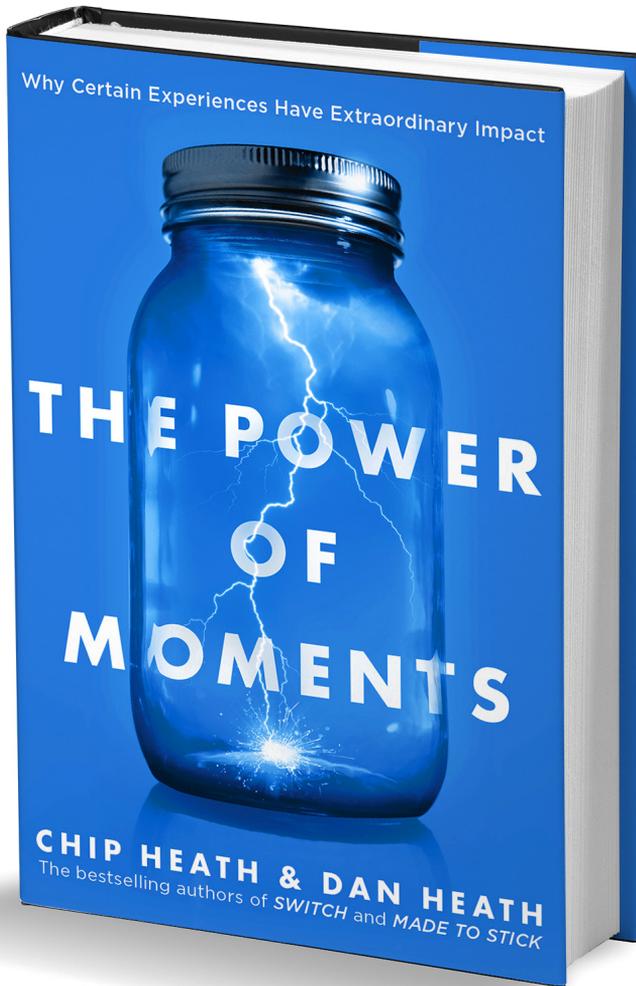


CHAPTER 1: **DEFINING MOMENTS**



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1

Defining Moments

1.

Chris Barbic and Donald Kamentz were sitting at a pub in Houston, recuperating from another 14-hour day running their start-up charter school. They were drinking beer. Watching ESPN. And sharing a Tombstone pizza, the bar's only food offering. They had no idea, on that night in October 2000, that they were moments away from an epiphany that would affect thousands of lives.¹

ESPN was covering National Signing Day, the first day when graduating high school football players can sign a binding "letter of intent" to attend a particular college. For college football fans, it's a big day.

Watching the exuberant coverage, something struck Kamentz. "It blows my mind that we celebrate athletics this way,

but we don't have anything that celebrates academics in the same way," he said. And the students at their school—primarily kids from low-income Hispanic families—deserved celebrating. Many of them would be the first in their families to graduate from high school.

Barbic had founded a school to serve those students. He'd grown disillusioned teaching sixth grade at a local elementary school. "I saw way too many of my students head off to the local junior high excited about school and eager to pursue their dreams, only to return a few months later with that light in their eyes totally gone." They would come back to visit him, telling stories of gangs, drugs, pregnancies. It crushed him. He knew he had two choices: Quit teaching to spare himself. Or build the school that those students deserved. So in 1998, Barbic founded YES Prep. And Donald Kamentz was one of the first people he hired.

In the pub that night, as they watched the Signing Day news, they had a sudden inspiration: *What if we created our own "Signing Day," when our students would announce where they will attend college?* The event would allow them to honor all graduating seniors, since it was a condition of graduation at YES Prep that every student apply and be accepted to college, even if they ultimately chose not to attend.

Their excitement grew as they shaped the idea: They would call it Senior Signing Day, and for that one day, graduating seniors would be treated with the same hype and adulation as college athletes.

About six months later, on April 30, 2001, they held the first Senior Signing Day. Roughly 450 people crammed into

a community center next door to their campus: 17 graduating seniors and their families, along with every other student in the YES Prep system—from juniors to sixth graders.

Each of the seniors took the stage, announcing where he or she would be attending college in the fall: “My name is Eddie Zapata, and in the fall, I will be attending Vanderbilt University!” They would unveil a T-shirt or pennant with their chosen school’s insignia. Many of the students kept their final school decision a secret from friends, so there was suspense in the air. After each announcement, the room erupted with cheers.

Later, the students would sit at a table, with their families crowded around them, and sign letters of matriculation, confirming their enrollment in the fall. Barbic was struck by the emotion of the “signing” moment: “It hits home—the sacrifices that everybody had to make for their kids to get there. No one did it alone. There were lots of people involved.” By the end of the ceremony, there were few dry eyes in the room.

Senior Signing Day became the most important annual event for the YES Prep school network. For seniors, the event was a celebration, the capstone of their achievement. But it held a different kind of meaning for younger students. At the third Senior Signing Day, which had expanded into an auditorium at the University of Houston, there was a sixth grader in the audience named Mayra Valle. It was her first Signing Day experience, and it made a lasting impression. She remembers thinking, *That could be me. No one in my family has ever gone to college. I want to be on that stage.*

By 2010, six years later, the senior class had grown to 126

graduates, and Signing Day had expanded so much that it had moved to the basketball arena at Rice University, in front of 5,000 people. 90% of the graduates that year were the first members of their families to go to college.

The keynote speaker, U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan, was moved by what he saw. He scrapped his prepared remarks and spoke freely: “No basketball game, no football game begins to compare to the magnitude and importance of what happened here today. . . . Thank you for inspiring not just your brothers and sisters, not just the underclassmen here, but the entire country.”

One of the graduating seniors was Mayra Valle. Six years after she imagined being on that stage, today was her day. “Good afternoon, everybody, my name is Mayra Valle,” she said, breaking into an enormous smile. “And this fall I will be attending CONNECTICUT COLLEGE!” The school was ranked one of the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the country.

The crowd roared.

2.

We all have defining moments in our lives—meaningful experiences that stand out in our memory. Many of them owe a great deal to chance: A lucky encounter with someone who becomes the love of your life. A new teacher who spots a talent you didn’t know you had. A sudden loss that upends the certainties of your life. A realization that you don’t want to

spend one more day in your job. These moments seem to be the product of fate or luck or maybe a higher power's interventions. We can't control them.

But is that true? Must our defining moments *just happen to us*?

Senior Signing Day didn't just happen. Chris Barbic and Donald Kamentz set out to *create* a defining moment for their students. When Mayra Valle and hundreds of other YES Prep graduates walked onto that stage, they stepped into a carefully crafted defining moment that was no less special for having been planned. It's a moment they'll never forget.

Defining moments shape our lives, but we don't have to wait for them to happen. We can be the author of them. What if a teacher could design a lesson that students were still reflecting on years later? What if a manager knew exactly how to turn an employee's moment of failure into a moment of growth? What if you had a better sense of how to create lasting memories for your kids?

In this book, we have two goals: First, we want to examine defining moments and identify the traits they have in common. What, specifically, makes a particular experience memorable and meaningful? Our research shows that defining moments share a set of common elements.

Second, we want to show you how you can *create* defining moments by making use of those elements. Why would you want to create them? To enrich your experiences. To connect with others. To make memories. To launch your life or your career or your team in a new direction.

Our lives are measured in moments, and defining moments

are the ones that endure in our memories. In the pages ahead, we'll show you how to make more of them.

3.

Why do we remember certain experiences and forget others? In the case of Signing Day, the answer is pretty clear: It's a celebration that is grand in scale and rich in emotion. No surprise that it's more memorable than a lesson on multiplying fractions. But for other experiences in life—from vacations to work projects—it's not as clear why we remember what we do.

Psychologists have discovered some counterintuitive answers to this puzzle of memory. Let's say you take your family to Disney World. During your visit, we text you every hour, asking you to rate your experience at that moment on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is lousy and 10 is terrific. Let's assume we check in with you 6 times. Here's how your day shapes up:

9 a.m.: Cattle-herding your kids out of the hotel room.

There's excitement in the air. Rating: 6

10 a.m.: Riding "It's a Small World" together, with parents and children each under the impression that the other must be enjoying this. Rating: 5

11 a.m.: Feeling a dopamine rush after riding the Space Mountain roller coaster. Your kids are begging to ride it again. Rating: 10

Noon: Enjoying expensive park food with your kids, who

might enjoy it less if they knew you bought it with their college fund. Rating: 7

1 p.m.: Waiting in line, for 45 minutes now, in the 96-degree central Florida heat. Trying to keep your son from gnawing on the handrails. Rating: 3

2 p.m.: Buying mouse-ear hats on the way out of the park. Your kids look so cute. Rating: 8

To arrive at an overall summary of your day, we could simply average those ratings: 6.5. A pretty good day.

Now, let's say we text you again, a few weeks later, and ask you to rate your *overall* Disney experience. A reasonable prediction of your answer would be 6.5, since it encompasses all the highs and lows of your day.

But psychologists would say that's way off. They'd predict that, looking back on the day at Disney, your overall rating would be a 9! That's because research has found that in recalling an experience, we ignore most of what happened and focus instead on a few particular moments. Specifically, two moments will stand out: riding Space Mountain and buying mouse-ear hats. To understand why those two moments matter more than the others, let's explore some of the underlying psychology.

Consider an experiment in which participants were asked to undergo three painful trials. In the first, they submerged their hands for 60 seconds in buckets filled with frigid, 57-degree water. (Keep in mind that 57-degree water feels *much* colder than 57-degree air.)

The second trial was similar, except that they kept their

hands submerged for 90 seconds instead of 60, and during the final 30 seconds, the water warmed up to 59 degrees. That final half minute was still unpleasant, but noticeably less so for most participants. (Note that the researchers were monitoring the time carefully, but the participants were not told how much time had elapsed.)

For their third painful experience, the participants were given a choice: Would you rather repeat the first trial or the second?

This is an easy question: Both trials featured 60 seconds of identical pain, and the second trial added another 30 seconds of slightly reduced pain. So this is kind of like asking, *Would you rather be slapped in the face for 60 seconds or 90?*

Nevertheless, 69% chose the longer trial.²

Psychologists have untangled the reasons for this puzzling result. When people assess an experience, they tend to forget or ignore its length—a phenomenon called “duration neglect.” Instead, they seem to rate the experience based on two key moments: (1) the best or worst moment, known as the “peak”; and (2) the ending. Psychologists call it the “peak-end rule.”

So in the participants’ memories, the difference between 60 and 90 seconds washed out. That’s duration neglect. And what stood out for them was that the longer trial *ended more comfortably* than the shorter one. (Both trials, by the way, had a similar peak moment of pain: close to the 60-second mark.)

This research explains why, in reflecting on your Disney experience, you’ll remember Space Mountain (the peak) and the mouse ears (the end). Everything else will tend to fade. As

a result, your memory of the day is far more favorable than the hour-by-hour ratings you provided.

The peak-end rule holds true across many kinds of experiences. Most of the relevant studies tend to focus on short, laboratory-friendly experiences: watching film clips, enduring annoying sounds, etc. On longer time frames, peaks continue to matter but the relative importance of “endings” fades somewhat. Beginnings matter, too: When college alumni were asked about their memories from college, fully 40% of those memories came from the month of September!³ And beginnings and endings can blur—if you change cities for a new job, is that an ending or a beginning or both? That’s why it’s preferable to talk about *transitions*, which encompass both endings and beginnings.

What’s indisputable is that when we assess our experiences, we don’t average our minute-by-minute sensations. Rather, we tend to remember flagship moments: the peaks, the pits, and the transitions.

This is a critical lesson for anyone in service businesses—from restaurants to medical clinics to call centers to spas—where success hinges on the customer experience. Consider the Magic Castle Hotel, which as of press time was one of the three top-rated hotels in Los Angeles, out of hundreds. It triumphed over competition like the Four Seasons Hotel at Beverly Hills and the Ritz-Carlton Los Angeles. Magic Castle’s reviews are stunning: Out of more than 2,900 reviews on TripAdvisor, over 93% of guests rate the hotel as either “excellent” or “very good.”⁴

There’s a puzzle about the hotel’s ranking, though: If you

flipped through the photos of the resort online, you would never conclude, “That’s one of the best hotels in L.A.” An interior courtyard features a pool that might qualify as Olympic size, if the Olympics were being held in your backyard. The rooms are dated, the furnishings are spare, and most walls are bare. In fact, even the word *hotel* seems like a stretch—the Magic Castle is actually a converted two-story apartment complex from the 1950s, painted canary yellow.

The point is not that it’s a bad-looking place; it’s fine. It looks like a respectable budget motel. But the Four Seasons it ain’t. Nor is it particularly cheap—the pricing is comparable to Hilton or Marriott hotels. How could it be one of the top-rated hotels in Los Angeles?

Let’s start with the cherry-red phone mounted to a wall near the pool. You pick it up and someone answers, “Hello, Popsicle Hotline.” You place an order, and minutes later, a staffer wearing white gloves delivers your cherry, orange, or grape Popsicles to you at poolside. On a silver tray. For free.

Then there’s the Snack Menu, a list of goodies—ranging from Kit-Kats to root beer to Cheetos—that can be ordered up at no cost. There’s also a Board Game Menu and a DVD Menu, with all items loaned for free. Three times a week, magicians perform tricks at breakfast. Did we mention you can drop off unlimited loads of laundry for free washing? Your clothes are returned later in the day, wrapped in butcher paper and tied up with twine and a sprig of lavender. Which is much more pomp and ceremony than the doctor used when handing off your first child.

The guest reviews for the Magic Castle Hotel are raptur-

ous. What the Magic Castle has figured out is that, to please customers, you need not obsess over every detail. Customers will forgive small swimming pools and underwhelming room décor, as long as some moments are magical. The surprise about great service experiences is that they are *mostly forgettable and occasionally remarkable*.

Now, when you phone the “Popsicle Hotline,” is that a defining moment? In the context of a lifetime, certainly not. (Hard to imagine a deathbed regret: “If only I’d chosen the grape . . .”)

But in the context of a vacation? Of course it’s a defining moment. When tourists tell their friends about their vacation to Southern California, they’ll say, “We went to Disneyland, and we saw the Walk of Fame, and we stayed at this hotel, the Magic Castle, and you won’t believe this, but there’s a phone by the pool . . .” The Popsicle Hotline is one of the moments that defines the trip. And it was an engineered moment—the kind of moment that other hotels fail to conjure. (Courtyards by Marriott are fine places, but can you imagine *raving* about them to a friend?)

The point here is simple: Some moments are vastly more meaningful than others. For tourists, the Popsicle Hotline is a 15-minute experience that pops out of the surrounding 2-week vacation. For students at YES Prep, Senior Signing Day is a single morning that rises above a 7-year journey.

But we tend to ignore this truth. We’re not very good at *investing* in such moments. For example, a teacher plans his history curriculum for a semester, but every class period gets roughly the same amount of attention. There’s no attempt to shape a few

“peak” moments. Or an executive leads her company through a fast-growth period, but there’s little to distinguish one week from the next. Or we spend weekend after weekend together with our kids, but in memory all those times blend together.

How can we fight this flatness and make moments that matter? Let’s start with the basics: How are we defining a “defining moment”? In common usage, the term is applied in a variety of ways. Some use it to capture dramatic times when people have their character tested, as with a soldier showing courage in battle. Others use the term more liberally, as almost a synonym for “greatest hits.” (For example, an online search of the term yields results such as “Defining Moments in 70s Television,” which must have been a short list indeed.)

For the sake of this book, a defining moment is a short experience that is both memorable and meaningful. (“Short” is relative here—a month might be a short experience in the span of your life, and a minute might be short in the context of a customer support call.) There may be a dozen moments in your life that capture who you are—those are big defining moments. But there are smaller experiences, such as the Popsicle Hotline, that are defining moments in the context of a vacation or a semester abroad or a product development cycle.

What are these moments made of, and how do we create more of them? In our research, we have found that defining moments are created from one or more of the following four elements:

ELEVATION: Defining moments rise above the everyday. They provoke not just transient happiness, like laughing at a friend’s joke, but memorable delight. (You pick up the red phone and

someone says, “Popsicle Hotline, we’ll be right out.”) To construct elevated moments, we must boost sensory pleasures—the Popsicles must be delivered poolside on a silver tray, of course—and, if appropriate, add an element of surprise. We’ll see why surprise can warp our perceptions of time, and why most people’s most memorable experiences are clustered in their teens and twenties. Moments of elevation transcend the normal course of events; they are literally extraordinary.

INSIGHT: Defining moments rewire our understanding of ourselves or the world. In a few seconds or minutes, we realize something that might influence our lives for decades: *Now is the time for me to start this business.* Or, *This is the person I’m going to marry.* The psychologist Roy Baumeister studied life changes that were precipitated by a “crystallization of discontent,” moments when people abruptly saw things as they were, such as cult members who suddenly realized the truth about their leader. And although these moments of insight often seem serendipitous, we can engineer them—or at the very least, lay the groundwork. In one unforgettably disgusting story, we’ll see how some relief workers sparked social change by causing a community to “trip over the truth.”

PRIDE: Defining moments capture us at our best—moments of achievement, moments of courage. To create such moments, we need to understand something about the architecture of pride—how to plan for a series of milestone moments that build on each other en route to a larger goal. We’ll explore why the “Couch to 5K” program was so successful—and so much more effective in sparking exercise than the simple imperative

to “jog more.” And we’ll learn some unexpected things about acts of courage and the surprising ripple effects they create.

CONNECTION: Defining moments are social: weddings, graduations, baptisms, vacations, work triumphs, bar and bat mitzvahs, speeches, sporting events. These moments are strengthened because we share them with others. What triggers moments of connection? We’ll encounter a remarkable laboratory procedure that allows two people to walk into a room as strangers and walk out, 45 minutes later, as close friends. And we’ll analyze what one social scientist believes is a kind of unified theory of what makes relationships stronger, whether the bond is between husband and wife, doctor and patient, or even shopper and retailer.

Defining moments often spark positive emotion—we’ll use “positive defining moments” and “peaks” interchangeably throughout the book—but there are categories of *negative* defining moments, too, such as moments of pique: experiences of embarrassment or embitterment that cause people to vow, “I’ll show them!” There’s another category that is all too common: moments of trauma, which leave us heartbroken and grieving. In the pages ahead, we’ll encounter several stories of people dealing with trauma, but we will not explore this category in detail, for the simple reason that our focus is on creating more positive moments. No one wants to experience more moments of loss. In Appendix 1, we share some resources that people who have suffered a trauma might find helpful.

Defining moments possess at least one of the four elements above, but they need not have all four. Many moments

of insight, for example, are private—they don't involve a connection. And a fun moment like calling the Popsicle Hotline doesn't offer much insight or pride.

Some powerful defining moments contain all four elements. Think of YES Prep's Senior Signing Day: the ELEVATION of students having their moment onstage, the INSIGHT of a sixth grader thinking *That could be me*, the PRIDE of being accepted to college, and the CONNECTION of sharing the day with an arena full of thousands of supportive people. (See the footnote for a mnemonic to remember this framework for defining moments.)*

Sometimes these elements can be very personal. Somewhere in your home there is a treasure chest, full of things that are precious to you and worthless to anyone else. It might be a scrapbook, or a drawer in a dresser, or a box in the attic. Maybe some of your favorites are stuck on the refrigerator so you can see them every day. Wherever your treasure chest is, its contents are likely to include the four elements we've been discussing:

* It may not have escaped your attention that if you swap the order of Insight and Pride, you get a handy acronym: EPIC. We have mixed feelings about this. An acronym, in a book like this, boosts memorability at the cost of some cheesiness. In the past, we have happily embraced that trade, having used two acronyms in previous books to help people recall the relevant frameworks. In this case, we have decided against it. For one thing, we're not advising you to pursue "epic" moments. Some of the stories you'll encounter do fit that description, but many others are small and personal, or painful but transformational. *Epic* seems too grandiose and too shallow all at once. Also, and this is a personal failing, we can't read the word *epic* without imagining it being spoken by a stoned surfer dude. (You see what we mean now, don't you?) So, bottom line, if the EPIC acronym helps you remember the four elements, please keep it with our compliments. But this is the last time we'll mention it.

- **ELEVATION:** A love letter. A ticket stub. A well-worn T-shirt. Haphazardly colored cards from your kids that make you smile with delight.
- **INSIGHT:** Quotes or articles that moved you. Books that changed your view of the world. Diaries that captured your thoughts.
- **PRIDE:** Ribbons, report cards, notes of recognition, certificates, thank-yous, awards. (It just *hurts*, irrationally, to throw away a trophy.)
- **CONNECTION:** Wedding photos. Vacation photos. Family photos. Christmas photos of hideous sweaters. Lots of photos. Probably the first thing you'd grab if your house caught on fire.

All these items you're safeguarding are, in essence, the relics of your life's defining moments. How are you feeling now as you reflect on the contents of your treasure chest? What if you could give that same feeling to your kids, your students, your colleagues, your customers?

Moments matter. And what an opportunity we miss when we leave them to chance! Teachers can inspire, caregivers can comfort, service workers can delight, politicians can unite, and managers can motivate. All it takes is a bit of insight and forethought.

This is a book about the power of moments and the wisdom of shaping them.