

A COMPLAINT FREE WORLD

*How to Stop Complaining
and Start Enjoying the Life
You Always Wanted*

WILL BOWEN



Doubleday

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Free
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DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

For my daughter, Lia, her children yet to be, and their children;

each of whom will live in a subsequently happier, more

Complaint Free world.

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And thank you, dear reader, for being open to a new paradigm for your life and, thereby, shining light into our world.



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INTRODUCTION

If you don't like something, change it.
If you can't change it, change your attitude.
Don't complain.

— MAYA ANGELOU

In your hands you hold the secret to transforming your life. Big words? Yes, but I've seen it work for many, many people. I've read their e-mails and letters and taken their phone calls. People have used the simple concept of putting a purple silicone bracelet on their wrist and then switching it from wrist to wrist until they have managed to go 21 consecutive days without complaining, criticizing, or gossiping. In so doing, they have formed a new habit. By becoming conscious of and, thereby, changing their words, they have changed their thoughts and begun to create their lives by design. People just like you have shared stories with me of chronic pain relieved, relationships healed, careers improved, and having become an overall happier person.

VOICES

I'm a sophomore at Omaha North west High School, in Nebraska. Yesterday, we had a gunshot go off at our school, and a few students and I would like to try your 21 days of no complaining. I was wondering if I could get 5 bracelets.

— NAME WITH HELD

One man I know suffered from chronic headaches. Every night he would arrive home from work and tell his wife how much his head had hurt that day. Realizing that telling his wife about his headaches did nothing to lessen their occurrence or severity, he decided to stop talking about them as a part of becoming complaint free.

The man's name is Tom Alyea. He no longer has these headaches and he's now the senior coordinator of our Complaint Free World program, one of several dozens of volunteers who make this all happen.

Less pain, better health, satisfying relationships, a better job, being more serene and joyous ... Sound good? It's not only possible, it's probable. Consciously striving to reformat your mental hard drive is not easy, but you can start now and in a short period of time—time that will pass any way — you can have the life you've always dreamed of having.

You can order a purple Complaint Free bracelet by visiting our Web site: www.AComplaintFreeWorld.org. We send the bracelets out free (the program is supported entirely by donations and you can donate if you choose). Here is how to use the bracelet:

1. Begin to wear the bracelet on either wrist.
2. When you catch yourself complaining, gossiping, or criticizing, move the bracelet to the other wrist and begin again.
3. If you hear someone else who is wearing a purple bracelet complain, it's okay to point out their need to switch the bracelet to the other arm; BUT if you're going to do this, you must move your bracelet first! Because you're complaining about their complaining.

4. Stay with it. It may take many months to reach 21 consecutive days. The average is 4 to 8 months.

And relax. We're only talking about complaints, criticism, and gossip that is spoken. If it comes out of your mouth, it counts, so start over. If you think it, it's free. But you'll find out that even complaining thoughts will disappear as you move through this process.

Start right now. You don't have to wait for your purple bracelet to arrive to get started. Slip a rubber band on your wrist, put a coin or small stone in your pocket, move a paperweight to one side of your desk or find your own distinctive way of self-monitoring now. Do it now. Then, when you catch yourself complaining, criticizing, or gossiping, move the item. Move the rubber band to the other wrist, switch the coin to another pocket, or move the paper weight to the other side of the desk. It's important that you move the item. It's that act of moving it that plows furrows deeply into your consciousness, making you aware of your behavior. You must move it, every time.

Did you catch the very important word in the last paragraph? I said WHEN you catch yourself complaining, not IF. Complaining is epidemic in our world, so don't be surprised when you find out that you, too, gripe a lot more than you thought.

In this book you will learn what constitutes a complaint, why we complain, what benefits we think we receive from complaining, how complaining is destructive to our lives, and how we can get others around us to stop complaining. You will learn the steps to eradicating this poisonous form of expression from your life. If you stay with it, you will find that not only will you not complain, but others around you will cease to do so as well.

A while back, I was playing racquetball with a friend. Catching our breath between games, he asked, "So how many purple Complaint Free bracelets have you sent out?" "About one hundred twenty-five thousand," I responded, and then I added, "so far." Taking a moment for that to sink in, he sipped his water and said, "One hundred twenty-five thousand ... that's more than the population of a good-sized American city." "Yeah," I said, still trying to wrap my head around it all. "And how long have you been at it?" he asked. "Seven months," I replied. "One hundred twenty-five thousand bracelets in seven months," he repeated, shaking his head in disbelief.

Adjusting his sweat bands and replacing his goggles for our final game of the day, he asked, "How many times a day do you think people complain?" "I don't know," I said. "When I first started trying to go 21 consecutive days without complaining, I was moving my own purple bracelet about 20 times a day." He stood, indicating he was ready to continue playing. Grabbing his racquet and giving it a few swings to keep his shoulder limber, he said, "Do the math." Wondering if somehow I'd miscalculated the score of our last game, I asked, "What math?"

"If you take 125,000 bracelets," he said, "and multiply that times twenty complaints per day, times thirty days each month, times seven months, you get... well, it's ... well, it's a heck of a lot! Think how many complaints have NOT been made since this began." I stood a moment, thinking about this, and then walked on the racquetball court. He entered the court, approached the serving line, and launched one of his "death-in-a-corner" serves. My mind was preoccupied by his comment. I fanned the ball. I just couldn't stop thinking about what my friend had said, and ultimately he won the game. How much complaining, criticism, and gossip had this simple idea already helped prevent?

It certainly seemed to be having an impact, and the idea was continuing to grow. The church staff, where I am the minister, was averaging 7,000 requests for Complaint Freepurple bracelets a week. We had shipped them to eighty countries around the world. The mail folder that our office manager placed on my desk each week had swelled to a sheaf of letters nearly an inch thick. Schoolteachers were telling me that encouraging their students to become conscious of their complaining had transformed classrooms. Churches of various denominations were embracing this idea, not only giving "no-complaint" bracelets but beginning Complaint Free Wednesday-night classes and creating Complaint Free Sunday school curricula. People who were facing betrayal, poverty, life-threatening disease, job cuts, and even natural disasters were picking up the challenge to try to erase complaining from their lives.

This thing had taken on a life of its own, and it was thrilling to be a part of it.

In the summer of 2006, I decided to create a “Summer Book Club” at our church. We would encourage everyone to read the same book and have classes and discussions about what we were reading.

Wanting to select a book that would truly have an impact, we first looked at what our people needed. The number-one challenge people faced seemed to be money. Couples and singles alike came to talk to me about being in debt, job uncertainty, and feeling financially overwhelmed. After checking out several books on the subject, we selected *The Tour Spiritual Laws of Prosperity* by Edwene Gaines. Her book gives clear, concise, powerful, and measurable things one can do to begin to live a life of abundance. More than 100 people purchased the book, and I planned a five-week series in addition to classes for people to delve deeper and share their questions, ideas, and insights.

The second week of the series, I was in my home office writing my lesson when I had a moment of inspiration. I called Marcia Dale, our office manager.

I explained my idea to Marcia. She listened patiently, then sighed and said, “Another doodad Sunday?” Marcia feigned exasperation, but the truth is that she loves it when we give out little trinkets at classes and services. We've given out magnets, bookmarks, picture frames, pens, and other knickknacks that support and reinforce what we're learning. The “doodads,” as Marcia calls them, serve as a visual reminder long after the lesson is completed.

“Why rubber bracelets?” she asked. I explained that Gaines's book, like many others, reminded us that it's important to focus on what we want in our lives rather than putting our attention on what we don't want. “Thoughts held in mind produce after their kind,” Marcia said, echoing back something she'd heard hundreds of times. “Exactly,” I said. “And complaining is focusing on what we don't want. It's talking about what's wrong, and what we focus our attention on expands. So we want to help people eradicate complaining from their lives, and this will serve as a great reinforcement.”

“Tell me again how rubber bracelets will do this,” Marcia said ambiguously. “We'll give everyone a bracelet; you know, like the LIVESTRONG bracelets distributed to raise money for the Lance Armstrong Foundation, but another color,” I said. “About twenty years ago, I read a book that said it takes 21 days for a hen's egg to hatch and, ironically, it also takes 21 days of a person doing a new behavior for it to become a habit. We'll challenge everyone to put the bracelet on either arm and try to go 21 consecutive days without complaining. If they catch themselves complaining, we'll encourage them to move the bracelet to the other wrist and begin again.”

“Ooo ... sounds hard,” Marcia observed. Then, looking for a loophole, she asked, “If they complain, can they start over the next day and just have a ‘free day,’ complaining all they want for the rest of that day?” “No,” I said, “they switch the bracelet and start again at that moment. The idea is to make us aware of when we complain so, maybe, we catch ourselves before we do it next time.”

The phone was silent for a moment. “Marcia?” I said, checking to see if our call had been dropped. “I'm here,” she said flatly. “I'm just wondering if people can do this ... heck, I'm wondering if I can do this!” “Me, too,” I said. “Let's give it a try.”

“Okay,” she said ruefully, “I'll call some doodad places and see what I can find. Any particular color of bracelet?” I thought a moment. “No ... what do you think?” I asked. “How about purple?” she said. “It's classy and to some people it represents transformation. Besides, you see yellow, orange, and pink bracelets everywhere, but not purple.” “Sounds good,” I said.

Marcia found a company that sold purple rubber bracelets with the word SPIRIT debossed in them and we agreed to order 500, more than twice what we needed— little did we know. When Marcia told me about the bracelets, I asked, “Why ‘spirit?’” “It stands for ‘school spirit,’ I think,” she said. “They sell ‘em in all kinds of colors. If your school's color is orange, you buy orange ‘spirit’ bracelets. If your color is red, you buy red ‘spirit’ bracelets.” “Oh,” I said. “So we can't get bracelets that say something like ‘no complaining’ on them?” “We can,” she answered, “but on an order

of 500, the cost is out of sight. Besides, it's just a doodad most people will throw in a drawer as soon as they get home.”

“How am I going to explain the word ‘spirit’ on them?” I wondered aloud. “Tell everybody it stands for ‘the spirit of change,’” Marcia said, answering my question for me.

The next Sunday, we gave out just over 250 bracelets, but our entire stock of 500 was totally depleted right after the service from people wanting them for their offices, classes, friends, teams, and social groups. That day, in addition to explaining how the challenge works, I invited everyone to imagine what their lives would be like without the “ear pollution” of complaints. I could feel a mixture of excitement and trepidation in the room. I told them that I was accepting my own challenge and that, no matter how long it took, I was going to make it 21 consecutive days without complaining. “Twenty-one days in a row,” I affirmed, “with no complaining, criticizing, or gossiping.”

“Join me. If it takes three months or three years,” I said, “your life will be greatly improved. If you wear your bracelet out from switching it back and forth, we’ll give you another one. Stay with it.”

Complaining is talking about things you do not want rather than what you do want. When we complain, we are using our words to focus on things that are not as we would like. Our thoughts create our lives and our words indicate what we are thinking. Let me repeat that, because if you get nothing else from this book, please let this be

it: *OUR THOUGHTS CREATE OUR LIVES AND OUR WORDS INDICATE WHAT WE ARE THINKING.*

Put another way: “What you Articulate, you Demonstrate!”

We are, every one of us, already creating our lives all the time. The trick is to really take the reins and steer the horse to where we do want to go, rather than where we do not. Your life is a movie written by, directed by, produced by, and starring—you guessed it—YOU! We are all self-made. When asked about “self-made millionaires,” Earl Nightingale, the twentieth-century motivational master and philosopher, once quipped, “We are all self-made, but only the successful will admit it.”

You are creating your life in every moment with the thoughts to which you give the most attention. Today, people are waking up to this as never before, and it rings the bells of change for the consciousness of our world. Our collective minds are starting to grasp that our lives, our society, our political situation, our health, and indeed the state of our world are an outpicturing of the thoughts we hold and the actions those thoughts produce.

This idea is anything but new. It seems to be reaching a critical mass in our universal understanding today, but thousands of great philosophers and teachers have told us this for millennia:

“As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.”

— JESUS, MATTHEW 8:13

“The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.”

— MARCUS AURELIUS

“We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think.”

— BUDDHA

“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”

—NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

“You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.”

“We become what we think about.”

—EARL NIGHTINGALE

“The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts.”

—CHARLES DARWIN

“Why are we Masters of our fate, the captains of our souls? Because we have the power to control our thoughts.”

—ALFRED A. MONTAPERT

Our words indicate what we are thinking and our thoughts *create* our lives. People fall along a great continuum of being positive or negative. In my experience, I have never known anyone who thinks they are a negative person. No one I've yet known truly gets it when their thoughts are more destructive than constructive. Their words may reveal this to others, but they don't hear it. They may complain constantly—I was one of them— but most people, myself included, think they are a positive, upbeat, optimistic, and sanguine person.

It is vital that we control our minds in order to re-create our lives. The purple Complaint Free bracelets help us realize exactly where we are on the continuum of positive and negative expression. And then, when we go through the repeated practice of moving the bracelet from wrist to wrist, over and over, time after time, we truly begin to notice our words. In so doing, we begin to notice our thoughts. When we notice our thoughts, we can change and ultimately reshape our lives into whatever we choose. The purple bracelets help us set a trap for our own negativity so it can be caught and then released, never to return.

That Sunday back in July 2006, after handing out the very first no-complaint purple bracelets to my congregation and inviting everyone to commit to trying to go 21 consecutive days complaint free, I shared a story:

“When I was a boy,” I said, “I used to stand by the lake and throw rocks as far as I could out into the water. After the initial splash, I would watch as the ripples from the impact traveled out in every direction until they lapped the shores of the cove on every side. Together, we can create a ripple; right here, right now, in this small community, we can begin something that can touch and transform the world.”

Their tentative energy began to shift to enthusiasm.

“Let's give these purple bracelets free to anyone who asks for them,” I said. “Together, we'll make Kansas City, Missouri, the first ‘Complaint Free’ city in the United States!” Then I added, “Considering the way the Royals have played baseball this year, we've got a long road ahead of us.”

The room fell silent. Realizing my complaint, I moved my bracelet from my right wrist to my left for the first time—but certainly not the last.

People from our community began to hear about the purple bracelets. We ordered another 500, and they were committed before they arrived. We thought about ordering another thousand but wondered what we'd do with the leftover bracelets. We ordered them, and before the thousand came in they, too, were spoken for. Requests trickled in for them. The trickle became a drizzle, a downpour, and then a deluge.

Sensing something important was unfolding I called *The Kansas City Star* to ask who at the paper might be interested in a story like this. They referred me to Helen Gray, so I sent her an e-mail explaining what was happening.

As we sent the bracelets out, I found out personally how difficult this transformation could be. The first day, my hands got tired switching the bracelet from wrist to wrist. I realized that I was complaining all the time. I wanted to

call it quits, but everyone at church was watching me. After the first week, my personal best was to have only switched the bracelet five times in one day. And yet the following day, I was back up to twelve times, but I kept at it. I never thought of myself as a person who complained, but I was finding out otherwise. As I was struggling with not complaining, criticizing, or gossiping, I was simultaneously discouraged and glad that I'd not heard back from Ms. Gray at *The Star*. Although I thought this was a good idea, I certainly didn't feel as if I was excelling at the experiment and did not want to have to tell the reporter, "Yes, I'm the minister who challenged everyone to do this." And "Me? Well, after two weeks of really trying, I've made it almost six hours."

I stayed with it. Finally, after nearly a month, I had a string of three days going. Every Sunday, my congregation would look to see which arm the bracelet was on. I could see that some of them had taken off their bracelets. But many were staying with it. This inspired me tremendously. Finally, I wrote down a goal to "go 21 consecutive days complaint free by September 30." I read this goal three times each morning and three times each night. Slowly, I began to make progress.

I found that I could do very well around some people but not so well around others. Sadly, I realized that my relationships with some people I considered good friends centered on expressing our dissatisfaction about whatever we were talking about. I began to avoid them. I felt guilty at first, but I noticed that my bracelet stayed put. More important, I found myself beginning to feel happier.

After more than a month, Ms. Gray from *The Kansas City Star* e-mailed to say she'd been on vacation. She said she found the idea intriguing and wanted to write a story about our Complaint Free bracelets. As she was preparing the article, I finally completed my 21 days. When her first story came out, I was the only person to have made it.

I again confirmed with my church board that we would give bracelets free to anyone who wanted them. "We can help raise the consciousness of the world," we agreed. Little did we know that other papers would pick up the story from *The Kansas City Star*. Within weeks, we had requests for nearly 9,000 purple bracelets. We bought every purple bracelet our supplier had and ordered more. Volunteers stepped forward to automate our Web site so that bracelet requests would be taken directly from it, generating labels that our fulfillment team would use to package them. We acquired the Web site address TheComplaintReeChurch.org and more newspapers picked up the story, followed by television stations.

The idea was becoming bigger than just our church in Kansas City. A Catholic diocese requested 2,000 purple bracelets for everyone in their churches and schools. We started getting requests from places like Australia, Belgium, and South Africa. This was becoming a genuine worldwide phenomenon. Sensing that our "ripple in a pond" idea was actually going to make it around the planet, we purchased the Web site address AComplaintFreeWorld.org.

In time, we created a data-entry team, a fulfillment team, a supplies team, and a shipping team, all staffed by volunteers.

After 100-plus newspaper stories, *The Today Show*, and a true national launch on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, our movement is now millions strong and growing rapidly around the world! When I was interviewed by an associate producer for *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, I was asked what my goal was for this campaign. "To transform the consciousness of our world," I said. She looked at me and smiled sympathetically, "That's a pretty big dream, don't you think?" I returned her smile and said, "Do the math."

As I write this, we've received requests for nearly 6 million purple bracelets from people in more than 80 countries and we're receiving requests for approximately 1,000 bracelets every day. The average person takes 4 to 8 months to successfully make 21 days. Multiply the number of bracelets by the number of times most people complain and the world is already awakening to a new consciousness.

How many complaints have already been quelled as a result of this simple idea? How much more positive are homes, schools, workplaces, churches, sports teams, hospitals, prisons, police departments, fire departments, clinics,

the military, and government agencies now as compared to just a handful of months ago? In every corner of our world, there are people in all of these groups who are wearing purple bracelets and striving assiduously to frame their words only in the positive.

Transform the world? It's happening.

There are two things upon which most people will agree:

1. There is too much complaining in the world.
2. The state of the world is not the way we would like it.

In my opinion, there is a correlation between the two. We are focusing on what is wrong rather than focusing our vision on a healthy, happy, and harmonious world. And you are now part of this. It's no accident that you have picked up this book. You have answered your soul's call to stop being part of the problem and to become part of the solution. You can change the world by simply becoming an example of positive change. You can bear the torch for a bright future for our children by taking this challenge and staying with it, however long it takes, until you succeed. You can be a healing cell in the body of humanity.

The other day, I was at a Kansas City Royals game and there was a group of fans trying desperately to get a “wave” going around the stadium. The wave would begin with great enthusiasm as people leapt to their feet, raising their arms, and letting out a big “whoop!” It traveled around the park but began to fade at a certain section. The fans in that section, for whatever reason, were not committed to the wave and it stopped; the wave died.

This wave of human-consciousness transformation has now been passed on to you. You can keep it going. You can help create a Complaint Free World. Do it for those around you. Do it for your nation. Do it because it's a powerful first step toward world peace. Do it for your children and their children yet to come. But mostly, do it for yourself.

Do this for myself? Isn't that selfish? No. There is nothing wrong with doing something so you will benefit. As you become a happier person, you raise the overall level of happiness in the world. You will send out a vibration of optimism and hope that will resound with others of similar intent. You will *create* a network of expectation for a brighter future for all.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote that we should “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

The ripple continues.

Oh, and P.S.: Marcia made it!

Unconscious Incompetence

I Complain Therefore I Am

Man invented language to satisfy his deep need to complain.

— LILY TOMLIN

Complain: (verb) 1: to express grief, pain, or discontent complaining about the weather 2: to make a formal accusation or charge

—THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY

There are four stages to become competent at anything. In becoming a Complaint Free person, you will go through each of them and, sorry, you can't skip steps. You can't jump over them and effect lasting change. Some of the stages last longer than others. Everyone's experience with them varies. You might soar through one stage and then become stuck in another for a long time, but if you stay with it you will master this skill.

VOICES

Like most of the other folks who took up the Complaint free challenge quickly discovered exactly how many of the words I spoke in daily interactions were complaints. For the first time, I really heard myself when I vented about work, whined about my aches and pains, bemoaned political and world issues, and complained about the weather. What a shock to realize how many of my words held negative energy—and I considered myself such a positive person!

— MARTY POINTER, KANSAS CITY, MO

The four stages to competency are:

1. Unconscious Incompetence
2. Conscious Incompetence
3. Conscious Competence
4. Unconscious Competence

In “On a Distant Prospect of Eton College” Thomas Gray gave us the saying “ignorance bliss.” As you become a Complaint Free person, you begin in the bliss of ignorance, move through the turmoil of transformation, and arrive at true bliss. Right now, you are in the Unconscious Incompetence stage. You are unconscious about your being incompetent. You don't realize (are unconscious) as to how much you complain (are incompetent).

Unconscious Incompetence is as much a state of being as a stage of competency. This is where we all begin. In Unconscious Incompetence you are pure potential, ready to *create greatness*.

things for yourself. There are exciting new vistas about to be explored. All you have to do be willing to go through the remaining steps.

Many people are an “ouch!” looking for a hurt. If you cry “ouch” the hurt will show up. If you complain, you'll receive more to complain about. It's the Law of Attraction in action. As you complete these stages, as you leave complaining behind, as you are no longer an “ouch” looking for a hurt, your life will unfold for you like a beautiful spring flower.

One of the questions I'm often asked is “Can I never complain ... ever!?” To which my answer, “Of course you can complain.” I say this for two reasons:

1. I'm not out to tell you or anyone else what to do. If I were, I 'd be trying to change you and that means I'm focusing on something about you I don't like. I 'd be expressing my discontent about you and, by inference, complaining. So you can do whatever you want. It's your choice.
2. Sometimes it makes sense to complain.

Now, before you feel you've found your loophole in number 2 above, consider that word “sometimes” and remember that I and many, many people have gone three consecutive weeks—that's 21 days, or 504 hours in a row—without complaining at all. No complaints, zero, zip! When it comes to complaining, “sometimes” means “not very often at all.” Complaining should happen infrequently; criticism and gossip, never. If we are honest with ourselves, life events that lead us to legitimately complain (express grief, pain, or discontent) are exceedingly rare. Most of the complaining we do is just a lot of “ear pollution” that is detrimental to our happiness and well-being.

Check yourself. When you complain (express grief, pain, or discontent), is the cause severe? Are you complaining frequently? Has it been a month or more since you complained? If you're complaining more than once a month, you might just be giving in to habitual griping, which doesn't serve you. You're an “ouch” looking for a hurt.

To be a happy person who has mastered your thoughts and has begun creating your life by design, you need a very very high threshold of what leads you to express grief, pain, and discontent. The next time you're about to complain about something, ask yourself how the situation stacks up to something that happened to me a few years ago.

I was sitting in my office preparing a lesson. The home we lived in at the time was located at a sharp bend in the road. Drivers had to slow down to make the curve, and just 200 yards past our house the city road became a county highway and the speed limit changed from 25 mph to 55 mph. As a result, we lived on an acceleration/ deceleration lane. If it weren't for the curve in the road, our home would have been in a very dangerous place.

It was a warm spring afternoon and the lace curtains flapped softly in the breeze from the open windows. Suddenly, I heard a strange sound. There was a loud thud, followed by a scream. It wasn't the scream of a person, but rather that of an animal. Every animal, just like every person, has a unique voice, and I knew this voice well. It was our long-haired golden retriever, Ginger. Normally we don't think of dogs screaming. Barking, howling, whimpering—yes; but screaming is something we rarely hear. But that's exactly what Ginger was doing. She had been hit, and she lay in the road shrieking with pain not twenty feet outside my

window. I shouted and ran through the living room and out the front door, followed by my wife, Gail, and my daughter, Lia. Lia was six at the time.

As we approached Ginger, we could tell she was badly hurt. She was using her front legs to try to stand, but her hind legs did not seem to be helping. Again and again she yowled in pain. Neighbors poured from their homes to see what was causing the commotion. Lia just kept saying her name, "Ginger ... Ginger ...," as the tears flowed down her cheeks and wet her shirt.

I looked around for the driver who had hit Ginger but saw no one. Then I looked up the hill that marked the line between city road and county road and saw a truck, towing a trailer, cresting the hill and accelerating past 55 mph. Even though our dog lay there in agony, my wife stood in shock, and my daughter cried piteously, I was consumed with confronting the person who had hit Ginger. "How could anyone do this and just drive off?!" I thought. "He was just coming around the curve ... surely he saw her, surely he knew what happened!"

Abandoning my family in the midst of their pain and confusion, I jumped into my car and spun out of the driveway, leaving a plume of dust and gravel. Sixty, 75, 83 miles per hour along the gravel-and-dirt road in pursuit of the person who had hit Lia's dog and left without so much as facing us. I was going so fast on the uncertain surface that my car began to feel as if it were floating tenuously above the ground. In that moment, I calmed myself enough to realize that if I were killed while driving, it would be even harder on Gail and Lia than Ginger's having been hurt. I slowed down just enough to control my car as the distance between me and other driver closed.

Turning into his driveway and still not realizing I was after him, the man stepped from his truck in a torn shirt and oily jeans. I skidded in behind him and jumped from my car screaming "You hit my dog!!!" The man turned and looked at me as if I were speaking a foreign language. With blood raging in my ears, I wasn't sure I heard him correctly when he said, "I know I hit your dog.... What are you going to do about it?" After regaining my connection with reality, I shot back, "WHAT?!? What did you say?!" He smiled as if he were correcting an errant child and then said again, in slow, deliberate words, "I know I hit your dog.... Exactly what are you going to do about it?"

I was blind with rage. In my mind I kept seeing Lia in my rearview mirror standing over Ginger and crying. "Put up your hands," I yelled. "What?" he said. "Put up your hands," I said again. "Defend yourself ... I'm going to kill you!"

A few moments before, reason had kept me from killing myself while driving in a white-hot rage to find this guy. Now his dismissive and cavalier comment about having painfully wounded a pet I dearly loved had vanquished all reason. I had never been in a fight in my adult life. I didn't believe in fighting. I wasn't sure I knew how to fight. But I wanted to beat this man to death. In that moment, I didn't care if I ended up in prison.

"I ain't gonna fight you," he said. "And if you hit me, it's assault, mister." My arms raised, my fists clinched tight as diamonds, I stood there dumbfounded. "Fight me!" I said. "No, sir," he said, smiling through his remaining teeth, "I ain't gonna do no such thing." He turned his back and slowly walked away. I stood there shaking, anger poisoning my blood.

I don't remember driving back to my family. I don't remember lifting Ginger up and taking

her to the vet. I do remember the way she smelled the last time I held her and the way she whimpered softly as the vet's needle ended her suffering. "How could a person do such a thing?" I asked myself repeatedly.

Days later, the man's jagged smile still haunted me as I tried to sleep. His "What are you going to do about it?" rang in my ears. I visualized exactly what I would have done to him had we fought. In my visions I was a superhero destroying an evil villain. Sometimes, I imagined I had a baseball bat or other weapon and was hurting him, hurting him as badly as he had hurt me, my wife, my daughter, and Ginger.

On the third night of unsuccessful attempts to sleep, I got up and began to write in my journal. After spilling out my grief, pain, and discontent for nearly an hour, I wrote something surprising: "Those who hurt are hurting." Taking in my words as if they were from someone else, I wondered aloud, "What?" Again I wrote, "Those who hurt are hurting." I sat back, brooding in my chair, and listened to the spring peepers and the crickets celebrating the night. "Those who hurt are hurting? How could that apply to this guy?"

As I thought more about it, I began to understand. A person who could so easily hurt a treasured family pet must not know the love of companion animals as we do. A person who can drive away as a young child folds into tears could not know the love of a young child. A man who cannot apologize for spearing a family's heart must have had his heart speared many, many times. This man was the real victim in this story. Truly he had acted as a villain, but it came as a result of the depth of pain within him.

I sat a long time, letting this all sink in. Every time I began to feel angry at him and the pain he caused, I thought of the pain this man must live with on a daily basis. In time, I switched off the light, went to bed, and slept soundly.

Complain: to express grief, pain, or discontent.

During this experience, I felt grief. Ginger had shown up five years ago at our home in rural South Carolina. Several dogs had come to our home wanting to stay, but Gibson, our other dog, always ran them off. For some reason, he let Ginger stay. There was something special about Ginger. We presumed from her demeanor that she had been abused prior to coming to us. And, because she especially shied away from me, it was probably a man who had hurt her. After a year or so, she had begun to tentatively trust me. And in the remaining years, she had become a true friend. I deeply grieved her passing.

I certainly felt **pain**, real emotional pain that tore at my soul. Those of us with children know that we would rather endure any pain than have our children do so. And the pain my daughter Lia was going through redoubled my own.

I felt **discontent**. I felt torn for not having thrashed the guy as well as for having considered acting violently in the first place. I felt ashamed for having walked away from him and equally ashamed for having chased after him in the first place.

Grief. Pain. Discontent.

When this man hit Ginger, it was appropriate for me to have felt and to have expressed each of these. You may have experienced something equally difficult at some time in your life. Fortunately, such traumatic events are rare. Similarly, complaining (expressing grief, pain, or discontent) should be rare.

But for most of us, our complaints are not sourced by such deeply painful experiences. Rather, we're the character in the Joe Walsh song "Life's Been Good" —we can't complain but sometimes we still do. Things are not really bad enough to warrant expressing grief, pain, or discontent, but complaining is our default setting. It's what we do.

Ignorance is bliss. Prior to beginning your trek down the path to becoming a Complainer-Free person, you were probably blissfully unaware as to how much you complain and the damaging effect of your complaints on your life. For many of us, griping about the weather, our spouse, our work, our bodies, our friends, our jobs, the economy, other drivers, our country, or whatever we are thinking about is something we do dozens of times each and every day. Yet few of us realize how often we complain.

The words come out of our mouths, so our ears must hear them. But, for some reason, they don't register as complaints. Complaining can be likened to bad breath. We notice it when it comes out of someone else's mouth, but not when it comes from our own.

Chances are you complain a lot more than you think. And now that you've accepted the 21-day challenge to become complaint free, you have begun to notice it. You start moving the bracelet from wrist to wrist, and you realize how much you kvetch (Yiddish for "complain"—I'm not Jewish, but I really like the word).

Up until this point, you would probably have said, honestly, that you don't complain much, anyway. Certainly, you think that you only complain when something is legitimate and bothering you. The next time you're tempted to justify your complaining, remember Ginger's story and ask yourself if what you're going through is that bad. Then resolve to keep your pledge to not complain.

Everyone who has become a 21-Day Complaint Free Champion has said to me, "It wasn't easy, but it was worth it." Nothing valuable is ever easy. Simple? Yes. But "easy" is not part of becoming a successful person. I say this not to scare you but to inspire you. If you find becoming a Complaint Free person (monitoring and changing your words) difficult, it doesn't mean that you can't do it. And it doesn't mean there is something wrong with you. M. K. Alderson said, "If at first you don't succeed, you're running about average." If you're complaining, you're right where you're supposed to be. Now you're becoming aware of it, and you can begin to erase it from your life.

You can do this. I complained dozens of times every single day, and I made it. The key is not to give up. There is a wonderful woman in my church who is still wearing one of the original purple bracelets we gave out. Hers is now tattered and gray, but she told me recently, "They might bury me with this thing, but I'm not giving up."

That's the level of commitment it takes. The good news is that even before you make 21 consecutive days of not complaining, you will find your internal focus shifting and yourself becoming happier. Here is an e-mail I received today:

Hi,

Like thousands, I have already begun changing my focus. While waiting for my bracelet, I have started to wear a rubber band around my wrist. This has made me aware of what I'm doing. I've been doing this for about a week, and I am now rarely complaining. *The remarkable thing about this is how much happier I feel!* Not to mention how much happier those around me must be (like my husband!). I have wanted to work on my complaining for a long time and the bracelet campaign has been the impetus for my changing behavior.

The subject of the bracelets and the mission behind them has come up in MANY conversations, so the mission has a HUGE ripple effect where MANY people are at least thinking about how often they complain and perhaps deciding to behave differently. This movement may have a very far reaching effect as more and more people hear of the idea. The reach of this mission is far greater than those who actually get the bracelets! Awesome to think about!

Jeanne Reilly
Rockville, Md.

Venerated radio commentator Paul Harvey once said, "I hope one day to achieve enough of what the world calls success so that if someone asks me how I did it I will tell them, 'I get up more times than I fall.'" As with all things worth accomplishing, you must fail your way to success. If you're like most when you begin this process, you will probably move your bracelet from arm to arm until you get sore and tired of doing it. I moved my bracelet so many times that I broke three of them before making it 21 consecutive days. If you break yours, go to www.AComplaintFreeWorld.org and ask for another.

But if you'll stay with it, one day you'll be lying in bed about to drift off to sleep and glance at your wrist. There, for the first time in days, months, or even years, you'll see that your purple bracelet is on the same wrist as it was when you got out of bed that morning. You think, "I must have complained at some point today and just not caught myself" But as you do a mental inventory, you'll realize that you made it. You actually made it one whole day without complaining! One day at a time. You can do it.

As you begin this transformation, you are fortunate, because even with my warnings of the difficulty ahead, you have a psychological advantage working for you. It's called the Dunning-Kruger effect. Whenever a person tries something new, whether it be snow skiing, juggling, playing the flute, riding a horse, meditating, writing a book, painting a picture, or anything, it is part of human nature to think it will be simple to master. The Dunning-Kruger effect is named for Justin Kruger and David Dunning of Cornell University, who did studies on people attempting to learn new skills. Their results, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in December 1999, stated that "ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge." In other words, you're not aware that doing something is difficult, so you try it. You think, "This is going to be easy," so you begin, and getting started is the most difficult part.

Without the Dunning-Kruger effect, if we knew the amount of effort it would actually take to become proficient at a new skill, we would probably give up before we begin. My wife Gail, sums it up well. When asked, "What's the best way to learn to ride a horse?" Gail always responds, "Time in the saddle ... time in the saddle."

Time in the saddle. Wearing the purple bracelet (or rubber band, coin in your pocket, or other self-monitoring tool) and moving it. Moving it every time you complain. Moving it even though it seems hard, embarrassing or frustrating. Moving it even after you've made

ten days. Starting over again and again. Staying with it even if others around you have given up. Staying with it even if others around you have succeeded and your personal best so far two days. Staying with it... time in the saddle ... time in the saddle.

There is an old story of two construction workers sitting down to eat lunch together. One opens his lunch box and complains, “Yech! A meatloaf sandwich ... I hate meatloaf sandwiches.” His friend says nothing. The following day, the two meet up again for lunch. Again the first worker opens his lunch box, looks inside, and, this time more agitated, says, “Another meatloaf sandwich!? I'm sick and tired of meatloaf sandwiches. I hate meatloaf sandwiches!” As before, his colleague remains silent. The third day, the two are preparing to eat lunch when the first construction worker opens his lunch box and begins to shout, “I've had it!! Day in and day out it's the same thing! Meatloaf sandwiches every blessed day! I want something else!” Wanting to be helpful, his friend asks, “Why don't you just ask your wife to make you something else?” With bewilderment on his face, the first man replies, “What are you talking about? I make my own lunch.”

Tired of meatloaf sandwiches? You're making your own lunch each and every day. Change what you are saying. Stop complaining. Change your words, change your thoughts, and you will change your life. When Jesus said, “Seek and ye shall find,” it was a statement of a universal principle. What you seek, you will find. When you complain, you are using the incredible power of your mind to seek things that you say you don't want but nonetheless draw them to you. Then you complain about these new things and attract more of what you don't want. You get caught in the “complaint loop”—a self-fulfilling prophecy of complaint: manifestation, complaint: manifestation, complaint: manifestation, and on and on it goes.

In *The Outsider*, Albert Camus wrote, “Gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.” The Universe is benign indifference. The Universe, or God, or Spirit, or whatever you choose to call it, is benign (good), but it is also indifferent (it does not care). The Universe doesn't care if you use the power of your thoughts as indicated by your words to call to yourself love, health, happiness, abundance, and peace, or if you attract to yourself pain, suffering, misery, loneliness, and poverty. Our thoughts create our world, our words indicate our thoughts. When we control our words by eradicating complaining, we create our lives with intention and attract what we desire.

Complaining and Health

Of all the self-fulfilling prophecies in our culture, the assumption that aging means decline and poor health is probably the deadliest.

— MARILYN FERGUSON, *THE AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY*

We complain for the same reason we do anything: We perceive a benefit from doing so. I remember vividly the night I discovered the benefits of complaining. I was thirteen years old and at a sock hop. If you're too young to remember, sock hops were dances, often held at high school gyms. They were called sock hops because the kids attending were required to remove their shoes to protect the gymnasium floors. These dances were popular in the United States during the 1950s, but a resurgence of sock hops occurred with the 1973 release of George Lucas's film *American Graffiti*. In 1973, the church I attended sponsored a sock hop for teenagers. Being thirteen at the time, and thereby a teenager, I went to the dance.

VOICES

I came home from work early yesterday and having had an exceptionally tough day with my back (major spinal fusion/ cervical fusions), I just wanted to relax and feel sorry for my self. At 47, I have a laundry list of medical issues that weigh me down. But when I plopped on the couch and watched you on *Oprah*, I was inspired!

I complain every day about my pain and am on so many pain medications. You are right, the complaints do weigh me down, and I want to participate in the no complaint zone. I have ordered 10 bracelets for my self, and some friends. I will be sending a small donation at a later time for these bracelets, but mostly am writing to you to say thank you.

I am most grateful to God that I CAN walk; I have good friends, a loving family, and a good job. I need to refocus my energies on being grateful and not wallow in self-pity for my myriad of medical problems. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

— CINDYLA FOLLETT, CAMBRIDGE, OH

Being a thirteen-year-old boy is interesting, to say the least. For the first time, girls are no longer “gross.” When you're a thirteen-year-old boy, girls are both magnetically alluring and simultaneously, terrifying. Terrifying as they might be, when I was thirteen girls occupied my

every waking thought and haunted my dreams. Thoughts of skateboards, model ship movies, and comics were all swept from my consciousness by thoughts of girls. I was under their spell. I wanted desperately to connect with girls but had no idea how to do so or what I'd do once I did. I was like the old joke about a dog chasing cars that finally caught one and then didn't know what to do with it. I wanted to be close to girls but was afraid to come near them.

The night of the sock hop was hot and humid. The girls were adorned in poodle skirts, bouffant hairdos, saddle shoes, and bright red lipstick. The boys' costumes consisted primarily of peg-leg jeans rolled up at the ankles, a white T-shirt with a cigarette pack (borrowed from our parents) rolled up in the sleeve, penny loafers with pennies in them, and hair slicked back into a style called a DA. The soundtrack from *American Graffiti* played over and over again as the girls stood giggling on one side of the room and I and the other boys kept to the opposite side of the room, lounging on metal folding chairs and desperately trying to look cool. We were panic-stricken about going over to the girls, even though every strand of our DNA begged us to do so. If we looked cool enough, we reasoned, perhaps the girls would come to us. If not, at least they would think we didn't care if they did or not.

My best friend at the time, Chip, was tall, a good student, and a great athlete. Of the three I was, well, tall. And unlike Chip, I was quite chubby. For as long as I could remember, clothes shopping meant my mother and me taking the escalator to the basement of Belk Department Store. The basement was the home of the "husky" (fat boys) department and the only place I could find clothes that fit.

Because Chip was in such good shape, I could tell that several of the girls were eyeing him. It hurt to know that he was more attractive to them than I was, and it also bothered me that Chip just sat there with us rather than going over and talking to one of them.

"I'm too shy," Chip said. "I don't know what to say." "Just go over there; let them do the talking," I said. "You can't just sit here all night." "YOU'RE just sitting here," Chip said, "and you're Mr. Talkative. You go over and say something to them."

Drug addicts will often remember the first time they tried what would ultimately become their "drug of choice," the drug that would consume and possibly take their lives if they couldn't shake their addiction to it. With my next sentence, I was about to embark on an addiction to complaining that would last more than thirty years. I looked at Chip and said, "Even if I went over there and talked to them, they wouldn't dance with me. I'm too fat. Look at me, I'm thirteen and I shot past 200 pounds a long time ago. I wheeze when I talk. I sweat when I walk—I'd probably fall down if I danced. You're in great shape. The girls are looking at you." The other guys nodded in agreement. "I'm just a funny guy they like to talk to about the boys they do like. I'm too fat. They don't want me ... and they never will."

At that moment, another good friend walked up from behind and slapped me on the back. "Hey, fat boy!" he said. Normally, his greeting would have meant nothing. Nearly everyone called me "fat boy." It was a nickname I'd grown used to. I never took it as an insult. They were my friends and it didn't matter to them that I was fat. But when I was called "fat boy" after having just given a greatly embellished speech on how tough it was being overweight, a way of getting myself out of going over to the girls, the effect in our little circle was palpable. One of my other friends said, "Hey, shut up!" "Leave him alone!" another said. "I

not his fault he's fat!" a third said. Every one of them looked at me with great concern.

"Play it up!" my mind said. So I sighed and looked away dramatically. When I complained about my body and its probable impact on my chances with the girls, I had gotten the other guys' attention, their sympathy, and I had gotten myself off the hook from going over and talking to the young ladies. My drug had kicked in. I had found my addiction. Complaining could get me high.

Years later, when I didn't get a job, I told myself and others it was because I was fat. When I got a traffic ticket, it was because I was fat. It would take me another five and a half years to shed this excuse and the weight that was damaging my health.

Psychologist Robin Kowalski wrote that many complaints "involve attempts to elicit particular interpersonal reactions from others, such as sympathy or approval. For example, people may complain about their health, not because they actually feel sick but because the *sick role* allows them to achieve secondary gains such as sympathy from others or the avoidance of aversive events."^{*}

By complaining and playing the "fat card," I had gotten sympathy and approval, and I had a justifiable reason for not talking to the girls. My complaining had benefited me. You may have done something similar at some point in your life. We complain to get sympathy, attention, and to avoid stepping up to something we're afraid of doing. When I was a kid and had symptoms of the flu or other illness, I'd play it up to stay home from school and watch TV. The odd thing was, I'd often find myself getting sicker after complaining about how I felt.

Have you ever played the sick role? Are you doing so now? Poor health is one of the most common complaints people voice. People complain about their health to get sympathy and attention and to avoid "aversive events" such as adopting a healthier lifestyle. When we complain about our health, we may receive these benefits, but at what cost?

You have probably heard the term "psychosomatic illness." A psychosomatic illness is caused by the mental processes of the sufferer rather than physiological causes. There is a tendency in our society to believe that psychosomatic illnesses are "made up" by a small number of disturbed individuals. Many believe that these diseases, having been created by the patient, are not to be taken seriously. However, doctors estimate that nearly two-thirds of their time is spent treating patients whose illnesses have psychological origins.^{*}

Think about that. Two-thirds of illnesses originate in the mind. Indeed, the word *psychosomatic* comes from *psyche*, meaning "mind," and *soma*, meaning "body." Therefore, psychosomatic literally means "mind/body." There is a connection between the mind and the body. What the mind believes, the body manifests. Dozens of research studies have shown that what a person believes about their health leads to that belief becoming real for them. I heard a story on National Public Radio where doctors found that if they told patients a drug held great promise in curing them, the drug had a far greater beneficial effect than it did for patients who received the same drug without such a suggestion. The story went on to report one study that found that Alzheimer's patients who had other physical illnesses, such as high blood pressure, did not get the full benefit of the drugs they took because, due to their diminished memory, they could not remember taking their daily medications. The mind has a powerful effect on the body.

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