

“*Choosing Greatness* is at once deeply thoughtful and eminently practical—an excellent read for anyone looking to broaden and deepen their professional lives.” —**DANIEL H. PINK**, #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Power of Regret, When, and To Sell Is Human*

Powerful Choices **Extraordinary Results**

Choosing GREAT NESS

An Evidence-Based Approach to
Achieving Exceptional Outcomes

CHRISTINA CURTIS

Praise for Choosing Greatness

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—**Daniel Pink**, #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author of
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“THIS BOOK is packed with meaningful strategies on how to identify and stay focused on the most important things. As a leader, it is critical to access the energy, attitude, and insights that will unlock new layers of growth and possibility for individuals and the organization. *Choosing Greatness* has refined techniques for all of us on how to do just that.”

—**Rich DiGeronimo**, *President,*
Product and Technology, Charter Communications

“*CHOOSING GREATNESS* captures invaluable insights to accelerate your career, getting you out of your head and back into the game. It’s a must-read for those in business looking to reach exceptional levels of performance.”

—**Neil Blair**, *President, KPMG Corporate Finance*

“*CHOOSING GREATNESS* is a clear-eyed, evidence-based approach that gets to the heart of how to choose your future. It strips away the artifice and provides practical advice on how to achieve your goals. I worked with the ever-positive Christina and am better off for it!”

—**Jeanine Jiganti**, *General Counsel, Walmart Health & Wellness*

“DEEPLY INSIGHTFUL book and fascinating read that compels us to look at our habits and assess what’s moving us forward or holding us back. Christina’s evidence-based and practical approach to coaching helped transform our executive leadership team into change agents, improving our overall business growth and success!”

—**Denise Napier**, *CEO and President, Health Partners Plans*

“*CHOOSING GREATNESS* will unlock the clarity you need to be a better leader and more fulfilled at home and at work. Christina’s storytelling prowess and personal experiences also make it an impossible book to put down.”

—**David Cuddy**, *General Manager, Public Affairs, Microsoft*

“THIS BOOK SHOWS you how to avoid letting your habits hijack your decisions. We must make every word and action count. Our time is finite. Using this system, you can learn to focus your intensity and really light your goals on fire.”

—**Wes Lujan**, *Assistant Vice President
External Relations, Union Pacific*

“CHRISTINA MAKES SENSE of the challenging topics of brain circuitry and neuroplasticity, with superb writing that lets the pages fly by! By learning to maximize good habits and break bad habits, I am convinced *Choosing Greatness* will serve an important role in helping us achieve exceptional results.”

—**Dr. Adam Wolff**, *Colorado Neurological Research Center*

“*CHOOSING GREATNESS* is a catalyst for positive, professional change. Anchored in scientific findings, thought leadership, and trust-based actionable insights, Christina has created a master-class for optimizing performance and maximizing your personal ROI. Christina’s vulnerability through storytelling makes this a must-read for any professional.”

—**Bill Merritt**, *Financial Services at Gartner*

“THIS BOOK is a *must-read* for those seeking to unlock their *professional potential* with practical and thoughtful advice.”

—**Dan Driscoll**, *Lockheed Martin*

PART 1

**CHOOSING
YOUR FUTURE**



Author Christina Curtis.

Chapter 1

HAVE YOU BEEN HIJACKED?

*Define success on your own terms, achieve it by your
own rules, and build a life you're proud to live.*

—ANNE SWEENEY, FORMER PRESIDENT
OF THE DISNEY-ABC TELEVISION GROUP

ON A COOL FALL DAY in 2016, I was driving my two young kids to school a little late, having fallen behind after the chaos of the morning. While thinking about the workday ahead, I half-listened to them in the backseat having one of those countless petty arguments as siblings often do. This one was about whom our dog, Becca, liked best.

We stopped at the red light, waiting to turn into the school parking lot, when suddenly, the passenger door flew open and a man with a knife jumped in. As I tried to

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process what was happening, the twelve-inch blade came at my throat and I screamed, grabbing his arm and his body, pushing both him and the knife away.

He yelled at me to drive, and I quickly obeyed, putting one hand on the wheel, and keeping the other on his wrist. My maternal instincts took over. Protecting my kids was my only priority.

If I get into an accident, people will come, I thought. Someone will help. Someone will save us. I hit the gas hard and drove fast toward a pole.

The man used his free hand to take control of the wheel and steer us back onto the road. Running on adrenaline, I swerved again. The more I fought, the more infuriated he became, the blade thrashing precariously between us.

My eleven-year-old son's voice broke through from the back seat.

"Mom, what should I do?" It was almost a whisper, but it shook me to my core. I looked in the rearview mirror. He was frozen, tears streaming down his face.

"Mom?" he asked again. Then I glanced at his nine-year-old sister, her eyes wide open, staring at me with

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ferocious intensity. She silently mouthed the words I'd said to her so many times over the years: "*You've got this.*" She was pleading for me to fix it, pleading with me to make this right.

In that instant, time stood still. Seeing their little faces snapped me out of my panicked state, and I felt an intense sense of calm wash over me. I took a few deep breaths, relaxed my shoulders, and brought the car to a slow crawl. Then I ran through my choices. With absolute clarity, I knew what I needed to do next: I had to get the kids out of the car.

"Sir, you can do whatever you want. Take me wherever you want to go. But my kids are getting out. I am going to pull over up here at the library." My assertive tone made it clear that this was nonnegotiable. He said no with equal conviction, and I realized the complication. We were in a two-door vehicle. For them to escape to safety, one of us in the front seats would have to exit first. There was no way in hell I would volunteer to leave, and he clearly felt the same way.

He demanded that I turn down the next street, which I knew was tucked away and quiet. In my mind, these

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instructions spelled disaster. Parking my car where no one else was around felt like too dangerous an approach. But what were my alternatives? Then and there, I decided that my only option was to fight him. If he and I were locked in battle, I could yell at the kids to climb out the windows and run.

But I didn't want my children to see this. I didn't want them to have this memory. As I have consistently done throughout their lives, whether dealing with a tantrum, getting their annual shots, or managing through a bored state of mind, I knew we needed a distraction! I asked the man to grab my phone in the center console so I could dial up a cartoon.

“Kids, want to watch a show? *Kung Fu Panda*? *Wild Kratts*? *SpongeBob SquarePants*? What sounds best?” I asked, speaking in a normal, conversational tone.

Our assailant seemed shocked by the request and fidgeted in his seat, his left leg starting to shake nervously. As I continued to force a casual dialogue with my kids, his anxiousness escalated. Perhaps the extent of what he had done was finally starting to sink in. After all, when jumping in the car, given the tinted windows, he would

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have seen only a female, not a mother and her two children. The seconds slowly ticked away, then out of nowhere, he shouted, “Pull the hell over!”

I veered to the sidewalk, and before the car even came to a stop, he opened the door and ran. I reached over, slammed his car door, and sped off to a friend’s house who lived nearby. We went into the house for safety. Everyone was OK. Everyone was all right. Having some trouble breathing, I walked back outside to get some fresh air. The panic had returned with vengeance, and my legs gave out beneath me. I crumpled to the ground and sobbed.

This miserable event left a significant impact on our whole family. Afraid to be alone, we all moved through the house as a pack, even when brushing our teeth. My daughter didn’t speak for three days, and my son jumped at any sudden sound or motion. But with time, the incident no longer invaded our every thought, and the edges of the picture began to fray. Perhaps my daughter described it best with the surprising profundity children often muster: the man’s face began to melt from our minds like a snowman by the fire.

I grappled with the enormity of what we had

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experienced, the reality that my children could have lost their mother that day, or worse, I could have lost them. This realization etched significant changes in the way I approach my life. It kicked the door wide open to the fact that our time is measured in minutes—that an unexpected, life-changing event can overtake the best-made plans. It tapped a deep reservoir of courage and aroused an even deeper commitment to stop watching the days, weeks, and months fall off the calendar.

I share this story with you because it clarified an insight that has shifted the way I see the world and has become foundational to my life's work.

In the middle of our nightmarish encounter, my children interrupted my initial reaction, bringing my conscious mind back into the driver's seat. It wasn't until then that I could see the different options available to me. While luck unquestionably played its part, the neuroscience and psychology I had been studying for years suddenly hit home in a visceral way. The difference between reacting and responding, between reflex and reflection, between habitual response and conscious thought, crystallized.

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In the split second between an event and our reaction to it, is a space that we need to inhabit. That we need to expand. Taking the time to pause and choose the thought or action that will move us toward the greatest outcome. Otherwise, these habits can hijack our decisions without our even realizing it. We end up

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**Habits can hijack our decisions
without our even realizing it.**

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repeating previously learned behaviors, reentering the coordinates of where we've been versus where we want to go next. It's estimated that roughly 40 percent of our actions each day are driven by habits.¹ The busier and more stressful our lives become, the more we rely on habitual responses that come barreling down our well-honed neural pathways.

These habits lie deep within the brain structure, firing automatically, regardless of whether we want them to or

¹ Society for Personality and Social Psychology. "How we form habits, change existing ones." ScienceDaily. (August 8, 2014), www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140808111931.htm.

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not. Sometimes these pesky patterns may, at first glance, appear trivial—such as looking at your phone, skipping a workout, not preparing, procrastinating, or eating poorly. But when we look at them in various contexts, we can see their true significance—glancing at your phone *while driving*, increasing the likelihood of an accident; skipping a workout *when stressed*, making you more punchy and less productive; procrastinating *on strengthening your relationships*, limiting your level of influence; not *preparing in advance of meetings*, decreasing your overall effectiveness. Heck, one study even found that after a heart attack, only 4.3 percent of participants made all three lifestyle changes recommended by physicians (quitting smoking, eating a healthy diet, and exercising).² Despite life-threatening consequences, habitual responses fire on.

Achieving exceptional outcomes in life requires consciously choosing the action or thought that will drive the greatest impact for every minute you spend and ounce of energy you're investing. Discomfort be damned.

Choose.

2 Koon Teo et al., (2013). Prevalence of a healthy lifestyle among individuals with cardiovascular disease in high, middle- and low-income countries. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 309(15), April 17, 2013, 1613–1621.

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And if it doesn't go as planned, choose again. No guilt or shame or regret required as you iteratively move your way through growth.

Fortunately, science has shown us the tools we need

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.....

to do things differently and the choices required to break through one layer of limitation to the next, then the next, then the next. After all, there's no need to grin and bear it by saying, "I'm fine," in areas where you feel anything *but*. Life's too short, and you work too hard for *fine* to be the future.

As my daughter said, "*You've got this.*"

Now, let's get started.

DEEPENING THE WORK

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The brain creates habits that enable us to perform certain tasks on autopilot, saving our limited neurological fuel.
- Peak performers choose the behaviors required to drive the highest return tomorrow, leaning into the discomfort that comes from choosing change. They choose what kind of hard they want to experience.
- Life is too short to tolerate “fine” when you feel anything but. Avoid the temptation to tolerate mediocrity.

EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS

Take thirty minutes to reflect on what you want to be able to say at the end of your career.

- What accomplishments did you achieve?
- How did you show up?
- What relationships did you build?
- What impact did you have on others?
- How much money did you generate?
- What did your personal life look like?

- How did you integrate career and personal living to maximize your sense of connection, meaning, and fulfillment?
- What is this current phase of your career all about?

TASKS

1. Look for any unproductive automatic behaviors that are occurring without much conscious thought. For example, glancing at your phone when driving or sitting in a meeting.
2. Take a few deep breaths to bring yourself back into the present in order to choose a different behavior. For example, do not look at your phone or even turn the phone off.
3. Observe the thoughts and sensations that immediately follow.
4. Continue to bring awareness to what it feels like when you choose to interrupt a habitual response, getting acquainted with that discomfort and not letting it drive your behaviors.