

Introduction

It was a stressful situation. Writer Catherine Ryan Hyde was driving home late one night in a run-down section of Los Angeles. Her aging car began spewing smoke and came to a complete stop. Suddenly, out of nowhere, two men with a blanket ran toward her car. Her instincts warned her that they were going to do her harm. She gripped the steering wheel and tried to prepare herself for the inevitable. To her surprise, the two men did not intend to harm her. Their purpose was to smother the flames that were by now shooting out from under her hood. At the risk of their own lives, they put out the fire.

After the fire was out and she had recovered her composure, Ms. Hyde tried to thank the men, but they were gone. She was left with the emptiness all of us have felt when we find ourselves unable to express our gratitude. So, what do you do if you cannot pay someone back? Ms. Hyde decided the best thing was to pay it forward—to pass the favor on to someone else.

This incident inspired Catherine Ryan Hyde to write the novel *Pay It Forward*, which was subsequently turned into a motion picture starring Academy Award winners Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt, as well as Haley Joel Osment, the popular child star of *The Sixth Sense*.

Pay It Forward is an inspiring story of a teacher, Eugene Simonet, who gives his seventh grade class their initial assignment for the school year: "Think of an idea that could change the world, and put it into action." One of his students, a serious-minded twelve-year-old boy named Trevor McKinney takes his teacher at his word and comes up with a simple plan: He'll do something really good for three people who, instead of paying him back, will be asked to "pay it forward" by aiding three other people who, in turn, will aid three others ad infinitum. This was young Trevor's plan for changing the world.

In spite of sterling performances by each of the leading actors, *Pay It*

Forward was not a box office success. Nevertheless, the author has done us a great service. Through young Trevor, she has demonstrated how change takes place in our world.

Welcome to *The Amazing Law of Influence*—an exhilarating study of the impact one person can have on his or her world. It is based on one of the central tenets of chaos theory—that tiny, incremental changes that build up over time within dynamic systems can trigger monumental alterations in the way things work in the world. Chaos science deals primarily with physical phenomena, and can be very technical. But this is not a technical book; instead, it is a volume of clear, concise concepts. But when you finish reading it, you will understand as you never have before that tiny, incremental changes in human behavior can also lead to monumental alterations in the way society functions. In other words, a solitary individual can, under the proper conditions, exercise enormous influence in the world as a whole.

Like our physical world, the human community is a dynamic system, and it is singularly susceptible to the actions of individuals. For within this dynamic system is a law—a law that guides many of these incremental changes and allows them to yield results far more impressive than the force of their original stimulus might have indicated. Here is the good news: you and I can harness the power of this dynamic law and put it to work in our families, companies, and communities with the result that we improve not only the quality of our own lives, but the quality of life for everyone.

It's like something Scott Adams once said.¹ Adams is the creator of the wildly popular comic strip Dilbert. The strip is syndicated in thirty-nine countries, which proves that Dilbert is a hero to corporate drones around the world. In an interview in *Time* magazine, Adams says, "I always expect everything I do to change the world, not just because there's something special about me, but because everything in the world was changed by one person, if you think about it" (*italics mine*).

He's right on both counts. Everything we do changes the world and everything in the world was changed by one person. How would you like to change the world? How would you like to be affecting life on this planet centuries from now? Impossible, you say? Not really. What if I could show you in a few simple steps how you really could change the world, beginning with those closest to you? Would you buy into it? Forget for a moment how preposterous that sounds. Forget for a moment the sense of powerlessness that modern life often imposes on us.

Before we begin, let me ask you another question. If you knew that you could exert a positive influence that would result in a changed world,

would you really want to do it? That is a critical question. Remember, we live in a very hedonistic world. Many people listen only to one radio station—WII-FM—“What’s in it for me?” There is a wealth of material in this book that will benefit you, even if you have no interest in saving the world. You will find ways to more effectively influence people you work with and people you love. But this book is especially written for people who dream of a better world and would like to be a solution, rather than part of the problem. This book is for those who want to do well by doing good. If you are a member of this group, then get ready: you’re about to learn how you can change the world.

The Most Exciting of Nature's Laws

A noted chemist once said something that really captured my attention. "Raise one of your fingers and wiggle it. When you wiggle that finger, you are tickling every atom in the universe." Wow! I was impressed. All that power in my little finger.

Dr. Donald Hatch Andrews, professor emeritus of chemistry at John Hopkins University, went on to say that the atomic structure of our universe is so incredibly sensitive that a person cannot move a finger without changing the relationships among all atoms in the universe.¹

Dr. Andrews' words echo the work of the physicist J. S. Bell and his colleagues. Building on the work of the creative thinker Ernst Mach, they have shown that all things are connected—at all times and instantaneously at any distance. Mach pointed out, using gravity, that every tiny movement anywhere in the universe automatically affects everything else.² What an exciting concept! Our universe is so sensitive that the movement of one atom affects every other atom. Along the same lines, one of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, compares the world to a great spider web. He writes, "If you touch it anywhere you set the whole thing a-moving." Amazing.

Concept #1: Every tiny movement in the universe affects the entire universe.

Hold on to this concept for a moment while we consider another significant insight into how our world works.

Back in the 1960s, the Beatles were captivating the young, bombs were falling in Vietnam, and in a laboratory at M. I. T., a meteorologist named Edward Lorenz had just made a discovery that would forever doom the science of long-range weather forecasting. What he found—quite entirely by accident—was that the tiniest possible movement in the air in one part of the world can produce dramatic changes in weather patterns months later

in another part of the world. He called it *the butterfly effect*. What Lorenz discovered was that a butterfly flapping its wings in Malibu might set into motion a series of meteorological events which could, months later, produce a monsoon in Malaysia.

Tiny changes yield enormous consequences. No wonder our meteorologists have so much difficulty predicting the weather. If a butterfly can produce a monsoon, think what a bald eagle might do! Think what you might do!

Concept #2: Tiny actions can lead to dramatic changes.

Wrap your mind for a moment around these two important concepts. Now add a third concept more exciting and far-reaching than either one of these. I call it *The Amazing Law of Influence*: **One life touches another, and potentially both lives are changed; one life touches another, and potentially the entire world is changed.**

Here is the central theme of this book. If you change one life, including your own, then potentially you are changing the world.

CHAPTER 3

Changed by a Smile

In a letter to *Psychology Today* magazine, Dr. Robert Healy, a psychotherapist, wrote of a patient who had come to him for help after having changed his mind about committing suicide. It seems that this patient, a young man, had planned to jump off a bridge when something strange happened.¹

While driving his car to the bridge, he stopped at a traffic light. Looking toward the sidewalk, he spotted an elderly woman who was smiling at him. He felt himself smiling back. The light changed and he drove on, but the memory of her kindly face stayed with him. He began thinking to himself that maybe life wasn't so bad after all. Before reaching the bridge, he turned his car around, drove home, and entered therapy to get help with his problems.

It was nothing dramatic, just an old woman with a pleasant expression on her face. But she changed this desperate young man's entire psychological environment.

I read this and thought to myself, "What if he had passed *me* on that street? Would the result have been the same?" Powerful thought. One life touched another, and a life was changed. But the process is just beginning. A young man decided to live; undoubtedly he will now touch other lives. Maybe he has family members, friends, and colleagues at work whose lives will be different because of him. His therapist wrote a letter to a national magazine read by millions. You and I now know about that experience, and it may affect our own actions. Perhaps we will treat strangers differently. Ultimately, the possible consequences of this man's decision to live are incalculable.

Suppose that young man has children and one of them performs some significant act—or, for that matter, one of his grandchildren or great-grandchildren. Suppose that somewhere among his descendants is another Winston Churchill? You can see that later generations might be affected by

this man's decision not to die, and it all began with an old woman's smile.

I must confess that I thought of omitting this story because it seems like such an isolated, unlikely event—a kindly smile from an elderly woman changes a young man's life. But recently I heard a taped interview with the well-known inspirational speaker W. Mitchell, who speaks from a wheelchair. He was in a motorcycle accident that left disfiguring burns over most of his body, including his face. Later he was in an airplane crash that cost him the use of his legs. Mitchell says that after his motorcycle accident, the most difficult adjustment he had to make was dealing with people who refused to look at him because of the appearance of his face. This was more crushing than the accident itself. But then, he said that one day a woman not only looked at him, but she also smiled. "That smile changed my life," he says. Can a smile do that? You bet it can. Now Mitchell delivers his inspiring message to large audiences all over the world. And every once in a while in those audiences someone is touched in a life-changing way. The ripples of influence go on and on.

The real-life implications of the powerful Law of Influence are amazing. We don't have to be politicians or rock stars to prompt change. We can be an old woman smiling at a passerby on a street or at a man in a wheelchair. We can be John Howard giving assistance to someone in need. Anytime one person encounters another the possibilities are limitless.

A story came across the Internet recently of the owner of a drive-through coffee business in southwest Portland, Oregon. She was surprised one morning to have one of her customers not only pay for her own mocha, but also for the mocha of the person in the car behind her. When the second car pulled up, the owner had the pleasure of telling her that her drink had already been paid for. This customer was so pleased that someone else had paid for her coffee that she bought coffee for the next customer—and that customer did for the next, etc. This string of kindness—one stranger paying for the next customer—reportedly continued for two hours and twenty-seven customers.

When you perform an act of kindness for someone else, you never know where it might end.

I am reminded of some words that have been attributed to South African President Nelson Mandela: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." I believe he is right. Through the amazing Law of Influence, we have enormous power. *One life touches another and potentially both lives are changed; one life touches another and potentially the entire world is changed.*