

The Universe of Opportunity

Three Beliefs That Changed Everything

C. Daniel Berumen

Before We Begin

If you're reading this, you probably know what it feels like to use something to manage something.

Maybe it was alcohol. Maybe it was something else. Maybe it was all of it at different times, in different combinations, for reasons that made complete sense at the time even if they're harder to explain now. The point isn't what you used. The point is what you were trying to do with it.

You were trying to survive something. To quiet something. To feel less of one thing or more of another. To get through a day, a night, a moment that felt unmanageable without help. That's not a moral failing. That's a human being doing what human beings do when the pain exceeds the tools they have to handle it.

I know this because I've been there. I know what it is to need something to work and to not care anymore what that something costs. I know what the crossroads feels like — the place where hurt and hope and fear and shame all arrive at the same intersection and you're standing in the middle of it trying to figure out which direction is forward.

This essay is about what I found at that crossroads. Not a program. Not a set of rules. Three beliefs that changed how I see myself, how I see other people, and how I understand what's actually possible from wherever I happen to be standing.

They didn't make my life easy. Nothing does that. But they changed my relationship to my own life in ways that made it possible to keep building something worth having. That's what I'm offering here. Take what fits. Leave what doesn't.

The First Belief: Nobody Chose Their Starting Point

You didn't choose the family you were born into. You didn't choose what got normalized in your earliest years — what was present, what was absent, what you learned about how to handle pain before you were old enough to question whether those lessons were true. You didn't choose your neurochemistry, your early exposures, the particular combination of love and damage that shaped who you became before you had any say in the matter.

Nobody did.

The person who grew up in a home where substances were as ordinary as dinner. The person who learned early that the only way to get through certain feelings was to get out of them. The person who was handed tools for managing pain before anyone ever taught them there were other tools available. None of them chose that. They worked with what they found.

So did you.

Understanding this doesn't remove responsibility. It removes the part of the shame that was never yours to carry.

Because here's what shame does: it tells you that where you ended up is evidence of what you are. That the choices you made from pain, from incomplete information, from a toolkit that was never adequate to the job — that those choices are a verdict on your worth as a human being. Shame doesn't ask what happened to you. It just tells you that whatever happened, you deserved it.

That's a lie. And it's a lie worth naming directly, because it is one of the things most likely to keep you stuck.

This first belief isn't an excuse. It isn't a reason to avoid accountability or to stop making better choices. It's a context. It says: yes, you make choices, and those choices have consequences — and those choices happen inside a life you didn't fully design, from a starting position you didn't pick. Knowing that makes honesty possible in a way that shame never does. You can't build something new from a foundation of self-contempt. You can only build from honest reckoning with where you actually are.

The Freedom on the Other Side of This

Here is the paradox buried inside this belief: the fact that you didn't choose your starting point is exactly what makes you free.

You didn't sign a contract. Nobody handed you an instruction manual that said this is what your life is supposed to look like, this is what you owe to the circumstances you were born into, this is the shape your future must take. You woke up inside a story already in progress — and now you get to decide what happens in the next chapter.

That's not the freedom of unlimited options. Real constraints exist and pretending otherwise helps no one. But it is the freedom of authorship. The freedom to look at everything you've been through — all of it, the parts you're proud of and the parts you're not — and decide what you want to build from it.

You're here. You didn't ask for any of this. And that means you don't owe the universe a particular shape to your life. You get to choose what it becomes.

The Second Belief: Everything Led to This Moment

This one is harder to feel than to understand. So stay with it.

Every single thing that has ever happened — in your life, in the lives of everyone who came before you, in the long unfolding of the world itself — was necessary for this exact moment to exist. Not some things. Everything. The good and the devastating and the ordinary and the things you wish had never happened. All of it had to occur exactly as it did for you to be here, reading this, at this particular moment in your life.

That includes the hardest parts. The years you lost. The relationships that didn't survive. The version of yourself you became that you're not sure you recognize anymore. All of it is part of the chain that led here. And here — this moment, this crossroads — is the only place from which anything different becomes possible.

You can't go back and change the path that brought you here. But you are here. And that's not nothing. That's everything.

The universe, as best as science can measure it, is 13.8 billion years old. For you to exist at all required an unbroken chain of events stretching back to the very beginning — stars that had to explode at the right moment, planets that had to form just so, people across hundreds of generations who had to meet at exactly the right time. The improbability of your existence, calculated honestly, is so vast it stops being a number and becomes something closer to a miracle.

You should not be here. And yet here you are.

That isn't an accident. It isn't a mistake. You are the outcome of everything — and the starting point of whatever comes next.

Your Choices Echo Further Than You Know

There is a version of this belief that can feel paralyzing — if everything is connected, if every action ripples outward in ways I can't see, then how do I know if any of it matters? But the truth runs in the other direction. It matters more than you think. Not less.

The moment you choose differently — even once, even in a small way — you change the chain. For yourself. For the people around you. For people you will never meet who will be affected by who you become and what you build and how you show up in the world from this point forward.

You cannot see all the ripples. Nobody can. But they are real, and they travel forward in ways that will long outlast your ability to observe them. A parent who breaks a pattern their children would otherwise have inherited. A person in recovery who becomes the proof to someone else that it's possible. A life rebuilt that becomes the foundation for other lives.

The universe spent an incomprehensible amount of time getting you to this moment. The question is what you do with it.

The Third Belief: You Get to Choose What This Means

When something hard happens — and in recovery, hard things happen — the mind's first question is almost always the same.

Why is this happening to me?

It's a natural question. But it almost never leads anywhere useful. The why me question tends to arrive at one of two destinations: either the world is arbitrary and cruel, or you somehow deserved what you got. Neither of those helps you take the next step. Here is a different question: What can I do with this?

Not because everything happens for a reason. Not because your pain was secretly a gift. Not because you should be grateful for what you've been through. But because the only place your agency actually lives is in what you do with what has already happened. The past is fixed. What you make of it isn't.

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived years in Nazi concentration camps. He watched people face the most extreme suffering imaginable and observed something that stayed with him for the rest of his life: even when everything else was taken away, one freedom remained. The freedom to choose your relationship to your own circumstances. He wrote that between what happens to us and how we respond, there is a space. In that space is our power. In our response is our freedom.

That space is what this third belief is about. Not pretending things are fine when they aren't. Not performing gratitude for experiences that were genuinely painful. Just the recognition that what happens to you and what you do with it are two different things — and only one of them is yours to control.

What Getting Through Something Actually Does

People who have been through serious adversity and come out the other side — not just survived it but genuinely processed it — tend to describe something unexpected. Not that they're glad it happened. But that they know things now they couldn't have known any other way. That they have a kind of strength they didn't have before. That they understand other people's pain differently because they know that territory from the inside.

A bone that breaks and heals correctly becomes denser at the fracture point than it was before. The body, responding to injury, reinforces exactly where it failed. The bone that was broken is, in the end, stronger there than the bone that was never tested.

The same thing is possible for people. Not automatically. Not without honest work. But the capacity is real. The hardest chapters of your life can become the source of your deepest understanding — of yourself, of other people, of what actually matters. The person who has known real darkness can sit with someone else in their darkness in a way that someone who has never been there cannot. That's not a small thing. That's the kind of presence that changes lives.

Acceptance Isn't the Same as Giving Up

One thing worth saying clearly: choosing what something means is not the same as pretending it didn't happen, or that it didn't hurt, or that everyone who caused harm along the way gets a pass.

Acceptance — real acceptance — is not resignation. It's not saying this is fine when it isn't. It's something harder: fully acknowledging what is true without spending all your energy fighting the fact that it's true. The event happened. That's fixed. The argument with the fact that it happened — that's optional. And it costs more than most people realize.

You can accept where you are and still work like hell toward somewhere different. You can accept what happened and still hold people accountable for their part in it. You can accept the reality of this moment — clearly, honestly, without flinching — and use that clarity as the foundation for everything you build next.

That's not weakness. That's the only way anything actually gets built.

What All Three Look Like Together

When these three beliefs work together, something shifts in how you move through the world.

You stop seeing yourself as someone to whom things happen and start seeing yourself as someone who decides what those things mean. You stop measuring your worth by where you started or what you've been through and start measuring it by what you're building. You stop looking at other people through the lens of judgment and start looking through the lens of curiosity — because you know that everyone is working with something, and most of what they're working with they didn't choose.

Recovery is not the absence of struggle. It's the presence of a different relationship to struggle. It's the decision — made once and then made again and then made again — to stay in the conversation with your own life instead of checking out of it.

The tools you used to manage what felt unmanageable made sense at the time. They were the best available answer to a real problem. But there are other tools. And the work of recovery — the real work, underneath all the logistics and the meetings and the milestones — is learning what those tools are and choosing, day by day, to reach for them instead.

You are not your worst chapter. You are not the sum of your hardest years. You are what you do next.

That's not motivational language. That's a description of how human beings actually work when they decide to stop letting the past write the future.

So here is what I'm asking of you.

Set a destination for yourself. It doesn't have to be grand. It doesn't have to be certain. It just has to be real — something that means something to you, something worth moving

toward. Small or tremendous, it doesn't matter. It's a point on a map you can guide yourself toward.

A place to land is only the beginning. The question is where you launch from there.
That's what this is here to help you figure out.

— *C. Daniel Berumen*
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