

HARD PIVOT

Embrace Change.

Find Purpose.

Show Up Fully.

APOLO OHNO

CHAPTER ONE

The Great Divorce

When we are no longer able to change a situation,
we are challenged to change ourselves.

VIKTOR FRANKL

Before you can reinvent yourself, you first have to decide who you want to be. I don't mean who other people want you to be or who you think you *should* be or who you think you deserve to be. You get to decide who you truly *want* to be, and you get to do so with your own criteria.

Most of us who grew up in the United States have been conditioned to define ourselves by our professions, even when our inclinations, desires, and skills aren't necessarily in line with our job title. Instinctually, we know that our work is only one part of who we are and that there are other less publicly recognized identities (as parents, volunteers, gardeners, or musicians) that are closer to our hearts. And even those labels don't tell the whole story.

PRACTICE

LISTING YOUR LABELS

This is a short exercise that we'll be revisiting a little later in the chapter. Simply jot down two lists on a piece of paper. On the first list, write down some things that people know you as: your job titles and roles in your community for example (this list includes labels such as "FedEx driver," "unemployed accountant," "kids' soccer coach," and "guy

with all the pink flamingos in his front yard”). For the second list, put down all the roles and labels that *you* identify yourself with (“father of two,” “avid reader,” “biker,” “pinball enthusiast”). The two lists might overlap in some places, but you might be surprised at how different they are.

THE FIRST CHAPTER

Early on in my career as a speed skater, my father told me that life is a series of chapters, one leading to the next and that we lean on the lessons and insights we gain along the way to move forward into whatever comes next. That’s hard to see when you’re so immersed in one particular chapter of your life. I spent years and years believing that being an Olympian would be the primary identity that defined me, and it would take a long time for me to understand how limiting that perspective was. Of course, winning those medals opened doors for me that just aren’t available to most people, and I’ll be forever thankful for those earlier chapters of my life. And although some people will always know me first as an Olympian or a winner on *Dancing with the Stars* no matter what I do, I can now see those parts of my life with the first Golden Principle I listed a few pages back: gratitude. I might not identify as an Olympian anymore, but my father was right—those earlier chapters led to where I am today. And for that, I’m grateful. They were springboards that empowered me to pursue new paths, interests, and opportunities.

It took me a long time to gain this new perspective. I had pursued my competitive goals with such single-minded purpose that I didn’t think too much about what the future held. On one hand, that single-mindedness is one of the reasons I was so successful as a speed skater; on the other, it’s also why I was so ill-prepared for life when I retired from the sport. I was twenty-seven years old, but inside I felt seventeen. I had no academic education to speak of, no work experience, and no training in finance or business. I’d never developed other parts of my personality, gained any other skill sets, or pursued any source of purpose or meaning outside of speed skating. I had ignored or pushed everything else away from me (including intimate relationships) in pursuit of my ultimate goals.

The Olympics were my first great love. Even now, I can close my eyes and hear the hush that descends on the arena just before a race, so quiet I could almost hear my competitors' hearts beating as we took our marks. At that moment, I had no doubt whatsoever about my purpose or meaning in life. As a representative of my country, I was part of something bigger and more substantial than myself, and eight different times, I found myself standing on top of the world with millions of eyes on me, as an Olympic medal was placed around my neck. Those moments defined the entirety of my existence. I'm telling you all of this just to convey how profound the Great Divorce actually was for me.

I had chosen to divorce myself from my previous identity—the one I foolishly thought would carry me through the rest of my life—but I had no idea how to go about forging a new one.

My first aha moment was when I realized that my skills inside the ice rink weren't exactly transferable to other arenas in life. In business meetings, for example, I was eager and focused, but I was also lost at first, and my lack of experience in the industries I wanted to be involved with made me feel insecure and small. And then I noticed that the further I got away from skating, the less frequently I was asked to do speaking engagements (and be paid for doing them). On top of it all, I struggled with the basics of how to arrange my day. For the longest time, my days had been structured around the team's training program, and I was no longer in the same world with those teammates and coaches—people I'd leaned on for years and years.

In short, the reality of the Great Divorce hit me harder each successive day. Everything I had accomplished—everything I was—seemed relegated to the past, mere scratches on a result sheet that would be eventually forgotten in time. It's hard to describe the confusion, uncertainty, and fear I experienced as a result of that realization.

I didn't know what else I was good at doing or if I was good enough to succeed at anything else. I had chosen to divorce myself from my previous identity—the one I foolishly thought would carry me through the rest of my life—but I had no idea how to go about forging a new one. I didn't know if anything could ever replace the passion I once had, the drive to succeed, or the incredibly powerful sense of identity I had with my sport. But I did know that whatever I was going to do next would be done away from the ice.

When I retired from skating, the thing I craved most and hungered to show the world was that there was so much more to me than what I did on the ice. I desperately wanted people to recognize me for the skills and strengths that I had outside of the Olympic sphere, even though I wasn't quite sure what those were just yet. I didn't want to go out to eat and just be recognized as *Apolo Ohno, Former Olympian Speed Skater*. I didn't want people to look at me as just another dumb jock. I didn't want to be just the latest face on a Wheaties box, one that would be replaced in short order and eventually vanished from public consciousness.

What I'm pointing out is that my pursuit for a new identity didn't have the healthiest start. It was reactionary, ego-driven, and fueled by my *FOPO* (fears of other people's opinions). Going back to the opening of this chapter, I wasn't looking into who I truly wanted to be; I was focused on what other people thought of me and what I mistakenly believed they expected from me. I was still terrified of letting others down—my father, my friends, my teammates, and my fans. Basically, I forgot about me. I forgot about the one person I should have been prioritizing the whole time.

A NEW PIVOT

Right after the Great Divorce, the first thing I did was sprint as far away from the United States as I could, mostly to Asia. I'd always been enamored with other cultures—the food, people, sights, and sounds. I loved being near the Buddhist monks in Thailand, gazing out upon rice fields in China, and enjoying the peace and tranquility of *onsen* baths throughout Japan, where my ancestors on my father's side are from.

While I was in Asia still working out what I wanted to do next in life, I haphazardly began pursuing various business interests, none of which I knew anything about. I started with rare earth minerals, and then I moved into cross-border investments, manufacturing, real estate, infrastructure, mining, shipping, and tech (among other industries). Although my experience in these arenas was quite limited, my curiosity and willingness to learn was quite high. Furthermore, I'd long since practiced the art of surrounding myself with experts, and immersing myself in their expertise jump-started my education and helped me cultivate important relationships along the way. Once I got started, I said yes to basically everything that came my way. That time in my life was quite disorienting and sometimes frightening, but it was also exhilarating. I was starting from scratch, something I hadn't done since I was a kid.

As I'd shown with skating all those years ago, I proved to be a quick study. And because I'd trained as a sprinter for so long, I was accustomed to going really fast to figure out what I had to accomplish and how. I worked at warp speed to learn everything I could about these businesses so I wouldn't walk into a meeting with, say, a bunch of investment bankers and encounter puzzled looks on their faces when I opened my mouth—looks that would signal that I didn't belong in the room, that I was out of my depth, that I should go back to doing what I was most familiar with.

I wanted the respect of my business partners. I yearned for them to see me as a peer, as someone who knew what he was talking about, as someone whose perspective brought value to the conversation. To that end, I spent my waking hours studying these businesses, teaching myself everything I could about the various industries, and immersing myself in their worlds. It didn't take long for me to notice that the drive and relentlessness that enabled me to win Olympic medals was transferable to these new ventures. I was beginning to see that I was way more prepared for my reinvention than previously expected. Just because you pivot, doesn't mean you should leave all your hard-earned skills behind. All your strengths and experiences are part of your transformation.

It dawned on me that I had become a great speed skater not simply because I was gifted as an athlete but because of my approach to

the sport and certain attributes I used to my advantage. It was mostly my dedication to the mental and physical training that made me a great speed skater, not because I was somehow inherently special. It was because I did the work, because I refused to let anyone outwork me. My natural gifts had only gotten my skate in the door.

Realizing that I possessed attributes and inclinations within my control, and understanding that I could apply them to innumerable pursuits beyond the athletic realm, was a revelation for me. My thirst for knowledge, drive, mindset exercises, and visualization techniques were directly applicable to the world beyond skating, and they'd enable me to gracefully pivot, shift my identity, and transform into the multifaceted person I truly was and wanted to be.

PRACTICE

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Take a look at the two lists you made earlier in the chapter. For each label and role you put down (whether assigned to you by others or yourself), think about the qualities and attributes that you bring to each identity. Being a FedEx driver might not be the main way that you think of yourself, but this is your opportunity to ponder what you specifically bring to that job: the ability to focus on multiple details at once, for example. Or, say you're a kids' soccer coach or father of two: you might acknowledge all the compassion, humor, and cat-wrangling abilities you bring to those endeavors. Write these attributes down. In the process of reinventing yourself, it's important to acknowledge and recall all your natural gifts.

LIFE ISN'T A SPORT

Even though I came to my new ventures with certain qualities and attributes, I also realized that the world of business—and life in general—wasn't the same as the skating world. Sure, you can always gamify your life to some extent, but there are certain rules in sports that don't exist in the business arena, and vice versa. And many of the things that I'd leveraged

to succeed in skating—my rage, insecurity, and terrible fear of failure, for example—weren't as useful in the realm of business.

I discovered that success in businesses is predicated on trust and authenticity and the relationships that trust and authenticity help foster. If you're not willing (or able) to show your authentic self, you'll have a lot more trouble succeeding in business. That's something I struggled with in the early days of my reinvention. I found it difficult to be transparent and show vulnerability because I was trained as a competitor to always wear a poker face and never show any sign of weakness. Unfortunately, closing yourself off in that way makes it a lot more challenging to empathize with others, and empathy is absolutely critical to success in business. Empathy is also something I've had to work at; it didn't come easy to me.

Neither did a lot of other things. Confidence, for example. And, even today, I still struggle with self-doubt, I'm way more insecure than I'm comfortable admitting, and I'm often inconsistent in how I practice and apply the principles I advocate for in this book. But here's the thing: even though I remain a work in progress, it's something I've come to accept about myself. And self-acceptance is key when it comes to empathizing with others.

Additionally, self-acceptance and self-love are critical in their own right. Most people, myself included, have difficulty saying "I love you" to the person they see in the mirror every day, but learning to do so is incredibly empowering. For me, it goes beyond loving myself regardless of my mistakes and deficiencies; it's about loving who I *am* above and beyond everything I've *done*. I'm not just the Olympian, the medal winner, the entrepreneur, or anybody else's idea of who Apolo Ohno is supposed to be: I'm so much more than any of that. And so are you.

THE PATH FORWARD

The ice remains special to me, sacred even. When I walk into an arena and smell the Zamboni fumes and feel that familiar cool briskness across my face, I'm transported. There's something indescribably beautiful about the experience. So many memories are embedded in those senses.

Although I'm still connected to speed skating, growing into my new identity has also required me to keep the sport at arm's length. People are usually surprised when I tell them that I haven't skated properly since

my last Olympics in 2010. I haven't laced those skates up even once, not even for a charity event or the sort of expected personal appearance in which you show up at a rink, wave to the crowd, take pictures with fans, and sign autographs. Sure, I've skated with rental skates from time to time, but not my *actual* skates.

When journalists ask me about my life today, I tend to answer them by focusing on attributes rather than my activities. So I'll say that I'm passionate. I'll say that I want to help people transform their lives. And if they ask me about my business endeavors, I'll say that I'm deeply committed to the environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) principles that guide ethical businesses today as well as to helping others embrace and embody those principles.

We've been conditioned to think about our identity in terms of what's printed on our business cards — what we do instead of who we actually are.

As I mentioned above, my path forward includes a lot of things that made me such a successful competitor, but I've also uncovered new attributes that are more applicable to who I want to be today. When it comes to skating or athletics in general, that means helping others who might benefit from practical advice (about physical training, nutrition, and so on) or from some guidance in the form of emotional or mental support (talking to them about self-imposed limitations or unhealthy expectations, for example). Beyond sports, I view my speaking engagements as opportunities to share my struggles and triumphs in order to connect to others and show them that we're not so different. If I can overcome my challenges, others can too.

At the time, skating for me was all about winning, setting records, and the acclaim that came with it all. But I see now that skating was just an earlier chapter that led to this one, and in this chapter I'm devoted to helping people believe in themselves, gain a healthier relationship with winning and losing, and learn new tools to transform themselves in order to achieve their true life goals. Part of how I do that is by sharing my story,

especially the hardships and trials of the earlier part of my life, because I believe I'm an example that whatever has happened in your life before now—no matter your triumphs, struggles, or mistakes—you already possess some of the tools you'll need to navigate what's coming next.

FACING UNCERTAINTY

If you're reading this book, chances are you've experienced a Great Divorce of your own. If you haven't, perhaps you're seeking reinvention for a different reason. For many people, a new identity often means a new job or career, although it doesn't necessarily have to. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we've been conditioned to think about our identity in terms of what's printed on our business cards—what we *do* instead of who we actually *are*.

For many people, what they do to make a living isn't even a remote reflection of who they are inside or even what they like to do or enjoy in any capacity. Many see work simply as a means to an end, as the thing they have to endure for eight or more hours a day to provide for themselves and their families. They don't seek fulfillment through their work; they seek sustenance and survival. It's about paying the rent and the car note and putting food on the table. It's a way to get health insurance.

Working people have been dealing with this issue for a long time, but the COVID-19 pandemic threw an additional wrench into the works for millions of people when the unemployment rate in the United States reached levels not seen since the Great Depression almost one hundred years ago. Due to circumstances beyond their control, countless Americans were laid off, furloughed, or unable to find adequate work in their field. Seemingly overnight, these people were forced to put to bed whatever identity had been printed on their business card, name tag, or company badge because the title no longer applied.

How many of you (and your friends, family members, neighbors, and so on) were left scrambling, thinking, *That was the only thing I'm good at. That's what I've known. I haven't developed any other skill sets or strengths. Everything else feels foreign to me. What am I going to do?* And when there are mouths to feed and a mortgage to pay, a \$1,200 relief check from the government doesn't go very far.

Even before the pandemic, it's been clear that the days of learning a trade, securing a job, and staying with the same company until retirement are a distant memory. These days, it's common for folks to have two, three, or even four acts in their professional lives (or even more). Very few people remain at one job for more than four years. Some careers are getting phased out entirely, while others are being transformed by automation and other emergent technologies. Without a doubt, it's a stressful and frightening time.

If there's a silver lining to this instability and uncertainty, maybe it's that the answer to that profound *What now?* question I talked about in the introduction can basically be anything. Whatever you're facing, it's an opportunity to review, reflect, and renew. It's an opportunity to get curious to know yourself better—both the person you've been and the person you're about to become.

PRACTICE STARTING SELF-INVENTORY

Grab a piece of paper and write down the following questions: *What am I good at? What am I passionate about? What was it that made me so good at the jobs I've had in the past (or, if you're currently employed, the jobs you now have)?* Maybe you're good at solving problems. Maybe, like me, you're passionate about helping people. Maybe you thrive when presented with new challenges or you get turned on when you're required to learn new skills. Leave lots of room to write your answers down and be as thorough and self-horn-blowing as you'll allow. Feel free to consult the list you worked on earlier in the chapter.

It's critically important to these exercises that you write your answers and thoughts down. Studies show that people who put their goals to paper are way more likely to achieve them than people who don't. As pro wrestling legend Diamond Dallas Page says, "Don't just think it, ink it."² That may sound corny, but it's fairly easy to remember (especially if you write it down).

These practices are meant to get you started on your path to reinvention. Before you transform your identity, you have to know yourself inside and out, and that takes a lot of reflection and self-acceptance as well. It can also involve some hard truths, so as you do the next practice, try to do so with as much clarity, openness, and self-love as you can muster. We'll talk more about the importance of that later in the book, but the key is to learn to see yourself clearly and honestly but without the unnecessary baggage of harsh self-judgment. To that end, try this exercise out.

PRACTICE ATTRIBUTES AND CHALLENGES

Take out your notebook or a scrap of paper and draw a line down the middle, making two columns. In the left-hand column, write down all the things you believe to be your most positive attributes. On the right side of the paper, list the things about yourself that you'd most like to change. For example, on the left you might mention things like "kindness," "intelligence," or "I always try really hard," and on the right things like "lack of confidence," "I get discouraged easily," or "education." Whatever's on your list is just for you to see, so feel free to write it out as comprehensively as you'd like. Here's an example from my own journal:

YOU'VE ALREADY BEGUN

Completing the initial practices in this chapter indicates that your journey of self-discovery and reinvention has already begun. In Joseph Campbell's words, you've been "called to the adventure."³ The call to adventure is the first step along your journey—a journey in which each step is crucial toward the direction of your eventual transformation. That call means you're leaving the world you've known behind and entering the world to come—the realm of the unknown—where new challenges, trials, and opportunities await.

Along the way, don't be surprised when you stumble or come across unexpected detours. They're all part of the journey. There will also be times when you want to revert, go back to who you were before you started this crazy adventure, and cling to whatever felt safe and

Qualities Pros/Cons

Qualities to Admire

Kind
 Humble
 Intelligent
 Generous
 Down to earth
 Appreciation for nature
 Loves Animals
 Family Oriented
 Strong Values
 Open
 Happy
 Positive

RED FLAGS

Arrogance
 Ungrateful
 Rude
 Disrespectful
 Culturally insensitive
 Negative / Pess
 Pessimistic
 Judgemental
 Dishonesty
 Cruel

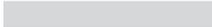
predictable to your former identity. That's okay; that's all part of it too.

No matter what happens, all you need to do is treat yourself with as much understanding and kindness as possible and keep moving forward. Before long, you'll find that the further you travel away from your former comfort zone, the harder it becomes to go back there, and you'll start to build more and more confidence with each obstacle you weather. And your journey will likely be way more enjoyable (and transformative) if you accept that struggle, pain, and loss are all part of the adventure.

My journey to becoming an Olympian involved more ups and downs than most people would guess, and after I retired, I stumbled repeatedly on my path to reinvention. I blindly trusted the wrong people in some of my earliest real estate dealings, for example, which resulted in incredible financial loss that I could have avoided had I done my due diligence. Still, it's hard to frame that mistake now as an abject failure because I learned a valuable lesson and became more resilient as a result. Without that experience, where would I be on my journey today? For that matter, without the hard-won lessons and remarkable resilience of our ancestors—thousands and thousands of generations of them—where would any of us be today?

I also want to acknowledge that it's totally natural to have doubts when you're on the path to reinvention. If you think about it, having doubt makes a lot of sense. Being in a new land means going without all the old landmarks you're accustomed to using, so it's normal to find yourself looking around from time to time, wondering where you are, and beating yourself up for getting so lost. When that happens, just keep putting one foot in front of the other and do your best to climb out of the swamp of negative self-talk. It's okay if you don't know where the road is headed sometimes (or even where your shoes are); if you focus on the journey itself and keep moving, you'll eventually arrive at your new identity. Like I said, you've already begun.

Whoever you are and wherever you've been, you set out on this journey with a set of attributes and gifts like nobody else. Your purpose in life is unique, too, and that alone makes you magic. I don't know what that means for you specifically or where you'll end up as a result, but this book is meant to help you get there.



PIVOT POINTS

- You aren't just the sum of things you do, and you're way more than the labels people assign to you.
- When it comes to reinventing yourself, be sure to rely on the aspects of yourself under your control—your attributes, interests, and hard-won life lessons.
- Harness the tools you already possess to thrive through the challenges coming your way.
- Struggle and instability are opportunities for curiosity, reflection, and growth.
- Accepting who you are in the present moment will help you develop into the person you want to become.
- Detours and doubts are all part of the journey.