

Introduction

*Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the
last river has been poisoned, only after the last fish
has been caught — only then will you find
that your money cannot be eaten.*

— Cree Indian Prophecy

A Single Step

BETTER IS A BOOK ABOUT HOPE.

This is a book about reconnecting to our animalness. Our humanness.

There is no shortage of books outlining bleak environmental theory. *Better* on the other hand was written to inspire you to create change in your everyday life that will in turn inspire people around you to make changes. *Better* depends on the power of each of us to have more purpose, be more joyful, more empathic and more loving to the Earth and each other. We need to understand where we went wrong, and we need the imagination to do better. *Better* provides a bird's-eye view of the desperate state the natural world's in and offers pragmatic options for changing that status quo one sustainable, creative action at a time.

Better invites you to change your perceptions and see adversity as opportunity. Instead of thinking outside the box, this book wants you to destroy the box entirely and ditch it in your compost pile. *Hasta la vista. See ya later, Alligator. C'est la vie. Better* is about reimagining

what our lives can be and repairing our relationship with the environment. This book is a call to arms: to take chances, bark at the moon, use less, play more, grow food, heed the power of coincidence, smile at strangers and turn your life into your greatest artistic achievement. Because no amount of doom and gloom can change the fact that a land of opportunity awaits us. When we change our perceptions and how we frame them, we change the world. It's like the fortune cookie says: "Everything you are against weakens you. Everything you are for empowers you."

All change begins with the acknowledgment of facts. We must fess up. It is time for us to admit what we are doing to each other, the planet and ourselves. Anxiety is bred from the outer edges of awareness — a refusal to look at and address hard issues at hand. It is time for us to empower ourselves to stare our situation right in the face, understand the problems and make new plans. This is a painful process. It is not easy to own up. It's not easy to open Pandora's box. And sometimes, solutions are hard to come by.

But everything starts in the dark. Changing our lives means reconnecting to ethics that exist above the plane of cultural *normalcy*. We have to stop acting as though over-consumption is *The American Way* — somehow a natural or god-given right. Our true rights and responsibilities lie in our ability to be enlightened, vulnerable, compassionate beings living in cooperation with the people and world around us. This is a cure to our isolation and a real road to fulfillment and purpose.

To anchor these perspectives, *Better* makes it personal with stories of people just like you and me who found ways to transition into more creative, sustainable ways of life. People who opted out of stagnancy. People who flipped the bird to hardships and demanded happiness over complacency. I'll also share the story of the farm where I live, and my own move from city to country. Transforming my uncle's commune into a sustainability campus and artist colony has been a crash course in the lessons of the Better Theory, a philosophy you are about to know a whole lot about.

All routes are not the same and I'm not encouraging you all to quit your jobs, ditch your relationships and head to the country to start

churning out a field of veggies and offering your home up to a bunch of artists. But I am encouraging you to look at your life differently. I'm inviting you to change your relationship to the planet.

Throughout *Better*, I refer to the problems *we* face and the environmental issues *we* have created. I realize we are not all the same: not all living without concern for the world around us, not all in utter isolation from our neighbors and families. Many of the issues discussed in *Better* apply to relatively wealthier demographics who may have televisions in every room, big lawns, multiple family vehicles and other amenities most people in this world will never have — and may not want. The use of *we* throughout *Better* is a tool designed to make cultural issues universal. Environmental problems don't exist in a vacuum, any more than behavioral problems or personality disorders do. We are all affected by each other and the world we live in. So *we* refers to our culture in general — the global culture — and invites each of us to bear the responsibility of all of us, across all living situations, demographics and personalities. *We* as a global community have pushed ourselves to the edge. *We* as humans have out-consumed our natural resources. *We* together should be seeking out creative solutions. Those solutions can often be enacted by a whole lot of people no matter their lifestyles, income levels or geography. We can all think about the ingredients in our toiletries, cleaning products and fertilizers. We can all think of ways to give back more to Mother Earth.

Art holds many meanings for different people. In the title of this book, *art* refers to any action done well. There is an art to everything — so why not to our own lives? Living intentionally, growing out of the Earth and sharing happiness with the people around us are art forms. Sustainable living deals specifically with the total celebration of life — one centered around growth, love and compassion for all living things, including ourselves.

I've heard lots of people say the human race is past the point of no return; that we may as well throw in the towel. But if we can't change everything, is it really appropriate to change nothing? The deepest satisfaction does not always lie in what you get out of x, y or z as a result of your work. The working is the reward. The journey is the gift. A small

change is still a change. We transform the world each time we give. Each time we choose love. Each time we grow, cultivate and build. Doomsday attitudes make us lazy. A life of complacency is no life at all.

You don't love in a real way for what you will get in return. You love not because a person will inherently love you back or because you have some selfish need for them; instead you might know how to love them well in a way they wouldn't otherwise experience. You do these things for them, but you can't help ending up a little wiser, a littler kinder and a little better off yourself for loving another. The act of love itself is transformative. It's not a cash deal or barter. You love someone completely and utterly for free. Sometimes you get burned. And if you're smart, when you're all done crying into a pillow and licking your wounds, you go out and you love some more.

Maybe you play sports. Maybe you're not a star. But maybe a person you play with or against is going to one day turn pro. And maybe during practice, you're actually in some way helping to thrust that player on to bigger things. Maybe that's your contribution: not to have been the best yourself, but to have been the one who pushed the others who go on to become giants.

There is a parable about an old man who walked along a beach the morning after a storm. Starfish were stranded along the sand as the tide went out. In the distance, the man saw a little girl throwing starfish one at a time out into the waves. He walked up to her. "Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" he asked. "The sun is up and the tide is low," she replied. "If I don't throw them back into the water, the starfish will die." The man shook his head. "Do you not realize there are miles of beach and thousands of starfish? You cannot possibly make a difference." The girl smiled, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea. She looked the old man straight in the eye. "It made a difference to that one."

This book is about small steps. It's about turning darkness into silver linings and making positive changes wherever possible, with the faith that those small pieces make huge differences. It's about creating art for art's sake, loving for love's sake, and it's about worshiping the dirt, the air and the water. It's about finding whimsy, coincidence and magic in

your everyday life. It's about paying attention to moments and seeing them as opportunities and gifts. It's about picking up one starfish at a time and tossing it back out to sea.

The greatest losses — and gains — in the world come in a flood of tiny instances. The recipe for life's complexities is comprised of the smallest, and at times seemingly insignificant, details. And as *Better* may show you, some of humanity's greatest turning points have occurred in the face of adversity and tragedy. Our moments of extreme opportunity often stem from the darkest times.

You do no service to the world by diminishing yourself. Character is always destiny. Each of us is capable of turning a negative into a positive. It isn't too late. In fact, it's the perfect time. It's here. It's now. It's Better.

We have arrived at a moment of reckoning. The question is, what will we do with it?

Our Disconnect

We're plugged in. We're turned on. And we're completely disconnected.

We spend more time scrolling through social media sites or checking our phones than we spend with our friends. We're inside more than we're outside. We keep our muscles toned in gyms, not by active lifestyles. The television is filled with talking heads arguing over politics, reality TV, gun laws and the ever-loosening fabric of our society and culture. We worry more about money than the environment.

Many of us have forgotten who we are on a literal level. We pad our brains with patriotism, pop culture and painkillers in a subconscious gesture to ignore The American Dream's disappointing, diminishing return. We're pissed off, we're isolated, we're fat and we're lonelier than we've ever been. We have gone so far in the wrong direction that we've somehow programmed our brains to defend our present way of life in the US even as it kills us.

We worry about our waistlines but not where our food came from. We debate politics but not clean water. We divide ourselves by political party, race, musical tastes, ages and income levels. We lose sleep over new smart phone and video game releases, not over air quality. We

practice idolatry of celebrities while neglecting the very ground beneath our feet. We are more concerned about buying than about what we leave behind.

Everything in the universe is made out of the same five basic elements: air, fire, water, earth and ether. All living things have utilized other living organisms and molecules to survive over and over again. What we do to the planet, we do to ourselves. Everything is connected.

Religion was born from the natural world. Stars in the night sky, volcanic eruption, illness, miracles, dimples and rainbows: all came from the earth and sky, and all were believed to be signs of a higher power, a godliness. So much of religion involves food: a recognition of the sacrifice one living thing makes to the next — plant to animal to human, or a variation therein. One thing gives its life so the next may eat. At the end of that chain, there is death and decomposition and the cycle repeats. We have no problem proselytizing and belonging to a sect; yet we forget why that sect exists in the first place, forget that all religions are based in the natural world. We worship the branches of our planet — gods, spirituality and religion in general — without worshipping the roots.

We've forgotten the natural order of things. To civilize the terrain, men carved trails of tears then paved paradise for a flurry of golden highways, strip malls and fast food outlets. We pay no heed to the weather, the seasons, the length of days or moon cycles, save for how these issues affect our wardrobes or social lives. Most of us don't know whether it's a good year for tomatoes, if there's a blight on elm trees or if there are algal blooms in our local lakes. We don't know how the honeybees or bats are doing. We don't know how the soil is in our own backyards.

This isn't right. It isn't normal. And it's not how we ever used to do things.

For most of human existence, *garbage* was comprised of biodegradable items like clay pots or animal hides. When a person died, he or she wasn't pumped with preservatives and then buried as some strange, toxic seed in the ground. Items were manufactured to last. Once we learned some basic agriculture, people grew their own food as a matter

of course. Victory gardens in people's backyards during World II accounted for a full 40% of vegetables produced in the US in 1944.¹

Until very recently, many people in the US knew by the age of 18 how to safely handle a firearm, milk a cow, repair a piece of clothing, split firewood, make basic repairs, cultivate a garden, hammer a nail and prepare food.² In the grand scheme of human evolution, we've only been living as unskilled as we do now, as distinctly set apart from nature, for a couple of centuries. That's a blip on the radar. A grain of sand on the beach of time.

In order to do any human things — to make civilizations and destroy them, obsess over material gains, build great skyscrapers and jet set and work a nine-to-five job, lobby congress, invest and gamble and win and lose — we have to, fundamentally, be able to breathe and eat and have shelter. Before we can worry about job loss in the US or our footing in the international economy, we would be wise to remember we're animals who need certain things in order to survive. We have to inhale and exhale, drink water and swallow food. And the more we poison that which provides those things, the closer we bring ourselves to the point of no more life. That's literal.

We button ourselves away in homes, each of which must have its own washing machine, dishwasher, lawnmower, several air conditioners and televisions, a furnace, hot water heater and swimming pool. We consume instead of produce. We have lost ourselves entirely to a world emphasizing money and consumption over mindfulness and compassion. What's the endgame? A satirical zoo exhibit of humans in their constructed habitats looking more like a movie set than a world, without any speakable future. The emperor has no clothes. The cat's out of the bag. The vandals took the handles.

In the short-term we can rely on water treatment plants; they allow the richest people to drink the best water money can buy while actual water bodies are polluted. We can continue chemically treating lawns so they're zapped of organic matter but look green and healthy. We can frack for natural gas and continue to pull oil out of the ground. We can use treated, drinkable water to flush human waste to a septic or processing plant. We can make more and more car factories, farm salmon

indoors and we can break apart mountains to mine pretty bands of gold that prove how in love we are. We can upgrade our smart phones every two years and buy new laptops every three. We can stay comfortable with the planned obsolescence of all the crap we buy, throw away and buy again.

We can continue getting meat from companies that operate factory farms and shoot said product up with pink slime to keep prices down and food in high supply. We can purchase vegetables from halfway around the world and eat apples that have been sprayed with god-knows-what so they are without a single blemish. We can keep doing these things, but while our heads are in the sand the One Great Truth is that these things, done in these ways, simply can't go on forever. The system itself is unsustainable. Too much is being taken, and too many toxins are being given back. It's a one-way, dead-end street.

Sustainability refers to an action that can be repeated indefinitely, constantly replenishing what is being taken. If we do things that don't complement that design, eventually the system fails. The longer we choose industry over environment, jobs over air, corporate loopholes over water, well, the less sustainable we are. We can't keep pushing the pesky issue of finite natural resources out of the way to maintain some standard of living that is just wholly out of step with our animalness. Doing so secures only one thing: that we're going to run out of the very things we need the most even sooner.

A culture based on so-called infinite growth is doomed. The game is rigged. And yet we stay inside this ill-formed framework and think we can bring about real change. We can't. The current state of Big Agriculture, our relationships with the land around us, our politics and our separation from the very communities we live in have got to change completely if we actually want to leave things richer than we found them.

It's overwhelming, isn't it? Seems safe to say we're a hopeless case. Glaciers are already melting, we're watching more extreme weather roll through each year, and the population is going in only one direction. Will it be our overuse of cars or rainforests cleared for cattle that will be our undoing? Will it be fracking? An oil pipeline? We're coming too close for comfort to a cliff edge we're just beginning to clearly see.

But what if I told you we have a choice? We are not kittens up a tree or damsels in distress. We actually have a hand in this game. We can live comfortably, happily and safely without diminishing the natural world. We can stop being part of the problem. We can change the rules and save ourselves. We can still make things Better.

All we have to do is start.

Part 1

Ah, the world! Oh, the world!

— Herman Melville

Mundus vult decipi.

The world wants to be deceived.

— Latin proverb

Hardships often prepare ordinary people
for an extraordinary destiny.

— C.S. Lewis

The earth's atrot! The sun's a scream!

The air's a jig. The water's great!

— James Joyce

They tried to bury us.
They didn't know we were seeds.

— Mexican proverb



Chapter 1

The Better Theory

IN THE BETTER THEORY, every experience is a teacher. Crisis teaches you cool, pain teaches you pleasure, loss teaches you love. Every large and small and good and bad happening offers countless opportunities to grow, expand, let go and learn: in a nutshell, to be better.

Each trauma, eerie coincidence, tragedy, missed bus, layoff, breakup or failure has something to show you. The answers to all our questions lie in the events of our everyday lives; the Better Theory teaches us the significance of each occurrence.

People's perceptions transform experiences. How one looks at the world alters that world wholly. If you look at the next bad thing that happens in your life as an opportunity to grow and learn, you will grow and learn from it. If you keep this concept with you, you'll find countless chances every day to improve your life and your surroundings. You will also see how others throughout history and storybooks have used the Better Theory to achieve the seemingly impossible: that Joan of Arc would of course employ her visions to lead the French military; that Frodo Baggins would utilize his perspectives as a simple hobbit to save the world and that David had the edge on Goliath the whole time.

We generally consider hardships to be disadvantages — experiences to be loathed and avoided at all costs. With this conventional wisdom, anything that is difficult or painful works against us. Yet history tells a much different story.

Twelve of the first 44 US presidents at a young age lost their fathers. Albert Einstein didn't start speaking until he was four years old. Benjamin Franklin dropped out of school when he was ten because his parents could no longer afford his education. Ella Fitzgerald — along with other celebrities like Halle Berry, Jewel, Dr. Phil, Jim Carrey, Harry Houdini and Charlie Chaplin — experienced homelessness. Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie*, was rejected 30 times. Oprah Winfrey was sexually abused as a child, became pregnant at 14 and lost the baby in its infancy.

An astounding number of successful business people struggled early in life to overcome dyslexia. Just a few include Cisco CEO John Chambers, cell phone pioneer Craig McCaw, JetBlue founder David Neelema, Kinkos founder Paul Orfalea and discount brokerage firm founder Charles Schwab. In his book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Malcolm Gladwell suggested that instead of succeeding in spite of their learning disabilities, these moguls triumphed precisely because of them. Their battles with their disorders taught them some things that became assets.

Of course no one wants to point to trauma or extreme hardship as a requisite for success. And of course those of us who grew up in loving, nurturing homes with creature comforts enjoyed the advantages of protection, security and support. All those benefits can certainly help a person become successful and happy in the world. But choosing to muscle through the most difficult human experiences bolsters directness, toughness, pride and the ability to creatively solve problems. And those too, Gladwell argues, are necessary ingredients for success.

Where would we be without the blues, anyway? Without struggle, hardship or broken hearts there would be no music. No art. Without the blues there would be no Billie Holiday. No Ray Charles. No Hank Williams, Elvis Presley or Etta James. Without the blues we'd be without Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo and Picasso. Bad stuff that happens is the grit in our bellies we can choose to use as fuel for our creative process.

It's tempting to turn negatives into energy vacuums. Something bad happens, and we use it as a chance to pull attention from people around us. We complain. We act out. We manipulate. In the short term, this can feel like we're getting *a fix*. But in reality, we're damaging everyone

involved. There is another way to meet our needs. Instead of staying broken and seeking instant gratification, we can choose to heal. Instead of wearing our tribulations as armor, they can become tools to aid us in expanding ourselves so we don't need armor. We can forgive ourselves our weaknesses and begin the often-challenging process of moving on.

Rory McIlroy, a young pro golfer from Northern Ireland, was winning the 2011 Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta, Georgia. Most professional players go their whole lives without winning any round in the majors, but McIlroy at just 21 years old and without any prior victories was enjoying a safe lead on the final day. But on the back nine, McIlroy choked. He shot a triple-bogey on No. 10 and proceeded to shoot the worst day of golf in his four-year career. He tied for 15th place and was all but laughed off the course. It was painful to watch.

Because McIlroy came so close and lost so dramatically, most people thought he'd never win a major. Many thought McIlroy would become a head case in a sport played largely in the six inches between one's ears. After the loss at Augusta, the young golfer was forced to interview for the public media. Reflecting on his worst day in his professional career, McIlroy chose to quote Muhammed Ali: "It's repetition of affirmations that leads to belief — and once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen." Three months later, McIlroy won the US Open. But he did more than win: he shattered almost every record associated with that tournament.

For as long as we have kept history alive through storytelling and writing, so too have we used mythology to tell tales of individuals who triumph over tragedy or seeming disadvantages to become successful. Movies and literature document countless tales of overcoming obstacles and underdogs having their day at the top.

Ill-equipped rebels take on — and beat — the Empire in *Star Wars*. Peter Parker faces down the side effect of an insect bite by becoming Spider-Man. In Roald Dahl's story and the film made from it, Matilda overcomes adversity by reading and teaching herself telekinesis — a talent that allows her to come out on top. The tortoise beats the hare. In *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Sissy Hankshaw takes a deformity — grotesquely oversized thumbs — and turns it into an advantage.

In *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, a Starfleet Academy training exercise called the Kobayashi Maru tests the gumption and poise of cadets when faced with a no-win scenario. In this flight-simulation exercise, a cadet in command of the USS *Enterprise* receives a distress signal stating that civilian freighter *Kobayashi Maru* has hit a gravitic mine in the Klingon Neutral Zone and is losing power and life support. Cadets must choose to attempt a rescue of the *Kobayashi Maru* or abandon it, as the test by design offers no way to rescue the freighter and get out of the neutral zone without inciting a fatal battle with Klingon ships.

The test itself is interesting, but what makes the *Kobayashi Maru* simulation in this story great is how cadet James T. Kirk beats it. Before he undertakes the exercise for a third time (after failing twice), Kirk manages to reprogram the simulator so it's actually possible to rescue the *Kobayashi Maru*. Kirk is awarded a commendation for original thinking. He effectively changed the rules of the game in order to create a different outcome rather than play within the confines of an unworkable system.

That's the purpose of the Better Theory: to redefine what we would normally consider a negative or no-win scenario and turn it into an opportunity for greatness. And that's the goal of the work I do at Better Farm: to take all the environmental obstacles and cultural isolation we're faced with in this world and use them as lessons in how to transcend them.

This isn't to say we should wish for bad things — or that when bad things happen we should somehow act like they're no big deal. The same trauma that invigorates one person may overpower another. But what we gain by going through tough times and coming out on the other side is courage. When we're in agony, we become willing to take chances we don't when we're comfortable. We suddenly discover a feeling of urgency and thrilling sense of freedom. We get to make new rules. And the people who come out on the other side are the same people who emerge as leaders in their fields, innovative thinkers and joyful individuals.

The world needs people like this.

All you've got to do is climb aboard, hang on tight and push yourself forward into the abyss. It's a tricky theory to test-drive; rarely do you say "Better" first thing after something terrible happens. But the truth is, Better works.

French pharmacist and psychologist Émile Coué trailblazed the idea of *conscious autosuggestion* when in 1910 he began a series of experiments in which he had subjects repeat the mantra "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better" (in French: Tous les jours, à tous points de vue, je vais de mieux en mieux).

John Lennon fans among you may recognize Coué's mantra from the 1980 song "Beautiful Boy."

The people in Coué's experiment were to recite the line 20 times each morning before getting out of bed and again each night before falling asleep. Subjects' eyes had to be closed, and the line was to be spoken in a whispered monotone.

Coué's goal? To improve rehabilitation for people who had experienced physical or emotional distress. Roots of the Coué method came from his discovery that his patients' bodies responded better to medications when Coué made a point to praise their effectiveness. Theorizing that patients internalized the optimistic suggestion, he began to explore the powers of the imagination to facilitate physical and mental healing.

Coué felt the key to wellness lies in an individual's ability to change his or her unconscious thoughts through imagination. Sound familiar?

C. Harry Brooks, who wrote a number of books about Coué and his work, estimated the success rate of this practice at 93%. Those successes included people suffering from atrophy, organ problems, trauma, diabetes and many other physical ailments. Coué's subjects were, ultimately, able to heal themselves.

Jimmy Nicol was a stand-in drummer for the Beatles during their 1964 tour of Europe, Hong Kong and Australia while Ringo was in a hospital nursing tonsillitis. Nicol was known for using the phrase "It's getting better," which would go on to inspire Paul McCartney's lyrics for the group's hit "Getting Better." Lennon and McCartney wrote the verses for that chorus; and as McCartney sang the refrain "Getting better all the time;" Lennon threw in the line "It can't get any worse."

While the title points to the optimistic (better), the verses refer to an “angry young man,” schoolroom disobedience and violence.

Because it is the negative that informs the positive. This is the tension of Better.

Losses will often give more than gains. Losses wake us up. In a miserable marriage? Have a job you loathe? Personal life uninspiring? Pay attention to what you feel uneasy about. That voice is your inner self telling your outer self to get this show on the road. The Better Theory is about realizing that your life is bigger than any one of these negatives. These negatives are going to push you where you are meant to go. We have lots of words for this like fate, ambition and finding one’s path. It’s all Better.

The Engaged Buddhism movement, founded by Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, invites individuals to draw from their teachings to facilitate change on social, political and environmental platforms. The movement pushes practitioners beyond meditation in order to encourage outside action: boycotts, protests and grassroots activity. The practice allows people to address their personal fears and limitations before taking on exterior adversity.

For the Engaged Better movement, your challenge is similar: to ditch the complexities and utter busy-ness of today’s consumer-based society and sign on the dotted line for fun. For mischief. For joy. The Better Theory is about grabbing the reins. It’s about using your struggles to inform your successes. It’s about no longer waiting for humankind to improve, instead living like that day is here. You be the outlaw. Let humanity catch up to you.

The Better Theory is your ticket out of all the things that bind you. It’s a reminder you can turn even your worst misery or mistake into your most enlightened teacher. Heed the Better Theory, and those things entering your life of which you are most afraid become your partners in crime in a car chase toward Enlightenment. You’ll be choreographing dance moves for your demons in no time — and counteracting this planet’s bad case of the blues with a little bit of green.