

A Strong Life Lived***What does a strong life actually look like?***

We all live in suspense, from day to day, from hour to hour; in other words, we are the hero of our own story.

—Mary McCarthy (1912–1989), American writer

No matter how strong you are feeling right now—you might be in your strengths zone or completely lost—your challenge is straightforward: how can you design your life so that, week by week, it strengthens you? Faced with a world that expects so much of you, but that is blind to who you are and what you really need, how can you be true to yourself? How can you live the life you were supposed to live?

Look around you—you probably have already—and you will find some wonderfully helpful advice, everything from time management to defining personal boundaries, all the way to spiritual advice about building a life of faith.

Though a lot of this advice is excellent, I have been looking for something different. What, if anything, do women who are both happy and successful have in common? Not that they will have all made the same choices in life—they clearly haven't—but they might have all had a similar method to making their choices, whatever they turned out to be.

Do they all have the same *approach*?

I believe they do. This approach explains not only why they make the choices they do, but also why these choices carry strength and power, rather than guilt and regret. This approach is a *practice*, not a destination; and as with any practice, if you stop doing it, you won't net the outcomes you want. But when you stick at it, and learn to get good at it, this strong-life practice will help you make the right choices in virtually every aspect and stage of your life. I realize that's quite a lot to ask of one practice, but read on and you'll see that this strong-life practice can indeed become your master lever: pull it, and everything in your life will work better.

It can benefit both men and women, but since, at its core, it is a practice that shows you how to *choose*, and since women have many more choices to make than men, it will benefit women most.

In this next section, you will see what this practice looks like and, hopefully, learn how to incorporate it into your own life.

To introduce it to you, I'll ask you to put on your researcher's hat for a few minutes. Rather than simply asking you to take the Strong Life test, and describing in bald terms what this strong-life practice entails, let me tell you the story of two women. If you really want to understand what it takes to live a happy and fulfilling life, it's worth getting to know them. You see, they are similar in so many ways, these two—both were born and raised in the Midwest, both got college degrees, both are healthy and have a wide circle of friends, both are smart, articulate, funny, both are married, and both have two kids, a boy and a girl. But, at the time we meet them, they feel completely differently about their lives.

You may recall Anna Carson in the last chapter. She's the Hollywood agent.

When you think of her, don't imagine a slick, Gucci-clad, deal-making shark. Instead picture a tall redhead, quick to smile, with a hearty laugh, a woman who doesn't necessarily demand your attention when she walks into a room, but who reveals her strength and self-assurance in each subsequent meeting. She's really competent, and she knows it. Yet not in an arrogant way. Her manner is so open, so candid, so optimistic, she leaves you feeling that she would be a great best friend. You know you would trust her with your career, and more. And as you chat with her, listening to her self-deprecating stories of motherhood and movie-land, you can't help it, the clichéd question pops into your head, *How does she do it?*

Meeting Charlie prompts a very different question: what can I possibly do to help her? She's about five years older than Anna and somehow she's slid into a life that doesn't fit her at all, a life where she feels a toxic combination of panicked, incompetent, and, in the end, numb:

She explains, "I'm working as the office manager for my husband's company. He felt I was the only one he could really trust, and besides it would give me the chance to be there with the kids after they came home from school, so I took the job. But it's killing me. I feel most unhappy knowing that I am disappointing the people who mean the most to me. When I take a personal inventory, I realize I traded my professional life for a better personal life and now my personal life is suffering too. I'm completely stuck. I know I need to leave this job, but I don't know how to quit my company without quitting my marriage."

You could theorize till you're blue in the face about what it takes to live a strong life, but one way to think about it is to ask yourself, "What's the difference between

Anna's actions and Charlie's? Both started off in roughly the same situation, yet one ended up motivated and fulfilled, while the other (at the time I met her) recoils at the thought of waking up tomorrow and going to work. What can account for this difference?

In looking at both women, you might say that the wild card in their game of life was good fortune—Anna had it; Charlie didn't—and you might be right. Luck certainly played some role in how their lives turned out, as it did, does, and will in yours.

Or you might say that one chose the “right” career, and the other didn't. Or that one chose to stay in the Midwest while the other moved to L.A. Or you might land on some other explanation, some other variable. And in each case, you might be right.

What I must tell you, though, is that I interviewed a lot of women who were happy and successful, and a lot who, at the time, were less so, and that Anna and Charlie best capture the difference between the two groups. Look closely at the choices each made and how they made them, and you'll see that Anna took a distinct approach to her life, different from Charlie's, and this approach—more than any other variable—explains why she made the choices she did, and why these choices strengthened her.

Charlie's not to blame for her choices—she is a driven, well-intended woman trying to do her best in a world that doesn't know her. Nor am I saying that Anna followed this approach all the time—as you'll see, there were long stretches of her life where she neglected it. What I am saying is that whenever—and there were multiple times—Anna needed to get her life on track, it was this approach, this practice, that did it for her, and that when Charlie's life went wrong, it was a flawed approach that led her astray.

Charlie

Charlie had always had a passion for developing teenagers, in particular kids who were struggling. So after graduating with a degree in English, she worked to get the qualifications necessary to become a therapeutic recreation specialist, someone who used outdoor activities and games to rehabilitate juvenile sex offenders.

With her qualifications in hand, she made the leap to the world of recreational rehab. And for a while she found it quite rewarding. Yes, the kids could be mentally exhausting, but she was energized by the thought that she was bringing comfort and aid to those whom society had cast aside.

Two questions nagged at her, though. First, she wasn't making very much money. She had a nice house, but it was in a questionable part of town, the kind of neighborhood where everything looks fine on the surface but you can't let your kids play in the front yard. She was a single mom by this point, so, financially, she was feeling a little anxious.

Also, aspects of the recreational therapy job were starting to get to her. One of the boys she was working closely with had recently committed suicide and another had tried to stab her with a pen. There were days when the job was just a little too intense.

She was sizing up her options when she met Peter. He ran a small engineering consulting organization in their town, and the moment they met, they knew their relationship had the potential for something special. They were both outdoorsy and loved sailing and camping. On any Friday night Peter would turn to Charlie and say, "Let's go," and in forty five minutes, without a word needed between them, they would pack up everything and be ready to head out for a weekend trip. Both of them knew how rare it was to find a partner with whom they were so completely in sync.

Peter loved how clear and systematic a thinker Charlie was. “Come work with me,” he said. “Come help me organize our workflow. Get our systems up and running. I’ve got no one to turn to, no one I can rely on.”

“Besides,” he went on, half joking. “It’ll be a great litmus test for our relationship.”

No pressure there, Charlie thought. But, then again, she did love Peter, and she was intrigued by designing programs and systems—when she wasn’t camping or sailing she could be found trawling the Barnes and Noble stacks looking for the latest tome on systems integration. (It sounds odd, I know, but trust me: for Charlie there’s nothing quite like reading a good systems integration book to pass the time.) Sure, it was an office environment and she’d never worked in one of those, but it would offer her more flexibility, the chance to spend more time with her kids, to pick them up from school, and to be there when they played in the front yard. *Maybe things will work out with Peter*, she thought, *and we’ll move in with him, out of this part of town, and everything will be great.*

Initially, things did work out according to Charlie’s plan. She and Peter were married a year later, they did move to a safer part of town, and at work she proved her value by redesigning the entire office workflow. With her ability to gain a thirty-thousand-foot perspective on the company’s operations, she was able to design a system where everyone—employees, clients, Peter himself—could track the status of any project and the clients were automatically matched up with the right employees whenever they called with questions or concerns.

But then Peter asked her to come in and run the systems she had built. Be the

office manager. Do the accounting. Pay the taxes. Handle the invoicing and the collections. Be his right hand.

And gradually things started to fall apart.

This was her description of her life when I first met her: “I take no pleasure in a reconciled bank account; in fact, I dread the financial responsibilities that have become mine and mine alone. I hate the repetition of the day-to-day tasks. I don’t like being interrupted by one area of my job when my head is deep into another area. I tend to have a loud voice (camp counselor, recreation leader voice), and I don’t have good phone etiquette, and when you add to that the fact that my office is open to everyone else and I am constantly on the phone dealing with sensitive financial or personnel issues, you have a terrible work environment. I feel crushed whenever I receive a comment about the appearance of my desk, speaking too loud and not being discreet with financial information, or getting nothing more done than the day-to-day, never doing anything to grow the business.”

She made countless plans to talk with Peter about her growing unhappiness, but she couldn’t find the right words or the right way to frame the conversation. She knew he didn’t feel comfortable letting anyone else see the financials of the business, and she took his trust very seriously. And of course, she was *capable* of balancing a checkbook and paying the invoices. But how would she even broach the subject? “Honey, I love you and I know you need me to do this, and I know, do I ever, how overwhelmed you are, but I just don’t like paying these invoices. I just don’t like keeping my desk organized. I just don’t like opening all these envelopes.”

It sounded ridiculous, pathetic even. And “pathetic” she wasn’t. Charlie had

always seen herself as a positive, confident, self-reliant person. She had always taken care of her family. She didn't need help or a handout from anybody. She was strong, she could cope, she was fine, thank you very much. She wasn't about to whine to her husband about how her job was "getting her down," particularly not with him working so hard right by her side. "If I change my attitude," she said to herself, "look on the bright side, organize myself a little better, I can make it through this trying time and get to the other side."

And yet today, at this moment right now, she knows, with as much certainty as she knows anything, "I should not be doing this job."

She admits that she tried to dismiss this certainty, banish it to a small, dark corner of her mind and cover it up with happy, grateful thoughts. But it refused to stay hidden. It kept pushing itself to the forefront of her mind, insisting "I should not be doing this job. I must get out this situation. I must talk to Peter."

But she didn't. The conversation kept getting delayed. There was never a good time or a good way that she could see to talk about it. And then a horrible event occurred—her daughter's best friend committed suicide—and Charlie was consumed with making sure her daughter and her schoolmates were grieving in a way that was healthy, not self-punishing. Her daughter's friend had called her the night before the suicide, but her daughter hadn't called back. When she did return the call the next morning, her friend was already dead. Charlie found herself spending many hours a week at school sitting with her daughter and her friends, counseling them, helping them to grapple with the anger and the confusion.

This felt authentic to Charlie—after all, she was a therapist for troubled teenagers.

What else was she supposed to do now that her daughter and her schoolmates were suffering? But it meant that *her* life, and the conversation with Peter, got pushed even further down the list of must-dos. Down and down it went. Months passed during which her panicky little fears swelled into full overwhelm, then dulled into numbness, and she slowly emptied herself out, until one day, Charlie broke. Stopped. Crumpled. Couldn't put her key in the car door and drive to work.

She checked herself into hospital and that, for a while, was that.

Charlie is an extreme example, but you've probably seen friends get themselves into similar situations. They don't do anything wrong—at least not on the surface. More often than not, they are trying to do the *right* thing—support their husband, earn more money, be there for the kids. All of these are noble intentions, and they are certainly what drove Charlie. And, before things started to go wrong, it would have been a bold confidante who would have told her to ignore these noble intentions and do something else.

Yet we now know that Charlie followed through on all these intentions and still wound up living the opposite of a strong life—no success, no instinctive anticipation, no growth, and very few needs fulfilled.

There must have been a better way, something she could have done before she started down the wrong path. And if not, surely she could have done something to stop the sinking and resuscitate her life.

What would you have told her to do? Just gut it up and have the conversation? Easy to say, but very hard to do when that conversation is fraught with other, conflicting emotions, such as “I've got to be there for my husband.” “I've got to do the right thing

for my kids.” What she needed was a way to fulfill her obligations as a wife and mother and, at the same time, honor her own strengths and passions. She needed a new approach to seeing her life and making her choices. She needed a new practice.

Anna

Anna’s life and the choices she made offer clues to what would have helped Charlie. As you read her story, don’t imagine that Anna has led a picture-perfect life, a life that you or Charlie or anyone else should copy. As I said before, it’s been a regular sort of life, with confused beginnings, long stretches of “What I am doing with my life?” and the occasional “Oh no, what have done!” The lesson from Anna’s life is not that she never felt confused or lost or weak; instead, the lesson lies in how she made her choices whenever these feelings came upon her. Her intentions were as noble as Charlie’s were, but her approach was different, and so her choices were different, and so her life was different.

Anna Carson didn’t grow up under the shadow of the Hollywood sign but on a farm in Iowa. Her dad was a farmer, and her childhood address was the kind of thing you make up when you’re making up stories about farmers: “The Carson Farm, Rural Route 1, Iowa City, Iowa.”

Anna was the fourth child out of six, the girl in the middle, and her family was close and tight-knit. So when she was ready to go to college, she chose the University of Iowa. It was home.

And she did well; she’s always been a hard worker. She graduated with a degree in business administration, which she used to get a job as a district supervisor for a high-

end grocery chain. That seemed the right thing to do at the time. It gave her a car, a steady income, a place to live close to her family, and a future that was already mapping itself out.

But then something happened, an event that became a critical catalyst in Anna's story. One day, she saw a shoplifter on the store's closed-circuit television. Anna called the police, but because she was one of six and not afraid to stand up for herself, she decided to confront the man alone. She challenged him, and he seemed about to 'fess up and give in, when suddenly he turned and sprinted down the aisle toward the front of the store. Unthinking, Anna dashed after him, caught him—did I mention she's tall, long-legged?—and grabbed his shoulder, at which he twisted in her grip, punched her full in the mouth, and escaped.

She stumbled back to her office, called the police again, and tried to speak. Blood-spittle and gargled words were all she could manage, so she hung up and pulled out a mirror from her desk drawer to assess the damage. She wasn't in much pain (mouth injuries are funny that way. You don't feel much pain until the oral surgeon starts giving you Novocain injections), but she could see that all four of her front teeth had been smashed up. And there in her office, as she sat waiting for the police to arrive, feeling out the damage with her tongue, she found herself thinking, *What on earth am I doing here in this job, in this store, in Iowa? Is this seriously what I want for my life? To be a grocery-chain supervisor five miles from where I grew up?*

Anna loved her family. Her mother, despite losing both of her own parents when she was only nine years old, was optimistic and enthusiastic, an endlessly positive influence on Anna's life. Her dad was the farmer, cautious, aware that the wind and

weather will change. In his world, you plant your seeds and you wait for them to grow. It's what he thought Anna should do: settle with the seeds she had sown, build her reputation, and secure her future.

So what did she do? Sorry, Mom and Dad, Anna listened to her instincts and followed her boyfriend to Washington, D.C., where he was getting his master's degree at George Washington University.

When she arrived, she hunted around for work. She still wasn't sure what she wanted to do with her life, but that didn't stop her from getting a job. That's one thing Anna always believed in. You always find something to do to move forward, even if you know it isn't what you are going to be doing for the rest of your life.

So she found the best temp job she could, working for the Paper and Plastics Association, as it happens, and all was fine and dandy. Washington, D.C. was a fun place for a couple of young, upwardly mobile Iowans—when, out of the blue, her boyfriend landed a job as an associate professor in a small university town in Germany.

Should she go? *Well*, she thought, *why not? I haven't yet found my purpose in life, and since I moved to D.C. for him, why wouldn't I go in whole hog and move to Germany with him?* So she did, and, as before, when she arrived, she rustled up some work. This was trickier to pull off than it had been in D.C. because, technically, she wasn't allowed to work, but she ferreted around anyway and soon she was teaching English and aerobics, helping a German friend file for a United States visa, and basically gaining a pretty good foothold, when, after a short nine months, her boyfriend announced that Germany wasn't working out for him, that they should move back to the U.S. He was thinking Denver, Colorado—what did she think?

She thought they should give Germany a fair shot. But, still playing the dutiful girlfriend role, she swallowed that opinion and hightailed it to Denver. Where, upon arrival, her boyfriend decided that eight years was enough. The relationship was over.

Now what was she going to do? She was twenty-nine, single, and aimless. Talk to your friends or visit the Oprah.com message boards, and you'll hear stories from thousands of women in a similar predicament. They moved their life around for a boyfriend or a husband, and then, after the break-up, they find themselves at a loss. This other person had given their life direction and purpose, so they didn't have to ask themselves too many questions about what *their* strengths were, what did *they* want to do with *their* life, what was *their* destiny? But now, with that person out of their life, those questions crescendo until they can't think about anything else.

This is what happened to Anna. She sat herself down and forced herself to ask all those destiny, purpose, and "what should I do with my life?" questions.

And then a false start. Having racked her brains for something to latch onto and coming up empty, she took another temping job, this one on the TV show *COPS*. She was quickly promoted to become an onsite producer, yet almost immediately she knew she'd made a mistake. The job had superficial trappings of glamour—this was television, after all—but its core purpose grated on her. Some people get a jolt of energy from filming reality shows. They love the rawness and the unpredictability of it. But Anna didn't. She saw herself as a voyeur of Denver's underbelly, someone who was profiting from her subjects' suffering. When she filmed a person who was arrested for DUI, he or she was *really* arrested. When she captured a person being carted away to jail, he was *really* being carted away. Was this where her life was meant to end up? Was this why she

had worked for her degree, why she had defied the advice of her parents and followed a man around the world? Her instinctive answer was no, so with no clear alternative in mind, she quit.

It was while she was weighing her future, and fending off anxious inquiries from her mom—

“Are you sure you want to quit, honey? It’s a good job.”

“Yes, Mom. I’m sure.”

“You haven’t really found your feet since you left Iowa. Maybe it’s time to come back and rethink things.”

“No, Mom. I’m fine, really.”

—that Anna took a New Year’s trip to visit her sister in Chicago. And there, at 2 a.m. on New Year’s Day, she met the man who would become her husband, David. David was in sales for his family’s printing business and was about to relocate to Los Angeles. By the time he was due to go, he and Anna were in a serious relationship, both sure they had found a life partner in the other. So, with a *here-we-go-again* feeling, Anna followed her man to a new city where she knew no one, had no leads, no contacts, and no idea of what to do.

Back to the destiny, purpose, and “what should I do with my life?” questions. Sitting around the apartment they’d rented, she dredged through her life trying to find something, anything that might give her a clue about how to bring focus to her willingness to work hard. All she could come up with was that she was an inveterate clipper. A confessed “information junkie,” she would clip articles from any publication she happened to be reading (this was pre-Internet) and stack them in file folders for . . .

well, who knows what they were for? She just liked having information at her fingertips.

She pulled out the file folders from one of the moving boxes (the clippings traveled with her from Iowa via D.C., Germany, and Denver) and sifted through them. And as she was doing that, as she pulled each one out, reread it, and carefully put it aside, she had a vivid memory of looking at a huge magazine stand at the University of Iowa, reaching past John Deere's *Tractor Quarterly* and *Cosmopolitan*, and picking the *Hollywood Reporter* from the racks. And not just one time. Often. Once a week at least. Thinking back now, she remembered that she wouldn't read the first two or three pages, the ones with the stories about the biggest stars of the day and their exploits. Instead, she would turn to the back of the magazine and read about the details of the deals. How did this movie get financed? Which studio bought this book to adapt into a movie? Who was going to direct it? How much would they get paid?

It seemed crazy that she'd forgotten this, but with all the flitting around the world and the scrabbling for work and the traipsing after her boyfriend, she had. Now, as she sat quietly reading the clippings—here was one about the setting up of the Disney Channel, here was one about the making of *Beverly Hills Cop*—it came back to her with great vividness. *Huh*, she thought. *Interesting. I really like learning about the details of movie business deals.*

She didn't know what job she should try to get, but at least she had something authentic to build on. And while she had no connections and no film experience, at least she was in the right town to start discovering what she wanted to build.

She asked around in some employment agencies and was told, "If you want to learn the ropes, become an assistant to a talent agent. You'll probably hate it—they'll

make you scurry around like a mad four-year-old—but there’s no better or faster way to gain experience in the entertainment industry.”

So Anna thought, *All right, I’ll treat it as an MBA in the entertainment industry. I’ll work as seriously as I can for three years and then take stock.* She had heard of a company that promoted from within its ranks, so she applied there for an assistant’s job and was hired to work for a book agent.

“From almost the day I arrived, I knew I was at the right place,” Anna says. “There was a book that my boss was trying to buy for a producer, and as her assistant I got to see the whole thing unfold. I was at the center of it all as we negotiated with the author of the book, hooked in a screenwriter, and closed the deal with the production company. I can still remember holding the author’s \$1 million check in my hand. But it wasn’t the money that excited me; it was being at the center of things. Being the hub. I just loved that I knew more than everyone else about what was going on.”

Fueled by this love, her new role consumed her. While other assistants were out at parties, schmoozing and networking, Anna stayed late at work, gathering information, planning, devising ways for the agency to do better, writing ideas and notes for her boss at midnight. Looking back, she realizes she was probably something of a nuisance, but she couldn’t help herself. The ideas came so furiously she just had to capture them and share them with whoever would listen. *Finally, she thought, my real life has started.*

And then a setback. One of the ideas she presented to her boss was that the company needed a coordinator for her department, someone who would gather all the relevant information about each of the agency’s clients and then use it to position the right client with the right project no matter where the client or the project resided within

the agency. This position didn't exist at the agency, and, in Anna's opinion, this meant many opportunities to find good work for their clients were missed. She told a couple of people about her idea and was waiting for the right moment to tell her boss, when an announcement was made that another assistant, a friend she'd shared her idea with, had been given the role. Apparently this "friend" had made an appointment with the powers-that-be, presented the idea as his, and soon thereafter been offered the position.

Anna was floored. She'd trusted this person, confided in him, and then he'd stolen not only her idea, but the position as well. How could she have been so naive? She was thirty years old. She should have known better.

She kicked herself. Stomped around the apartment. Shouted her frustrations at David. Fantasized about creative methods of retribution.

And then she righted herself. She could have raised a stink about it and demanded a fair hearing, but, talking it through with David, she decided to take a different tack. She knew three things for sure: (1) the agency needed this coordinator role not just within her department but within other departments as well; (2) she was still the best person for this kind of "information junkie" role; and (3) if she just kept talking up the role and making others see how useful it could be, in the end, other opportunities would present themselves.

On all three counts, she was right. Six months after her "perfect" job was stolen from her, the agency created the same role for another department, the talent department (think movie stars) and offered her the job.

"Everyone in the talent department was shocked," she remembers with a smile. "They were like 'Who's this assistant from the literary department, and why did she get

this job?’ They didn’t realize that I’d been laying the groundwork for the last nine months or more.”

Fast-forward a year and a half, and Anna was excelling in the coordinator role. In fact, she was getting so good and feeling so confident in her abilities that she allowed herself to start wondering when she’d be promoted to the plum role of talent agent.

This role is the life-blood of the agency. Everything depends on the agent’s ability both to sign quality clients and then to find these clients good work. And Anna was certain that she would excel at it. In fact, in her estimation, she was already doing the work—she had studied the intricacies of every deal that came across her desk; she was known to have a wealth of information at her fingertips and so was regularly sought out by clients and agents alike; and, most importantly, people trusted her.

So she asked her boss when she was going to be promoted. “Soon,” she was told.

Then she asked again.

And again. And again. Always politely. And always armed with an example or two about how she was already doing the job.

“Soon,” she was told.

And so, finally, she gave the agency an ultimatum. It was done very professionally, but it was an ultimatum nonetheless: “I’m doing the agent job now; I just don’t have the title. Give me the title by June, or I will go be an agent somewhere else.”

Whether worn down by her persistence or persuaded by her obvious competence, or a combination of the two, when the June deadline hit—and not a week earlier—they made her a full agent.

That was a decade ago, and during those years Anna has risen to become one of

the most trusted and influential agents in Hollywood.

One final detail: not long after she became an agent, Anna became a mother too, giving birth to her son, Ben. She nursed him and after her maternity leave was up, she returned to the agency. Both she and David had full-time jobs, so, as many working couples do, they hired a nanny.

She explains, “I thought I’d be fine with it, and I guess I was for a while. But, then, my senses started picking up on something. I felt weird leaving him. It’s not that I didn’t want to go back to work—I did, and I enjoyed work even after being a mom. It’s just that something didn’t seem quite right at home. I wrestled with it for a couple of weeks trying to pin it down. And then one morning, it dawned on me that our nanny was rushing me out of the house. It wasn’t anything that I could actually point to; it was just a feeling, a feeling that grew more insistent the more I thought about it: ‘My nanny does not want me in my house!’”

She installed a nanny-cam. And that night, watching it at home—“The worst night of my life,” she calls it—she saw why the nanny wanted her out of there. The nanny slept on the floor for almost the entire day.

“It killed me to see video of Ben clambering over her and toddling to the window calling our names, looking over the little gate into the kitchen and calling for me. It wasn’t that she was being mean to him. She was just completely ignoring him. No attention. No love. No cuddling. Absolutely nothing. It was just terrible. The next morning, the full momma bear came out and I fired her the moment she set foot in our house.”

Which left her and David with a problem. Anna didn’t want to stop working, but

neither could she stomach the thought of leaving Ben at home. Even with a different nanny. She and David sat down that night and talked it out. It was a tough night, but in the end they found the right solution for them. As much as Anna loved her job, David was bored with his—his family had sold the printing business and the new owners weren't overly fond of the having the oldest son still walking the halls. David, this athletic, rangy 6'3" sportsman, didn't know what it would be like to spend all day looking after his son, but he wanted to give it a try. Anna would work full-time, he would take care of Ben and any other kids who came along (a daughter, Charlotte, after a couple of years), and then Anna would come home and put them to bed every night.

That was seven years ago. It's not an arrangement that would work for every family, but it works for Anna and David. They are lucky to have each other, and they are stronger, together.

What's The Difference?

What can you learn from comparing Anna's life with Charlie's? The differences aren't immediately obvious, are they?

Drive? No, both Anna and Charlie were driven. And besides, I imagine you know lots of driven individuals, some of whom are not happy, some of whom are not successful, and some of whom are neither.

How about a caring partner? You might think to yourself that Anna was uniquely blessed, with David giving up his job and looking after the kids. But her blessings aren't as unique as you might think—according to the most recent U.S. census, in 20 percent of households the primary caregiver for children in kindergarten or younger was the

husband, and in 35 percent of households the wife earns more than the husband. Besides, if David had decided not to stay home, or if they couldn't have afforded for him to quit his job, I see Anna as the kind of person who would have figured out another workable solution, don't you?

And what about David in comparison to Charlie's partner, Peter? Having talked at length to all four of them, I have to tell you that Peter appears just as loving and caring as David. Even if he weren't, is a caring partner really the deciding factor in your success and happiness? A caring relationship is a beautiful gift, but many times a caring partner and a strong life do not go hand in hand—in fact, sometimes a caring partner encourages our very worst decisions.

Following your passion? Passion is surely somewhere to be found at the heart of a strong life, but, then again, your passions often compete with one another. Charlie was passionate about Peter and her family, yet she was not passionate about her work. Which passion should she sacrifice? Or rather, how could she design her life so that all of her passions were honored? The answer for Charlie, or for you, cannot simply be “follow your passion.” It must be “follow your passion” plus something else. And this “something else” must tell you how to channel *all* of your passions in a productive, healthy way.

How about setting clearer goals? Well, neither Anna's nor Charlie's life could be said to be driven by a specific goal or dream—Anna never said, “I've gotta get out of Iowa and head to Tinseltown!” She just sort of ended up there. Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that dreams are without value. I'm sure you have dreams. You don't know if you will ever achieve these dreams, but you hold onto them tightly, and they give

you focus, a bright, clear beacon whether your life is storm-tossed or at a standstill.

Yet you mustn't entrust your life to dreams because, unfortunately, all the research we have on dreams and goals reveals that we are woefully inaccurate at predicting which dreams will fulfill us. Money is the simplest example. Many of us yearn to earn more money, and we make many decisions in our lives based upon increasing our earning power. But the jury is in on the link between money and happiness. If you live in poverty, you will be less happy than those who live above the poverty line; however, once above the poverty line, you do not become happier the more money you make. So by all means, hold your dreams of a bigger house and a healthier bank account close to your heart, but don't imagine that either one will necessarily make you happier.

And even if one of your wildest dreams comes true, you are wired, as are all human beings, to become hardened to the joys of this dream, just as you are wired to become increasingly immune to the sadness of a tragedy. A famous series of experiments compared the satisfaction levels of lottery winners just after they'd won the lottery with paraplegics' satisfaction levels just after the accident that paralyzed them. Initially, as you'd expect, the lottery winners' satisfaction rose and the paraplegics' sank, but then, after only six months, each person's daily level of satisfaction returned to the level it was before. How trustworthy can dreams be if a happy fantasy and a terrible nightmare leave you, after six months, feeling the same as you did before?

I'm not saying you shouldn't have goals and dreams. Merely that if you target your entire life toward attaining a particular goal or dream, you may well find that it doesn't leave you feeling quite as fulfilled as you had hoped.

There's one other difference we might consider, a slight variation on the one

above. Could it be the power of intention? That Anna had it, and Charlie didn't? You could certainly make the case that the Annas of the world launch more positive thoughts out into the universe than the Charlies, and that these thoughts then become reality; that the Anna's actually create their future by believing more deliberately and visualizing more vividly the strong life they want. And it would be quite a convincing case—Anna's life did indeed become stronger at the very moment when her projections into the future became more vivid: "I am intrigued by the details of the deals in the entertainment industry. So I should seek out work where I am involved with these details."

However, this emphasis on intention raises an even more intriguing conundrum.

Anna's intentions sprung from the Anna-like voice inside her head that was telling her what to do. But why should she trust this voice? How did she know that what it was telling her to do would actually fulfill her? Charlie heard this voice too, and her intentions were equally vivid: "I see myself married to Peter, working with Peter, moving out of our sketchy neighborhood, and playing with my kids in our front yard." And all these vivid intentions came true.

And yet they broke her down completely.

There is, it seems, such a thing as a trustworthy intention and an untrustworthy intention. They both sound the same in your head, but one leads to fulfillment while the other leads to emptiness. The practice of living a strong life must help you create the former and avoid the latter.

So, if the difference between the Annas of the world and the Charlies isn't drive, a caring partner, or pure passion, and if both goals and intentions can *misguide* as easily as guide, where does this leave you? What can you do to ensure that you strike out on the

right path and that, on your journey, you gain the strength you need to stay on this path?