

Introduction

Ideas for Life

IT GOES BY MANY NAMES:

A flash of insight.

The Eureka moment.

A spark of genius.

The big “Aha!”

An epiphany.

It’s the moment when a new idea forms in your head, and you suddenly see a way to accomplish something meaningful in your life. All the great minds, all the great leaders, all the great achievers have had at least one of these moments.

And you can too.

That’s because in recent years, thanks to the modern science of the brain, we know enough now about flashes of insight to take full advantage of this mysterious power of the human mind.

That’s what this book is about.

Here I call it the “seventh sense.” You know about your five senses—smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing. Scientists

have studied them for hundreds of years. What you might not realize is that your five senses are mental abilities. A sensation starts at your nose, your tongue, your skin, your eye, or your ear, but then nerve cells connect it to your brain, and that's when it becomes a "sense." Your nose takes in an odor, and your brain turns it into the smell of warm rain. Your tongue feels a tang, and your brain turns it into the taste of lime. Your ear hears a sound, and your brain makes it birdsong.

The key way your brain turns sensation into sense is through memory. Modern neuroscience has revealed the importance of memory in how humans make sense of the world—starting with your five basic senses. You recognize the smell of a rose because you've smelled it before. It's in your memory. If you smell an odor and can't tell what it is, that's because it's not in your memory: you can't make sense of the sensation. If you smell something and think it's familiar but can't place it, your brain searches your memory to identify what it is.

Eric Kandel won the Nobel Prize in 2000 for his pioneering work on how the brain learns and remembers. He says in his Nobel speech:

For me, learning and memory have proven to be endlessly fascinating mental processes because they address one of the fundamental features of human activity: our ability to acquire new ideas from experience and to retain these ideas in memory. In fact, most of the ideas we have about the world and our civilization we have learned so that we are who we are in good measure because of what we have learned and what we remember.

Learning and memory play a key role in the sixth sense too. The most common name for this sense is "intuition." You

make a snap judgment, or you get a feeling about something because you've seen it before in some other situation—even if you can't quite recall what exactly that situation was. Herbert Simon won the Nobel Prize in 1978 for his work on intuition and memory, and today Gary Klein is one of the field's leading scholars. Malcolm Gladwell's popular book *Blink* presented recent research on the power and pitfalls of the sixth sense.

Think firefighters, emergency room nurses, or soldiers in battle. They all make quick decisions that repeat in some way what they've done before. They all have a strong sixth sense. As you get better and faster each time you do some complex task, that builds up your sixth sense. If you've ever mastered a musical instrument or any kind of sport, you know what it's like to have a sixth sense. Or if you walk into a meeting and know exactly what's going on, before anyone explains it—that's your sixth sense in action. It's a form of *déjà vu*. You've seen some version of the situation before, and your brain calls it up from your personal memory.

That's the power of the sixth sense. But there's one situation where it doesn't work at all, and can actually lead to you make the wrong decisions: when you think you're seeing the same situation, but you're not. Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* is full of clever experiments that made even experts jump to the wrong conclusions. Their sixth sense failed them. You can probably recall times yourself when your intuition was wrong—when you followed your gut and it turned out to be a mistake. That's because you recognized something familiar, but the rest of the situation was new. Your intuition only works when you encounter something very similar to what you've seen before. If the situation is new, your sixth sense isn't enough.

For a new situation, you need a new idea. And your sixth sense cannot give it to you. Your intuition gives you the same

idea, again, faster and better with each repetition. For new situations, for new ideas, you need something else.

You need the seventh sense.

The seventh sense is the mechanism of the human mind that produces new ideas. It's the epiphany, the flash of insight, the Eureka moment—in the form of an idea you never had before. And in its highest, rarest form, it's an idea that no one else had before either. The seventh sense is how new ideas are born. And not just new ideas, but useful ideas. Human achievement advances through flashes of insight that come from the seventh sense.

Some new ideas lead to major changes in how the world works, but the majority of them just change the world of one person. Behind the scenes, lost to history, are millions of new and useful ideas that solve individual problems of life or work. A painful family or romantic relationship might call for a new and useful idea to heal it, and to solve that problem you need the seventh sense. Or a project gets bogged down at work, and you need a new idea to save it. These personal creative ideas, for work or life, are just as important for advancing human achievement and the quality of our lives as great innovations like electric light or the personal computer. And they happen in your brain in exactly the same way too. All of them come from the seventh sense.

Yet as you might guess, you cannot will an epiphany to happen. You can't squeeze it out of your brain like toothpaste from a tube. It just comes to you, and you suddenly see it. But this doesn't mean that you can't improve your seventh sense and improve your likelihood of these "aha" moments. The epiphany itself is just one of four steps that together make up the seventh sense. Two other steps come before the epiphany, to prime your mind to allow the flash of insight to happen. The fourth step comes after, to help ensure that you

put the flash to good use. While the flash of insight may be spontaneous, these other three steps are within your control. With practice, you can improve your seventh sense, and learn to make the most of it. That's what this book is about.

In chapter 6 I'll tell you how I found out about the seventh sense some ten years ago. Since then I've taught what it is and how best to use it to thousands of students in my classes at Columbia Business School and at professional workshops around the world. I've written before about how professionals and organizations can use it to come up with new business ideas. In this book I explain how to use it in your personal life. My students asked me to write it. They wanted it for themselves, to refer back to as they applied what they learned in class to their lives after graduation. And they wanted to give it to family and friends for them to learn too. You will hear more about some of these students and see some of their work in the chapters to come.

One thing I quickly found out from teaching the ideas in this book is that your personal life includes your work life. In a typical month, you spend more of your waking time working than with your family and friends, or alone. And your thoughts about your work include its personal side: for example, how to fulfill your interests and passions at your current job, whether to look for a different job, how to deal with difficult people at work, or how much time and thought to devote to work versus the other parts of your life. And new ideas in your work are personal too: innovation is always a risk, and takes personal commitment on the part of the innovator. So having new ideas at work, and deciding whether or not to commit to them, is part of personal strategy too.

My main goal is to show you how to develop your seventh sense to create new and useful ideas for changing something about your life. As you might guess, that turns out to be very

different from improving your sixth sense. To build up your sixth sense, you pick the activity you want to learn and then practice, practice, practice. Each time you do it, your sixth sense grows. But the sixth sense doesn't travel. If you have a sixth sense about one thing, such as playing the guitar, that doesn't help your sixth sense about something else, such as learning French. You can only improve your sixth sense activity by activity. You cannot improve your sixth sense in general.

The seventh sense, on the other hand, is a general skill. You can improve your ability to have new ideas of any kind. You can learn the right mental steps to prepare your brain for a flash of insight, and you can learn how to follow through after it happens. You cannot predict what the epiphany will be—after all, it's a new idea—or when it will come. And each epiphany will be different. The sixth sense helps you do the same thing better and better, while the seventh sense gives you something new. Asking your sixth sense to give you a new idea is like asking a horse to fly. The sixth sense can do many great things, but an epiphany is not one of them.

The first half of this book shows you how the seventh sense works. You will learn the science behind it, how it differs from your other mental abilities, and the details of the four steps that make it up. The second half of the book gives you a set of practical tools and exercises that lead you through the discovery of your own seventh sense, help you improve it, and show where you can use it best for new ideas in your life. And along the way, you'll see examples of great innovators and leaders who got their ideas through the seventh sense. By seeing the seventh sense in them, you can see it in yourself.

Smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing: these five senses give you ordinary ideas, based on common sensations that other

Introduction

people have too. The sixth sense—intuition—gives you good ideas based on your own personal experience. The seventh sense gives you new ideas that go beyond what you've ever known or thought before. It's how you see something new, do something new, and sometimes even become someone new.

In the end, I hope this book can help you find the answer to one of the most important questions you can ever ask:

“What should I do with my life?”

We've all known times when the honest answer is: “I have no idea!”

That's when you need the seventh sense. It gives you that idea.