



RISE ABOVE THE CROWD

a story about beating the odds

Author's message

There are two crowds in my book.
One is obvious.

The crowd I want you to rise above is the unseen one, the one populated with fears, hesitations, despair, confusion and millions of inherited, inflicted or projected things that stand in your way.

No crowd should stand between you and your potential.

The universe gives you dreams because you can have them.

by Georgia Mihalcea

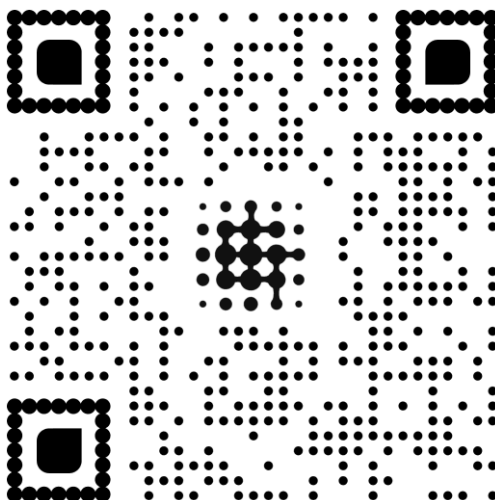
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Bounce Back Collection is a map to better places. Its purpose is to facilitate increasing resilience capabilities, sharp orientation and navigation skills in the globalized complex world, and to develop and shape a strategic, action and problem solving oriented mind.

BOUNCE BACK COLLECTION

- ❖ **XCULTURE** | How Superheroes Are Born
- ❖ **XCODE** | Code of Winners
- ❖ **RISE ABOVE THE CROWD** | My Purpose and Meaning Design

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Man on the Train:

Hey, are you a dreamer?

Wiley:

Yeah.

Man on the Train:

I haven't seen too many around lately. Things have been tough lately for dreamers. They say dreaming is dead, no one does it anymore. It's not dead it's just that it's been forgotten, removed from our language. Nobody teaches it so nobody knows it exists.

The dreamer is banished to obscurity. Well, I'm trying to change all that, and I hope you are too. By dreaming, every day. Dreaming with our hands and dreaming with our minds.

Our planet is facing the greatest problems it's ever faced, ever. So whatever you do, don't be bored, this is absolutely the most exciting time we could have possibly hoped to be alive.

And things are just starting.

(Waking Life, 2001)

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PART I. THE STORY BEHIND THE MAIN STORY

CHAPTER 1. My Path to the Prize

"If your heart is broken, make art with the pieces."

Year 2010. Autumn. Somewhere in October.

Three years after the big fall. My fall. Wrong moment, wrong people, wrong place. A perfect imperfection in the mechanism of the universe. Or just another blind choice. Or the world's fall. I walk in circles. Smaller and smaller circles. This is how identical thousands of days feel like. I am trapped between my past and future choices, between selves, worlds and times. It's terrifying, but at the same time I realize it is a unique opportunity.

I can choose from endless possible scenarios. This time the whole design is in my hands.

Am I smart enough to be lucky? To pick the best possible story for the rest of my life? Once I do, how can I be sure and how do I get there in due time?

Endless walking around the neighborhood and back again for the cheapest coffee in the park. I know all the leaves, birds and people in this place, no matter the season. Back and forth to St.Mary church across the street, on Sundays.

I know every inch of this road and the story of every brick from this building. More litigations in the company. The law around here is a big question mark. Endless days spent in court just to learn the judge mindset and to inspire from thousands of trials. Now I lost. Now I win. Now it's even. It never gets anywhere better.

The more I do the right thing, the less I am and the less I have. Why am I fighting and what am I fighting for? Values and principles. Peace of heart. Damn, this is such an expensive approach of life! Nobody told me this truth.

Everyone says to give up and to move forward. I say "you don't understand, there is no forward here and no shortcuts". One apartment evacuation order. The other apartment evacuation order.

Countless trips to my parents' house in the country to deposit all things from the office and from the lost homes. One car gone. My loyal blue Ranger. My father is not so well. The heart, of course. No way to reach him. We are like in prison here, a prison where we need to provide our own food and roof while at the same time we have to fight with countless villains, including the ones who live inside ourselves. As we are the protagonists, the others must be the villains. That's how we were taught, right? Now he is here. Now he isn't anymore.

I am falling deeper and deeper into the spirals of a life that I don't recognize and that I don't validate as being mine. There is no light in here. On the margins of life there is another life, different breeds of humans, new kind of stories and other rules. Here all people turned into words.

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Here is the best place to live up to your values. That is a luxury you seldom see inside the circles of the ordinary world. I never imagined that words hold so much power.

I remember I judged the people who crowd and push each other in church to take away as many pieces of wafer as possible. A Black Friday kind of scene. Then I abruptly changed my mind.

It happened that Sunday morning when I heard the bells, I woke up and I was hungry as I have never been before. I was raised in poverty, but it was my mother's poverty. She raised us alone and she learned how to make us forget about it. I never tasted my own.

That day I rushed to the church, waited restless for the priest to put an end to his preaching, pushed myself in front of everyone and grabbed the wafers. And then I stopped. *What am I doing?*

I looked around. Fallen and broken people everywhere. Different clothes, the same face. The face of poverty. Material, physical or emotional. Poor people look alike, if you noticed. I tried so much to escape it and here I am. Thinking to steal the wafers in the church. *How low can I get?*

How low are you willing to get? My mind replied.

I returned to myself and I spent days and days trying to figure out what my blessings are, and so started to count them. I still have some clothes left. My mother and sister are still alive and well. I still have friends. I still have a few time left in this house.

I still have my brains. Or at least, I think so. You never hear that click inside your mind. It just happens and that's it. You are clueless.

What else?

I still have my laptop. Ok, its display is cracked and dying, but still working. The utilities are off, they turned them off as I couldn't pay in due time, but there is still the light of the day and the old fashioned ways of dealing with this situation.

What can I do with these blessings?

Wrong question.

How can create a new life from the scratch having nothing but myself?

I don't know. I don't know.

Yet. My mind replied.

I want to pray and to light a candle. I search myself for some change.

No change. No candle. I look around and I see the rest of one down on the floor. I hesitate for a moment, but I take it. Who knows who was it lighted for? Was it a living or a dead one? I wondered.

I light it anyway for both me and the unseen stranger from this world or from the other. In those times all that was open for people like me was the church and the internet.

Think!

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Crisis just hit. Historic giants went bankrupt. Most of us went bankrupt. High skilled unemployment erupted like a volcano. It's bad.

Wait!

This means that there is a probability that somewhere, somebody could have thought to build a bridge between problems and solutions. A scalable bridge.

Who can that be? Americans, most probably. If such bridge exists, I must find it. Really fast.

I started to visit some of my closest friends because they had internet at home. It didn't take me long to find the bridge. It was there.

They were pioneers at the time in open innovation market. I scroll inside the challenge center and damn! They are all about Chemistry, Math, Biology and loads of technical stuff. Too specific. Too far from my big picture kind of brains.

Not quite fair, but good enough cash awards, fast deadlines. If I only could solve one problem! Only one. I could get some cash, I could push forward and with a little bit of luck, my life will change. If I only could!

Now what?

Wait. Wait. Be patient. It's on its way. My mind whispered.

I was just like someone waiting for that life changing letter to come and who jumps at the window each time the postman pops up in the street. I started to doubt myself, the way my mind is wired. *What am I doing?*

And one day, here it was. *Models for Sourcing Regional Food Databases*. Anonymous seeker. Healthcare industry. 10.000\$, one week left till deadline, 141 worldwide solvers registered to solve this problem. This is wild.

Just the thought of it makes me want to quit. And the award, come on! On the consulting market that's at its best 20% of the value.

Don't think about that.

I decided to rephrase the premise, to not solve the entire problem and to send them just that paragraph. When I rephrased it, the solution opened itself to me and dragged me further. Just like a whole new universe. I wrote it as fast as I could. Its title was *"Broadening Opportunities Towards Global Health"*.

When I finished it, I realized it's late after midnight and I don't have internet. No. This cannot happen! I jumped out of the house and started to walk around randomly. Then it hit me: the gas station down the street. They have free Wi-Fi.

I looked at the time. Few minutes left till deadline. I switched myself to turbo mode. Here I am. Standing in front of the gas station, trying to figure out between the display cracks where on the desktop I saved it. The internet connection works. I am on. Open the browser. Enter the site address. Go to the problem. Upload solution. Submit. That's it!

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That was the most imperfect of my writings.

After a few days I totally forgot about it and I fell back into the spiral. Two months later, long after my midnight, I received this e-mail:

"Dear Georgia,

It gives me great pleasure to let you know that the Seeker's review of your submission to Models for Sourcing Regional Food Databases led to you being chosen as one of the two winners for this Challenge."

At first I thought it's a scam or something. It made some correspondence with their team to realize it is not. Anyway, I couldn't believe it until I cashed the prize.

I had to borrow \$50 to legalize the Affidavit at the US Embassy, the Intellectual Property transfer agreement. The other winner was a guy in his mid-40s, having an executive position at some banking institution in USA. That seemed to me more fascinating than the news itself. Two brains at two ends of the spectrum, one bigger mind, one solution, a match with the seeker. What a beautiful ricochet!

My life didn't change much after this boost of adrenaline and confidence. It was me who started to change once again. And maybe a little piece of the world or of the seeker's. I don't know I'll ever know. I have no clue what happened further.

I used the monetary awards to leave the country and so I became an emigrant. I took myself by surprise as I never believed I would ever leave my home country.

I was about to find out that once you leave and live enough time somewhere else, it's hard to fit the same picture again.

Emigration is a totally self-changing experience. Anyway, that was one of my best decisions ever. I was too far in the future already for my home country's culture, politics and economic environment.

This new discontinuous life path became a sort of "follow the signs" kind of experience.

Playing this game kept me busy, focused and connected, but mostly taught me lot of new things about the world and about myself. In parallel, I started to accept working opportunities in film production, my first choice of heart.

While walking on the innovation road, I developed a portfolio of over 40 solutions to various profit and common good problems from a diversity of industries. With six I managed to rise above the crowd.

In 2011, together with winning solvers I have never met in real life, we built a collaboration platform to "recycle" our non-awarded ideas openOI.org, to get them out of the black box and to push them further into the market. Moneyless as we were at the time, but better equipped than ever.

At the end of 2015, I decided to make a step forward and to do something I wanted to do from Day 1: to bring more light upon our winning solvers community.

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So, I started to produce an online video serial called We Are Solvers, a video document featuring ones of the most prolific solvers, their motivations, their stories, their predictions and messages to worldwide influencers and people alike.

We never met each other in real life. I convinced two sponsors to support the production of the debut series. One of my goals is to gather the resources needed to implement the format I initially designed for this production (a more entertaining one) and to meet and highlight as many serial winning solvers as possible, to reveal as many stories as possible.

Eventually, I ended up leading and co-founding a research and innovation cluster in my home country, Romania (Europe), a place where I lived permanently until 2013, afterwards only from time to time.

It didn't work for me. It could, but it didn't. Too many cultural differences between me and the rest of its leaders. So, I chose to quit. Again.

Looking back, I don't know when I crossed the line.

The years from the beginning of this story faded away. I am not an entrepreneur anymore. I changed too much and turned into something else, maybe something closer to who I am and to my purpose and meaning in this life.

Today, I am just a free person exploring the world's corners, edges and borderlines doing what she can with whatever has at hand in order to add more value to the world and to her life, but mostly to find her place in the world.

I walk in circles. Wider and wider circles.

Life remained hard, but it became kinder in return.

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CHAPTER 2. My problem solver life. New mindset. New skills.

"The reinvention of daily life means marching off the edge of our maps."

My name is Georgia Mihalcea, but my *scene* name is Gi Young, my creative alter ego and the co-founder of the design thinking and personal transformation creative agency Kent & Young, a place where we play and ask crazy questions instead of giving advice.

I began my problem solver official life in 2010 when I began to hunt crisis opportunities as a solution to my adversities and problems, and that is when I found Innocentive, the pioneer open innovation platform and the innovation marketplace that introduced me to the wild realm of crowdsourcing and digital global competitions, concepts that eventually became a growing part of my life and a source of inspiration, learning and fascination.

In September 2010, Dwayne Spradlin, Chief Executive Officer of InnoCentive, discussed how challenges unleash a world of human potential and flashes of genius at The Economist Human Potential summit in New York City during its Ideas Economy annual series of events. The theme that year was: **Human Potential – The Next Level of Competition.**

For that speech, Innocentive asked a few winning solvers, including myself, to make a short video recording, a montage that was included in the final presentation.

In 2012 the Ideas Economy Summit theme was "*The Great Unrest*" - where it explored the fundamental issues affecting personal and professional life, including creativity, management, social purpose and the future of jobs. In 2013 the theme was "*A New Era of Talent Management*" - where it explored the fundamental issues affecting talent development, education, and human capital around the world.

There were times of profound recession, right after the crisis hit in 2007/2008, and crowdsourcing venue and open innovation marketplace were science fiction notions for many, including the human resource who engaged in this process like myself.

I remember that I hoped for my life to change after that event, but that thought turned out to be very far from the following realities. Seven more wild years were about to pass, just like in the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, until the first wall to fall. Though, I realized once again that leaders and decision makers will never change their habits and mindsets unless they are forced by a drastic fall of profits or hit by a hard crisis.

By the end of 2010, I turned myself into a winning problem solver for the incentivized challenge "*Models For Sourcing Food Databases*" launched by an healthcare U.S. Based organization.

My solution called "*Broadening Opportunities For Global Health*" won half of the prize, the other half being won by an American who worked in an executive position inside a financial institution. The number of solvers who signed up for sending one or more solutions to that challenge was 148.

This is how it all started. The first solution written, the first strike. You may say it was the beginner luck. A random success. Many said that at first.

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The second awarded solution came in the same year in social innovation this time, an area very much related with notions like social business and social entrepreneurship, concepts I am very fond of as they are much closer to my nature than business entrepreneurship.

This is what I suspect to be also the core reason I never made it as a millionaire. I just end up being the same province girl that I always used to be.

It was Social Business Tour 2010 for SE Europe, an event organized by Grameen Lab and Muhammad Yunus, the awarded Nobel Peace Prize winner for founding the Grameen Bank and pioneering the concepts of micro-credit and micro-finance.

My proposed social innovation solution was called *“A Good House For Bad Times”* and was a finalist.

As a finalist, I was about to receive free consulting services from a top lawyer international company and financial consulting from Erste Group through GoodBee – a financial inclusion banking service that makes financial services more accessible to previously ‘under-banked’ individuals and businesses in Central and Eastern Europe.

The purpose of this non-monetary award was to help me develop and implement my project.

As I was totally broke at the time and as there was not (and isn't till today) any fund to give the first dollar to start-ups or individuals, and as Romanian legal and economic framework was hundreds of years behind such concept, I couldn't make much use of the award. Still, the information collected and the recognition gave me hope and new things to consider in my quest to purpose and meaning design for my life.

One of the things that became clear to me at the time was that I won't practice social entrepreneurship and social business in my own country for a very long time, at least not in its conventional form. So I set myself to forget about it and to find new ways to add meaning to my life and solve my own problems.

The third awarded solution came four years later, in 2014. It was a problem launched by a banking group based in U.S.A. and it was called *“Humanizing The Digital Customer Experience”*.

All we know about the seeker is that it won numerous Customer Satisfaction awards from J.D. Power and Associates, a global market research company, it launched that challenge under anonymity for competition reasons.

This humanizing technology challenge was about developing new ways of interacting with customers via non-human channels, in order to provide superior customer service.

In more words, to design a way to enhance customer satisfaction during electronic interactions – online, mobile, interactive voice response (IVR), point of sale machines (POS) and automated teller machine (ATM).

The idea was supposed to create positive customer emotions, be simple to implement, and be something that the customer would likely bring up in conversation with family and friends as a memorable positive experience that they want to share.

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My solution was called *"Your Private Banking Coach - a very personal experience"* and it won the grand prize. Two more solutions were awarded smaller prizes. The number of solvers registered to solve this challenge was 401.

It was so simply and clearly crafted in terms of Challenge Design, that it made me lose my peace by pushing me towards the challenge of offering the same simplicity and clarity in my vision. That was the real challenge in the core. Simplicity.

I couldn't come up with at least half an idea until the last 3-4 hours remained till submission deadline. I read tons of materials, I turned the web upside down, but nothing lighted my fire. I gave up and I put myself to sleep, still I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The thought of not having a vision about this challenge, especially after so much research and life and human nature experience felt unacceptable, unbearable.

Try harder.

And here I was, staring at a blank e-paper, more asleep than awake, unable to write a word. Time was passing by, less than two hours till deadline.

I began to write all words that came to my mind, in a complete chaos and randomness, totally free of censorship. If I couldn't write the solution, at least to write something. Anything.

While cutting the clutter, it started to fall itself together somewhere in the back of my mind. I could see it so clearly that I felt like I am already experiencing it.

It was seductive and uplifting, at the same time, as such design and user experience should be for the purpose of emotionally connecting humans with the machines. The kind that holds a high potential to corrupt, if you are not used to work on yourself on a daily basis, if you are not at least a little bit aware of your own human nature mechanisms.

I wrote it down at my highest speed, about 5 pages, and when there were a few minutes left till submission, I experienced a moral dilemma. An ethical dilemma, to better say it. I felt like sending a devilish thing out there in the world, my design was highly addictive from a user experience perspective. I was 100% sure I will win the grand prize. I had no doubt about that. But first, I had to regain my peace of mind and to sort this out.

I chose the scenario where my main duty and purpose is to give my best to achieve the goal and to win the prize, and hopefully solve also some of my life problems. This is the game. How will it be implemented and how people will use it, it is not my choice. This is where my freedom ends. It's all about "take it or leave it". As it is not the atomic bomb or some dangerous thing for the security of society, this is it. And so I sent it.

Of course, in the greater scale of things, I perceive my thinking as being modest. But, I am where I am, and I do what I can do. For me, the game was all about that. It was one of my best crafted solutions in terms of writing.

At that point in time, I had already developed a portfolio of over 30 more or less innovative solutions for a variety of industries and business levels, I read and wrote tons of materials to practice my writing skills and my solution design clarity, so it was natural to be much better after four more years of exercising and investigating all sorts of areas from my brain and self.

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The fourth and fifth awarded solutions came in the same year, 2016. That was a prolific year for my parallel life as a problem solver and much more rewarding, as the seekers were not anonymous anymore, thing that matters a lot, but I will talk about that later.

The fourth awarded challenge solved was launched by N Square and Stimson Center and it was called *"Innovative Approaches to Proliferation Prevention: An Industry-Government Information Sharing Platform"*.

N Square is a multi-year, multi-million-dollar program designed to foster collaboration, ignite the public imagination and spark new ideas about how to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons. N Square is a collaborative effort between five of the largest peace and security founders in the United States: The Carnegie Corporation of New York, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ploughshares Fund, and the Skoll Global Threats Fund.

The Stimson Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan "impact" tank based in Washington DC and devoted to addressing transnational challenges and exploiting opportunities that enhance global security and economic prosperity.

This problem was about the fact that industry plays the central role in the manufacture and movement of goods - increasingly including sensitive "dual-use" items that may be used for peaceful or for highly destructive ends. As such, many firms contribute - knowingly or not - to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The challenge was seeking ideas on how to build, grow, and sustain an information sharing solution whereby private industry can identify and share within industry and with governments suspect information that can help disrupt proliferation activities.

My proposed design wore the title *"Source-to-Share Platform"*, it won one of the three prizes at stake. The number of solvers registered to solve this challenge was 91.

This award made me the proudest. I felt it mattered the most. The solution itself was the most difficult one for me to architect, because it was entirely related to the American system I knew nothing about and it required loads of research in areas where I don't have a natural call or immediate interest.

I was also clueless about peace and security mechanism, dual-use weapons and technologies, due diligence processes, intelligence systems, and so on.

The problem-solving process of this particular challenge made me feel like reaching all my ends, but it was the importance and the scale of the problem addressed that offered a powerful enough motivation and inspiration to look for a good enough solution beyond my own limitations.

The fifth awarded challenge was a beautiful one, exclusively for my heart and story. It was launched by the U.S. based organization Bereny Incorporated through HeroX crowdsourcing platform and it was called **"Patterns for Success"**.

In terms of challenge design, it was beautifully crafted, thing that managed to naturally attract thousands of solvers from all around the world in the attempt to deliver the best recipe of strategy, leadership and culture for Do-It-Yourself and small business owners.

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The seeker structured the program we were about to architect in 3 major success categories (Strategy, Leadership, Culture), each containing 3 modules.

I wrote the entire material for all categories, and I was the fortunate winner of **Culture success** category.

"Patterns for Success" was a very special award for me because it allowed me to mark a highly challenging era of my life in a beautiful and beneficial way. It allowed me to recycle my past. It made me happy. And it made me cry. It gave me new ideas about designing my purpose, but also a more stable and better secured life. After two years, it turned into my next book **"XCulture: How Superheroes Are Born"**

The sixth awarded challenge solved (and the last now of this writing) was launched by HeroX and it was called **"Unleash Your Superhero - Your Path to the Prize"**.

This was a beautiful challenge addressed to innovators to share their journey in a creative way. My story **"Hey, you're a dreamer?"** won the first place. A piece of it you have already read in the first part of this book.

After this second award with HeroX, they offered me a job offer as a Challenge Designer to a global problem launched by the US Government and the consulting organization Booz Allen Hamilton called "Power the Globe".

In a way I started to remotely live the American dream, a dream that marked my childhood in those communist times in my country through smuggled video tapes with American movies. A great piece of documentary was made by Romanians film makers on this topic called *"Chuck Norris and the Communism"*.

I remember in those times my father secretly invested in a Panasonic video machine and allowed soldiers and neighbors to watch films for money. It was a great risk to do that those times, but he was fearless. That was my first cinema and entrepreneurship experience. Spartan, still 100% real.

To end this first chapter, I remembered what another influencer told me once in a middle of a conflict at a leadership level, in the organization we tried to put together with other people from his big league:

I realize now how extraordinary you are, but we don't know how to use you.

And then he looked at me as if I was his dearest child from the ones he once left behind.

I felt his remark as an insult. Not to me, but to the entire world.

If you are the most representative sample around here and this is the best you can, then what's left to expect and hope? My first instinct replied in my mind.

To his face all I could say was:

*Well...
Learn.*

The more you read, learn and work, the better you become and the more your life will change. You change. Everything changes. The entire world changes.

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PART II. RISE ABOVE THE CROWD

**"When you dance, your purpose is not to get to a certain place on the floor.
It's to enjoy each step along the way."**

Thoughts

For both problem solvers and seekers, crowdsourcing brings on the table unique benefits. There are also shortcomings, but the exponential exposure and rhythm of growing and its beautiful side effects overcome its limitations and question marks.

Some leaders in the open innovation market push too much for seekers and too little or not at all for solvers. Some went so far to imagine a world where hiring is replaced by crowdsourcing.

I wouldn't want to live in such a world. To be obliged to wake up each day and conquer a global crowd to earn my living is not my picture of a bright future.

The greatest potential of crowdsourcing and all the technologies that are about to enter the markets because of Industrial Revolution 4.0 lie in their extraordinary power to solve social problems very fast, sometimes in real time.

Unfortunately, these instruments are much more used for business purposes for the moment. I believe that will change. Almost instantly, once the latest technologies reach the markets.

If digital revolution changed the way we do things, technology revolution will change who we are. It has already started. We will be challenged to adapt instantly and to design our own ways.

During this part of this book, I will share some of my insights based on my personal experience on both sides of the crowdsourcing game to help you rise above the crowd and stay there.

Whether you are problem solver in open innovation marketplace or a solution designer who wants to thrive in global digital competitions, the tips and tricks I gathered on my own pathway will lead you there. Or at least, they'll get you closer.

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CHAPTER 1. You must win an invisible audience. Key aspects.

"Winners are different. They're a different breed of cat."

In crowdsourcing and virtual competitions winning is the hardest thing for a few key reasons:

- in many cases you don't know who the seeking organization is, so you cannot get the vibe of its tone, language, mission or vision;
- you have no clue who the judges are;
- you don't know from what level of business the problem comes from;
- you don't know the larger problem;
- you don't know seekers' intentions and motivations behind it.

So, you are lacking the main ingredients for crafting your best possible presentation. You are blinded, and you have to hit the target at the same time when thousands of others like you or better than you do the same. All you have is assuming, your intuition. Based on that, you decide what aspects to develop and highlight more, on what tone and key, what words to use to touch the second and third possible target readers, otherwise decisive in your evaluation, how to structure your thoughts for better impact.

Pitching an idea to an audience you can see, like it happens in start-ups zone, is piece of cake. Knowing and facing your judges makes it much easier, this simple fact gives you a lot of information that can help you in calibrating your idea presentation. Here you must learn to read between the lines, to feel it all. And there's no science or school for that. The only science there is, it's called experience.

Developing your thinking and writing skills (especially if English is not your native language) is much more than a secondary or optionally thing. It's one of the main keys to success, to break the barriers and grab the prize.

I know solvers who delivered better solutions but written into a less attractive language (even though perfect on its niche) and lost the award, and solvers who delivered poorer solutions but uplifted by a better or more creative language, powerful enough to unlock judges' imagination and won the award.

By reading repeatedly times the project criteria and solution requirements you'll detect words that are repeating (the key words), a certain structure and pattern of writing that gives you clues about expectations and seeker's objectives, about their weak spots and where there's a missing piece of puzzle in their overall team and/or process, about their thinking and mindset. This phase of re-reading is going beyond the problem, it is about analyzing what's behind it through increasing your attention by scanning and processing the challenge design.

This part of the process offers you great guidance of how to start your research, where to look and how to set the foundations of your solution design. To get more of this phase try re-reading also loud to also hear what's behind it, but to also help your language in writing. It will offer more information than expected.

By doing this, you practically scan the unseen, the untold, a place that is full of valuable information. Winning the hearts and minds of an invisible audience is a complex and hard thing to do especially when you compete with people from all over the world, some even better than you. It's possible. Trust that, trust yourself and trust your own chance.

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CHAPTER 2. Problem Solving Strategy

"There are winners, there are losers and there are people who have not yet learned how to win."

The natural tendency is to first research your idea and then write what you know. It may bring you an award if it is good enough, but it won't make your chances to win better. I always use to try to go beyond this type of comfort zone.

Many problems are wicked problems (ill-defined or incomplete defined).

In these cases, you must cross some lines and ask some crazy or bold questions.

My methodology for wicked problems has its roots in *design thinking*. I also re-write a lot to get to the core and to cut all the clutter, to achieve simplicity and clarity of my presentation.

Designing solutions means creating new systems and mechanisms word by word, frame by frame.

You need a clear vision and an articulate strategy not only to design a functional and feasible solution, but also to rise above hundreds or even thousands of competitors and win your audience. Many times, it is hidden in the back of your mind, it comes in puzzle pieces, so you need to work to get it to the surface.

After I write the first draft, I look at the solution and at the problem as if they were Rubick cubes. I start rotating their facets endless times to spot my own weaknesses, seeker's weaknesses, more dots that can be connected, more bridges and networks that can be built. This is when I go in their smallest details and think about "what if" scenarios.

Then I change the tactic and look at them from a bird eye view (known also as helicopter view or as I like to call it, film camera view). Ideally, I leave a few days for it to settle, if time allows. I imagine my brain is a film camera and I place myself behind each side of the problem to see how it looks like, how it feels like, if it's feasible enough, inspiring enough, challenging enough; or, to see what I couldn't see while I was working on it.

After this phase, I change the tactic and start the hardest part: *asking daring and crazy questions*. This is the moment of truth. If my design survives my questions, that's it. It is the hardest part not because it's so hard to spot the right questions to ask, but because you risk discovering that you need to tear it all apart and to start it all over again from scratch. A good question always holds this risk.

You must be ready for this. If you want to win, you must be better than yourself and win over yourself constantly. Especially when you take yourself by surprise.

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CHAPTER 3. Structure

"Wherever you go is better than where you started. To stay on the road is a massive achievement."

Structure is critical in any design. In crowdsourcing, you have the freedom to structure your ideas the way you want. Still, you must develop a winning and successful pattern or better, a set of patterns and to adjust and improve them continuously.

The way you set your structure patterns is also influenced by the type of education you have, but also by the type of education and activity the seekers' judges have. A PhD educated person may deliver better or even smarter proposals, but if they don't have the WOW factor and if they are not smart enough to integrate also a creative and commercial language in the overall package, they risk being too technical and to fails winning all members of the judges.

I don't like templates and rules, I believe each solution comes with its own best design and for that to happen you need an open mind and approach.

In many cases the judges form cross-disciplinary groups coming from a variety of industries and business levels.

The more of them you touch, the greater your chances to win. Of course, in very technical cases, that may not be the case. But also, there, inserting a softer, funnier or inspiring language may be the thing to make the difference between proposals of similar quality.

The fusion of language phrasings you decide to use will influence the structure, it will help you organize better the information. And vice versa. Structure is also what makes the solution flow, what gives it the power to be visualized, felt, heard.

In all the cases, structure is what separates chosen from not-chosen writings and solutions, especially when it comes to similar proposals or identical ideas. It may kill or win your readers or listeners attention, no matter how charismatic you are and how good you articulate disconnected ideas.

Structure catalyzes, connects and breaks the language barriers and everything that stands in your way. For me structure is a unique opportunity to refine and sell my unique value proposition. From my perspective, it's pure art.

One of my main sources of inspiration when it comes to structure is reading film scripts, the best of them. Then writing the scenes myself and see the differences. Secondly, it is reading and watching very well-done materials from a variety of industries.

But there is a trick here, one you always must remember. The best films and the most valued films from artistic value point of view come from a time when people made them without scripts, when they left their imagination open allowing themselves to follow their flow. This way, they avoided falling into templates or failing to make their point. Think about Federico Fellini, for example.

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The best of them have a WOW factor and that X factor is the originality of the maker, his/her uniqueness in terms of pattern design and integration of ideas.

So, no matter how many great materials you read, when it comes to making your own, you must always leave room for your own uniqueness to give it the final touch, for your own diversity and unique fusion of elements to put their mark on it. It is what will set you apart and push you above a global crowd.

CHAPTER 4. Simplicity

"Simplicity is the glory of expression."



Simplicity is a craft. With time it turns into a mindset. Simplicity is what gives your words force, speed and precision at the same time. Eventually, what gives

your actions the same in the rest of your life plans, what makes you an outstanding navigator in a more and more fast changing and complex world.

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In cinematography, the script writing field has this mantra as central essence as they must create emotion and unforgettable stories through the composition of image, sound, light, and all the other elements. Literature is out of question.

As the action in film happens now, present tense simple it is the only tense they can use. Writing a script in that format makes you feel like a squeezed lemon.

They call this process of reaching simplicity in their storytelling “Kill your darlings” or “Cut the clutter”. It is a great exercise and challenge. It cuts out everything until all the seeds get out of it. It's pure surgery of self, of thoughts, of emotions and of words. At the end of the process, it survives only what matters.

The truth is simplicity is very hard to achieve. You cannot achieve it just because you set a goal out of it. It is a process that requires daily practice. Eventually, it a way of living. A mindset.

Simplicity was never so important as today because we were never exposed to such overwhelming and never-ending volume of information. Breaking down complexity and clearing out the smoke is a form of art.

Simplicity is not just a principle anymore. It is also a tool. A tool we must master to get above the crowds. It is the straight and direct line between us (as transmitters) and our customers, employees and business partners (as receivers).

If I look back and trace my evolution, simplicity came with time, with practice and experience. With the challenges I allowed to shape me. It is a never-ending process.

Reaching simplicity is not an easy or simple process. Paradoxically, it is a very complicated and complex one. It is about being very specific and clear. It challenges generalizations and literature. It challenges confusion.

I challenge myself always to define everything I have to say or to define in less than 100 words and long projects in less than 1 page.

This technique helps me a lot in keeping it all as simple, precise and clear as possible. To keep my practice going, I challenge myself to do the same with everything I read or see. To make short synopsis out of everything, on various tones and voices: books, films, science materials, anything.

It helps me a lot in getting the skills and speed needed for writing my daily articles and posts for content marketing, do my copywriting, write compelling strategies, presentations and solutions.

This summer, Bath Spa University from UK launched a life changing creative writing contest with the occasion of their 25 years anniversary. Aspiring writers were supposed to write a novel in 25 words, sharp. The winner and the runner ups will have their short novels read loud and live by Jeremy Irons in London, plus some cash for the No. 1.

That's simplicity! Think about that!

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CHAPTER 5. The WOW or X factor

"Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

When you design a solution to a problem or architect a presentation, you are caught up in technicalities and in figuring out how to build its mechanism and strategies. On short, to design an effective proposal from its purpose perspective. To win wild competitions, you need to focus also on its WOW or X factor. Normally, that's your thing, your DNA, it is what makes you recognizable.

For that, many times you must integrate your solution in a different type of language comparing to the one you are used to (academic, for example). That's because you need to *establish the emotional connection between you and your reader*, but you also need to broaden horizons and unlock possibilities or more ideas in the judges' minds.

Some industries use copywriting for this purpose, for example real estate. They don't sell houses, they sell life styles and they tailor the same property description for more potential target audiences / costumers profiles from a specific budget interval.

But it is more than copywrite, it is also creative writing. This is a zone that allows you to do the bungee jumping without the bungee and to not get hurt. It's a very investigative area. Shaping it and knowing how to use it requires practice. This is your sword!

Of course, the WOW factor does not always lie in the language only, but also in the content. There's a balance you need to achieve between the quality of your proposal and the overall wrapping, the way you communicate it.

A good enough way of saying the things you want to say highlights not only the strengths of your overall writing, but also empowers the reader. In many cases, even though "empowering" is not listed on the evaluation criteria, it is highly valued.

CHAPTER 6. Diversity Integration

"Diversity: the art of thinking independently together."

On the path of problem solving you become more and more diverse in knowledge and skills. You tap into a rich real of knowledge. That's what continuous learning makes of you.

While this trait makes miracles, in the world we still live in you have poor chances to get a decent job in terms of payment and excitement. The systems are standardized, conventional and diversity is valued only when it comes to "getting more for less".

Like crowdsourcing, for example.

Diverse individuals have no room in the system. They have to design, to create their own paths and exit doors. They have to design their purpose and meaning.

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Like becoming entrepreneurs, writers, artists, social entrepreneurs, freelancers. That's the truth.

If until Industrial Revolution 4.0. that's knocking on our door that was the hardest thing to do (and everything a conventional person would avoid for the sake of a comfortable life and work program from 9 to 5), soon enough it will become ordinary, something most of us will have to do.

In the area of writing winning solutions and presentations, in the area of making your case, this personal diversity makes wonders as it is the core of design thinking, divergent thinking. On short, of solving complex and wicked problems. Including your own.

At the same time, this kind of diversity is very difficult to manage, because you become better than many specialists at more than one thing, and finding how to survive without having an official paper for it to be recognized on the market makes one's life very complicated.

Managing your own diversity is ten times harder than managing a diverse group of people. It's always easier when it's not about you.

To write winning solutions and presentations, my way to go is integrating diversity helping myself by design and video making.

There are plenty of free and open source online design platforms that allow you to fast and easy integrate your content in a compelling and sexy manner. You don't have to have design skills for that. There are also online free or low cost courses that teach you this skill by using various software. The more you learn, the better.

When it comes to demos or animated storyboards, there are now low cost software and communities of creators built around them that allow you to make also film-like video presentations, with characters and flow of action.

Design, video and animated storyboards can take your solution to a completely new level. These are keys that open new dimensions of your solution or proposal.

What about your own diversity integration?

In my case this was the greatest challenge. At some point I broke myself down to 20 websites with 20+ different services. As you can imagine the costs and time spent with content writing were crazy. But I needed to do that to get the clarity I needed, to shape my thoughts and to practice my writing craft. It was part of the process. I had to get to a crystal-clear vision about what I wanted to do in life and how to get there.

At some point all that diversity demanded to fall together. I realized I needed a concept. A strong, playful and open one. So I decided to make another website. An integrative website this time. A place designed in such way to allow me to integrate all the other 20 niche websites and all my passions, interests and skills, so I can let all the other websites go.

The one concept that worked for me was one that combined the Rubick cube with boxes. I needed boxes to put my stuff in. Each "stuff" is a standalone world (with categories, blog posts, forums, etc.).

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When you hit the home page, all you see are a diversity of cube-like boxes labeled "Red Box", "Purple Box", "Locations Box", "Music Box", and so on.

For my type of fusion this concept worked incredibly well. It's the universe I needed. A universe that allows me to keep track on my own diversity, to grow and most important of all, that is not chaotic. It may be controversial at some chapters, while you read my things, but it all makes sense in this new design.

The methodology I applied is design thinking and the theme behind it is transformation, personal and organizational. Transformation in smooth, creative and graceful ways. Natural. For each case, the concept design differs. Though, to uplift your content and your ideas, to make them rise above the crowd and stay there, you need one.

That was the most complex challenge of all for me, as it was personal, subjective. Harder to solve. I had to apply a diversity of techniques and fusions of knowledge to put the mark on it.

CHAPTER 7. Tags and Keywords

"Success is where preparation and opportunity meet."

In many cases, the tags betray the seeker's / judges' expectations.

Many seekers leave too much space in between to attract more ideas, but they already set their preferences for the type of solution they expect and want. Still, they won't say a word about it in their text, but you'll find it in the tags and key words.

This is a misleading type of approaching challenge design to get more for less. I also heard the argument "because we don't want to manipulate the process and limit solutions". This is a good argument when the seekers are truly open for alternative solutions, otherwise it's poor like hell itself.

Try also searching the challenge by various key words and see after what key words you find it. They also betray the small bits expectations.

This information is very precious as it helps you to sharp you precision and architect a solution that holds the potential to tell them what they want to hear or looking for, and win the award. On short, to meet their expectations.

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CHAPTER 8. Challenge type and category

"Ambition is an idol, on whose wings great minds are carried only to extreme; to be sublimely great or to be nothing."

Challenges are of various types in terms of Intellectual Property rights. Usually, it is all set in the agreement you sign before accessing its details, an agreement you must read each time you decide to solve a problem because in many times some terms change, from seeker to seeker. Or, updates are made by the crowdsourcing platform.

Some platforms describe in details what each type means. The type of the challenge also gives you information about expectations. It helps you know from the start how to design your solution, how deep to dig, how broad to search and on what kind of elements to put your accents.

For some types of challenges, it may happen for the seeker to not choose any solution from the ones received. You have to be aware of that and be all right with it.

It is highly frustrating because it gets a diversity of good solutions and does not pay anything. I usually avoid these challenges and play only in those rooms where a minimum prize is guaranteed.

If the crowdsourcing platform has categories for its challenges, also the category where they choose to post it gives some clues about expectations from winning solutions.

CHAPTER 9. Master your inner revolutions!

"Anybody with artistic ambitions is always trying to reconnect with the way they saw things as a child."

Like also in life, there are many kinds of challenges in crowdsourcing and digital competitions.

The seekers ask something, set a deadline and offer a prize. In most of the cases the seekers offer or the agreements they want you to sign is a turn off. In some cases, it's even outrageous. It makes you wonder.

One of the dangers of crowdsourcing for labor market is paying the high skilled less and less for more and more.

Let's imagine you were victim of an online scam or fraud. I was twice, once in the virtual reality and once in the tangible reality. It is extremely frustrating.

You feel stupid, arrogant, incompetent. You feel shame and a variety of other emotions and feelings. But what you feel the strongest is a violent desire to expose and crash the scammer. To make him pay. To revenge. It's natural. You've been invaded, you've been tricked, and you lost.

Now, if the fraudster was smarter, you can't expose anything. On the contrary, technically speaking you may also be accused of slandering.

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You agreed all the way with it or you allowed yourself to be misled, or you reacted too slow. When you realize that, it gets even more frustrating.

There are a few ways to deal with it according to your motivations, each scenario holding different costs, strategies and benefits. In this case, 99% of the people let it go and most of them keep stalking their abuser (hoping secretly to recover their loss and pride at some point).

If your first motivation is to punish the fraudster, the chances to see a penny are close to zero. If your first motivation is to recover your loss, then your chances increase. These are two different scenarios that employ different sets of strategies and tactics.

To defeat the fraudster, you must know at least what it knows. You must learn. In my case, I prepared myself for 3 years for the online one. I learned, I studied law on my own and I built my “guns”, a popular blog and a big network, but also my story about it without emotions, in order to avoid falling into some trap, like slandering or something.

Journalistic. Then I opened a peaceful mediation discussion, they refused it and pushed it to a conflict, being 99% sure I'll give up. I didn't. I defended myself by attacking.

They attacked back more violently with threats, with copy-cattng my sites and pictures and publishing them online in endless places with bad reviews about my services, they were threatening my life and my family.

This war of nerves kept for 6 months.

Eventually, I sent them a clear message:

Look guys, you've prejudiced me. It doesn't matter that I was naive at that moment or that I did a mistake by saying Yes to your service. It matters that you broke the law here, here and here and I didn't. Now, you pay me back the prejudice and we are ok, there's no conflict left. I delete my posts, and everyone may go home and sleep better this evening.

Quiet for a few days. Then they said all right. I said thank you. Everyone kept their part of the deal. Of course, I could have kept the post for more people to avoid falling in this trap. But you see, I decided that I am not a vigilante. Before deciding that, I tried to find out all the victims and group them together in a collective action. They all refused because of the shame, because once they were fools. So, I found myself on my own. Again.

What I did, though, was to report the scam. It was an action I've taken from day one, when it happened. But the systems are too rigid and many times they are years behind the scammers. The fraudsters didn't negotiate with me also this aspect, to redraw my complaints, so I didn't. I have no clue if they were ever caught or if all the others recovered their loss.

I solved this complicated problem on my own, against all specialists' advice because I needed to. But I succeeded because I sorted out my intentions and motivations. Implicitly, all my emotions. I wanted to recover the money, to solve my problem, not to be a vigilante or to save others from themselves or the world. Simple as that.

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The question I asked myself was not “What do I want?”, but “What do I want more?”.

The answer to that offered more answers also to the other question “Who am I?”

This example is an extreme, but it is true and good enough to make my point.

What do you want more? To learn? To practice? To add up to your solutions portfolio? To grab the cash and move on? To make the seeker fail in its endeavor? To save the world from the possibility that seeker will use your solution in a bad way?

A good hierarchy of your intentions and motivations and a good balance between them will give you the best strategy to design and follow. Once you decide, take full ownership of it and act without hesitation.

CHAPTER 10. Managing Brain Voids, Creativity Block and Confusion

"Success isn't always about greatness. It's about consistency. Consistent hard work leads to success. Greatness will come."

There's nothing as painful as staring at a blank e/paper without having inspiration, ideas; or having your mind overloaded with clutter, loud flashes of words and thoughts, or confusion.

Confusion grows while your diversity grows. The more you learn, the less you feel you know and the more you wonder.

First, the more you write, the more clarity you get and the better your craft becomes. With each word you write, the confusion fades away. With each word you read, it happens the same, but in a different way. Both reading, and writing are essential.

My technique is to write whatever crosses my mind, no matter how senseless it seems. From one point, a word, a thought, a question or an idea get me out of there and show me where to look, where to search more, what to ask, and so on.

If nothing comes at all, I close my eyes and write randomly. At some point my state of mind changes.

Sometimes, I write creative things (stories, film scripts, random scenes, short prose, poems) to rest that part of the brain while I use another.

Some other time, I leave it all aside and do or write something else. Read a film script, watch a movie, go for a walk, meet my friends or get my ass in the car and drive away.

Sometimes, it all comes to me and I stop everything to note it down or record it. In the middle of the night, if a meeting, it does not matter. I cannot stop it. I don't want to stop it.

I also prefer handwriting as it activates more parts of the brain comparing with typewriting or recording the information. It helps a lot to unleash creativity.

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CHAPTER 11. Solve as many problems as you can

"I think... if it is true that there are as many minds as there are heads, then there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts."

It may not be your first passion, but it will become one of your fundamental learning and playing reflexes.

Like most of the good things in life, learning new things and practicing is the platinum key for your wellness. You can change your reflexes as you can change your habits. It's not an easy road, but it is a highly rewarding one. If you want to redesign and uplift your life, you must do that with yourself first.

The key benefits of solving problems:

- you build a portfolio of solutions
- you learn new things about your industry and other industries
- you shape your writing and presentation craft
- you build your reputation on the market
- you get a better sense of your market value and competitive advantage
- you connect with people and opportunities otherwise you wouldn't have met
- you may even get hired and have fun

On this pathway, you'll experience many contradictory feelings and moments.

If you considered yourself smart and one of the best, through competing with thousands of other people from all around the globe who believe the same about themselves change your entire perspective. You become humble, more collaborative and flexible, more open and precise, and better. Much better.

After solving several problems and doing tons of research and reading in the process, you'll experience moments when you feel squeezed, when you cannot solve anything, anymore.

That is a moment when you brain rewires and grows.

During these kind of moments, I use to do something else, something more creative or read random books and materials.

After a while, my appetite for engaging in problem solving again comes back to life and the winnings chances increase significantly.

I know more technical solvers who started to win continuously after such times. They simply crashed their competition and ended up ranking on top of the tops.

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CHAPTER 12. Join the community you belong. Influence change.

"High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation."

There are very few problem solvers who like marketing. Still, most of us need more and better recognition, visibility of our solutions, knowledge, achievements and skills. It is very hard to get through the web crowd to make your ideas known, even if you write on your blog or website.

You have to write tons of articles per month to make yourself noticed and you have to strategize a smart enough online marketing algorithm to push yourself forward, a thing that requires money, expertise and a lot of time.

The web is a very hungry monster and speaking about technicalities or niche subjects in common or commercial terms to reach a wider and more diverse target audience is another kind of craft.

You can save your time and money by joining the community you belong and engage in a collective effort.

Let the world know who you are and what you can do.

The world is changing very fast and you want to be on the top of the wave when that happens.

Be the first to be seen, to be listen, to be hired.

Doing all this effort individually is like climbing Everest naked and hungry.

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Final thoughts

We live in a world overcrowded with opinions. The more time you must write about what you do for living and the more money you have to spend on ads and marketing, the more legitimate your opinion becomes due to growing exposure. We can see that in all industries, from cinematography to consulting. Seldom it is also true.

Today makes us doubt ourselves the most. No other time in human history was so fast and intense, so cataclysmic, confusing and debilitating. Digital revolution *changed the way we do most of the things*, it automated loads of *known* jobs, jobs we were taught are great to have, jobs that meant the purpose in our parents and grandparents lives. While technology revolution is here pointing out an exponential rhythm in everything, we'll be challenged at the core of our being, *it will change who we are*.

We've never experienced something like this before.

The generations living these times are challenged to design their own purpose in life, their own meaning, to craft their entire faith. That's the beauty of it all.

There will be no more templates to waste our lives in. Still, it will be very hard for many to adapt so instantly. It already is. Resilience is the name of the game for most us. Resilience is also at the core of my own rising above the crowd process and win the game repeatedly.

Did it make radical differences in my life? I don't know yet, but it kept me on track, always facing the game. What I know is how much I changed.

When you are in doubt, forget about anxiety and remember the titans of our world and their rising above the crowd where there was no guide available to light their way.

Remember Fellini in cinematography, Dostoevsky in Literature, Tesla and many great inventors and artists who persisted in following their flow, their calling, who played the game by their own rules, who crafted not only their own destiny, but also the future of our world.

Trust you own chance. Sky is not the limit anymore. Imagination is.

*** The End ***

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Thank you for reading my story.

You can always reach me at: georgia.mihalcea88@gmail.com

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