



10 Books to Change Your Life and Make You a Better Person

(that was my experience, anyway)

So you say you want to make a change? That's great. Since we have no control over anything other than ourselves, changing yourself is a great use of your time. Seriously. Self-improvement is a really cool project because it never ends, kind of like the number pi. Well, I guess your personal development does have a finite end—it's called your death. But hopefully you have a lot of time here before that happens, and you might as well spend it striving to be a better person or know yourself better for clues as to why your life is going the way it is.

People have often asked me what I've read that inspired who I've become. The books below are listed in the order in which I read them over the past 20 years. I include when I read them, why and how they changed me as a person.

They may or may not impact your life as they did mine, but at the very least you will come away knowing a little bit more about something you didn't before OR rethinking yourself in the grand scheme of this thing called life. And perspective is good for the ego. Not having an ego is even better. But let's start with who you are, if you even really know.

Happy Reading!

PS at quick glance, you may think some of these are decidedly woo-woo (like spiritual) and not very practical or intellectual. I humbly admit you'd be correct. From having read these books and lived my life, I believe them to offer something as real and true as what science offers. But that's just the empirical evidence from my life.

See what you see unfold in yours.

ISHMAEL *by Daniel Quinn*

I read this book early in college and it blew my mind. Evolving as conversations between a man sitting across from an ape who is communicating with him telepathically, it initiated my intellectual capacity as a free-thinking young adult. For the first time, I thought critically about life (and other people and beings) outside my small, self-absorbed world, and considered my individual impact on society. It sparked my maturation process, indeed.

THE CELESTINE PROPHECY *by James Redfield*

Upon graduating from college, I fell in the love for the first time. It was such a heightened state of consciousness, I literally felt like I was floating on air. Synchronicity then brought this book (about coincidences) into my life, and I don't know if I gave it to my lover or she to me. Initially, I found it far-reaching and abstract but full of some interesting concepts. In recent years, I've experienced much of what happens in the book in my actual day-to-day life and really 'get' what the author was conveying through this adventurous story revolving around human behavior and enlightened thinking.

LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME *by James W. Loewen*

This book explores history from a revisionist perspective and challenged everything I'd been taught as a middle-class white suburban student from New Jersey. Whether or not I believe everything the author implies, I learned to not believe everything I hear, read or see as ultimate truth ever again. When I began my own teaching career at the age of 22, I was also exploring my political activist identity and supplemented my Social Studies core curriculum with chapters from this book, delighting as my students' jaws hit the floor in shock.

ROOTS *by Alex Haley*

Also from my teaching years, I came upon this book while researching the unit on slavery. I was going through a break up at the time and read this each night for its cathartic effects, sometimes sobbing out loud as I connected with the human suffering on each page. Having not previously known the gruesome details of American slavery, I considered myself transformed in my identity as a white American. I'd turn off the lights in my 8th grade classroom and read chapters aloud to my students who later told me they connected with and remembered this content more than anything else I taught.

WHEN THINGS FALL APART *by Pema Chödrön*

In my late 20s, I was still grieving my first breakup. I was yet totally unaware that my suffering was actually coming from behavioral habits and thought patterns stemming from core wounds in my youth. Two dear friends, both women well-versed in world religions, handed me this book written by the Tibetan nun, Pema Chödrön. I have read the words so many times, I've practically memorized them. This book inspired me to pursue Buddhism for the next 15 years. Since reading this book, I've met Pema twice in person and was even lucky enough to ask her a question about anger, the bodhisattva path and its impact on my own life.

ALL ABOUT LOVE *by bell hooks*

Reading this work of essays by bell hooks greatly influenced my understanding and experience of love. It changed my awareness of myself and my tendencies in relationships of all kinds and helped me develop more insight and compassion about human beings and why we do the things we do when it comes to love. I tried to go back and read this book recently and experienced it differently, since many of my viewpoints around identity politics have changed and I don't agree with as much of what hooks says now as I did years ago. Regardless, it's an incredible body of work.

WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA? *by Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD*

The intriguing title inspires the transformative content. Anyone seeking insight and awareness about racial identity development, no matter how you identify or how others identify you, should read this book. I read it in my early 30s to help me understand myself as a white person in American racial politics. Tatum's easy-to-read and relatable writing style made things come together for me in ways they had not before. She illuminates how all people come to know themselves in comparison to others in a society that uses race, as one of many ways, to lump and split us all together.

JUST ADD HORMONES *by Matt Kailey*

I read this book, a first-person narrative of a transgender man's gender transition process, about six years before making the decision to transition, myself. My own identity was so repressed, I could barely connect to his words and lived experience but was nonetheless transfixed and inspired. Years later, his untimely death occurred early in my own gender transition process and left me grief-stricken. Prior to that, his selfless and open-hearted correspondence with me via Facebook messages helped soothe my late-adulthood turmoil. When I consider my personal role models, Matt is high my list.

THE HAPPINESS HYPOTHESIS *by Jonathan Haidt*

This book explores the search by human beings for truth, meaning and everlasting happiness over the ages. I read this just having left a long-term relationship in my mid-30s, two years into a gender transition and with one year left of graduate school. I didn't think I would make it out alive. Attuned to my grieving process, my dear friend Amy, who recommended **Things Fall Apart** to me many years before, came through once again and mailed me *The Happiness Hypothesis*. It helped me crack through and find light again, bringing an eventual end to my profound hopelessness and despair.

7 HABITS OF HIGHLY-EFFECTIVE PEOPLE *by Steven Covey*

I heard about this book for years before I finally decided to read it. It found me in some second-hand state from where I can't recall, its pages yellowed from age. But Covey knows his stuff and I added this book and the truths buried within to the content of my own resources and courses for personal transformation. I have yet to organize my life as effectively as I perceive he does...his organizational chart is a real challenge to keep current!

Contenders Who Didn't Make the Top 10

THE FOUR AGREEMENTS *by Don Miguel Ruiz*

THE GIFTS OF IMPERFECTION *by Brenè Brown*

THE SUNFLOWER *by Simon Wiesenthal*

WHAT TO EAT *by Marion Nestle*

THE WAY OF CHUANG TZU *by Thomas Merton*

Look, what I've found is that ultimately all these people who write books like this for effective leadership (and happy humanhood—is that a word?) are saying the same thing.

It's what you DO with their advice that makes your life what it will be or become.

Once you read them, *start DOING*. Take action. That's when you see results unfold.