

TO THE READER

*“What lies before us and what lies behind us
are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.”*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Welcome to what I hope for you is a life-changing journey, designed to put at your disposal the tools you need to reach your highest potential in virtually any and every area of your life!

If this seems like a daunting task or a promise that is too good to be true, let's begin with the good news: **Within you resides everything you will ever need to get there in the shortest time possible.** *Stage Climbing* will show you the way. All you need to do is to make the commitment to yourself to get on board by learning the process and then applying the strategies you are about to learn that speak to where you want to take your life.

One of the subtitles I considered for *Stage Climbing* was “An Adult’s Guide to Help You Get Motivated and Grow Up—Wherever You May Have Stayed Behind,” because yes, this may indeed be the very first self-help book ever to teach adults *exactly* how to achieve optimal maturity wherever you believe you may be lacking. **However, “getting motivated” and “growing up” are merely important steps toward the real goal of this process, which is to be operating from what I call “your highest potential”—wherever you are not already.** You might also think of this as your best life, as life rarely gets better.

The main premise of *Stage Climbing* is simple: Inner peace, optimal motivation, passion, and a life determined by your unique purpose and

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characterized by excellence—all staples of those parts of you that are being lived at your highest potential. You will soon see how all of this is firmly and naturally within your grasp, once you learn how you are holding yourself back in a certain area (or areas) of your life—and we all have them—and **how to “grow up”** (as I often refer to it metaphorically) **to your highest potential.**

Stage Climbing is about you and your life as well as how to take immediate control of it along with the process by which you reach your potential. It's also about how and why you think and act as you do, how you once were, and how you could be. *Stage Climbing* will teach you a set of principles that will also help you deal with anyone who has ever crossed your path or who ever will.

My primary mission is to present you with a concept that is so powerful that it can enable you to understand and then choose to accept or change virtually every area of your life. My secondary mission is equally important: that this concept I call *Stage Climbing* be an extremely simple one to grasp, very easy to use, and one that puts many things that you might already be familiar with—whatever you define for yourself as personal fulfillment, for example—into a new perspective. It's possible then that you will find countless ways to use it to enrich your life and the lives of those you care about. At the very least, you will find numerous ways to enhance and clarify the way you view yourself and others. *Stage Climbing* transforms a holistic overview of how you operate into easy-to-understand action steps you can use anytime you choose. It even bridges the often murky gaps between self-help, psychology, and spirituality.

Let me begin by asking you a few questions: What part of your life could be better? Where could you feel happier? How can you operate with a greater level of fulfillment or maturity? Be more motivated? Feel more at peace? Function in a way that's more on target or where you feel more satisfied with your life as it is today? Where do you wish that your contribution to those around you—your family and friends, your community, your profession, or the world—could be greater? Where could you be or at least *feel* more successful? Take note of anything that may come to mind as you ponder these questions. Throughout *Stage Climbing*, you will find many opportunities to address them all.

Stage Climbing is a new way of thinking that can help you to do many things if you let it. For example, you can think of it as a simple system for understanding exactly how complex you are. It's also a formula to give you insight into where and how you may be stuck in a specific aspect of your life; such

as relationships, your career, your self-esteem, or your life's calling, mission, or purpose. *Stage Climbing* will also give you powerful strategies for moving forward in those areas. Not only will it help you to find the fulfillment you want, but will help you go beyond that level of fulfillment and onward to a new plateau that until now perhaps you may not even have thought possible. Again, **you need only pursue and make optimal use of the ideas and strategies in this book that speak to you. They all point toward an aspect of your highest potential.**

Stage Climbing introduces you to a user-friendly system that can give you a fresh and clear perspective on practically any issue, dilemma, or personal conflict that you are trying to understand that involves you or someone in your life. It's then your choice either to change or accept certain things that may have been a source of difficulty until now.

If you compare yourself to others, this book will help you to stop doing that. Instead, you will clearly see how to make **the only comparison that is truly valid: the one between your life as it is now in one or more areas, and what it could be.** The latter can be thought of as your full or highest potential, as you now see it. By using merely the resources that exist within—resources readily available to you at this moment that are just waiting to be recognized and activated—you are free to reach or get as close to that potential as you are willing to go. For over thirty years, I have used evolving versions of this concept as a clinical tool in my practice as a psychologist to help bring about change for thousands of clients who have represented almost every conceivable population or walk of life.

One of the great mysteries of the mind is something I call *psychological farsightedness*. So often, we cannot see that to which we are too close. Therefore, I hope you will also consider this book to be a set of psychological “reading glasses.” *Stage Climbing* provides you with seven distinct and ascending views or stages that you can apply to any facet of your life. You then have the power to choose to stay where you are or move on to the target stage *you select*. In the process, you may even find yourself raising the bar on how you define your best or optimal life.

Stage Climbing is a different kind of book. It's about your life in “seven chapters.” And since it's about you, **I offer you many examples, but deliberately avoid case studies that would take you away from focusing on**

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your own life story or the story of whomever in your life you may be thinking about.

Since as humans we are each a unique work in progress, not only will this book have a different meaning for each person who reads it, but it will also offer you benchmarks to help you see clearly how you have advanced through this process each time you reread or come back to it as a reference. The kaleidoscope is a wonderful metaphor for how the human mind works—the components of a kaleidoscope remain indisputably constant, yet what you see never looks the same way twice. *Stage Climbing* unleashes this phenomenon with all the components of your life.

How we each develop to become the unique individuals we are is the area of psychology I have always found to be most fascinating. **My life's work has been to help people—often very high achievers—identify what they see as their potential in one or more areas of their lives; and then do what it takes to make the life changes they've chosen in order to get there as rapidly and effectively as possible.**

In the very earliest part of my training and career as a psychologist, I first became interested in answering for myself the questions *Stage Climbing* addresses. In addition to my professional curiosities, when my daughter was born, like most new parents, I found myself mesmerized by watching her very early development. Thus, in graduate school, I studied virtually everything I could find on the subject of human development, especially the top theorists and their trademark theories. For example, Sigmund Freud's *Psychosexual Development* (Strachey, E., & Freud, A., 1953), Erik Erikson's *Psychosocial Development* (1963), Lawrence Kohlberg's *Moral Development* (1987), Abraham Maslow's *Self-Actualization* (1987) and many others who in some way attempted to explain adult behavior based on how we develop. The problem was that as brilliant and groundbreaking as these concepts were—especially in their heyday—there were many gaps and missing pieces of the puzzle that for me left major questions unanswered. In the end, I was quite disappointed as to how dry developmental psychology could sometimes be, and how unrelated it generally seemed to my interest in creating and mastering the most effective clinical techniques to bring about lasting change in adults. The field of human psychological development seemed to be much too oriented toward *defining problems* while hardly at all focusing on *solutions*.

An early and very influential mentor of mine, the late Dr. William Swartley, introduced me to an obscure article written in the 1950s by Clyde Sullivan, Marguerite Q. Grant, and J. Douglas Grant: “The Development of Interpersonal Maturity” (1957). Their model was to become an important part of the seed from which *Stage Climbing* was to grow. However, like all the others, it had gaps that left major questions unanswered. Another early mentor, Dr. Albert Ellis, the originator of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy— the original and still a leading cognitive behavioral approach— filled in some of those gaps with his empirically based emphasis on finding solutions by changing beliefs and attitudes directly (1962). Other approaches, such as Dr. Aaron Beck’s *Cognitive Therapy* (1976) and Dr. Arnold Lazarus’s *Multimodal Therapy* (1981) have made the cognitive behavioral approach the most state-of- the-art form of psychotherapy practiced today. These brilliant pioneers continue to be major influences on the work I do every day. Once again, however, many gaps became more and more evident to me as I used their ideas when treating patients/clients in the real world. So my mission became twofold: to take as long as necessary to fill in those gaps, and then to keep refining my own model called *Stage Climbing*. I decided I would not be happy until it became as useful a tool for you the reader to bring about rapid and lasting change as it has been to me and those I have helped with early versions of its concepts. In the process, I hope you also will find that (at last) it makes the understanding of human behavior, development, maturity, motivation, and how to reach your potential easy and enjoyable.

Before writing *Stage Climbing*, I also needed to satisfy myself that I could explain just about any aspect of my own life by using the *Stage Climbing* model.

My life has been one of many twists and turns. Indeed, *Stage Climbing* meets this challenge and continues to help me understand and navigate the flow of my own life as nothing else ever has; and once you learn the premise and the formula, it will do the same for you.

I started my very early career as an accountant. Within a few short years and still in my early twenties, I began my own accounting firm, which quickly became successful and lucrative. Around the same time I also married, became a father, and seemed to have it all. However, by my mid-twenties, I became very bored with my career. It no longer had passion or challenge in it. Our marriage wasn’t working either. After much contemplation, one-by-one I began making a series of major changes in all areas of my life. Over a period of several years, I

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sold the firm, got divorced, went to graduate school, got a master's degree and doctorate and changed my career to psychology—the field I loved as a hobby, but had never even thought of as a career.

My two careers have very little in common. In fact, that they couldn't be more different. As an accountant, I often became frustrated by the fact that there usually seemed to be only one view and acceptable protocol for doing most things. To me, there was little room or incentive for innovation and creativity. Although that's certainly not how every accountant experiences his or her profession, that's how I did. As a psychologist, I found that the climate was the exact opposite. I quickly discovered that the psychology profession had much to offer to fulfill what up until then had been missing in my career. It was impossible for me not to be challenged and fascinated by the complexity of each individual I worked with as well as the vast and continuously expanding body of knowledge that I could both learn from and contribute to.

The practice of psychology is really about teaching people to help themselves; and I have been fortunate enough to have the privilege to achieve this with an extraordinarily wide range of people and settings. I have had major contracts to work with both criminals and the police. In my private practice, I have treated patients with severe mental impairments; worked with college students; and with extremely well functioning, upscale and highly accomplished clients. I also have been a consultant to many business, government, and educational organizations and executives, written several popular books, and created many audio programs with major publishers for couples, singles, and those in relationship transitions. My audio self-help programs on numerous personal and relationship topics are used globally by lay people and mental health professionals alike. I have taught graduate students, trained mental health professionals extensively and have run an internationally acclaimed training institute. My radio programs have been broadcast locally and nationally. I have appeared on *Oprah* and *The Today Show* as well as in scores of other print and electronic media. Most of all—and I say this with an immeasurable degree of gratitude to all of my patient/clients, readers, trainees, and colleagues who made it possible—I have enjoyed almost every minute of it!

All the while, I have been working behind the scenes on the concept of *Stage Climbing*. **I decided long ago that I would not write this book until**

I could definitively say that the theory and practice I espouse holds up to virtually any segment of the population or application to which it is applied. For me, this includes my roles as a husband (in a very successful second marriage), father, and grandfather, as well as every type of personal or business relationship in which I am involved.

As a strong proponent and author of self-help books and audio programs, I am sadly aware that many people discount self-help psychology as irrelevant. One reason for this is that it is so often contradictory. Do you deal with life circumstances in the “here and now” (i.e., your present life), or do you go back to your childhood? Is the answer to be found by shedding light on a problem or by somehow delving further into your darkness? When is psychotherapy the best approach versus, for example, medication, meditation, yoga, or some other spiritual practices? ***Stage Climbing* honors it all and demonstrates that practically any approach to understanding human behavior and making your life work better for you has both pluses and minuses. However, there needs to be clear criteria for when, how, and why each approach is effective. *Stage Climbing* provides you with a simple model for sorting this out.**

Stage Climbing will also offer you a very handy and more importantly, a *non-dogmatic* way to understand and help you choose the best path for you with regard to any given issue. **You may also find it useful to consider *Stage Climbing* an encyclopedia of choices. In addition to providing you the proverbial “meal” as do most self-help books, it teaches you “how to fish.”**

Everything you might have been exposed to until now has its place in the *Stage Climbing* process. For that reason, don't discard any favorite self-help books or audios, even those that may not have yet produced lasting results. You may find a new level of meaning and application for them once you see, via the principles of *Stage Climbing*, how they fit into your life.

If you have been overwhelmed, confused, or disappointed until now by the sheer number of approaches there are to changing your life or how effective they've been for you, please read on, and be open to the possibility that once you understand *your Stage Climbing* process, they will deliver those results.

Because the concept of *Stage Climbing* is so simple (as opposed to simplistic), you may find yourself challenging it. I both welcome and honor

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that. I was so concerned that its simplicity was too good to be true that I consulted many friends and colleagues who are mental health professionals. I asked them to look at outlines and early drafts of this book to get their views on the soundness of *Stage Climbing* from their perspective and to help me detect any inconsistencies within its principles. Their feedback continues to be extremely important to me. **I am now able to say that once you see how *Stage Climbing* works, it will become an invaluable tool not only for you personally, but also for helping or understanding all of those around you, and without labels or blame. This is regardless of your lifestyle, gender, race, ethnicity, demographics, or life experiences.** Of course, this is only to the extent to which you put it to work for you. Despite the claims of so many originators or promoters, there has never been any one approach that flawlessly provides the answer to every possible question or dilemma you may have. *Stage Climbing* certainly doesn't claim to achieve that impossible standard, however, it does fill in many glaring gaps that been left unaddressed until now.

In addition, this book will give you a fresh perspective on some issues that may touch any or every important aspect of your life:

- ❖ Why are we so often conflicted about the things that make us feel happy, successful, motivated, and fulfilled? (Short answer: The seven stages present us with seven levels of happiness, fulfillment, success, motivation, and spirituality from which to choose. Each comes with a different vision; and often they clash. However, by understanding them, you will see them as an enormous and wonderful set of choices, rather than conflicts.)
- ❖ What do the most successful, accomplished, happiest, or seemingly most fulfilled people have that you don't? This includes not only our contemporaries but the truly great men and women who've managed to most change the world throughout history. (Short answer: Very little that you cannot also choose to develop and learn to access in *your* own unique way, just as they have. One mission of this book is to teach you many of the strategies and ways of thinking that can help you integrate into your life the highest qualities of functioning and self-perception that you might associate with those icons. You can apply

it all to your own life immediately. *Stage Climbing* gives you the action steps you need to do this.)

- ❖ What keeps us in unfulfilling relationships, jobs, or lifestyles? (Short answer: The problematic hooks to our lower stages that you will now learn to dismantle and bring under your control.)
- ❖ How do I know my mission or purpose in life, and what is the role of spirituality in making that determination? (Short answer: Purpose and spirituality are different at each stage. This is what can make it seem so confusing! *Stage Climbing* sorts this all out. Consider it a tool that teaches you the options, and then shows you how to fine-tune and navigate them. Along the way, you will access inner resources that may have been dormant up until now that will clarify this. Then, simply commit yourself to honor and pursue the choices you make.)

Whether you are sitting high atop the pinnacle of success and affluence trying to make a blessed life even better, in a jail cell where you believe you have little or no control over your life, or anywhere in between, the principles of *Stage Climbing* are waiting for you to put them into action and change your life. **I believe that boundless fulfillment, exceptional happiness, and even personal greatness are within everyone's reach.** *Stage Climbing* will give you a formula to define those virtues, along with strategies to raise the bar higher and higher for what you think of as your best.

We have all had to rise to some occasion, even if simply to deal with a crisis or to help someone else. *Stage Climbing* will show you how to access those inner resources to face the situation practically every time. In the pages ahead, *Stage Climbing* introduces to you this model of seven-stages or visions of yourself and just about everything that's important to you. **The stages span from infancy to beyond even what you may now imagine could ever be your optimal existence.**

Emerson said, "We are wiser than we know." Tapping into your own wisdom and ending all forms of self-sabotage is the essence of *Stage Climbing*. Then watch miracles happen!

