



CHAPTER 1

A Dream Is Born

*Somewhere, over the rainbow, way up high.
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.*

The Wizard of Oz

I spent much of my growing-up years in Meade, Kansas, a small town just outside Dodge City. That being said, have you ever heard the expression “Get out of Dodge”? It means to leave a troublesome or perilous environment as quickly as possible, as in, “I had to get the heck out of Dodge.” The saying refers to Dodge City, Kansas, a bustling cattle town in the late nineteenth century popular for its corruption and the well-deserved title of “The Wickedest City in America.”

Dodge City is the site of a famous series of gun battles called the Dodge City War and hosted such colorful characters as Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. Its checkered past made it a favorite setting for movie and television Westerns in the early to mid-twentieth century.

By the time I got there, however, the cowboys, saloons, and gamblers had long since moved west, and Dodge City had become a sleepy, quiet little town much like others in western

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Kansas. The city traded in its brothels and bars for meatpacking plants and wheat and sorghum farming. I'm not sure what sorghum is, but I am familiar with wheat—more on that later.

My years in Kansas were spent in a small Mennonite Brethren community. As I write this, I'm looking outside my window at the palm trees swaying in the gentle breeze of the Los Angeles landscape, and I am reminded there is a time difference between the West Coast and my quaint little Mennonite town in Kansas. For instance, right now in California it's 12:55 p.m. and back there it's 1956. And just so you know, I'm not necessarily convinced that is a bad thing. Mostly.

Perhaps you aren't quite sure what a Mennonite Brethren is. Mennonite Brethren are Christians; that is to say, they believe in the lordship and saving grace of Jesus Christ and in the triune God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although they share ties to other types of Christianity, the Mennonite Brethren are neither Catholic nor Protestant and—most importantly—they are not Amish. Although the Mennonites and Amish originate from similar traditions begun in the sixteenth century, there are significant differences in how the two groups live out their Christian values. For instance, the Amish generally shun modern technology, refrain from political and secular involvements, and wear odd-looking hats.

Mennonite Brethren, on the other hand, are permitted to use electricity, such as the type used to power electric razors, and therefore have no good reason to walk around with those goofy-looking beards. While the Mennonite Brethren are not nearly as hard core or conservative as the Amish, they do make the Mormons look like a pack of Hell's Angels.

I grew up a churchgoing kid. Then again, I didn't have much

of a choice because my father was a preacher in the Mennonite Brethren Church, and every Sunday he brought us to work with him.

SON OF A PREACHER MAN

As a preacher's kid, I was aware of the spiritual realm much earlier than a lot of people. For instance, I accepted the Lord into my life at the ripe old age of four. Which is strange, when you consider no court of law anywhere in the world would consider a contract signed by a four-year-old legally binding. By the time I realized what I had done and what I had pledged to forgo until my wedding day, it was too late.

Much has been written about the lives of PKs, and I see no reason to add to or revisit any of it here. I'm sure you've already heard how our families typically have to move every four years or so to the next church and how we have to share our parents' time and resources with an entire congregation. You've probably heard we're held to a different standard in terms of our good behavior and spiritual maturity. In pop culture, PKs are categorized as either repressed, wound-tight Goody Two-shoes who end up in a bell tower with a high-powered rifle or we're angry, heroin-addicted atheists who wear too much Goth-inspired mascara. I have never been either of those. I'm proud to have had parents who sacrificed and devoted all they were and all they had to the service of God. There are times, however, when that service can be overpowering for a child. While I learned at a young age that being part of a ministry family could occasionally be difficult, I never felt the need to wear mascara. Just saying.

My parents instilled in me a strong work ethic from a very

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early age by assigning me chores, duties, and other responsibilities. I appreciate having that quality now, but at the time I lacked the foresight to understand the value of a hard day's work. The whole ordeal was annoying because it got in the way of doing the things I enjoyed, like catching frogs or building tree houses.

PICKING ROCKS

I remember the first job I ever had, and looking back I can't decide if my parents had my best interests in mind or simply didn't like me very much. I was about nine years old and in the fourth grade when I was hired to pick rocks out of farm fields. I was a rock picker. Rock Picker is not a glamorous title nor is it a particularly exciting job, but there you have it. Unless you grew up on a farm, you might not understand the importance of rock picking. Allow me to explain.

In addition to whatever crop the farmer happens to be cultivating, some fields tend to also grow rocks. They propagate in a variety of sizes; some start out no bigger than your fist, but if you're not diligent in removing the rocks they can quickly grow into boulders. The pesky and invasive rocks that grow in a farmer's field not only have the potential of damaging expensive farm equipment, but they also take up valuable real estate that could have been seeded. Seeds will not grow on top of or underneath rocks, so they must be picked up, and that's where I came in.

Rock picking usually involves taking a wagon or trailer pulled by a tractor out to the field, walking up and down looking for rocks, and then picking them up and throwing them onto the trailer. In my case, the rocks were then transported to someone else's field, where presumably another nine-year-old fourth grader was hired to pick those rocks out of that field and

bring them back to ours. The cycle is infinitely self-perpetuating, which explains why rock picking is a time-honored and ancient profession. I think that's how it went. At least that's the way it seemed to my nine-year-old self, who would rather have been anywhere doing anything else.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that I was lazy or that I shied away from hard work. Nothing could be further from the truth. For one, I was making four dollars an hour picking rocks, which allowed me to buy *Star Wars* action figures when they came out. Even at nine years of age I had my priorities straight.

Nevertheless, despite my tender age, I wondered if there were something more enjoyable I could do that would still allow me to buy my toys. Something that was more fun but also paid me lots of cash. I believe the expression is *having your cake and eating it too*.

After a few years of rock picking and other mind-numbing jobs I was forced to do, I began to acknowledge that, for me, certain work was pure drudgery. At the same time I also accepted much of this work was unavoidable and often necessary. I began to realize that if I had to work, then I needed to learn how to work smarter. It took me a few more years, but I eventually figured out that some kinds of work were just more appealing to me than others, and if possible I would trade up from the work I didn't care for to the work I preferred.

In an attempt to save money at the grocery store, my parents kept and maintained a huge vegetable garden. Actually, they kept it, but their children maintained it. The first of their free laborers were my older brother and sister, but as soon as I came of age, the task of weeding this massive expanse fell on my shoulders.

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I'm not talking about a cute little plot of ground where my folks grew the occasional tomato plant or begonia. I had to weed an enormous tract of land with dozens of types of fruits and vegetables. If memory serves, there were far more weeds growing than rutabagas and cauliflower, so much so that oftentimes I couldn't tell the difference between them. By the way, I have since learned that vegetables are much easier to pull out of the ground than weeds. I learned this lesson the hard way.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote of weeds, "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have never been discovered." No disrespect intended to this great American poet, but I am here to tell you Ralph never weeded my parents' garden. If he had, he might have changed his mind about the virtues of weeds.

I grew to detest weeds only a bit less than having to go out and pull them. I accepted that this had to be done, and I knew why my budget-conscious parents were growing a garden in the first place, but in order to save my back and knees, I needed to think of a better way. I needed to work smarter and come up with a compromise.

That's why in my freshmen year of high school, I purchased a riding lawn mower. You're probably thinking it was my intention to ride over the weeds, mowing them down and then calling it a day. My parents would not have gone for that, so I had something far more creative in mind.

I planned to use the riding lawn mower to start my own lawn-mowing business so I could pay my parents not to grow a garden. I asked them to calculate how much money they saved at the grocery store each month by growing their own produce, and then I told them I would pay them that amount each month instead of tending a garden for our family. It was my idea for

how to eliminate a job I disliked and offer a compromise I hoped my parents could not refuse. They were speechless when I first presented my plan to them, but after some consideration they found no other option but to agree with my logic.

At fourteen years of age, I started David's Lawn-Mowing Service. I drove that riding mower all over town, mowing people's yards wherever and whenever I could. I made decent money that summer of my freshman year in high school, even after subsidizing my parents' nonexistent vegetable garden.

At the end of each month I wrote my parents a check from the money I made, and thereby eliminated the need for a garden and freed myself from the bondage of having to weed it.

I can't swear to it, but I might have even seen a glint of admiration in my father's eye when he would show neighbors the exact location of the garden where he wasn't growing corn. "And over there is where we're not growing potatoes. Next year," he would muse, "I'm considering not growing strawberries."

I don't consider what I did to have been lazy. I think of it as knowing myself, understanding my limitations, and working within the boundaries and confines of the system. At the time, the "system" was comprised solely of my mom and dad. It wasn't so much that I wanted to "beat the system," but rather to *navigate within it* and arrive at a mutually satisfactory destination. I learned the invaluable concept of compromise from negotiating with my parents. Of course I could not have known it then, but this was a skill I would employ time and time again much later in my professional life.

A couple of years later I heard the US government had devised a similar arrangement with our nation's farmers where under some circumstances the government would pay the

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farmers not to grow certain crops. Now you know where they got the idea! And you thought this book was going to be a lot of self-aggrandizing fluff.

During the summer of my sophomore year I was talked into working with my brother, who had a small business painting houses. I have very little to say about my summer of house painting other than it wasn't for me. Since I couldn't pay people not to paint their houses, I elected to exercise the next best option. I quit.

AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN

The summer of my junior year my dad thought it would be a wonderful and life-enriching experience for me to “go on harvest” and work on a wheat farm. I learned that two important inventions were responsible for the sudden surge and popularity of wheat farming in 1930s America.

The first was the development of the combine, a machine that aids in the harvesting of grain crops by combining three separate functions into one piece of equipment. The combine made harvesting wheat easier and less expensive and therefore more profitable.

The second invention largely responsible for the popularity of wheat came out about the same time as the combine. Toast.

Yes, you read that right: toast. Around this time the automatic bread slicer had been perfected, and a couple of years later the automatic, spring-loaded toaster was introduced into homes. America would never again eat breakfast the same.

You may wonder why I am telling you all of this. You might even be thinking, *I'm not reading this book to hear about combines and toast! What's this guy going on about?* I point these things out

because they are what I had to tell myself that summer while driving a combine or tractor across a wheat field when there were plenty of other “teenaged guy” things I would have rather been doing. It’s always hot when you harvest wheat; either that or it’s raining. “So how did you spend your summer vacation, David?” Wheat, heat, and rain.

By the way, I am allergic to wheat. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not talking about a “Quick! Throw him down and stab him in the heart with an epinephrine auto-injector!” type allergy. It’s more the sneezing, coughing, and runny nose kind of allergy that leaves you so miserable you wish someone would throw you down and stab you in the heart with an epinephrine auto-injector. I am sure there is a marked and valid difference between the two, but at the time I had considerable difficulty discerning what that might be.

I learned something about myself from my experiences picking rocks, pulling weeds, painting houses, and harvesting wheat: although these were noble pursuits in their own right, none of them were for me. It wasn’t that I thought I was better than these jobs or that they were beneath me in some way. I didn’t realize it at the time, but the problem was that these jobs didn’t match the dream I had for my life. For as long as I can remember, the only thing I wanted to do was to go into the entertainment industry. This dream consumed my daily thoughts. I was interested in the cowboys and desperados of Dodge City, mostly because I wanted to be one. I enjoyed playing with my *Star Wars* action figures because I imagined myself as Han Solo or Luke Skywalker, traveling across the universe righting wrongs with my lightsaber and blaster. I knew I could never actually be a cowboy or Han, but I wanted to be the guy

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who got to portray him on the big screen. The frustration and boredom I felt while riding a combine began to crystalize this vision. All along, my discontent was trying to tell me something, but it wasn't till I was eighteen, during my last summer on the farm, that I began to realize it.

LISTENING TO THE WHISPERS OF MY DREAMS

It is when you are stuck doing something in your life that you would rather not be doing that you often find yourself thinking most about what you would rather be doing. Your uncomfortable reality and your lofty dreams make for strange yet compatible bedfellows. One can't exist without the other. One gives birth to and continually nurtures the other.

To put it simply, if you feel the life you are living is empty, vacant, or unfulfilling, then it's possible your dreams are trying to show you a better way. Dreams are like exit signs prompting you to get off the road to nowhere. Which is why we must listen to the whisper of our dreams, for they are the doorways to happiness and a satisfying life. Your dreams are your ticket out.

It was during this process of bemoaning one life and coveting another that I started paying attention to my inner voice, my calling. By the way, it's referred to as "a calling" because if you're not listening then you might not hear what God is trying to say to you. During my last summer on the farm, I began to listen.

I had no choice because there was little else to hear. Have you ever heard the sound wheat makes when it's growing? The silence is deafening. If you ever need to be alone with your thoughts, I mean *really alone*, then go sit in the middle of a wheat field. The boredom left my brain on pause and my heart open, both begging for meaningful discourse. I'd be out in the fields

with nothing but wheat in front of me and wheat behind me, and I suspected there was something different for me out there. Not out in the wheat of course, but way, way out there beyond the wheat. About 1,200 miles past the wheat to be exact, in a mythological city called Hollywood. Truth has a way of sneaking in when you're alone with yourself, partly because despite the way it may feel, you are never truly alone. God is always there, and sometimes he uses these quiet moments to communicate with you. For lack of anything else to distract me, the quiet of the wheat field made it easier for me to hear his whisper. His whisper came in the form of a desire—a dream, really.

I couldn't understand it. Why acting? Where did this desire come from? The whole thing was a bit ridiculous. My exposure to acting and the dramatic arts was extremely limited. We did own a television, but it was rarely on because the Mennonite Brethren frowned upon television as too worldly. It wasn't until I was eight years old that I saw my first movie in a theater, and believe me when I say that the adventure came about completely unintentionally. I was out with my friend and his parents, and they took me with them to see the movie *Grease* with John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John. It was a magical experience. The sound and images on screen were incredible. Even though I was sitting with an entire audience, it was as if I were taking my own trip into an incredible fantasy world. My enjoyment was tarnished only by the fact that, after seeing Ms. Newton-John in her skintight, black leather pants, I was convinced my soul was now consigned to eternal damnation. It would be another ten years or so before I ventured back into a movie theater.

The acting bug bit me in seventh grade when the high school English teacher, Mrs. Rooney, cast me in the role of Kurt

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in the high school production of *The Sound of Music*. I was more than flattered. I was validated because Mrs. Rooney typically cast only experienced upperclassmen and yet she chose me, a novice and a middle schooler no less, to play what I considered the most important role in the musical. I remember thinking Mrs. Rooney must have seen through all of my shortcomings and recognized my raw yet undeniable talent. Looking back, I think it was probably less about my talent and more due to how short I was and that I looked more like a young kid than any of the juniors and seniors, who were already six-foot plus and sporting whiskers.

While putting on the clothes and makeup was a little weird, I loved the theater. In a way it was like being in a time machine; for an hour and a half I was catapulted into another life, another world. I've always been a huge fan of people's stories. I find them fascinating; I think if I hadn't gone into the entertainment industry, I might have gone into journalism. The other thing about the theater was, when the lights go down, there's electricity in the air. Anything can happen—it's like the actors are on a tightrope. That's why live theater will never be replaced; it's similar to a sporting event, except you're able to transport yourself into the story. There's something so exciting about it all. And to me at that time, I was hooked. I felt alive.

By the time I got to high school, the theater program was involved only in producing musicals, and since I don't have the greatest singing voice, I pretty much sat out. Other than a bit part as a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*, my experience on stage was limited; our school had no drama classes or acting lessons. Most of my classmates were interested in farming or sports, so even though I had begun to realize that what I really wanted to do with

my life was to act, I knew very little about how to go about it. I was too embarrassed to share my dream with anyone or even talk about it, because I was clueless about the acting field in general. I had no idea how or where to start, what it would look like when I got there, or what obstacles might be in my way, but as I sat in that wheat field, I knew acting was a dream I had to pursue.

WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW DIDN'T HURT ME

If I had known then what I know now about the entertainment industry, I might not have chased my dream. I'm sure the impossibility of it all would have overwhelmed me, and I would have talked myself out of it. Believe me, most people would have advised me to let go of this dream, telling me it was a childhood fantasy. Because of my insulated upbringing, I possessed a wide-eyed innocence, making me the last person on earth who should have left all that he knew, moved to Hollywood, and entered into arguably the most cutthroat, competitive, "only one in a million survive" industry on the planet.

However, in retrospect I can see my naïveté served me well. I was too dumb to know what I didn't know, and my ignorance gave me confidence. Not an ideal situation, but I'll take it. Bottom line, I wasn't afraid—and that is a good thing when it comes to pursuing your God-given dream. If you allow fear to get in your way, to stop you from getting to where God wants you to be, you run the risk of a far less rewarding and fulfilling life than what could have been.

My dream of a successful career in the entertainment industry was my beginning, my starting place. The finish line was still far away, so far away I couldn't even see it clearly, which is surprising when you consider how flat Kansas is!

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What is your beginning? Where is your wheat field, and what waits for you beyond it? These are not rhetorical questions. You are going to need to answer them and be very clear about your answers if you ever hope to live your dreams. In order for you to fulfill your dream, you must first identify it. This is critical, but I don't believe it is the first step. I believe your journey begins by understanding where that dream came from in the first place.

THE ONLY “YOU” GOD EVER MADE

During the “in the beginning” days of the universe, when God first created humankind, I imagine he used a specific and unique genetic blueprint for each and every one of us. There is and never will be anyone exactly like you. Psalm 139:14 reads, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” In the original Hebrew text, the word *wonderfully* means “unique, set apart, and therefore uniquely marvelous.”

Do you have a hard time accepting this? Are you having difficulty imagining that of all the bajillion people on the planet Earth, God created no two exactly the same? It might be easier and more palatable for you to simply refer to God's unique blueprint for you as DNA. That's fine. Call it what you like, but I would like to point out that the Swiss chemist Friedrich Miescher first identified DNA some three thousand years after David wrote about being “wonderfully made.” Just saying.

I believe God included a dream, a destiny, and a uniquely specific reason for living in each of our unique blueprints (DNA).

We are told in Romans 12:6, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.”

Here’s what I believe is a plausible backstory to this verse. I am oversimplifying this process, but I picture God pondering his creation and concluding that he needs something specific done here on Earth. Perhaps he knew a certain community would one day need a leader, or that it would need a bridge built at some point, or maybe even that a child somewhere would need to laugh at just the right moment to give him the strength to persevere in his battle against a life-threatening disease.

God saw what he wanted done here on Earth, so he said, “I’m going to need someone to do _____ for me. It has to be just the right person with all the right qualifications. I should probably then make this person.” So he took a little bit of this and a touch of that and he created *you* to do this specific thing. He conceived and designed you to do it better than anyone else. There is a certain way your heart loves that nobody else can duplicate; a unique way you process information that nobody else can imitate; a way you relate to people; a particular sense of humor you have; a unique way of singing, telling stories, building a business, designing, or decorating. You bring something to this world that no one else can deliver. You please God unlike any other. Your dream is inside your heart, but it didn’t start there. God put it there, and now it lives within you.

I suspect that some of you reading this are doing a quick inventory of your talents and your special attributes and somehow coming up with nothing. You have concluded there is nothing special or unique about yourself, and therefore God has nothing in mind for you to do for him. You feel as though God has left you to fend for yourself.

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You might have come to this erroneous but nonetheless dangerous conclusion for many reasons, but one comes to mind that I see a lot in the entertainment business. My guess is, you are comparing yourself to people our society celebrates, and as a result you feel less than special.

We live in a culture that glorifies certain talents and attributes while ignoring others. Much is made of the NBA player who repeatedly and without fail sinks the ball from the three-point line or the young woman whose voice wows the celebrity judges on *American Idol*. These people are elevated to the status of superstars and royalty and are rewarded with vast sums of money and adoration. “He has a God-given talent,” they say, or “Her voice is a gift from God.” It appears logical to us that people who are so blessed by the Lord would be successful in their chosen endeavors.

What about the talents and gifts that are not so obvious or the dreams that don't seem so grand? What of the basketball coach with the gift of organizing and fund-raising who imagined building a community gymnasium and, after ten years of work, finally realized that dream, offering a place where young athletes can begin to realize their own dreams? What of the piano teacher who led a children's choir and in doing so introduced music into the lives of children and instilled in some of them a great passion for singing?

Unsung heroes? Maybe, but I tell you this. When people achieve their God-given dreams, heaven sings for them. What else really matters?

Every day I meet people who feel they are nothing special. It reminds me of a disease, actually. It's almost like some kind of illness that has spread like a virus throughout our society, causing

people to look into the mirror and see so much less than what God sees when he looks at us. God sees more because he can see into our spirits. He is not distracted or dismayed by the external, what exists only on the surface. First Samuel 16:7 tells us, “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

There are tons of suggestions and explanations as to why there might exist a type of institutionalized epidemic of low self-esteem. I have heard it theorized that advertisers need for us all to think less of ourselves so we’ll buy their products that promise a new and improved life. Some say it’s a result of social media; others suggest uninvolved caregivers or early emotional trauma.

Whatever the road or reason that leads people to despise or think less of themselves, their assessment of themselves is erroneous. It is a lie that they are less valuable or significant than anyone else. I know this to be true, for there are piles of Scriptures announcing God’s love for each individual soul. Here are just a few:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6–7)

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (1 John 3:1)

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:4–5)

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The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

We are, after all, each and every one of us, made in his image. Do you think that when it came to you, God made a mistake? Do you imagine that in the very instant you were created, God was distracted and you were shortchanged?

You might be thinking I am giving you too much credit. *David wouldn't say this about me if he really knew me. I'm far from special. I'm not particularly educated. I'm not successful. I have no illusions of grandeur.* You might also be thinking, *Actually, if you get right down to it, I'm a seriously flawed individual. I don't live a perfectly righteous life—far from it. I'm not the kind of person God would have a special plan for.*

If you remember nothing else in this book, remember at least this: It doesn't matter where you were born or what kind of life you had growing up. Maybe as an adult you have felt unappreciated or even rejected. Maybe you've had your share of bad luck and misfortune or suffered great tragedy. It is not an accident or random chance that you are here on this planet. You are here for a reason—and that reason, that unique destiny, is found in your God-given dream.

There is no one too common, too ignorant, too uneducated, too poor, too inexperienced, or too broken and sinful that he or she cannot be used by God to achieve his goals.

You think I am the one giving you too much credit? Actually, I'm not the one giving you credit—God is! At the end of the day, what difference does it make what I think? Or what your boss,

teacher, spouse, neighbor, or anyone else thinks? God has faith in you. He thinks you can do what he created you to do.

“In the beginning” refers not only to the creation of time, space, and matter. It also refers to the conception of you and me and the dreams God has instilled in each one of us, dreams to do specific tasks that he needs done on this planet.

Now that we’ve established that your dreams are not entirely your own, that they exist because God gave them to you and that God thinks you are worthy of these same dreams, you may be thinking the hardest part is behind you. If so then you should probably turn to chapter 2.



For photos of David’s childhood, his early jobs, and his first acting role, go to DavidARWhite.com/Exclusive.