



A Higher Branch

What if happiness is as simple
as climbing higher?

Sam Makhoul

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International Pty Limited

*This book is dedicated to my grandmother Rose Makhoul.
It was on her mulberry tree that I reached for my first branch.*

*She made my childhood magical, during what were
turbulent times in Lebanon's history.*

*And to my children Christopher, Matthew and Amelia,
without whom I cannot breathe.*

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FOREWORD

This book is a guide to life, a journal and an inspiring story – almost a novel. It is a magical journey filled with beautiful analogies that are sure to live in your memory long after you have read it.

For as long as I have known Sam he has travelled through life with a journal in his hands and his eyes firmly fixed on achievement. Not content with standing still, he has a childlike excitement for the future and all its possibilities.

Sam is a dreamer, a thinker, an idealist, a student of life and a person with a curiosity for other people's potential. He is also an entrepreneur at heart but one with a keen sense of justice and a love for humanity.

Sam has written this fable with deliberate simplicity. He likes to write as he speaks, freely and spontaneously. He uses the language of life that leaves no reader behind.

Part One

THE EIGHT TREES
OF LIFE

CHAPTER 1

The Boy who Loves to Climb



*“Each child is an adventure
into a better life – an opportunity to change
the old pattern and make it new.”*

Hubert H. Humphrey



When I was eight years old, I had one of those life-changing experiences that some people talk of when they are much older, perhaps as a result of an epiphany or a life-altering illness. My memory of it is so vivid that I am able to write about it many years after it happened. It shapes my thinking and dictates every decision I make in life.

My story begins on one sunny spring afternoon, when I ventured away from home to explore the woods. It was a serene time of the day with no clouds in the sky and no wind blowing. Only the sound of birds searching for a spot to settle before sundown.

I was a boy like any other, curious and adventurous. I loved being surrounded by nature. I loved walking through the woods with my head constantly looking up in search of interesting happenings that took place in trees.

As I wandered through the woods on that day, I came across

a tree that I hadn't seen before. It was larger than any other. It was strange that I hadn't noticed it on my previous treks. How could I have missed it? I knew the woods like the back of my hand.

My eyes scanned the breadth of the tree and I noticed something odd about it. Its leaves were rustling, even though there was no wind blowing. The surrounding trees were eerily still, but the branches of this tree moved like it was beckoning me to get closer to it. To touch it. To climb it.

I approached cautiously and could not help but feel a connection. I ran the palm of my hand over the bark and looked up at the fork in the trunk where the branches fan out into all different directions. I noticed that the tree was high and difficult to climb, but that did not deter me. I used the knots in the trunk for leverage to start my climb. They were deeply embedded and seemed to be located in just the right spots. As I placed my hand on the first knot, it strangely felt like the strong supportive hand of my father.

I started climbing up with the fearless determination that only a child could muster. After I worked my way up to the top of the trunk, I started reaching further for the many branches that were on offer, slowly getting higher and higher until I was at the very top canopy. I stood there, perched for what seemed like a long time and admired the tree's detailed and ancient structure beneath me. I felt a sense of freedom. I felt strong. I felt energetic. I felt supported.

The changing colours of the setting sun in the distance interrupted my daydream and I realised it would soon be getting dark. I climbed back down to the trunk and stood there pondering how to make it down without falling and hurting myself. Contemplating my next move, I began to worry. The light of day was about to disappear and my parents would be expecting me home. I leaned back on the large branch, only

intending to rest a moment. I felt a serene sense of calm as my mind drifted to other matters, as it so often did. The branch cradled my body and as I relaxed, I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke to the sound of birds chirping and glimpses of the sun rising in the distance. The woods looked unfamiliar. Did I wake up in a different place? How could that be? I looked out and noticed that the tree I lay in was in the middle of a meadow of lush green grass. To my right were a number of rolling hills that trailed in a row all the way to the ocean. I sat up and noticed that I was in a large majestic tree that had an elegant network of branches full of bright green foliage that appeared to be shining magically.

Around me were seven other trees with a similar network of branches. They were linked in a perfect circle, with their branches overlapping. It looked like they were holding hands and reminded me of the nursery rhyme 'ring-around-the-rosie'.

Was I in a dream or did I sleepwalk to another meadow? How could it be the morning? The sun was setting when I drifted off to sleep. Did I spend the whole night on the tree?

I will never know whether what happened next was a dream or not. What I do know is that it changed my life forever.



I heard water trickling at the base of the trunk and looked down to see an old man dressed in bright white clothing with a watering can in one hand. He appeared to be illuminated by the morning light. He looked up at me, smiled and greeted me with a warm “Hello”.

“Hello,” I replied hesitantly.

“Are you enjoying this tree?” he asked.

“Yes, but I need to climb down and find my way home.”

“Then jump down,” he urged.

“It’s too high. I’ll hurt myself.”

“Don’t worry, I will catch you,” he assured me.

I looked down cautiously at him. My parents had taught me to never talk to strangers; although he looked harmless, I thought. Besides, I had no other option. I had to get home. I planned to make a run for it as soon as my feet touched the ground.

“Okay, here I come.”

I stood up and steadied myself.

He put his watering can down and opened his arms. They appeared to stretch far and wide, as the flowing white fabric of his garment expanded like a hammock ready to catch me. I closed my eyes, jumped and felt like I had landed into a big soft pillow.

As he helped me to my feet I couldn’t help but make eye contact with him. His face looked friendly and his eyes kind and gentle. There was something strangely familiar about him. I returned his smile and decided not to leave in a hurry. I was curious about what he was doing alone in the meadow.

“Why are you watering this tree?” I asked.

“I water all these eight trees daily,” he replied and pointed to the trees in the circle, “but this one is my favourite. I couldn’t help but notice you were sleeping peacefully on it. So I had to come over and say hello.”

I was just as curious about the trees in the circle. “Why do these eight trees look so different to the other trees in the meadow?” I asked.

He looked up at them, then back at me and said, “Because these eight trees hold some very special fruit on their branches, especially this one,” he gestured up to the biggest tree in the middle. “This tree holds the secret to climbing the other seven.”

Before I could ask another question, the old man asked, “Why do you love to climb?”

“I don’t know,” was my first response. I thought about it

some more, looked up at the trees and said, “When I reach the top, I can see everything that is happening all around me. It’s like a bird’s-eye view.”

“Is that the only reason you like to climb?” he asked with an inquisitive smile.

“I also like the exciting feeling of climbing from branch to branch, reaching higher and higher. It’s an adventure. You know, the best fruit is on the higher branches.”

“Indeed it is,” he said, nodding with a knowing smile.

There was a long awkward silence and my attention returned to the fact that I was lost in an unfamiliar place. I was homesick and felt weak with worry. I also felt sad because I missed my mother, father and my little sister Sophia. My dog Woody would be waiting for me at the front gate.

The old man must have sensed my concern and asked me in a gentle voice, “What is your name, son?”

“Tom,” I replied.

“Well do not worry Tom. I am sure you will find your way home.”

My worry subsided a little.

“Do you know where I live?” I asked with hope.

“No, I don’t, but I know how you can find your way home.”

He leaned over a little and added in a soft secretive voice, “You must first find the Garden of Happiness.”

I was puzzled and asked with an equally hushed voice, “Where is that? Is it far from here?”

“It is closer than you think, Tom,” he replied. “But it is what you find *in* that Garden that will lead you home.”

I turned to look around the meadow. I always thought of a garden as having flowerbeds and blossoming trees, much like I would find around my grandmother’s cottage. But this was not a garden I was standing in. It was a meadow with only these eight trees. They did, however, look amazing. Every time

I looked at them, I felt the urge to climb. The branches looked so easy to navigate and the fruit that hung on each one was alluring. But it was still no garden. I looked back at the old man, puzzled.

“Don’t be confused, Tom. You will find what you are looking for if you follow your instinct to climb.”

He leaned over again and whispered, “To find the Garden of Happiness, you must first climb these eight trees,” he pointed upwards.

I did not understand what he meant. How could these eight trees show me the way home? Could you see my house from the top? But why would I have to climb all of them?

“Tom, the *fruit* from these eight trees will help guide you home. In fact, you can always return to eat from them whenever you get lost in life.”

While it did not make sense in my mind, what he said struck a chord in my heart. I loved to climb and I trusted what he was saying. There was something about him that made me want to listen to his every word. He looked at me with such wonder in his eyes, as if he was about to reveal an ancient treasure chest.

“Did you know, Tom, that these eight trees were planted and started growing when you were born?”

“Really?” I responded shyly, feeling embarrassed that the trees could be about me.

“These trees have been growing with you and will continue to do so for as long as you are climbing them throughout your life. When you are young, it is easy for you to climb, but as you grow older they will grow out of reach if you continually neglect them – especially this big one in the middle.”

He patted the trunk of the big tree again with the palm of his wrinkled hand. This time I looked carefully at the tree to notice that its branches spanned wide and overlapped the branches of the seven others. It looked like it was supporting them.

“What is so special about this big tree?” I asked.

“This tree is your Tree of Health, Tom.” He stopped to look at me and smiled as if he was introducing me to a long-lost brother or sister.

“You need to spend your life climbing this tree along with the seven others that surround it. The Tree of Love, the Tree of Family, the Tree of Work, the Tree of Friendship, the Tree of Learning, the Tree of Wealth and the Tree of Charity.”

He listed and pointed to each one like a father would name his children.

“These are your eight Trees of Life, Tom. There is great wisdom in them. You will find that when you climb each one daily, you will experience completeness. And you will achieve happiness and success in ways you would never have imagined.”

I was now convinced that I was in a dream. What the old man was saying sounded all too fantastical to be reality. But I also believed in all things magical, so I started to accept what he was telling me. Dream or not, it sounded too intriguing to run from. I was being introduced to *my* Trees of Life and I wanted to know more about them. So just like my favourite character, Aladdin, I went along for the ride of my life.



Part Two

THE CIRCLE OF
POSITIVE THINKING

CHAPTER 11

The Circle of Positive Thinking



“To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one’s family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one’s own mind. If a man can control his mind ... all wisdom and virtue will naturally come to him.”

Buddha



*W*e often underestimate the ability of children to understand life’s wisdom. The world may appear to be complex but the fundamentals of living are really very simple. Children understand this more than adults because daily issues like finances and work deadlines do not distract them. Children also do not live with arrogance, pride or self-importance. So they are open to learning much easier than adults.

Had I met the wise old man when I was older, I may have better understood the guiding principles in the eight Trees and the importance of climbing higher in each of them, but I may not have taken action. As adults we often dismiss life’s little lessons as too childish for the real world. But I have learned and witnessed that the most successful people in the world focus relentlessly on the fundamentals of living. They eat well. They

exercise. They love. They laugh. They learn. They innovate. They create. They inspire. They share.

Conversely I have met cynical people who view life as a complex maze. They think that success is either inherited or happens by luck. Their cynical mind is not easily guided by simple truths. It does not dream. It does not motivate action. It becomes weak with indecision and eventually causes stagnation.

I look back on my time with the old man and cannot help but feel grateful that I met him when I was only eight years old. It meant that I wholeheartedly accepted the guiding wisdom in the eight Trees without any cynicism whatsoever. I focused on and got to climb each Tree of Life. I heeded his advice by not neglecting any. I pursued my passions and disciplined myself to climb daily. Sometimes it brought me hardship, but I never stopped climbing.

That much was easy.

The most challenging part, however, came in the way I climbed. For it is one thing to know where you are going in life but another to know how to get there. In my adult years, I realised more and more that my eight Trees were merely a guide, albeit a powerful one. They directed me to what I should be climbing, but they did not teach me how to climb.

There came a time when I became disillusioned with my achievements. I felt like they were not so great if it meant having to be selfish, and even ruthless, to get what I wanted out of life. My adult-induced cynicism grew and I started doubting the wisdom. For a time, I lost focus and stopped climbing altogether. The fruit sat on the branches uneaten and eventually fell to the ground, wasted. I became unhappy.

It was during this particularly difficult period in my life when I realised that though my climb had been adventurous and taken me to significant heights, something was still lacking. That for all these years I had forgotten the second and most

important wisdom the old man had taught me. It was bidden in my subconscious, only to be unlocked by the most challenging phase of my life.

It was on one particular night, at my lowest moment, when I awoke in the early hours of the morning with my heart beating seemingly out of my chest. I sat up in bed, sweating profusely. The storm raging inside my heart subsided a little and I decided to go for a walk to calm myself and gain some perspective. Before I left the house, I went into the attic and dug up an old journal with many blank pages left in it. It was one that I stopped writing in and had tossed aside like an unwanted buddy. It felt good to blow the dust off it. A new beginning? Perhaps.

I left the house and after a short walk, arrived at a serene spot overlooking a nearby lake where I sat waiting for the sunrise. I turned my attention to the journal in the hope of writing something, anything! I closed my eyes and tried to remember the old man's face and the sound of his voice. Our time together seemed so long ago.

As my hopes for inspiration started to fade, I felt a bright light suddenly fall on my face. The warmth of it tickled my cheeks. I opened my eyes in surprise only to see that it was the sun greeting me like an old friend.

It was in that instant that a series of memories came flooding back; memories of my time with the old man during the second half of that fortuitous day in the meadow. I closed my eyes again and remembered that it was the afternoon when he shared with me the most powerful way to control my thoughts.

As I recalled the wisdom and the lessons, I began to write profusely in my journal. I wrote and wrote until my hand ached. I smiled as I wrote. I felt like I was eight years of age again. I felt empowered. It was like something inside of me had awakened to see the truth. The truth was that although I had been climbing higher in life, I had not been doing so with a

positive mind and a congruent heart.

This truth opened the door to the next phase of my life – the door to intellectual and emotional enlightenment. It was the second piece of the puzzle that had been missing and I had found it in the sunrise.

The old man taught me the simplest of ways to develop a strong mind. He taught me a pattern of thinking that was impenetrable to the chaos and negativity of the outside world. It armed me with the wisdom that would strengthen my mind and my heart forever.

He taught me the Circle of Positive Thinking.



A New Pattern of Thinking

The day seemed to be standing still in time. I sat there in a happy daze looking around the meadow of lush green grass. I looked up at the clear blue sky and noticed one small cloud drifting by. The sun was shining above the eight Trees and I could feel a gentle coastal breeze beginning to blow softly on my face.

The old man had just finished relating his life stories, including his many mistakes. I had learned about all stages of his life, each teaching me a valuable lesson. I felt like I knew him better than I knew myself. We had only been talking for a few hours and yet it seemed like I had known him my whole life.

He left to go to the nearby stream to fetch some more water for both of us. As I waited, I lay back on the grass imagining how my life would be as an adult. I tried to imagine what I would achieve in each of my eight Trees. A sense of excitement filled my body and butterflies in my stomach started to dance.

As I contemplated my future I also started imagining some terrible things that could go wrong; circumstances that would

stop me from climbing. What if some of the boys started bullying me at school? What if I got sick? What if my parents died? What if? What if? All the ‘what ifs’ popped into my head and my heart started pounding with fear. I opened my eyes to bring me back to the present, sat up and noticed the old man walking back towards me. He spoke as he approached. “Remember, Tom, that life will not always be rosy. Even if you do climb all these eight Trees, life will still bring you challenges.”

He arrived and sat on the grass next to me and added, “Some people are tested more than others. It could be illness or loss of a loved one or losing your job. Or even living in a country that suffers a natural disaster or war. We cannot control such random events. The best that we can do is to keep climbing.”

“But I started imagining some horrible things that could go wrong,” I said anxiously.

“Dear Tom, I can see that you are upset by the pattern of negative thinking you talked yourself into.”

“I don’t understand,” I interjected, “I didn’t say anything to myself. These bad thoughts just popped into my head.”

“We talk to ourselves all the time,” he responded. “We do it so instinctively that we do not even realise that it is an internal conversation we are having. But the good news is that just as you can talk yourself into a negative pattern of thinking, you can also talk yourself into a positive one.

“There are some people who get defeated by life’s setbacks and lose the will to climb. That is a choice they make because they view their challenges negatively. They blame others for their problems or they blame their circumstances or even themselves. They tell themselves, ‘I can never do that because I was not taught to’ or ‘I don’t live in the right neighbourhood or go to the right school’ or ‘I am not strong enough or smart enough’ or ‘I might get hurt’ or – my personal favourite – ‘I don’t have time!’

“When someone *thinks* like this, they are talking themselves out of climbing higher in life. The reality is, no one is ever born into a perfect set of circumstances. And, the other reality is that we all have the same time. So the difference between us can only be our state of mind.

“I have now realised that the only thing we can control is *how* we think and *what* we think. This is very important because thinking is what precedes the decisions we make and the actions we take. If we think the wrong way we will make poor decisions in life. It’s as simple as that.

“I used to talk myself out of a lot of things *because* of my negative thinking. But *one day* I discovered a new pattern of thinking that changed all that.”

He paused, as he often did, before revealing one of his thought-provoking lessons. But this time, the serious look in his eyes told me that this lesson was very important.

The Circle of Positive Thinking

“I want to share with you the most powerful way to manage your thinking, Tom. It will make you strong and fearless. Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes please.”

My curiosity was sparked.

“Where did you discover this pattern of thinking?” I asked.

“When I lay in that hospital bed recovering from my heart attack, I had a lot of time to think. I reflected on all the poor choices I made and realised that there are no mistakes in life, only lessons. And I was lucky enough to learn a life-changing one.

“I learned that you could train your mind to follow a pattern of thinking that always leads to a happy outlook; one that can reverse and flip any negative thoughts. I call it the Circle of Positive Thinking,” he said thoughtfully.

“There are some challenges that you will face throughout your life, Tom. Most will be outside of your control. It happens to all of us. But how you process and *think* about such challenges is the key to life-long happiness.”

“So how am I supposed to think?” I asked.

“You must learn to *consciously* follow a positive pattern of thinking. Whatever happens in your day, whether it’s good or bad, can be processed using this pattern. It will make your mind strong and your heart even stronger.”

The old man put his right hand into the pocket of his long garment. He pulled out a scroll with a string around it. He untied and unrolled the linen-like paper.

“I want you to have this,” he said. “This is the five step pattern to the Circle of Positive Thinking. Since leaving the hospital, I have been living by this Circle. It is the most powerful way to think. It will give your mind the discipline it needs for you to keep climbing higher and will help you climb back up if ever you fall off and lose your way in life.”

He handed me the scroll. I placed it on the ground next to me and unrolled it. I found four little pebbles and placed them on top, one for each corner, to keep it open. I studied each step in the Circle briefly then looked back at the old man, only to find his face beaming with a proud smile. It seemed like he had been waiting a long time to share this with someone.

