FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS

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To my husband, Jim—days with you
continue to inspire me to focus on what truly matters.

To my sons, Marco, Paolo and Joshua,
—you make my life worth living!

To my parents, Boy and Evelyn Nazareno,
who have inspired me to live a life of generosity and love.

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Preface

The intention behind this book is to lead us through a journey of focusing on what matters. It is inspired by my own personal desire to pursue clarity amidst the difficulties and challenges of life. It is a result of my search for that balance, that peace, that inner calm that will get me through life's challenges. In that personal search, I have met many people along the way who have asked me, "How do I stay focused?"

It is my hope that this book will help you discover deeper truths about yourself, and that you will learn to trust your personal wisdom. I hope this book will help you understand yourself better. Help you define love, life, and living for yourself, to help you make better decisions.

In my experience as a professional life coach, I provide clients with helpful structures in addition to being available to them in coaching conversations. These build a foundation for greater clarity for them as they move on in life. This book is not meant to take the place of a visit to a mentor, psychologist, counselor, or psychiatrist. Rather, it presents a framework and options for readers to use and to help them find and *anchor* on clarity throughout the life experiences that come their way.

Life is too short. We never know when our time will come. There are sudden accidents, long battles with cancer, or phone calls or messages telling us that a loved one just passed away. All these are reminders that our time is limited.

At the age of 30, I had a near-death experience that forced me to put things in perspective. I was successful and earning a lot and yet found myself feeling empty, unhappy, shallow, and worthless. It was January 1, 2004, and I woke up with difficulties in breathing. I was experiencing a severe allergic reaction that was causing my airways to close—anaphylactic shock. My husband put me in the car and rushed me to the hospital.

On my way to the emergency room, I thought to myself, "If these were my final moments before

judgment, then have I loved enough? Have I optimized my full potential here on earth? Have I lived my life's purpose?" Clearly, my answer was I had not.

With all the talents bestowed on me, I had not made enough of an impact or improvement in the lives of others. It was a very heavy feeling—a feeling of deep regret for having spent so much energy being weighed down by selfish and self-centered endeavors. I was feeding my ego and my pride, and making decisions out of insecurity. These were decisions such as spending my money on unnecessary luxuries for myself: expensive shoes, bags, and jewelry that do not even come close to what I would choose for my life's legacy.

As my life flashed before my eyes, I realized that such decisions did not contribute to my freedom. I realized that it was a bad call, to decide to spend money on material things which I cannot take with me when I die. As I evaluated this, a feeling of great heaviness came upon me. I knew that if I were given another chance, I would have to do things differently.

At that moment, as I faced my mortality, my soul's consciousness shifted beyond my physical body. I was inside my body, and yet my deepest desires—what I loved and cared for—and my feelings of being alive radiated beyond my physical existence. It was as if my

thoughts were freed, my state of being was limitless, and my soul began to soar. My two sons at the time were three and less than a year old, respectively, but my cares were no longer for them or with them. My concern was more a matter of a love and nurturing that went beyond the role I played as wife and mother. It was a sense of accountability for the lives around me, even those beyond my immediate circle. My soul felt like it was being judged with regard to how my life decisions had improved or provided meaning or purposefulness to others around me.

Questions came to me: Have I lived my life for myself thus far? Have I offered my life, my hours, days, years, to reach out to others, to provide comfort to those in need, the less privileged and marginalized, the lost, hurt, and broken?

The passion behind this book proceeds from that single, clear, and significant near-death experience. We will all encounter death. Some of us may get a chance to look back and weigh each separate moment of our lives as we have responded to them. Some of us are given a chance to come back from the brink of death. I feel I was given that chance, along with a desire to help prepare people for when that time for them comes.

The gift of this temporal life is the liberty—or even luxury—to be indifferent to and detached from what we love or what we hate, to know deep within ourselves that whatever is happening to us or around us is temporary and fleeting. If we have spiritual beliefs, we can see this in the thought that the soul lives beyond the physical body and the fact that the physical body is limited by space and time.

Our life on earth is defined by roles and responsibilities—positions, expectations, standards, and relationships. What all this does is provide the soul with a learning space, a school structure to get to know and understand realities and lessons—existential lessons that mature our souls. These lessons help us extend outward in assistance and support of all that is created. They refine our souls to be free of any tainted filters that may prevent us from rendering unconditional service.

This book is also inspired by my wanting to do more, to be more, to live more, to be free in the truest sense of the word. No matter what difficulties come my way, I wish to stay focused on what truly matters most in my life, making decisions that are free from fear or restlessness, insecurity, or pride. These would be

decisions that I am confident and at peace with because they are made with clarity and freedom.

In my choice of a bachelor's degree, I was led to take up philosophy at a Jesuit university. This sparked an openness to questions of being, meaning, and purpose. After university, I asked myself, "What would be a worthwhile use of my time while I am still unclear of my choice of occupation?" By His grace, this led to the desire to learn more about that singular yearning of my soul, an understanding of my God. Who is He? What is He? What has made Him who He is to the world today? At the end of this book, I write more about this deeper yearning for knowing my God, and the journey that inspires me to live out my best in every daily challenge.

I then took units in theological studies at the same university, and my studies eventually led to my writing my first book, *Born to be a Hero*™. I wrote this first book while organizing a group of young adults just out of university in the summer of 2008. I had just resigned as Director of Student Activities from the university where I had also studied theology. I spent all my working hours there with the best and the brightest students that the school could offer. Despite their academic success, leadership skills and oozing

confidence, when graduation came, none of them had any clear idea what they would like to do after school. There was a common sense of being at a loss, so much so that even the best and the brightest felt uneasy, insecure, uncertain, and even afraid of the unknown world ahead of them.

I sat down with them, sharing the confidence I had gained from being 12 years older. Having had that head start, I realized that the solution was neither to provide them the certainty, nor to provide them the answers, nor train them in the skills to get ahead of the pack. The solution was to unplug them from the need to know or act immediately. It was important to mentor them through a process of personal mastery: of getting to know themselves more in order to make the best decisions they can for their lives. It was in those conversations that I observed the value of their understanding the *gap* between their own personal preferences and the expectations of the world, a topic that we will be covering later on in this book.

These same conversations were the inspiration behind providing others with a means of letting go of any attachment to specific outcomes, and a process that would allow them to stay focused. I wanted to help them hone their skills at finding clarity and staying focused

despite the uncertainties that life would continue to bring.

Years later, in 2014, I gave a series of monthly talks on the distractions that keep us from cultivating our higher selves. Each month, I focused on one particular distraction—anger, fear, pride, regret, among others. These are emotional habits that consume a lot of our energy, bring down our wellbeing, and lead us to make ill-informed decisions. At each talk, attendees would ask me questions, and of course, several common concerns would come up. They asked me how they could deal with difficult people in their lives, or why they had not found love yet, or why it was hard to take on a new direction.

I tried my best to show them the importance of taking care of themselves first and having a sense of personal responsibility for their lives. Yet it did not feel enough. I needed to give them a framework they could use on a daily basis that would somehow act as a guide to making sense of themselves and clarifying their priorities.

I usually introduce such a framework in a two-day program that I call Discover Your Core. But because the monthly talks were only around 40 minutes long, there was not enough time to introduce it to the attendees.

What happened then, over the course of 2015, was that the content of the monthly talks evolved and combined with the Discover Your Core framework, and what came out was this book.

My hope is that this book will help us find clarity and stay focused on what matters. No matter how we strive to know, to understand, to make sense of, and to act accordingly, all of us have to face personal hindrances or obstacles that leave us uncertain and prevent us from staying on the right path. These obstacles may come in the form of how we think, feel, or act. Understanding and overcoming them are essential in our seeing more clearly. When we are anchored on our clarity, we find it easier to stay focused.

Though there are many life concerns that get in the way and our staying focused on what matters becomes difficult, this book will, hopefully, present ways for us to build resilience so that we can develop the necessary skills to keep our spirits high and moving forward.

There are uncertainties that come with every twist and turn in life. The earlier we reconcile with this fact, the more we can make the most of it. To find focus amidst uncertainty is a choice inasmuch as it is a gift.

Introduction

This book is intended to help us understand and clarify what is worth focusing on in our lives. If you picked this book up and bought it, then there must be a need for focus somewhere in your life. If you are dealing with confusion in your thoughts, feelings, or decisions, this book will present options for focusing on what matters to help simplify your life. This also serves as a guide to build resilience and self-acceptance, which help us go past our personal issues and find our truest selves. Points and examples[1] provided in this book will help you get in touch with what weighs you down and what motivates you to go deeper and acknowledge the core of your being.

[1] *Names of people have been changed to protect their privacy.*

To make the most of this book, I invite you to commit to the process. I will be walking you through all new terms and concepts as you take the journey to focusing on what matters.

Focusing on what matters begins with laying the foundation for finding clarity through the exercise of self-mastery, self-development, and self-commitment —a process that I call *Inner Work*.

The first section of the book discusses major elements to strengthening our *Inner Work*. This means developing the skills that help us *anchor* ourselves on what is clear and detach ourselves from our personal reactions to life events. *Inner Work* is grounded on the habit of Motivating ourselves, Inspiring ourselves, Cheering for ourselves, and being Kind to ourselves (*MICK*). This foundation builds a core of assurance and confidence that will help us focus as we go through the process.

The second section discusses the process of finding clarity, as well as the obstacles and hindrances that keep us from focusing on what matters. The section starts with helping us identify these distractions, then provides a framework for dealing with distractions from a place of clarity, free from fear and pride.

The third section of the book guides us in applying various tools that empower us to choose the life we want, find balance in the Five Aspects of Life and embrace the changes that come our way. Finally, the last section of the book deepens our understanding of what it means to authentically represent ourselves, and live a life of love and of focusing on what matters.

As you prepare to go through this book, I invite you to do three things:

1. Put aside some time to read and digest the points presented in each chapter, and to go through the exercises and record your insights in a journal. This book is not meant to be finished in one sitting. Ideally, twenty to thirty minutes a day will do. If you just have five to ten minutes of personal time, then take those brief moments to invest in yourself. Make sure this is a time when you will be undisturbed so that you can reflect on your life. Whether in the morning or at night, any time during the day when you can be alone will work.
2. Find a place free of distractions. This should be a room or space where you will be comfortable, where no one will interrupt you, and where you will feel free and safe to be yourself. Set aside your mobile

phones and other devices and keep them on silent mode. Ask the people around you in your life to give you this time to yourself.

3. Use a daily journal. Some of you may have the option of using the journal that I have designed as a companion for the book. Journaling daily may seem challenging in the beginning, but will be quite beneficial in your ability to *focus on what matters* in the long run. Going back to what you have written for the week, for example, will help you focus on how you are progressing in your journey. This book includes exercises that will ask you to write your thoughts down. *Feel free to choose only those exercises and questions that allow you to go deeper into your process.* I invite you to write your journal entries by hand. Use this opportunity to write about any highs and lows in your life, and other insights that come up as a result of the exercises provided in this book. If there is anything specific that is troubling you, you may also write about it for a few minutes each day while you are alone.

These three recommendations are part of committing to the process of finding clarity and focusing on what matters.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Self-Mastery, Self-Development, and Self-Commitment

There are too many things happening all at once in our life, such that we have to make a deliberate effort to look inward in order to deal with these challenges. In the past 15 years of my leading people to clarity, I have observed that one of the greatest challenges in this life is discerning what is worth spending time and energy on. We need a practical model in choosing which of the many options presented to us is worth pursuing or is the best path to take. We need a structured guide to zero in and spend time on what we truly value in our life.

In 2009, I put up a company with Pia Magalona. How interesting that two women with the same first name end up committing to growing an organization

together. Pia's husband, the famous Filipino rapper, actor, and all-around entertainer, Francis Magalona, passed away that year at the age of 44, leaving Pia with eight children. We met on the set of a television talk show. I was the guest resource person, while she was asked to share about the loss of her husband at such a young age. With a common battle cry of "Life is too short," we decided to put up a company that would support individuals in making better life decisions.

We called the company The OneCORE—*One* referring to the need for each person to prioritize themselves first; *CORE* referring to that which defines us—our values, principles, and beliefs—whatever grounds us and makes us unique.

The inspiration behind putting up The OneCORE is to support and assist people in making better life decisions so that they can focus on what really matters in their life. All programs and services of The OneCORE have been designed for people who are at a crossroad, zeroing in on the specific life transitions that they may be going through.

We began with programs for university graduates, then moved to creating programs and services for young professionals, newlyweds, young parents, children

from middle school onwards, and retirees, respectively. We have been providing coaching, training and employee-assistance programs since 2009. Our services have since evolved to include ongoing online support and participation on mainstream media, which includes radio and television. Truly, this is a mission we continue to be proud of.

Supporting our commitment to journey with people in focusing on what matters are eight statements that we call the Guiding Principles of The OneCORE.

People can make the right decisions for themselves.

People have inherent wisdom.

Every individual grows through their personal process.

It is important to achieve balance in the Five Aspects of Life: Self, Family, Social Life, Career, and Sense of Purpose.

People should have the courage to pursue their own dreams.

It is important that we surround ourselves with positive people.

Self-mastery, self-development, and self-commitment are essential to achieve a purposeful life.

Genuine humility creates personal success.

These are beliefs that keep us grounded and strong in our core. They provide us with a strong foundation, serving as a starting point for those in the process of finding and anchoring on clarity. These principles provide that necessary learning space for us to truly see our authentic selves amidst the many challenges and crises that we all experience in life.

When we invest in focusing on ourselves and on what we believe in, we are then rightly equipped to make a difference and be of service to people around us. Being strong in our core allows us to create an environment that imbibes our personal values and beliefs.

Having a strong core allows us to *anchor* ourselves on what truly matters. One must find clarity and focus through a commitment to self-mastery and a knowledge of self that we call *Inner Work*. One of OneCORE's Guiding Principles includes a dedication to these three practices of self-mastery, self-development, and self-commitment. It is in sticking to these three that we become attuned to who we are, how we are changing, and how dedicated we are to ourselves and our process.

Self-Mastery

Unless we prioritize our understanding of who we really are, what we really value, and what we are really made of, our steps toward focusing on what matters would be compromised. I am no longer the same person I was 10, 15, 20, 30 years ago. We all grow, evolve, and mature. Staying plugged in to what is new about ourselves is an integral part of self-mastery. Let us be sensitive to personal insights or feelings that are revealed to us in response to new situations that we encounter. It is possible that there are situations that we may have been comfortable with in the past that may be a cause for concern today.

Back in 2005, we hired someone new to help us care for our boys. The job was to be part nanny and part household help. This person would help take care of the boys and also clean and tidy up the home at the end of the day. At the time, our eldest son Marco was five and Paolo was two years old. Less than eight days into the job, I was informed that this person had lost her temper and raised her voice at my son. There was some allusion to her possibly physically hurting them, but when that came up, I was not ready or willing to hear the rest of the story. I informed this lady right away that unfortunately, we were not a right fit to work together, and I terminated her services. She was apologetic and admitted to

having lost her temper with the boys. Much to my surprise, I was not ready or willing to receive her apology.

I always saw myself as one who would accept an apology if another person reached out and extended it. But I discovered something new about myself that day. Even if someone insisted to see me then, reaching out to me to extend an apology, I may not be ready or willing to accept one. Since then, I have been very open to mastering more things about my own person. I constantly learn how to be more patient, kind, and generous with more things than I was before. I try to see how I can be more sensitive, cautious, or concerned about things that normally did not worry me in the past.

Self-Development

Discovering new things about ourselves is an invitation to respect, care for, and nurture who we are. Self-mastery or awareness is the first step. It is important to note that beyond the initial awareness is a deeper process, an *awakening* that needs to be discovered. There may be something in our lives that we wish to change. And yet many months or years after, we find ourselves still unable to work them out. For example, you may be aware that you are a people-pleaser and yet, you cannot say no when

family or friends ask for a favor. Time passes and you find yourself in the same predicament—allocating most of your week for tasks or favors others have asked of you and losing real quality time for yourself. Our process of personal development takes time, hence the next step.

Self-Commitment

Personal growth is a process, and life continues to invite us to a devotion and assurance that we will do our best as stewards of our personal gifts and talents. When faced with uncertainty or doubt, we are invited to choose a path that leads to clarity and confidence. We have to make that decision to continuously invest in ourselves. Even if our natural instinct when drowning is to swim for the surface, many people unknowingly choose to become accustomed to the discomfort of drowning or even the feeling of sinking.

We are invited to do what it takes to master, develop, and commit to a higher calling—our life's purpose. We are invited to *"do it until"*. Doing it until means for us to stay the course until we arrive at the clarity we seek.

People have their own process. I emphasize this principle here to remind all of us that the process of

finding focus and clarity is different for each of us. It is not a matter of going fast or slow, but rather being patient with our personal process.

The desire to make a difference and have better relationships with people around us is our incentive to master who we are, and continue to grow and commit to being better. We continue to commit to ourselves in order to be life-giving to others. We commit to achieving clarity and focus in our own lives in order to provide the same calm encouragement and for others.

Our journey towards personal mastery, continuous development, and self-commitment is inspired by our desire to be a better parent, spouse, manager, boss, leader, and friend. All these relationships encourage us to be better. Relationships can be complex, and it is important that we remain strong in our core as we connect with these very distinct and unique relationships in our life. Relationships are dynamic, ever-growing and constantly maturing—just as we are dynamic, ever-growing, and constantly maturing on our own. Hence, there is a need to constantly commit and focus on being the best we can be.

There are several exercises included in this book to guide you in doing it until. Some of these exercises we may only need to do once, while others we may need to go over several times. It does not matter how many times we repeat the exercises. What is more important is that we stick to our process with patience and understanding. Feel free to choose only those exercises that help you move forward in your process. My invitation here is for us to be open to this new, profound journey of self-mastery and development. I invite you to *do it until*.

There is a mystery to growth that we only discover and recognize after it has taken place. The pace of doing it until is different for all of us. The exercises in this book are a start, like a springboard. The rest is up to you.

If you have any specific ideas of what clarity would mean for you, I invite you to let them go. Let us do the work that will cultivate our clarity, but let us not hold on to our expectations. Your clarity will arise at its own time as long as you make space for it and invite it in. I ask that you trust your process to take you where you need to go. I also ask that you do the work needed to get there.

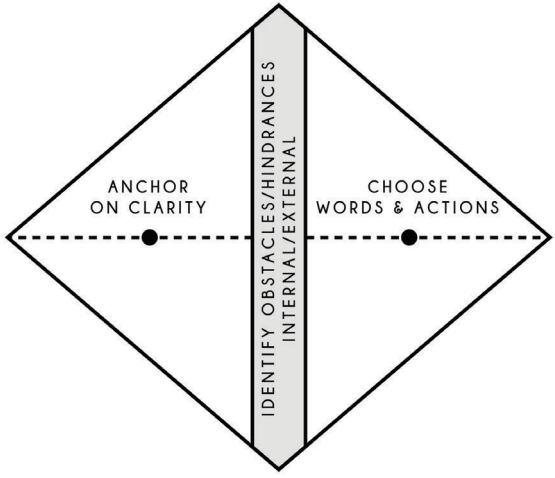
CHAPTER 2

The Clarity Framework: An Overview

Valuing the journey of clarity and focus will be emphasized throughout this book. Let us begin by familiarizing ourselves with the process to attain clarity. Everyone achieves clarity and focus at their own pace. The Clarity Framework aims at helping us arrive at the best decision for ourselves by accomplishing three main steps:

1. Ask yourself: What is clear?

What seems like a simple question is quite complex and challenging. Many of our experiences are compounded and complicated by the stories we tell ourselves about our life or about the world in general. The Clarity Framework begins with finding clarity in how we see our life experiences.



The Three Main Steps of the Clarity Framework

Rachelle was working in a production company as an executive producer. She was promoted several times over the years, beginning as an intern and making her way to the top. At the height of her success, Rachelle took a risk and started all over again to follow her real passions: film and photography. She quit her job to take an internship with an advertising company that tapped into these interests.

However, Rachelle's decision led to a lot of doubt and fear. She felt a need to prove herself to her new colleagues even while she was suspicious of their motives when working with her. This crisis led Rachelle to discover that her lack of trust in others stemmed from her inability to trust her mother. She remembered that while she was growing

up, she and her mother had an unhealthy relationship, and Rachelle had to constantly prove herself to her mother.

Even as an adult and a professional, she was still trying to prove to her mother that following her passion was the right thing to do. Rachelle's mother had also opposed this career move and saw this decision as her daughter disregarding her priceless advice. The bad decisions Rachelle made afterward were also proof of this disregard.

Rachelle worked hard to find clarity in pursuing her inspiration. She reminded herself that what she did lifted her spirits and gave meaning to her work. She found clarity in discovering that her choices were not about disregarding her mother's advice and rebelling. Her clarity lay in finding meaningful, inspiring work and not in proving herself to her mother. Her journey was fraught with doubt and fear, not to mention reduced income from her career shift. Despite all this, by finding her clarity and staying focused on her dreams, Rachelle was able to find happiness and meaning for herself, and her professional success eventually came after.

2. What are the obstacles and hindrances to finding my personal clarity?

Once we have answered the question "What is clear?" we need to pay attention to what it is that may be preventing our ability to *focus on what matters*. This

means identifying the obstacles and hindrances in our way. We all have core issues that prevent us from seeing things clearly. Concerning our future, we may be anxious about possible failures or impatient for success. Concerning our past, we may be holding on to some anger, guilt, frustration, or regret. Either way, we lose out on the significance of each present moment and are compromised in our decisions.

There is always something worth clarifying. It is possible that we are clear that our job makes us happy. But an obstacle to clarity would be the heaviness that comes with spending less time with our loved ones due to the demands of that same job. We are torn between devoting our time to a job to earn the income that we want and spending more time with our loved ones.

Elmer could not wait for his life to start. For him, this would begin when he attained a high-paying job that would let him live in comfort and luxury. Elmer only realized later on that he was trapped in the rat race of his career. He was so focused on his quotas and commissions that he lost sight of what truly mattered in his life.

Elmer found himself spending less time with his growing family. He became aware that his desire for material comforts was hindering him from spending meaningful time to get

to know his children better and be more present to his wife. Only by addressing the obstacles and prioritizing his personal clarity did Elmer learn to find balance in his life. He decided to make an effort to always leave work on time so that he can get home to his family and spend more quality time with each of them.

3. What can we say or do that represents our clarity?

The third and last step is to align what is clear with the choices we now make as we move forward. Representing ourselves well would be for us to have a choice of words, expressions and actions that will exemplify who we truly are. The objective of this step would be for others to meet our authentic selves in all that we say or do. Our authentic self is characterized by a genuine, truthful, and honest representation of who we are in the different aspects of our life.

Shayne is the eldest of 6 children. Her parents had her when they were still teenagers. She grew up being friends with her mother and father rather than being nurtured by them. Even at a young age she had a natural maturity about her. She was articulate, level-headed, and very intelligent. She was a natural leader who surpassed all the expectations her family had of her. She had been raised by parents who had her when they were so young. She found herself playing

mediator when her parents would fight, even suggesting ways for them to find a healthy compromise. She played this role, also caring for her younger siblings who needed support with schoolwork and other day-to-day needs.

Her parents eventually decided to separate, and she found herself devoting all her energy to providing her siblings the guidance that her parents could no longer provide. She continued to get caught in the middle of their quarrels and be consumed by how their fighting was affecting her very young siblings.

Eventually, Shayne's siblings grew more independent, and she found herself engaged to be married. In planning for her own future, Shayne was at a loss. Almost from birth, her role was defined by what she could do for others: her parents and her siblings. When it came to herself, she had no idea where to start. As her fiancé was an accomplished and driven man, Shayne felt some insecurity in being not as ambitious or motivated.

But Shayne came to find clarity in being able to accept that she did not know how to articulate her desires and dreams for herself, and that was okay. She chose to address the insecurity that she felt by being honest in talking with her fiancé. She said she was still figuring out that part of her that has nothing to do with being in charge of her family.

The work involved here intends for you to get in touch with your innermost and highest self, without being attached to any specific result. The exercises in the following chapters invite us to answer questions, gain insight and record all these realizations in a journal. Some exercises intend for you to get in touch with your core, find authentic freedom, and make decisions from a position of inner strength. Others will reinforce your Motivation, Inspiration, Cheer, and Kindness. Remember that doing these exercises a few times may not be enough. Making better life decisions takes work, and this process is different for each of us. We need to do the work with full intention while staying open to where the process leads us, and being patient with the time it takes. Trust the process and do what works for you. How do you know when the exercises have taken effect? To find out, you will have to stay the course and *do it until*.

If at any point you feel uncomfortable, take your time. Make a note of your discomfort and any thoughts or feelings that arise. Then, take a break. Acknowledge the effort you made in the exercise and feel free to try again once you are ready. You can come back when you are more calm and collected and approach the exercises with patience and understanding for yourself.

Journal Entry: Finding Clarity and Focus

There must be a reason you picked up this book—a need for focus somewhere in your life. For your first exercise, answer the following questions in your journal:

- Why did I pick up this book?
- Where in my life do I need focus and clarity?
- Are there any major changes happening in my life right now? If so, what are they and how do they affect me?