

# Say Yes to No - Book Excerpt

## CHAPTER ONE

*Michelangelo and the Marble: The Art of Negation*

I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.

--MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI, sculptor, painter, architect, and (in the eyes of many) creator of the Renaissance

The story goes something like this: An admirer ran up to Michelangelo and asked how he sculpted the famous statue of David that now sits in Accademia Gallery in the city of Florence. How did he craft this masterpiece of form and beauty? What was he thinking? How did he work with the rock so that he produced this exquisite human figure?

Michelangelo replied with this strikingly simple description: First, he said, I fixed my attention on the slab of raw marble. I studied it, sketched a few simple pencil drawings on it, and then

"chipped away all that wasn't David." The questioner was stunned. When pressed to go further, the artist offered an explanation: "In every block of marble I see a statue as though it stood before me, shaped and perfected in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." He discerned, imprisoned inside the crude block, a beauty that had to be released. And so he labored with all the genius and persistence he could muster. And what emerged from the rock has amazed and fascinated viewers ever since. Some even call it the greatest sculpture that ever existed.

Michelangelo unveiled beauty through what he removed. His was the art of negation. He created through the power of no.

I find that I'm often careless and haphazard at chipping away the excess in my life. I don't tap away in order to craft what's essential and crucial in myself. Instead, I add. And unlike with marble, humans have the choice to attach more and more blocks of unformed matter to our daily lives. Many times we become bored and abandon our project when just the hint of the beauty is peering out of the rock. Or we never get started. We stare at the raw, unformed marble and freeze before the tasks that stare back at us.

And then, to complicate matters, we live surrounded by a culture of almost countless possibilities. And so, paralyzed by choice, we can't decide what to cut out. To commit--to work on one's stone--means to say no to the overwhelming majority of these alluring possibilities. The options mock the hint of limits, and setting boundaries comes across as a mere suggestion. Consequently, many of us remain unformed. Many never find the life of beauty, excellence, and success that lies within.

Yet some do. Some of us do chip away with precise vision and durable resolve. What makes the difference? What's the secret? How do we move beyond good intentions to form habits that produce integrity and care for others, that craft goals and character in our lives, that make space for the relationships we crave, and that hone skills at work?

The Michelangelo story leads to some reflections on the power of no and how to sculpt our lives for true success. As the master artist phrased it, "The more the marble wastes, the more the statue grows."

How are we blocks of unchiseled marble? Have we succeeded in finding excellence and pursuing it with dogged perseverance? Is there a "you" and "me" hidden in a formless life, waiting to be released? Are we imprisoned in nos yet unstated? Are you letting God, the Creator and Re-creator, transform your life, craft and mold you?

These are some lessons I've learned by studying the great artist, organized into four large blocks: chiseling, creativity, grit, and God.

### Chiseling

True success (that is, beauty and excellence) is found in chipping away.

Michelangelo found that he could create his sculpture only by removing what the figure didn't need until it achieved the beauty of its inherent form.

We need to say no to the things in our life that we don't want or need. This is most important when it comes to setting goals.

I've observed three major steps in setting goals. The first step in creating a successful life is to determine your key priorities. What do you really want? Here's the crux: Those goals and plans often lie dormant in the rock unless we start chiseling. Step two: outline your nos. In other words, what will you not pursue? It's finding what to say no to. And, finally, step three: sticking by those nos. This is where most people fall down in seeking what's best for their lives. Step three becomes really demanding when other good options present themselves. This is especially true of those things that seem like success: goals like wealth, fame, and position. But those things--as I'll describe in the next chapter--are not what really matters. They are secondary goals and can become significant distractions. Instead, true success is to discern the essence of what we're created to be and to follow it relentlessly.

## **Creativity**

Break the mold or see something for the first time and replicate it . . . with variation.

Donatello had created a David sculpture (bronze, in this case) in the 1440s, some sixty years before Michelangelo's. That could have been the final artistic word on this biblical hero. But Michelangelo knew he had something original to offer. And so he took marble, started to sculpt, and took David in a new direction. Donatello crafted his slim, slightly effeminate David after the battle with Goliath, wearing just a hat and holding a sword, with his foot on the giant's head. Michelangelo discarded the silly hat and conferred a new power and vitality to the young warrior, who stands poised before battle, with veins bulging, to take on his gigantic foe.

Looking intently at the David's face, you can see an idealized projection of Michelangelo--not his actual visage, but his driving creativity. Just as he chose to portray David in the sculpture before the battle, looking out to face his enormous foe, this twenty-six-year-old artist seems to be scanning the horizon for his future projects.

## **Grit**

The artist's vision directed his work and provided him with gritty resolve.

With precision of vision combined with incredible resolve, Michelangelo peered through the unformed shape into the figure it could become. This is the artistic concept of *disegno*, meaning "to sketch" or "to draw": The final product must first appear in the artist's imagination. Michelangelo simply knew David--his age, how he was positioned, the shape of his torso, and that beautiful curved left arm just below his chin. Through the amorphous mass of rock, a clear form sparkled in his imagination. The marble would only need chipping away. And so, gradually, tap by tap, David--or the Pieta, or Moses, or the Dying Slave--emerged. The glory of Michelangelo's sculpting was that he could see through the raw material, through all the chipping away, to its ultimate destiny. As Michelangelo believed: "The marble not yet carved can hold the form of every thought the greatest artist has."

To be clear: The yes will help guide the vision. And it needs to be decisive. We need to know the voice that guides us. Critical to the process of continuing is to know the direction you're going. To discern that vision, I draw inspiration from a quotation by the noted feminist Naomi Wolf:

"Excellence, to me, is the state of grace that can descend only when one tunes out all the world's clamor, listens to an inward voice one recognizes as wiser than one's own, and transcribes without fear." Where do you become quiet enough to hear that wiser voice? In Chapter Three, I have some directions for tuning out the technological static and listening. For now, I want to underline that the yes directs the nos. Our *disegno* directs the chiseling.

My reading of Michelangelo is that he felt that he was simply one of the greatest geniuses alive . . . although this fact also clearly tortured him. Other art, and artists, seem to have spurred him to creativity.

We probably don't proceed with similar conviction--or perhaps with Michelangelo's overinflated ego and distressed soul. Instead, we may feel inadequate for the task of chiseling our lives into something beautiful. Nevertheless, I know I've got to start because it's my life, my work of art. No one else can really do it. And in view of all the lives around you, your vision will be something different, a unique contribution. And though every act of refining our lives through the chiseling power of no may not be a masterpiece, that's okay. The critical decision is to begin.

It takes a great deal of time and durable resolve to finish a job, a journey, a commission.

Sometimes Michelangelo clearly loved, or hated, the commissions he was given. And they took time. The famous tomb for Julius II at the church of San Pietro in Vincoli presented a recurring forty-year nightmare.

What waits before you? Finishing a degree? A new baby who needs care? Restoring a marriage that's teetering? Or trying to figure out how to write that song that's rolling around in your head? Whatever it is, setting your mind to the task begins the work, and there will be innumerable distractions along the way. What we need is the power to say no and mean it. What we need is determination.

Think of the World Wide Web with its four billion sites. I know what beckons me: Every time I look at this computer screen to type in more of Say Yes to No I hear the voice of the Web beckoning, "Surf me. I have so much information and stimulation to offer." Or remember when there were just the three channels of network TV? Now cable tenders hundreds of alternatives. Consider that it used to be coffee, black or with some combo of milk and sugar. Now you can order a 2 percent decaf grande mocha, with or without "whipped."

It's a struggle, and I know it. "No fatigue" enters quickly. To maintain a healthy diet of saying no to distractions challenges me daily. I can be dazzled by all the glittering models for success that our culture parades before me. I intend to live for what really matters for me, but I fail. And so I want to move beyond good intentions to realizing all I can be. I want to succeed at what's really important because, when I'm doing things with excellence, I find happiness. Or there's apathy: I'd rather watch another episode of 24 or surf the Web. Or there's -self--doubt: the thought that I simply can't do it. I'll never complete what I started.

Moreover, chipping away takes time. Here I've realized that anything that matters to me is long-term. The David took three years. It

must have been tedious work. As Michelangelo himself stated, "If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it wouldn't seem wonderful at all." Chipping away hurts. The chisel, however, must be harder than the stone. Our resolve must move us forward against the odds.

Yet sometimes we need support. Michelangelo had sixteenth-century popes and the Medici family. He had some deep pockets behind him. But they could also be demanding and capricious.

To be honest, I'm still looking for a patron! (Aren't we all?) But barring some serendipity, a patron, or the fickle face of fame, will never smile on me with undiminished resources. I've found that a surprising number of great artists--and many of us--are still hidden in the folds of history because they never had the backing they needed. (I'll take on that topic soon.) That, however, doesn't diminish their artistic acumen. Nor should we worry if our inner lives are unseen. In order to create a success, you must let go of fame, wealth, and position as preeminent goals. Maybe we have to look for another type of patron, which leads me to the next point.

## **God**

The quality of your raw material and your source of creativity are critical.

Michelangelo's marble had to be chosen carefully for size and composition. Or at least he had to work with the qualities given to him by his raw material. As the artist's fame grew, the marble was supplied to him by some of the richest patrons of the day, but even when he sculpted the David, the quality of the stone was mediocre.

We are made of different material, and we can gain confidence by remembering that the Creator is the source of our lives, that God has in fact created each of us with unique talents and gifts. None of us is without flaws, but in the case of the art of our lives, sometimes it's the imperfections that create our most beautiful shapes.

We are God's creations in progress. We are sculpted into who God wants us to become, according to His vision. Michelangelo believed that his creative power reflected divine inspiration. Later he received the moniker *Il Divino* ("the divine one"), though he was a bit more modest than his fans: "The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection." And I'm convinced my Creator knows what that can look like because God is the supreme artist, who sees our lives as works of art. As the nineteenth-century master painter Vincent van Gogh once wrote, "Christ . . . is more of an artist than the artists; he works in the living spirit and the living flesh; he makes human beings instead of statues." It's definitely more difficult to work with living beings--and to use us in the process of chipping away, since often we resist the chisel. And yet, you might even say that God's chipping away becomes part of the healing of lives.

Saying no through chiseling away at possibilities appears to be God's method. Scientific discoveries have confirmed that this is the way God has created the masterpiece we call our universe. In forming the world, God also chiseled away. The entire universe has come into existence through a gigantic quantity of nos. Since the 1960s, an astounding set of discoveries reveals that the universe has certain, very specific conditions, which allow for the emergence of conscious, moral creatures. Derived from *anthropos*, the Greek word for "human being" (as in "anthropology"), the anthropic principle states that the cosmos is fitted from the beginning for the emergence of life in general and intelligent life in particular. In fact, about thirty discrete, precisely calibrated parameters--such as the expansion rate of the universe, the mass of the universe, the strength of a strong nuclear force, and the ratio of antiprotons to protons--all were needed to produce the universe. Otherwise, it simply would not exist. The Oxford physicist Roger Penrose has described just one such parameter, the "phase-space volume," with a number almost impossible to write--a 1 followed by 10 to the 123rd-power zeros. That's amazingly precise and signifies an almost innumerable amount of nos.

In other words, the Creator chipped away at an enormous number of possibilities to create this world. God said no many times to create the yeses of life. It looks like the creation of beauty, intelligence, and goodness depends on what is rejected even more than on what is selected. And here's what I figure: If it's good enough for God and the universe, it's good enough for you, me, and our lives.

In sum, as we learn to allow our lives to be shaped--as we learn about chiseling, creativity, grit, and God--a life of beauty emerges. These lessons I take away from Michelangelo and the marble. Michelangelo's image of chipping away and its bearing on creating successful, excellent lives are also paralleled in several other fields. In the next chapter, I will explore how these ideas resonate with seeking to no what's best for us.

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