

BOOK PREVIEW

Try a New Path

Introduction

A preview excerpt from the book by Shanelle Simmons.

This PDF includes the full Introduction as it appears in the manuscript.

“Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?”

- Parker J. Palmer

INTRODUCTION

*Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me?*¹

—PARKER J. PALMER

THE MOMENT EVERYTHING CHANGED

On a July day in 2024, I didn't cry—I came undone. In those tears, I found my freedom. My breath hitched. My shoulders shook. Years of silence cracked open inside me.

A group of veterans gathered at a conference center on the southern coast of South Carolina. The occasion was the Vantage Point Veterans' Leadership Conference, designed to help veterans transition from military to civilian life. The room buzzed with introductions, laughter, and anticipation. Small teams gathered, eager to gain insights on navigating this next phase of life. Some were years into civilian careers but still struggled to find purpose. Others were now counselors, guiding fellow veterans through this challenging transition.

I sat among them—another veteran in the room, unaware a revelation was about to shift how I saw my journey.

I didn't realize it then, but something in me was shifting like a storm gathering beyond sight. Who knew that within twenty-four hours, that revelation would find me?

THE ARMOR I WORE

Fifteen months earlier, I had retired after serving over two decades in the United States Marine Corps, one of eleven African American female lieutenant colonels. I had commanded recruiting stations, led units in combat zones, and shaped human capital initiatives across the Corps. My presence at this conference was supposed to be about guiding others, but I was about to uncover something about myself I had buried for years.

I had lived many lives before this moment—athlete, Marine officer, commander, speaker, financial expert, culinary school graduate. I had thrived in spaces where I was often the only one like me, breaking barriers in male-dominated fields and proving transformation isn't possible; it's necessary. Despite all my past reinventions, this moment forced me to confront questions I had not asked myself:

Who do I become when no next mission awaits, no next rank calls, and no next competition demands a win?

Is the life I am living the same as the life that wants to live in me? Have I been choosing paths out of expectation rather than desire?

THE PROMPT THAT FROZE ME

On the second day of the conference, a journaling coach named Catherine—Cat, as we called her—stood at the front of the room. Her tone was even, but the room straightened instinctively. She said, “Good afternoon, everyone! Today, I want to introduce a tool that can transform not the way we work, but the way we think and reflect on our lives.”

She asked us to turn to page twenty-eight in our workbooks. The prompts were simple:

“Where have you been?”

“Where are you now?”

“Where are you going?”

Cat encouraged us to write freely. She wanted us to let the words flow, not overthink. I embraced the challenge, pouring my past onto the page with ease. I chronicled my years as an athlete, my military career, my travels, and the milestones I had reached.

Then I moved on to the second question.

“Where are you now?”

My pen froze.

I was supposed to let the words flow, but my mind resisted. The room was silent except for the scratch of pens against

paper. Then, with five minutes left, something within me demanded I write.

I wrote about the transition—the shift from Marine to civilian, from structure to uncertainty. I wrote about how foreign my life felt at that moment: a new husband, a new career, new colleagues, a new city. The freedom I’d longed for made my chest tighten. It felt like stepping off a cliff without a parachute.

I still wasn’t ready to answer the third question, “Where are you going?”

I closed the workbook, but the question followed me into the night.

I had no idea.

A CLIFFSIDE CLUE

To understand why this question unsettled me, I need to take you back six years earlier, to spring 2019.

I stood on the promenade of Okinawa’s Cape Manzamo, overlooking the vast Pacific Ocean. The waves crashed against the elephant-shaped cliff, and the golden light of sunset stretched across the horizon. The air filled my lungs, and for a fleeting moment, I was present—free of duty, free of obligation, free of the weight of rank and expectation. I was there.

As I took in the beauty of that moment, a sadness crept in. The feeling wasn't melancholy; it was the ache of knowing the moment would soon pass. This was what I wanted more of. Not the uniform. Not the titles. Not the career milestones I charted. I wanted more time doing this: existing in a space where I felt truly alive, engaged in the world through my own senses rather than through the lens of responsibility.

That's when realization hit: the same job that brought me here also kept me from moments like these.

Standing there, the ocean roaring beneath me, the word *enough* slipped out before I could catch it.

I tucked that realization away, convincing myself I'd deal with it later—the payoff for waiting... clarity.

BREAKING OPEN IN FRONT OF EVERYONE

Back in that conference room in 2024, on Day 2, is when I confronted those journal prompts head-on.

Reserve Marine Lieutenant Colonel Mark Holyfield, the conference director, pulled me aside.

He said, “Shanelle, would you mind reading what you wrote for the journaling exercise? I believe you have a unique story to share.”

By this point, I felt a deep connection with my fellow veterans. They understood this transition. They understood

me. I agreed. Besides, that little girl inside me wanted to show off a little.

The scene was set like an episode of *Inside the Actors Studio*. I took my seat, facing my audience—a mix of veterans, counselors, and conference staff. A warm and wise counselor served as the interviewer, setting the stage.

I started reading.

“Where have you been?” My voice was strong, steady. My chest expanded as I read the words aloud. For the first time in years, my accomplishments felt heavy in my hands—real.

Then came my next prompt, “Where are you now?” I am a retired Marine.”

That was the moment I broke open. My voice cracked. I tried again—nothing. My lips trembled, my breath faltered, and then the truth surged upward, clawing its way out, refusing to stay buried any longer.

My lips and chin quivered.

The letters blurred. My mouth opened, but no sound came.

Tears came—deep, soul-wrenching sobs I hadn’t expected. I had spent years suppressing these emotions, and, now, surrounded by people who truly understood, I couldn’t hold them back.

The director said gently from his position on the opposite side of the room, “What’s happening right now?”

I didn’t know.

He pressed further and asked, “What is your purpose?”

For the first time in my life, I admitted the truth: I didn’t know. Struggling still to speak, I sounded like a toddler with a drawn-out cry, “I want to be free.”

He concluded with clarity, “I think we just witnessed someone releasing the Marine Corps.”

RELEASING THE ROLE; RECLAIMING THE SELF

I had spent my life choosing paths based on expectations, doing what I had to do, not what I truly wanted. My calendar overflowed, my inbox chimed with praise, but inside, everything felt stale. More importantly, had I ever stopped to ask myself if I was living *the life that wanted to live in me*?

At that moment, standing on that cliff, I realized I wasn’t. Even worse—I was outgrowing the trap I had built for myself.

My breakdown that day wasn’t emotion; it was feedback. Psychologist Carl Rogers called this *congruence*—a term he used to describe that sweet spot where your inner truth matches the life you’re actually living.²

When those parts drift apart, we feel it. It shows up as restlessness, exhaustion, or that vague sense your life fits, but only if you hold your breath.

Research over the decades backs this up: when who we are on the inside doesn't line up with what we're doing on the outside, the body starts filing complaints long before the mind catches on.³

When alignment goes missing, fulfillment packs up and leaves, too.

Building on Rogers's ideas, psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan developed what's now one of the most widely used frameworks on motivation—*Self-Determination Theory* (SDT). Their work says: we thrive when three psychological needs are met—autonomy, competence, and connection.⁴

In plain English? We need the freedom to make our own choices, the confidence we're good at what we do, and relationships where we actually feel like we belong.

You know that stuck, restless, “something's off” feeling when one of those is missing? That's not in your head. According to *Verywell Mind's* summary of SDT, when autonomy, competence, and connection are fulfilled, we experience more motivation, confidence, and joy—and when they aren't, we don't sigh; we start humming the sad little tune of self-doubt under our breath—the kind you don't notice until it drowns out everything else.⁵

The truth is, breakthroughs rarely happen when we're gripping the familiar for dear life. Growth tends to show up when comfort finally runs out of excuses. Research suggests real transformation often begins on the edge of uncertainty when we take a breath and step past what's predictable.

Psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, who pioneered the study of post-traumatic growth, discovered that some people come out of life's hardest seasons with new strength, perspective, and purpose.⁶

The point isn't that we need trauma to grow—it's that even pain can become a classroom if we let it. If growth can rise from hardship, imagine what's possible when we leave the comfort zone on purpose. That's where the real magic starts. Standing on that cliff in Okinawa, I finally understood. The moment had come to leap.

A UNIVERSAL TRAP

Let's be real—this isn't just my story, what I wrestled with shows up everywhere, in different outfits. I've seen it in boardrooms and classrooms, in families and friend groups—the same invisible walls of expectation, doubt, and fear.

We stay in jobs that drain us or relationships that no longer fit—not always because we want to, but because stepping into the unknown feels riskier than staying put.

Not everyone's trapped, but predictability pulls hard. Society tends to reward what's steady and familiar; breaking the pattern can feel like rebellion. That quiet sense of restlessness many of us carry becomes the first clue that something inside is ready to grow.

Neurosurgeon James Doty reminds us that we aren't powerless; our own routines hypnotize us. He calls it a negative flow state, where the mind gets used to running the same patterns that it forgets it can choose differently.

I call it *auto-pilot adulthood*. You wake up one day, wondering who scheduled your life without consulting you.

That's why I wrote this book.

We all have choices to make, and one of the biggest is learning to tell the difference between decisions rooted in doubt, fear, and comfort and those driven by faith, courage, and confidence in our abilities. The key isn't making a change; it's knowing when to make the change and having the guts to follow through.

Trying a new path isn't easy. It means letting go of what feels safe and stepping into the unknown. It means trusting yourself even when you don't have all the answers. It means believing you are capable of more than you ever imagined.

I know this because I've lived it.

I have redefined myself more than once, pivoting from professional athletics to military service, from

commanding and managing Marines to advocating for leadership and diversity in the civilian workforce. In addition, I have sprinkled in the titles of public relations associate, adjunct professor, culinary school graduate, and scholar. I've learned how to trust my instincts, push past fear, and embrace change.

This struggle isn't unique. Most days, people wake up feeling stuck—trapped in careers, relationships, and routines built on expectations rather than passion. The biochemist who dreamed of being a professional choreographer. The teacher who longed to travel. The government employee who wanted to open a doggy daycare business. The manager who wanted to build wealth. Indecision and conformity kept them frozen in place. Society rewards predictability; they settled, but what if stepping into something more isn't as impossible as it seems?

THIS BOOK IS YOUR MIRROR

This book provides a way out. It offers the tools to recognize when it's time for change, the strategies to navigate uncertainty, and the courage to step into a future you create.

If you have ever felt lost, restless, or like you were meant for something more but didn't know where to start, this book is for you. It is not about my journey; it is about yours.

We will learn to tell the difference between choices made out of doubt, fear, and comfort and those made with faith, courage, and confidence. The key is knowing when to try a new path.

This book may start with my story, but it's written for you—for the moments when you feel a pull toward something more and must choose whether to listen or turn away. Too often, we hesitate—waiting for a sign, for permission, for the “right time” that never comes.

Well, here it is. Permission granted. Your future isn't waiting; it's calling. The only question is, will you answer?

You've been standing at the edge long enough. It's time to move. No more waiting. No more searching. The next chapter of your life starts when you decide to turn the page.

The question isn't whether you're ready—it's whether you're willing.