Getting Unstuck Introduction

In 1995, Betsy Sloan was 35 years-old and had worked her way into "the perfect job." As a CPA in a large California insurance company, she had a great salary, stock options, a "fabulous boss," and hours that were the envy of her friends.

"And I was miserable," she says today. She leans comfortably into the back of a chair, her dark eyes sharply focused behind her stylish, orange-framed glasses. "The art of the deal, the big transaction—that never did it for me. What was worse, I could project 30 years into the future and know exactly what I’d be doing every quarter—making SEC filings, doing internal reporting for the CFO. It was mind-numbing."

"I felt totally stuck," she adds. "I made too much money to quit, but I hated not being able to go do what I really wanted." Sloan had never been encouraged to "do what she really wanted." Her middle-class, suburban family had encouraged her to develop strong skills and then find a job that would set her up for life. Always good at pleasing teachers, parents, and professors, she’d earned a 4.0 average in high school, won a full scholarship to college, excelled in accounting, and landed a job in a "Big Eight" CPA firm. After six years, she moved to the dream job at the insurance company.

Then, one day, she decided she couldn't do it anymore. She quit and left the office—and its financial security—the very same day. Sloan moved in with her parents and started taking classes at the local community college. One of those classes was Creative Writing. "I started writing about what I loved," she recalls. "I realized that I had been happiest in my life when I was in school. I loved that environment. Actually, I'd always secretly wanted to be a teacher. So I took the subject-matter proficiency classes to be a math teacher, and then I applied to graduate school for a master's in education."

By the time she turned 38, Sloan was teaching ninth-grade algebra and pre-calculus honors at a Seattle public high school. She had gone from making $106,000 a year to making $34,000. And she was loving every minute of it.

All of us, like Becky, can suddenly find ourselves stuck and miserable. These feelings might come at predictable moments: the loss of a job; the end of a romance; the departure of a child and the sudden yawning of an empty nest; or the death of someone who has long helped us feel recognized, loved, and appreciated. But they might also come at unpredictable moments: when the job of a lifetime somehow loses its juice; when we ache for intimacy but can't seem to find the right partner; when we find ourselves longing to renew a sense of life's adventure.

We find ourselves at an impasse, and we suffer. At work we feel stale or unchallenged—or fret that we are not progressing to a more rewarding role. In our personal lives we feel agitated, deflated, or downright bored. We are desperate to discover a meaningful way to contribute at work, to find a reinvigorated role in our families, and to dive back into the current of our own lives. We sense that life is flowing all around us, but we sit like a boulder in a river, at a loss about how to be swept back in and transformed by the river's great energy.

We know well the experience of being carried off by this energy, when we experience the surge of life, when our ideas and the will to act on them come from a well deeper than our own small selves. We feel connected; things get done; we sense something exciting is at hand. We are, as the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would say, "in the flow."
When we are at an impasse, we often cannot even sense this flow—or how close to it we may be. We cannot see how close we are to a dynamic dislodging that would place us back into the energy of the moving current. When we are feeling stuck, we forget that the next thing that will wake us up and energize us deeply is already in motion, upstream, moving toward our awareness. When we have run aground, we sometimes fail to realize that this is a necessary crisis, without which we cannot grow, change and—eventually—live more fully in a larger world.

Impasse and Vision
This is a book about how impasse, like the Greek god Hermes, often appears in our lives as a herald, to let us know that we must change.

But this book is also about vision. It is about how we do see our way, again and again, from impasse to renewed meaning—at work, at home, with colleagues, and with family, and how we find a renewed sense of self—with the aspects of our lives that bring both passion and satisfaction.

Vision as it is used here is not merely a plan for the future; vision is a renewed sense of purpose in our day-to-day work. It entails stopping, reflecting, imagining, and then acting—stepping anew into the creative flow. It requires building, over time, a clearer and more immediate sense of the patterns of activities, people and environments that are most likely to be rewarding. Vision allows us to tap into what is already moving within us at a deeper level, already asking for fuller expression. With vision, we are better able to recognize what resources, behavior changes, and relationships we will need in order to reconnect with what is most important to us.

When we have a sense of vision, we feel more connected to the world, more alive. The gap between our thought and action, our internal world and external world, vanishes and we more fully occupy our "self." Our everyday choices feed off our vision the way a lantern flame feeds off kerosene.

Just as important as vision is re-vision, for the process of seeing anew happens time and again throughout our lives. (And it happens for each of us in different ways.) Sometimes a sense of vision leads to a relatively minor decision, as when we plan carefully for an important event or decide to give new priority to certain tasks. At other times, vision leads us to major change, as when we marry or pursue a radically new career path. There are times of great epiphanies, times when our awareness opens and we gain insight into our lives—about what big things we want and which big things we must do. And then there are times when a slight shift can make a dramatic difference in how we feel about something smaller—the arc of our workday, perhaps, or our time with our children.

The Cycle of Impasse
Getting stuck involves a slightly different process for every one of us. But there is a predictable "cycle of impasse" we all must go through to make real change, and there is a pattern to the way we can move toward clarity and a renewed sense of vision. The impasse cycle—in which we move from feeling deeply stuck to gradually imagining a new place in life and taking the leap to get there—has six predictable phases.

In the first phase the crisis develops. Something in the way we order life and move through it is no longer working. Crisis may arrive with a painful event: a serious illness, the death of a parent, or a financial setback. It may arrive in the subtle symptoms of unrest, anxiety, or boredom. Our usual sense of certainty disappears. We begin to see that something is missing. We long for change.
The second phase involves deepening of the crisis. Our attempts to avoid, rationalize, and evade have not worked. Things are getting worse. Even more difficult, this crisis is starting to feel familiar. It brings difficult feelings from the past. "I thought I was done with all of that," we say; but the feelings of resentment or inadequacy or shame continue. If we do not attempt to rationalize or evade the reality of the crisis, we instead realize that we cannot continue business as usual. Our way of doing things, our comfortable routines and poses, are no longer working and we know it. We had a "model" for the way life works, but the crisis has shown it to be inadequate.

In phase three that old model breaks up. In this phase we hit bottom, we drop our defenses, and we open up. We are in trouble and we know it. Our old ways are not working, and we do not yet have any new ways. Our wheels are deep in the mud; we get out of the car, stand there, and begin to listen to the sounds of the night around us. What can we possibly do?

This coming to a complete halt, this admission that we are beyond our resources, this opening up, is the very condition that makes phase four possible. Now we can receive not only new information, but a new type of information. This information comes in the form not of fantasy, but of real imagination: we are able to receive coded images of what is missing in our lives, we notice signs pointing to what needs to happen next. The work to be done at this phase is the work of disciplined imagination, which allows our understanding to shift. We find ourselves using a mode of thinking that is less linear and more metaphorical. We recognize new relationships between forces and ideas that previously seemed in opposition. Our perspective becomes less certain and dogmatic, more pliable and full of possibilities. Something new is on the horizon, and we begin to catch sight of it.

As we begin to emerge from the crisis, we take stock of the experience itself and how it has affected us. We realize that we have learned something. The pain of the impasse experience has taught us, in an immediate way, what counts and what doesn't. We learn something vital about what we need and what we want, and about what we are willing to give up to get these things. We may be shaken, but at the same time our feet seem a little more firmly planted in the earth. Phase five marks an opportunity for a deeper reflection on what our choices have shown us about who we are. A deeper pattern of self becomes clearer with each journey through the impasse cycle. If we have been doing the hard work that impasse brings, we know ourselves better and better as we age. Our mental model of the world and our place in it shifts, and we acquire a surer appreciation of our own unique identity. We gain a clearer sense of what works for us and what doesn't. And we develop better instincts—and confidence—about how to home in on the right path, about how to grow and how to contribute to the lives around us. We are better able to know the types of work, the people, and the environments that will fulfill us the most.

But our lives do not change without action. The impasse crisis has its resolution in a decision to make specific choices that change our day-to-day reality. The final, sixth phase of the impasse cycle may be a decision to confront a co-worker, to begin work on a book, to go to graduate school, to end a relationship, or to move to the country. The decision might also be as simple as a change in a daily schedule or a commitment to balancing bank accounts monthly. Knowing what the action needs to be, and actually performing it, is what seals the cycle of learning and change and allows us to move forward.

If we do this work well, moving through each of the six phases with all of the honesty and energy we can muster, we have the opportunity to break through previous
limitations that we had unconsciously placed on ourselves. We can exceed previous notions of what we might do with what we have been given. Impasses will come again, for crisis is the crucible for the work of making a larger self. But the next time around we will meet it with all that we have gained from previous work. The next cycle will take place at a higher level of integration, as our life experience widens and we live with a self that is more tolerant, less self-critical, and more ready to accept aspects of our own personhood that had been either unrecognized or exiled.

**Getting Unstuck: The Cycle of Impasse and Vision**

**Missed Opportunities: Staying Stuck**
Crisis and impasse can bring another response if we are not ready for the work that it demands of us. The shock of the experience can overwhelm us. The old issues and memories evoked can seem just too painful, so we might suppress them or disassociate from them before they even become conscious. There are times when we choose, with or without full awareness, to retreat. Or to evade. "Just let me get through this so I can get back to what I was doing," we might say to ourselves, or "I know this needs my attention, but I just can't face it right now." This response is not a sign of moral weakness. Sometimes what life presents is just too much. When we don't do the work of the impasse cycle, the process becomes one of defensive evasion. It may get us past the immediate circumstances of the crisis, but resolving the underlying issue beneath the crisis, and going through change, are merely postponed. There is no integration of the crisis experience.
Sometimes, staying stuck seems like the most natural way of moving forward. It allows us to hew the familiar, to remain “who we are”—or who we think we must be. But this book presents another option. It is a guide through the impasse and vision process, with these distinct phases:

- The arrival of the crisis and impasse.
- Its deepening and the attendant reemergence of unresolved issues.
- The dropping of old assumptions and the opening up to new information.
- The shift to a new way of understanding our situation.
- The greater recognition of deep patterns of our personality.
- The decision to take concrete action.

This is the process that leads to a larger sense of the world and our place in it.

**My Perspective**

My understanding of what we experience when we are stuck, and how we can get ourselves unstuck, has evolved out of more than thirty years of work as a social scientist, psychotherapist, and career counselor. I have worked at Harvard Business School and for a variety of organizations, from small high-tech startups to Fortune 500 corporations. I have been employed by the organizations themselves, but also by individual executives during times of career transition. People sometimes come to see me when they have been let go, or told that termination is imminent. At other times, people may seek my counsel because they lack a sense of accomplishment in an otherwise stable and well-paid job. People often come to me seeking work that is more rewarding. Whether consciously or not, they all come looking for meaning. As a result, I have focused much of my research on the “meaning of meaning”—on how individuals find a path to life situations that are satisfying and sustainable.

I am also a teacher of other counselors and mentors. At Harvard, I direct a counseling and coaching program and I train a group of more than 30 career coaches. Most of these coaches have worked in business, and most of them are graduates of Harvard.
In addition to my work on the Harvard Business School faculty, I direct a career development program designed to help MBA students develop a unique vision of their career. The vast majority of MBA students, at Harvard and elsewhere, do not have a clear idea of what they want to do with their lives at the time they first set foot on campus. On the contrary, enrolling in an MBA program is often done as a gesture toward an as yet undefined future. These students, during a short two years in school, must discover how they are different from every other member of the class and how that will help them make the most of the career ahead.

I approach my work both with business executives and MBA students with two different but complementary perspectives. First, I am researcher using large databases and sophisticated quantitative analyses to study the way in which personality structure is related to job choice and career satisfaction. My databases now have extensive psychological testing information on more 125,000 business professionals and MBA students. This research has led to a number of theoretical models and psychological tests that I use in my teaching, mentoring, and counseling.

But I am not just a social scientist. I am also a psychotherapist. My second perspective, then, is that of mentor for the many students and clients that have worked with me personally when they have been facing their own crisis and impasse. It is from the perch in my counseling office that I have learned the most about how people come to a vision of what they want their lives to be. And I have learned about the way they begin to make the bold choices to make that vision real.

**How to Use This Book**
This book, of course, is neither about these business executives, these students, or these particular clients. It is about you and the work you must do, many times in the course of your life, to move closer to more meaningful work and a more meaningful life.

You will be using the vision-building exercises that I use in my classes at Harvard and in my workshops with executives and career coaches all over the world. Specifically, you will:
- Learn how to recognize the state of psychological impasse and use it as the starting point for real change in the way you make life and work choices;
- Participate in exercises that *activate, evoke, and deepen* images that will shape your new life vision;
- Learn how to recognize enduring *patterns of meaning* that point to the activities, rewards, types of people, work cultures, and communities that are most likely to feed you;
- Learn how the creative work you do at times of impasse can enable you to *take action* and make life choices that will make your vision a daily reality.

I will place strong emphasis on career and work crises, but impasse does not differentiate between the work life and the personal life. My method is relevant for anyone who has come to the realization that something must change—in a job description, in working habits, in a marriage, in a friendship, or in an overly frenetic and frustrating way of living. Even though you have picked up this book, your reasons for doing so may not yet be fully formed or understood. That is a good place to begin, with a vague sense of possibility that has the chance to emerge as you move deeper into the way of working that this book presents.

A brief note on the theoretical underpinnings of this material: This book does not offer new developmental theory, though it calls repeatedly on theory to help us look deeper
into what is actually going on during a time of impasse. To this end, it will use both the theory and models that have emerged from my own research and from the work of some of the most prominent developmental psychologists of the past century. If you are interested in the potent ideas of these researchers and psychotherapists, you will find references in the chapter notes found in Appendix TK. In Appendix TK is an annotated bibliography, should you want to probe further the work of these important thinkers.

More important than some schema of adult development, however, is the actual experience of working through psychological impasse. Each phase of the impasse cycle and vision process has its own mood and its own challenges. Each requires its own response. This is not about speed-reading or quick course corrections. There will be times to be still and listen, even when you want to run. There will be times to let your sensibilities sink deeper until you reach a bottom that can support a new movement upwards. There will times to be busy, to focus and work as if your life depended on it. It is important to sense the mood, gauge the challenge, and calibrate the response appropriate for each phase.

The book is designed as a journey through these phases; you will move through a sequence of meditations, readings, and exercises designed to take you through the full impasse cycle and into a richer vision of your work and life. The best way to get unstuck is to take your time with the book, and to work through each exercise as it appears in the text. Of course, you may want to do some of them more than once during this journey—and again and again in the future when the feeling of impasse returns.

**Becky's Vision**

"I've always liked math, but it's sharing the ideas with students that gets me out of bed in the morning," says Becky Sloan, almost breathing a sigh of relief as she talks about her former career as a CPA and her current life as a teacher. "I care more about people than the bottom line. And I really care about ninth-graders: you get to fall in love with them—and then have them for three more years."

As a high-school teacher, Sloan has found the freedom to be who she really is. "As a CPA in a Big Eight firm in the '80s," she says, "I couldn't wear pants. I couldn't even wear a dress. It had to be a suit. In the insurance firm in the 90's maybe I could wear a pants suit." Her work attire today is a brown button-down blouse and khaki trousers, and her auburn hair falls to her shoulders in graceful waves. But during her nine years as a teacher she's gone from her natural color to dyed to bleached blonde—and back to auburn.

"Students are very accepting," she says. "All they care about is how much homework I give them. And all the administration cares about is whether I'm teaching the curriculum."

"What I care about is that high schoolers get my jokes," she adds, laughing. "I'm shy, but put me in front of a class and I'm a ham." Quickly settling into a more reflective tone she adds, "My charge is much more that developing good math students." She has found that the great meaning in her work comes from counseling and mentoring her students, whether leading a discussion after one student died in a car accident, or inviting kids into her classroom at lunchtime. "We usually have four games of Scrabble going, kids hanging out over Scrabble and talking."

For those of us who, like Betsy, take the time to let ourselves fully experience impasse, letting the crisis deepen, listening to that clear inner voice, and taking action
to make change, life will prove more and challenging than our younger selves had imagined, and it will, at the same time feel more familiar and authentic.

I wrote this book to guide you through the "necessary crisis" of growth that each experience at impasse brings. It is my hope that what I have learned about how this process actually takes place will draw you deeper into your own vision for what needs to come next in life and deeper, as well, into your ability to recognize and help those around you who find themselves at their own frontier.