

4 Simple Steps to Create
the Life You Want



Awaken a Better YOU

BJ THOMPSON

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WATERBROOK

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No book can replace the diagnostic expertise and medical advice of a trusted physician. Please be certain to consult with your doctor before making any decisions that affect your health, particularly if you suffer from any medical condition or have any symptom that may require treatment.

This book proposes a program of dietary and nutrition recommendations for the reader to follow. No book, however, can replace the diagnostic and medical expertise of a qualified physician. Please consult your doctor (and, if you are pregnant, your ob-gyn) before making sustained or extensive changes in your diet, particularly if you suffer from any diagnosed medical condition or have any symptoms that may require treatment.

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Foreword

As a twenty-year-old in college, I had a very powerful spiritual transformation. I made a commitment to no more drugs and no more alcohol abuse and decided to focus on a healthy lifestyle. But I didn't want to hide it. Instead, I was vocal around campus about changing my habits.

Yet two years passed, and I was in a slump. I had come from a broken home, was struggling with my faith, and didn't have any real friends. I was depressed and looking for my identity in a relationship. I was on an island, trying to figure out life.

One day, I wandered into the campus gym—thin and insecure, but trying to bulk up to impress the ladies. A young man, roughly my age, walked into the gym. He was vibrant, verbose, and muscular. He stared at me for a second, then walked over to me and said, “Aren't you Lecrae? Aren't you the guy who changed his life?”

I felt exposed. I thought I was hiding in the shadows and that no one remembered the promises I had made to myself and others. I thought maybe I could fade into obscurity, but this guy was shining a light on me. I acknowledged I was who he thought I was and

then tried to move past it.

This guy wouldn't let up though. He inquired about what I was up to and what my life looked like. At first, his intentionality disturbed me. His intrusion into my space made me dislike him. Yet that moment would change everything. I left that day challenged and convicted to be who I believed I was created to be.

The young man who approached me was BJ Thompson. He would later become one of the most pivotal people in my life. Even as a younger, less-informed man, BJ was still leaving an indelible mark on people. Through his passion and intentionality, I became a better me.

I count you, dear reader, as blessed because BJ has now accumulated years of wisdom, insight, and experience that he will pass on to you through this book. I've seen him weather storms of death, division, and despair. He's been to the farthest corners of the world and walked people off the edge of hopelessness. This book is the accumulation of those experiences, brought to you.

Many people will offer segmented approaches to health and choose only one part to address: Relational, emotional, mental, physical, spiritual. However, BJ has learned that those areas are integrated and should be treated as such. A better you does not mean simply a better mind, marriage, career, or parent. Rather, a better you means all those areas of your life will be influenced because you dealt with yourself as a whole.

Your life is a story and, like me, you may have had some pretty bad chapters. But, it's time to turn the page and write some stories of growth, transformation, and change. The journey begins now.

—Lecrae

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PART ONE

Start Here

I shouldn't even be here. By rights, I should be dead. I shouldn't be anything close to successful.

I was a premature baby, birthed to a seventeen-year-old mother and a father who left school in the tenth grade. I was raised in two zip codes that had the highest incarceration rates in Texas during the height of gang culture. John Singleton's movie *Boyz n the Hood* was more than a window into my world—it was my life.

I spent my early years as a latchkey kid, caring for my two younger siblings, convinced it was my job to keep us all alive. From a very young age, I recognized that though I loved my family, our life together was harder than it needed to be. I remember walking to the kitchen for cereal, turning the lights on, and watching as roaches scattered like a party had just ended. While we hoped there wasn't one in the box, if roaches did get in the cereal, we would act like they were raisins—if you know, you know. I didn't yet have the words to describe our poverty-stricken lifestyle, but it felt like something was working against us. Everything was hard.

SURVIVAL

When I was seven, my family went to a concert where a fight broke out and led to a shoot-out—the first of many in my young life. At eleven, I was jumped for the first time by a gang of eight kids. Later that year, I was in my first drive-by shooting. At sixteen, I experienced my first stampede riot. The week after graduat-

ing from a school with the most gang-affiliated students in South Dallas, I almost died in a shoot-out on the freeway.

Things weren't just dangerous on the streets, though. They could be just as serious at home. One day, I got a strange call asking for the whereabouts of one of my relatives, and I said, "He's in the back. Who is this?" Next thing I knew, there was a loud bang at the door and someone was screaming, "Open up, police!" I looked up as officers rushed into my house to pick up my relative for drugs or a related violation. I was speechless. Watching them carry away a close connection was unsettling and disturbing. If that was his future, was it also mine?

THE ODDS WERE STACKED AGAINST ME

Making it more difficult, I came of age in a nation that has a four-hundred-year history of creating racially biased systems and enslaving and degrading people of color. I experienced the generational fallout of this dynamic firsthand. Those of you raised in similar circumstances can join me in testifying. We were in no way well positioned to succeed.

Like me, maybe you grew up not knowing a single person who worked a white-collar job, mostly because the White people took those sorts of jobs with them in what sociologists term *white flight*.¹ Not a doctor, not a lawyer, not a business owner was left—unless you count the "street pharmacists" on the corners.

Growing up in a hardworking, blue-collar community alongside a neighborhood Crip gang, none of us could imagine anything different. At best, we would become rappers, sell drugs, or go to the league. If you were really talented, you'd get a job in a call center and make just enough to live in a loft downtown. That was the future laid out for me.

Yet here I am. A walking miracle. Beyond simply making it out

alive, I've become a global leader—an author, speaker, and life coach with more than twenty years of experience. As the founder and executive director of the growth and development organization Build a Better Us, I've coached tens of thousands of people—including professional athletes, entertainers, and global influencers—toward transformation. I also helped launch the 116 Movement, a faith movement that has influenced millions of people around the world.

How did I get here? How did I overcome the barriers before me so I could “make it”? My journey wasn't some huge leap. I'm no different from you. I feel just as much fear at the idea of change. I try new things and make mistakes and fail and have to try again. But I made a decision at a very early age that I would not simply go with the flow of my surroundings. Instead, I would take hold of my agency—my power to choose.

HARSH BEGINNINGS

Before the start of third grade, my parents had saved up enough money to buy us a spacious home in Pleasant Grove, and I was transferred to a new school. The only problem, I didn't know a single soul, and it seemed like trouble sought me out every chance it got. Once, I was chased home by a group of kids. Another time, I was walking home from school and suddenly felt a fist hit the back of my head. I was jumped by eight to ten boys for simply breathing the wrong way. And to top it off, my shoes were from Payless in the era when everyone wore Jordans and name-brand shoes. I was roasted almost every day. “That ain't Jordan. That's an overweight man leaning on a backboard.” I hated school.

I wanted to fit in and be a happy kid, but I found myself socially rejected and ducking bullies daily. They would see me in the hall, dart in my direction, and push me, mock me, or do something else

that shook me. I was a little, scrawny kid trying to survive, and in doing so, I was allowing my life to just happen.

THE MOMENT EVERYTHING CHANGED

On the last day of school, my classmates were all hanging over one another, crying. We were all transitioning from elementary school to middle school, and everything would change. Friend groups would be split up, sent to different places. They all loved one another so much. And there I was, watching them carry on while I sat at my desk by myself.

Nobody cared where I was going. Nobody cared what would happen to me. Nobody cared, period. I might as well have been invisible. I had been there for several years. I ate lunch and played games with these kids. I had suffered abuse from them. Hadn't I done enough to be missed? Not even one person was sad I was leaving? That's when it dawned on me. Letting life just happen, letting it all wash over me, had led to full rejection. Sitting there alone, my face flooded in tears, I felt the ground shift beneath my feet.

I would never make this mistake again. Never again would I let life just happen. From that moment on, I would dictate how my life would go. I would define my own identity and become the social influencer in my environment. I would be a leader, not a follower.

In that moment of desperation, I took the first baby steps on my journey toward transformation. Over the course of my life, I would experience transforming faith, restored relationships, emotional healing, trauma recovery—in short, total transformation. It wasn't a huge leap but a series of smaller steps that led to progress. And it all began from a place of desperation.

Perhaps you can relate. You're hunting for growth, hungry for

change. In order to take your first steps, you'll have to make a choice like sixth-grade me did. From the depths of desperation, you must come to a decision. You couldn't control where you started, but you can choose where you go. You can learn how to grow in mind, body, and spirit—learn how to foster healthy relationships that propel you instead of holding you back. Your past does not have to dictate your future. It all starts with deciding that you want to change and that you won't allow anything to hold you back—not even you.

**It all starts with
deciding that you want to
change.**



MANUAL MODE

Reject the idea that a great God made you to be mediocre. You have been made with purpose. Growing your potential into your purpose is not magical, though. My transformation into a better me didn't happen overnight, and yours won't either. It will be a progression. No one can become a better version of themselves out of nowhere. There is no autopilot function that will result in awakening a better you. Instead, you will have to step into the sometimes-uncomfortable process of knowing who you are.

That means being honest about your entire story—good, bad, and ugly—not simply the chapter of life that you are most proud of. Read that again. Unfortunately, some people try to skip a rung in that ladder. Bypassing self-reflection and personal development, they try to take the helm before they've studied how to sail a boat. The next thing they know, they've run onto the rocks and are taking on water. They're sinking fast and feel they have no choice but to abandon ship. Don't let that happen to you. Before you can become a better version of yourself, you must discover and own who

you are and appreciate the richness and value in your entire story. You must mine the depths of who God has truly created you to be. To do so, let's go back to the basics.

YOU ARE DEEPLY LOVED

Every thought in this book—and the basis of who you are—is undergirded by one basic principle: You are a mess—yet deeply loved by God. Reread that last statement. You are a mess—yet deeply loved by God. No amount of personal development will make you any more worthy than God already finds you. You're already loved. Just as you are.

Hear me. The ultimate goal of this book is not to change who you are. God has already empowered you with everything you need to become the best version of yourself. Instead, I aim to provide the resources by which you

**You are a mess—
yet deeply loved by God.**



can unlock greater mental, spiritual, relational, and emotional health by moving through four growth points: from desperation to information to application to

transformation. In doing so, you can achieve the sort of balanced, holistic health—involving mind, body, and spirit—that can awaken the better you that God intends you to be.

While I wrote this book from a Judeo-Christian worldview, the principles will work for anyone when properly applied. In fact, these principles have already been proven to work for tens of thousands of real people and influenced millions. Like them, you don't have to wait any longer to find the life you want. The only person you're waiting on is you.

HOW TO USE THE TOOLS

While this book can be read straight through from the first page to the last, your current needs may draw you to one section or another. Part one (chapters 1–4) will be the foundation of your transformation. In it, you’ll learn how to chart a path toward becoming exactly who your Creator made you to be, with all the accompanying risks and rewards. But after reading part one, you may decide to skip around in part two (chapters 5–8). Read the chapters in this section in any order you like. If your mental health is of primary concern, chapter 5 might be the next logical step for you. If your physical health is currently in shambles, you may want to skip straight from part one to chapter 6. If your relationships are a mess, you might head to chapter 7. If you’re underwater spiritually, chapter 8 might be the one drawing you next. Whatever order you read them in, be sure to circle back and read them all. The essence of holistic health is that we grow in all areas of our lives—body, mind, and spirit. Given your current situation, one chapter may feel more important than the others, but you need them all.

At the end of each chapter, you will see three sections: “Talk It Out,” “Work It Out,” and “Write It Out.” These are best approached after you’ve read and processed each chapter in full. “Talk It Out” questions are for you to process within trusted community. While some questions must be pondered in solitude before they’re addressed publicly, no one learns and grows well in isolation. We are all better together. In the “Work It Out” sections, take notes and work through key takeaways that will help you apply what you’re learning to your particular life and situation. In “Write It Out,” respond to the prompt as honestly as you can. This section will help you process where you are and give you space to brainstorm where to go.

As mentioned before, I wrote this book from a Judeo-Christian

worldview. That means I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The teachings of the Scriptures will be foundational to everything we will discuss in this book. As one connected to the ancient roots of the Christian faith and connected more to the global church than to the small American subset of Christianity, I prefer to use Hebrew names for Jesus, names like *Yeshua* and *Adonai*. I hope this won't be a distraction to anyone but instead a reminder of the faithfulness of these teachings. As we step forward together, know that we are walking an ancient path that has been trodden by generations of followers who have taken similar steps of faith across the world.

EVERY LITTLE STEP YOU TAKE

If you're feeling overwhelmed, here's some good news: You don't need to do it all right now. If a desperate situation has led you to seek change, you're already on the right track. Once you start applying what you're learning, then you're on the road to transformation—and transformation doesn't have to happen all at once.

While you don't need all the answers, all the solutions, or every little thing in place before you start making changes, it's helpful to know a few stages that you'll face on your journey:

- **Desire.** A journey toward better health has to be something you want for yourself, not something others have pressured, shamed, or forced you into. The desire starts with you.
- **Decision.** Desire alone does nothing. Your desire for transformation must lead you to exercise your agency by making a specific *decision* to change your *direction*.
- **Discomfort.** I'm going to be honest with you. Transformation, though necessary, is never easy. Even contemplating making

changes may stretch you beyond your comfort zone. If you anticipate this discomfort and prepare yourself to face it as a natural part of the process, however, it will hold less sway over you when it comes.

- **Determination.** Once you decide to change, your subconscious will immediately go to work trying to sabotage you. If your subconscious is anything like mine, it does this thing where it tries to convince you that you're going to die. You'll hear this dynamic play out in the way people who are trying to change how they eat talk about their favorite foods. "Oh," they'll say, "I couldn't live without bacon," or, "A life without butter just isn't worth living." Sometimes they're joking, but there's a serious undercurrent beneath the laughter. Your subconscious, desiring ease and comfort, wants you to believe that positive changes will actually kill you. In fact, the opposite is true. You'll need determination to override your body and brain's panicked overreactions and press forward toward transformation.
- **Drive.** Wherever you are along this scale—whether you're sensing a desire to change, making the decision to seek transformation, feeling discomfort, or seeking to press forward with determination—one thing that will keep you grounded is your motivation, your "why." Why are you doing this? What is your purpose for awakening a better you? Whenever you feel tempted to quit, reconnecting with your purpose will fill you with fresh motivation.

LEAVING THE MATRIX

Like Morpheus did with Neo, I stand in front of you now, holding out a blue pill and a red pill. If you fail to commit to your own transformation, you'll be choosing the blue pill—a seemingly safe but ultimately limiting choice that leads to a monotonous life of

uninformed sameness. This may feel like a safe bet, but as Neo discovered, the blue pill will never lead to a full life.

Your other option is to choose the red pill. Leave the Matrix. Commit to your transformation, open yourself to a new reality, and see how drastically your vision of the world—and yourself—can change.



TALK IT OUT

1. Deciding to seek transformation is a key moment. What prompted your decision?
2. Seeking transformation can be a long and complicated process. What will keep you motivated along the way?

WORK IT OUT

What does it mean for you to know that you are a mess and yet deeply loved by God?

Rank from 1 to 5 the areas of your life you wish to transform, with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important. Remember, this is a question of urgency based on your current needs. While one area might feel like a higher priority right now,

becoming the person God created you to be means you will grow in each area over time.

- ___ mental and emotional health
- ___ physical health
- ___ relational health
- ___ spiritual health

WRITE IT OUT

Spend five minutes freewriting about what might be holding you back from seeking transformation.
