

# *Avalanche: The 9 Principles for Uncovering True Wealth*

## Chapter 7 Excerpt

With no job and no income, money began flying out of our bank account. Mortgage payments, car payments, the gardener, the maid, tuition payments, credit card bills—it all piled up. I suddenly had a flashback to the day Dad walked in the house and told mom about the bank's calling in his loans. I now understood how he must have felt—feeling like a failure for not protecting the family's financial resources. As a man, I wanted to be the provider; I wanted to be the rock. Instead, I felt like a fraud.

Aside from helping the Luthers, I had time on my hands in the first few days after I quit. For someone who was used to hard work and long hours, hanging out at the house was rather depressing. I had time to think about my life and what I wanted to do, but there were no easy answers. Should I stay in real estate? Should I do something completely different? Was I really a financial failure? How could I let my family down like this? Was I having a midlife crisis? I didn't know, and the scary fact was, I had no idea how to go about finding the answers. This whole concept of self-reflection was foreign to me. Ever since I was 16, I'd known exactly what I wanted to do, but now, for the first time in more than 25 years, I had to come up with a new plan.

With the right attitude, it could have been a great situation. I was talented and smart and had a lot going for me. Instead, I let negative thoughts overwhelm me. I became depressed and more detached from Sandra and the kids.

I soon discovered, though, that everything in life is connected—frequently in ways we never expect.

We had an old couch in the basement, and about two weeks after I quit my job, as Sandra tried to make me useful, I moved it. Thinking I was still 25, I manhandled it and wrenched my back. Bent over and in pain, I realized that my youth and health had escaped my body while I was busy chasing status symbols with about as much substance as a jellyfish.

Unemployed and now hobbled—this wasn't exactly how I pictured my 40s.

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## Chapter 9 Excerpt

Although I tried not to show it, Dr. Graham's mysterious envelope had piqued my curiosity. Frankly, I was in no position to argue. Unemployed, lost, and out of shape, what did I have to lose? Dr. Graham was a well-respected doctor, and I had known him for years. If anybody could help me, he seemed like the guy.

Sandra's prodding was what I needed. "All right, let's open it later tonight."

That evening, we passed around Dr. Graham's envelope and fiddled with it like two nervous teenagers. It was as if we both knew this envelope could hold the key to something special.

"Go ahead, open it," said Sandra, not wanting me to delay the suspense any longer.

Just as I was about to reach into the envelope to pull out whatever was in there, I looked at Sandra and said, "Are you sure you want me to read this?"

"Yes, yes!" she said, looking happy that I was being a bit playful.

Inside was a neatly folded piece of Dr. Graham's stationery. It didn't take long to read. I turned to Sandra and said, "You'd better read this."

I didn't know what to expect, but I certainly didn't expect this.

Be a living example of . . .

Stick to . . .

Be driven by . . .

Be accountable through . . .

Cherish your . . .

Value your . . .

Wisely use your . . .

Find ways to . . .

Be open to . . .

It was just a piece of paper with several incomplete sentences. That's it. No instructions, nothing else. I told Sandra, "If he's trying to help me, why didn't he finish the sentences instead of making me guess?"

"I think he's telling you that these are questions you have to answer on your own, through your own discovery process."

"He's the doctor, not me. I'm paying him to give me answers, not to go on wild goose chases."

"Andrew, listen to you. These aren't easy issues we're dealing with, and you're already dismissing Dr. Graham."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. I just hope my meeting with Dr. Graham next week is not a waste of time like opening up this letter was. I'm gonna go to the study and read."

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## Chapter 17

### Excerpt

As part of my workout ritual, Tamara typically started me on the treadmill with ten minutes of walking at 3.5 miles per hour and a 2 percent incline. At our fourth workout, after a couple moments of chitchat, she got right to the point.

“How have you been eating, Andrew?”

I was prepared. I had tried to follow my “What gets measured gets done” philosophy, and I pulled out the list of foods I’d consumed over the previous week. She carefully scanned it and was impressed with my level of detail but not with all of my choices.

“Overall, I think you’ve made a good start here, but there’s plenty of room for improvement.” She probably didn’t like the chocolate candy. “People have a tendency to make dieting much harder than it really is, Andrew. Keep in mind, if you want to lose weight, you have to burn more calories than you consume.”

“Does that mean I have to give up the M&M’s?”

“As a personal trainer I like to put things in terms that people can relate to. An occasional bag of M&M’s probably won’t kill you. You may just have to exercise a little longer to maintain your ideal weight.”

“I never really thought of it in those terms before.”

“Most people don’t. As humans, we have a tendency to live for the moment and not think of the consequences of our choices. Every choice we make has a consequence. If we choose to fill our bodies with junk food, we’ll end up paying a steep price. If we choose to fill our bodies with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, fish, and the occasional lean steak, we will, as Mr. Spock says, ‘Live long and prosper.’”

“Is that why so many people in our country are overweight?”

“I think it’s because our society today is so competitive and fast paced. People don’t have time to plan and prepare meals anymore and family dinners seem to be a thing of the past. Instead of an enriching communal experience, eating has become, for many people, an unhealthy, rushed activity. I don’t mean to get on a soapbox, Andrew, but I do feel strongly about health. That’s why I’m a personal trainer.”

“No problem,” I said. “I value your opinion—that’s why I asked.”

Tamara looked at my detailed food log again and gave me some additional ideas on how to eat better. She really connected with me when she explained that health is like a three-legged stool.

1. *Diet* is the first leg. What you put into your body is fuel, and the better fuel you use, the more efficiently you’ll run. Imagine trying to put regular gasoline into a jet engine. It may fly but not very far and not very efficiently. Likewise, putting the wrong fuel in your body could lead to lethargy and obesity.

2. *Aerobic exercise* is the second leg. Aerobic exercise offers several benefits, including a stronger heart, weight loss, and the release of endorphins. Endorphins are "happy" chemicals released by the brain. They help you feel euphoric and reduce stress and anxiety. Being aerobically fit also boosts your immune system, so you'll be less susceptible to minor colds and the flu.

3. *Strength training* is the third leg. After about age 35, we lose roughly half a pound of muscle a year. Diet and aerobic exercise is important, but if that's all you do, you'll end up thin and weak. Strength training will keep your muscles active and growing and help keep your fat down.

For 45 minutes, Tamara led me through a full-body workout on the weight machines as she interspersed her words of wisdom.

"This feels pretty light," I said, as I did 12 reps on the bench press machine.

"That's by design. One of the biggest mistakes people make when they start an exercise program is they overdo it. I promise you, you'll be sore tomorrow, even though we're going pretty light today."

"But I feel like a sissy. See that woman over there; she's lifting more than I am. Can we increase the weight? This is embarrassing." Still ruled by my ego, I was comparing myself to other people.

Tamara said we'd start with a light full-body workout for the first few weeks, so I could get my muscles into the groove of stress. "Muscles grow because you put them under stress. During the workout, you actually break down the muscle, and then after the workout, when you are resting, the muscle repairs itself, and that's how they grow," she said.

"You think my muscles are going to grow after this measly workout?" I asked. I'm sure I wasn't the first client she'd ever had that was a little difficult. To her credit, she knew exactly how to deal with me.

"How long did it take you to become an expert in the real estate business?" she asked.

"Probably eight to ten years, why?"

"Just like when you got into the real estate business, you have to start somewhere and then build on it. These exercises may feel easy, but they're sending a signal to your body that something is changing. That change will build over time, and as we develop this muscular base for you, we can gradually raise the weight level."

She was probably right, but I was impatient. "You're the boss," I said with some resignation.

As we wrapped up the session, I noticed I was wiping sweat from my face. "It feels good to sweat again," I told her.

"So maybe it wasn't such an easy day after all?" she replied.

"Well," I stammered, "it's not that big of a sweat," and we both chuckled.

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## Chapter 18 Excerpt

As I thought through this business decision, Sandra and I moved forward with our financial planning goals. We had a second meeting with Hank to go over the wealth plan. We spent the first few minutes updating him on the results of our Blueprinting Exercise. I tucked my tail between my legs and told him he was right about how helpful the exercises could be. He just smiled and said he was very happy it worked out. He also said that Blueprinting is not just a one-time deal.

“As things change in your life, revisit the exercises and make adjustments as appropriate.”

During the rest of the meeting, Hank and his team went over the wealth plan. I was very impressed, because it seemed as though Hank had really listened to us. His plan addressed all our needs, including the following:

- *Cash flow.* He showed us how much money we were spending and how long our existing assets would last at a 4 percent withdrawal rate.
- *Investments.* He compared our existing investments to his proposed portfolio and showed how through intelligent diversification, we could improve our odds of getting a better return without taking any additional risk.
- *Taxes.* He recommended some new investments that would help us reduce our tax burden and provide us with tax-free income.
- *Risk management.* He identified some holes in our insurance protection that he could solve rather easily.
- *Estate planning.* He had some ideas on how to minimize our potential estate taxes and how we could make charitable contributions in the most tax-advantaged way.

Along the way, Sandra and I asked a few questions, and Hank and his team had good answers. The plan made sense, so we gave Hank the okay to proceed. It turned out to be a surprisingly painless process. His staff did a great job of handling all the paperwork and transferring our assets to the new accounts. He even arranged meetings with an accountant and an estate-planning attorney to go over our tax and estate situation. Sandra and I couldn't have been more pleased with the service.

On the drive home from the office, Sandra commented on how much better she felt now that we had a financial plan in place that covered all aspects of our situation.

I said to her, “You're just happy because, with this insurance policy, I'm worth more to you dead than alive.”

Without missing a beat she said, “At least I can laugh all the way to the bank.”  
She found that a little more humorous than I did.

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## Chapter 21

### Excerpt

With that behind me, I set my sights on finding a climbing partner, and I knew just the right person—Dr. Graham. He agreed to meet up with me for a hike, and as we walked through the forest near his office, I just flat out asked him.

“Dr. Graham, I know you stay in good physical condition, and I was wondering if you are up for a big challenge.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m planning on climbing Mount Rainier next June, and it would be more fun with a partner. Would you like to train with me and do the climb?”

There was a noticeable silence before he responded. “Mount Rainier.”

“Yeah, you’re familiar with it aren’t you?”

“Yes, Andrew, I am familiar with Mount Rainier. Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into climbing that mountain?”

“I think so. Several companies guide neophytes like me up to the top. They say anybody in good shape with strong determination and a little luck can make it.”

“Rainier should not be underestimated. It’s created many widows over the years and left torrents of tears in its wake.”

“I know, a little danger adds to the allure.”

“You can find danger in places other than mountains. Why Rainier?”

“Tamara asked me that same question. At first I told her it would be for bragging rights, but after I thought about it, I realized it’s a big challenge, it will force me out of my comfort zone, and who knows, maybe I’ll have a religious experience or something during the climb.”

There was another long pause as we continued walking. Dr. Graham then picked up four large sticks and gave two to me. “Here, we’ll need to practice walking with poles if we ever have any hope of making it to the top.”

It was his way of saying yes.

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