

FOR THE LOVE OF...

For the Love Of... is a collection of essays containing personal advice from Marcus Johnson, an accomplished musician and entrepreneur. Marcus has managed to stay afloat in cutthroat industries, ultimately achieving success, despite venturing into the saturated markets of live and recorded music and wine and spirits. Along the way, he encountered many obstacles and faced numerous pitfalls that almost cost him his sense of self. Forging ahead against the grain, Marcus fell into his groove and began to find joy even in the midst of working his way around countless roadblocks on his path to success.

Within these pages, Marcus shares the lessons that helped him cope as he rode out the highs and low of making his dreams a reality. He provides practical strategies and techniques that will inspire you to discover your purpose, pursue your passion, and stay the course in spite of perceived challenges. *For the Love Of...* will inspire, motivate, and empower you to figure life out regardless of your circumstances.

**To book Marcus for a speaking engagement,
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MARCUS JOHNSON

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Living the journey of life with intention, love,
passion, and happiness!

MARCUS JOHNSON

FOREWORD BY SHEILA JOHNSON

co-founder of BET, CEO of Salamander Hotels and Resorts

This book is dedicated to my daughter Chase!

*Plain and simple, you are my reason for being. I do this for the love
of your life, passion, inspiration, and guidance.*

flo[®]...

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FOR THE LOVE OF...

Excellence

*Excellence is a verb!
It's the way in which you live your life!*

The only person that you harm by choosing not to be excellent is yourself. I used to hear the term “excellence” a lot when I was younger. It was a challenge to me, my brother and sisters, teammates, and schoolmates to do our individual and collective best. My father always used to encourage me by saying, “Son, act the way you want to be, and soon you will be the way you act!” Of course, as a child, I thought he was crazy. I didn’t have any say in the way that I was. I just “WAS” that way—right? Well, as I got older, I saw the wisdom in my father’s statement. In short, he was telling me that my success was based on what and who I chose to be. Furthermore, he was telling me that my self-definition and my self-concept were completely in my control—always. I always have the option of committing myself to excellence through my choices, my actions, and how I deal with consequences.

Excellence isn’t an adjective that describes a result; it is a way of life that requires a commitment to executing at your highest level in everything that you choose to do. Excellence is relative and personal in every sense. Everyone’s definition of excellence is informed by their abilities, goals, and perspective. For instance, a new runner might train for years and push

himself to achieve a personal best; an excellent eight-minute mile. For a career sprinter that would be considered a very slow day.

One of the issues I have found in our current society is that excellence is often distilled down to and measured by things—the things that we accumulate, in the form of degrees, awards, business deals, wins, intimacy partners, cars, houses, etc. Is our excellence really about the material things that we have committed ourselves to and accumulated? No. Focusing on this accumulation of things is a distraction that society encourages to always make you feel like you aren't good enough; buying into this distraction keeps you from actually pursuing your personal definition of excellence. People get frustrated from even beginning their pursuit of excellence, believing they don't have the accumulation of things that would allow them to achieve their goals in the first place. They get bogged down in envy and materialism; they lose sight of what's important and what they could achieve if only they would slow down to take account of their own gifts and define excellence in their own big and powerful terms.

There are so many stories about great people who have achieved excellence without material wealth. Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi, Booker T. Washington, Richard Branson, and President Barack Obama all took account of their own gifts, and pursued excellence in such large scopes that they became *major change agents in history*. Their excellence transcended their material worth. They each possessed a purpose and committed their lives to its achievement. They overcame the obstacles placed within their paths, and through focus, dedication, and commitment, they achieved their goals and influenced the greater society. In all of these cases, their purpose was not focused on their own peace, security, and material gain; it was focused on being an instrument to positively impact the world.

I am committed to excellence in myself in all facets of my life; I am dedicated to achieving at the highest level possible for me. From the very beginning, as a self-taught concert jazz pianist, I could have gotten frustrated by the obstacles in my course. I was not raised by Benny Goodman, and I didn't get to take lessons with Thelonious Monk. My first instrument was a Casio MT-32, not a top of the line Yamaha Concert Grand. I started playing

seriously at the age of fourteen, watching over other people's shoulders; I was not a five-year-old Mozart prodigy. I went at it the hard way, took account of the gifts that I have and how far I could make them go, and now I have eighteen records and play close to 200 shows a year for thousands of people. People who live lives of excellence are not bound by their current situations. They stare fear, poverty, adoption, illness, death, and any other type of excuse in the face and make the choice to succeed—PERIOD!

Still, if I hadn't been conscious of defining my excellence through the scope of my choosing, I might, to this day, feel like a failure. If I defined the scope of my goals materialistically, and just wanted to make billions off my musical career, I would also be disappointed. I have achieved a professional career as a musician against the odds, but I am not competing against anyone in a Forbes' wealthiest list any time soon. The scope of my goals, what I strive for with excellence, is to positively impact the world with my music. I write and practice and perform with the goal of making people happier for listening. My music is not only an art, it is a form of therapy and healing for myself, my band members, and my audience. Pursuing that goal with excellence gives my performances an authenticity you just can't fake. I often am asked "Marcus, where do you go when you close your eyes, make those faces, and play your heart out?" I go to what I call the healing zone. My goal is to make every single note count. When I hear the cheers from the crowd, and when people approach me after I come off the stage glowing and jubilant from listening, I know I'm on the right path.

I consider all of the tools available to me when I'm examining how to pursue each facet of my life with excellence. I encourage you to consider each of these elements, and how they can impact your own focus for living a life of excellence!

EXCELLENCE TOOLBOX

Self-knowledge: Excellence is a relative and personal term, and you must continually define it for yourself. This is one of those *for you-by you (FYBY)* life requirements. You must take the time out to conduct your

own self-analysis to see what you value—what’s important and what is not. What are your core values, your goal objectives? What are your priorities, and how are you doing with them?

You must acknowledge that all of these elements might change over time, and if they do, you must be truthful with yourself about that. Failure to acknowledge these changes and how they inform your journey leads you to chase things you no longer truly want, and takes time and energy away from working toward your true inner goals. This is where many people fail to live their own lives of excellence!

We can be very successful in the eyes of society and others, but unless we’re pursuing our own goals, dreams, and ambitions, we’ll never be fully satisfied with the results. I recently had a very candid conversation with my sister about our current views of success. When I was younger, I wanted a bunch of things—not necessarily material in nature, but I wanted things nonetheless. She was very similar. My mother strongly encouraged her to go to medical school. She went, and she was in the top ten in her medical school class and won many awards; she secured a coveted pharmacology fellowship, a great residency, and then an awesome job at one of the world’s most successful pharmaceutical companies. She has traveled extensively, lived in China and Vietnam, and seen so much of what the world has to offer. When I asked her how she felt about everything she had accomplished, her response was simple—“Tired!” Since those goals had been set externally for her, the accomplishments in hindsight weren’t exhilarating, they were exhausting. After taking time out to think and reflect on her life, her eyes are open with new insight and wisdom. She is in tune with her current needs and focused. This has allowed her to reset her goals and definition of excellence—on her own terms.

We chase a ton of things in life. Many of them are admirable, others are fulfilling—others not so much. As we get older and wiser, things change. As we have more experiences, things change. We have to reflect and make accurate evaluations of our beliefs, actions, and their consequences. My father always said, “If I thought the way now that I did when I was thirty, I would have wasted forty years of my life.” As you live a life of personal

excellence, it is important to understand and allow for change over time. Give yourself the leeway to incorporate that into who you are, what you are doing, and where you are going! This is the true definition of wisdom!

SKILLS TO BUILD TO PURSUE AN EXCELLENT LIFE:

You don’t need a lot of material things in order to start focusing on excellence in your life, but you do need certain skills in order to live excellence. Remember, excellence isn’t a one-time thing; these are skills you should build and maintain like muscles, through regular use and development, to see the best results.

Not staying stuck: A close friend and I were talking the other day about a tough situation I was in, and I told her that I was going through hell. She laughed and said, “Well, okay, so long as you don’t get stuck there!”

So much of living a life of excellence is making sure that you overcome the daily obstacles that life puts in your path. People can get stuck “in hell” when they don’t achieve their expectations, goals, and objectives, and instead of going through the process of re-evaluation, setting new goals, and moving on, they take things personally and make the choice to stay in hell and subject themselves to punishment. They obsess about what could have been, instead of taking what was given and using it to redefine who they are and who they are going to be. I often tell my friends, “If life throws you bricks, be sure that you build something great with them!” This is a matter of perspective, but having a positive perspective is key to living a fulfilled and excellent life.

Taking care of yourself: John C. Maxwell talks about how when we are younger, we gladly give all of our health to generate and accumulate money, but when we are older, we would gladly give all of the money that we have to overcome the effects of our neglect on our physical and mental health. You must recognize that a healthy lifestyle is necessary for a life of excellence.

There are many new studies coming out about the connection between brain health and stomach health, exercise, overall nutrition, and rest. Treating your mind and your body right takes more time and

planning than letting it go, but when you do it, not only are you able to function at a higher level, but your experience while doing it is enhanced as well. Can you function as a physician, businessperson, lawyer, teacher, and parent off an all-Dorito diet with three hours of sleep and a liquid diet of Bourbon? Of course you can, but your health, personal experience and effectiveness might be compromised.

Society can often push you to run your body down. We're not encouraged to take time out for self-care and rejuvenation. It even sounds funny writing it here. We're pressured (and pressure ourselves!) to have perfect, high-achieving lives, bodies, families, homes, and careers without giving ourselves the time to prepare and eat nutritious foods, get up from our desks long enough to exercise, get the proper amount of sleep each night, and take vacations. There are some intense deadlines in life, when these crucial elements have to be temporarily sacrificed, but living this type of schedule over any long term period will ruin your health and inevitably slow down your ability to achieve with excellence. You only get one body, and you can ruin it through years of trying to make it operate without the proper care—and you won't even get peak performance out of it!

I perform at an increased level of proficiency in both music and business when I have had rest, eaten a good breakfast, and performed some type of exercise. The reverse holds true as well—when I do not get rest, have too much to drink or eat, and go for prolonged periods without exercise, my overall performance, impact, and effectiveness are significantly reduced. Yes, there have been times that, due to one thing or the other, I have not been in my best physical shape, and I have been able to make it through... we all have. But the experience is not enjoyable, and “making it through” is not *excellent*. Excellence and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive; they must co-exist, and caring for yourself and your health is crucial to personal enjoyment of an excellent life!

Choosing mentors, support team, and environment: No one achieves the highest levels of excellence and lives excellently on their own—nor should they. In the twenty-first century, with the full power of the internet—YouTube DIY videos, Google, and the like—it is easier than

ever to use the expertise of others to help you learn and refine your skills. I am amazed at the tips and advice I can find with simple search terms on nearly anything I can think of. If you feel like you're not finding the help that you need, consider going old school and visiting your local library. Librarians are actually trained to conduct unobtrusive research interviews, to help you boil down to the essence of what you're actually searching for. This works well if you're getting frustrated trying to put your thoughts into words. They can help you define your search terms for better accuracy.

Choosing the right people to surround yourself with is crucial. When I was just out of law school, I saw a picture on a wall of a restaurant extolling the “Thirty Rules of Success.” Rule number one was to pick the right team and life partners. Rule number two was that the other twenty-nine rules didn't matter! It was a pivotal message for me to read at that time; prior to that moment, I hadn't taken the time to consider my journey outside of the scope of myself. It finally started to click, how instrumental and helpful my life partners would be to allowing me to live excellently. They are key to creating a fertile environment in which my dreams can be cultivated to grow!

My father had always advised me to surround myself with good people. You are what you eat, not only in terms of the food that you put in your body, but in terms of the energy, information, spirit, grace, purpose, and commitment of those that you have around you. If you have negative, pessimistic, angry, impulsive people around you and on your team, you will have a negative, pessimistic, angry, impulsive strategy, which will lead to awful results. When you have positive, grateful, purposeful, and committed people around you, you cannot help but be more successful.

Where do you find these people? One of the first places I look is in the headlines of stories in magazines and periodicals relating to my goals and interests. I am looking for people who already have things going on, people who make things happen! I want to talk to people who are farther along the path than I am, who can help me solve issues they have already faced and give me new perspectives and information. How am I going to make something happen if I have a team of people who have NO experience with making things happen?

Counsel is very important, but I regularly see people seeking advice from others who have no experience with success in the area in which they are being asked to advise. It's the equivalent of asking a foot doctor to perform heart surgery. It's just not a good idea.

Overcoming failure is a key part of success, but actually having people on your team that have already overcome obstacles and achieved success is the element of excellence that you need. These are the people who will pull you up when you are down, correct your path when you are lost, recognize the opportunities you miss, and test your best ideas in a way that continually and positively refines them. They will not allow you to accept anything but your personal best! This is also a good definition of a good friend; however, your team should be your friends in a different way. They are friends of the world you are working to create, and friends to themselves. You become a beneficiary of their individual commitments to lives of self-excellence and collective empowerment. They understand that their successes are embodied in their investments in the success of the team. Look at any good team: if you pull out any one member, you will see that personal and collective success are high on their list of priorities.

Making sure that you are committed to surrounding yourself with people of shared values, goals, and missions is a key component to achieving your goals with excellence. This might seem like a lot of work, but I would argue that living an unfulfilled life is a much heavier burden to bear!

Requesting help: In *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey describes the need for people to ask for help from both their active and passive supporters. Active supporters are the people who are close to you and who know that you need support. Covey stresses how we can miss getting a lot of impactful support if we do not engage our passive support systems: the people who would help *if only they knew that we needed it*.

There are many reasons why you could be afraid of asking for help; maybe your pride would be hurt by admitting you can't get through something on your own, maybe you fear being judged for not knowing something, or maybe you worry that you're going to be rejected if you ask. None of the possible reasons are more valid than your need for

assistance. It's plain and simple: when you recognize you need help, you need help! Go get it.

When we have a headache, we go to the medicine cabinet and pull out Advil. When we have a cold or sore throat, we go to the doctor. However, when we have a strategy or life plan that isn't working, many of us suddenly seem to have a need to "man-up" and figure this stuff out on our own. Whenever I'm struggling with those feelings, I like to remember the quote, "Your best thinking got you here," or, as Einstein once said, "A problem cannot be solved at the same level at which it was created!" If your best thinking and efforts created a sick strategy or life plan, you can't solve the problem you created using more of your best thinking—you must ask for help!

It is taboo, especially in my community, to get counselling of various types. I think that we all could use more life coaching, nutrition coaching, strategic coaching, organizational coaching, and mental health coaching. Little voices inside our heads try to get us to label ourselves as failures for not being able to solve every problem on our own—but aren't we actually failing ourselves if we neglect to get the professional support we need to keep us on track to personal excellence? I'd recommend looking at it like this: any one of these forms of help is a simple step to getting a diagnosis and prescription for realizing your excellence. Pride does not apply here; this is where you must demonstrate selflessness *toward yourself*. That self-forgiving spirit will allow you to overcome the obstacles in your way, secure the proper counsel, and establish your new trajectory towards excellence.

If you commit yourself to living a life of excellence, carefully defined (remember: FYBY—excellence is always defined from within!), and build these skills, you'll be more successful and happier, even in the hardest times. Choose excellence!

WHAT IS FLO...?

FLO represents the journey through which we discover those things in life that fulfill us and make each experience that much better. For the love of Life, Self, Happiness, Passion, Joy...Love itself. This book is but one expression!

May it help you smooth out the crinkled pieces of paper in your life.

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