus a truth that had been simmering in my mind: We are often kept from our greatest dreams and ambitions not by insurmountable challenges but by the allure of a clearer way to things that seem good enough.

We choose these goals because the world around us makes it easy for us to do so, and even encourages it.

The writer Robert Brault said it best: “We are kept from our goals not by obstacles, but by a clear path to lesser goals” (Kerpan 2024). Unlike Brault’s scenario, the seedling demonstrates the opposite truth. It overcame significant obstacles precisely because there was no easier path available. Without the option of comfort or convenience, it was driven by necessity and purpose to push relentlessly toward the light.

From birth, your genetics and environmental influences, such as your parents’ backgrounds and personalities, culture, religion, language, and societal norms, shape you. These forces set expectations and define the roles you’re supposed to play in life.

Modern society reinforces these expectations, prioritizing economic metrics and encouraging a path of least resistance toward safety and security. You’re told from a young age that the path to a good life is to get good grades, attend prestigious universities, and pursue high-paying professions. You will be rewarded with comfort, pleasure, safety, and stability if you do so. For some, this path feels natural. They easily adapt and thrive.

For others, including myself, it’s different. You spend your life trying to fit your unique passions and abilities—your square-peg self—into round-hole worlds defined by external expectations. You struggle, feeling perpetually

out of place, never fully achieving the impact or fulfillment you crave.

For most of my life, I have tried to follow the path laid out for me as a child growing up in the United States of America. I chased traditional success markers such as prestigious job titles at recognized companies, high pay, and the full suite of material possessions, believing they would lead to a good life. By age thirty-five, I had it: an executive position at a Fortune 100 company, the income and savings that go with it, a beautiful home, luxury cars, and a growing, healthy family.

Yet, despite these achievements, I felt profound emptiness. Maintaining this life required a lot of effort, and it often felt unnatural, like acting in a film at times. This disconnection between who you are and what you do is at the heart of modern dissatisfaction.

Already, many of us are feeling this shift. Achieving *success* yet still feeling lost is increasingly common. Burnout, mental and physical health issues, and deeper existential questions about life's purpose are on the rise. We're overworked, overstressed, and overwhelmed because we chase an external definition of success without questioning its validity.

The urgency around alignment is accelerating. Artificial intelligence and automation are reshaping our lives, careers, and societal expectations faster than most realize. Many external markers we've depended on for identity, meaning, and security will soon shift or vanish

entirely. Pursuing external definitions of success won't just feel empty. It will become irrelevant. Alignment is no longer just something nice to have. Alignment is essential. Understanding your wiring, your unique cognitive blueprint, intrinsic motivations, and authentic values, is crucial preparation for the profound changes happening right now.

If you've achieved more than you thought possible and still feel off, you're not alone. This is not a hustle culture book. It's not another set of productivity hacks or mindset tricks to squeeze more performance out of yourself. You've likely done that already. What this book offers is something different: a return to alignment.

In these pages, I'll share the process I've used personally and with clients around the world to help high performers reconnect with who they are and build lives that fit. I call it the SEPARATE Framework; a structured, practical method for rediscovering your purpose and walking a path that feels both powerful and peaceful.

Just like the plant breaking through asphalt, you have the power to overcome barriers holding you back. I'm writing this book because it's time for a change. Many of you want change but don't know where to start. I understand the daunting nature of realigning your life against expectations. It can feel overwhelming, like standing at the base of Mount Everest looking up at its peak.

There is hope, and you can accomplish it. I've lived it myself and now guide others through the same process

using the SEPARATE Framework. This book is for those ready to break through their own asphalt, to stop settling for lesser goals, and to unlock their true potential.

My journey has taken me from corporate boardrooms to psychology training and neuroscience research, and countless conversations with others and myself about life's meaning. These experiences have revealed to me the profound transformative power of living authentically.

True success aligns with your traits, talents, passions, and purpose. Hard work alone isn't enough. It's merely the ticket to entry. Discovering what makes you uniquely you and building your life around it unlocks your ability to pursue your greatest goals and highest levels of success.

While your definition of success might differ from mine, our shared struggle is universal. We resist easier, familiar paths to seek greater personal fulfillment. This book is for anyone feeling stuck or unfulfilled, including students, professionals, parents guiding children, or those seeking a midlife change. You'll find insights, practical tools, and a road map for a fulfilling journey.

In the pages ahead, I'll share tools, deeply personal insights, and actionable strategies to help you identify and navigate your own steeper path, no matter how deeply buried beneath the asphalt you currently feel.

My hope is that this book changes your perspective on success and empowers you to take control of your life. I want to help you find clarity, reduce stress, and

increase joy in all that you do. This is an invitation to a self-discovery journey, where work feels natural and fulfilling and your contributions create a happier, more fulfilled world.

You were meant to thrive by following your true nature. Just like the seedling that breaks through the asphalt. Ask yourself, what is your asphalt? What barrier has become so familiar that you've stopped seeing it as something to break through?

This book isn't about chasing more. It's about choosing better. Not better by someone else's measure, but by your own. The steeper path will test you, but it's also the only one that can carry you to the life meant for you.



The seedling that started it all.

—Photo by Lenn Pryor