

the shibumi strategy

a powerful way to create

MEANINGFUL CHANGE



matthew e. may

author of *in pursuit of elegance*

a personal leadership fable

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*To Deva, Kendal, Koreen, and Morgan,
may the spirit of shibumi always inhabit
heart, mind, body, and soul.*

*To my father,
who taught me at an early age that
“all things change, and we must change with them.”*

Though a thousand times a thousand men are
conquered by one in battle, the one who conquers
himself is truly the master of battle.

–GAUTAMA BUDDHA

contents

INTRODUCTION	01
THE FABLE	05
The Commitment	07
The Preparation	25
The Struggle	55
The Breakthrough	95
The Transformation	121
THE PRACTICUM	131
Note to Reader	133
Reflections on Shibumi	137
Kata for Practice	141
<i>Notes and References</i>	<i>151</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Reading and Resources</i>	<i>157</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>161</i>

the shibumi strategy

introduction

There are times in life when if fortunate we experience a moment of utter clarity. We feel wide awake and connected and balanced: everything makes sense, we know exactly who we are, what we want, and why we're here. In that moment, be it one blink or a thousand, our effectiveness is maximal. And yet our actions seem minimal, effortless even, and the experience is consummately satisfying.

These are breakthrough moments.

There is an ineffable quality to these experiences. Some have tried to define and describe them using English terms—such as *zone* and *flow*—that are inadequate to capture the essence of the moment, mostly because they simply compare the feeling to something known yet ultimately inferior, or express merely some part of the whole.

These are moments of *shibumi*.

Shibumi is a Japanese word, the meaning of which is reserved for just these kinds of experiences.

With roots in the Zen aesthetic ideals of art, architecture, and gardening, it is used in a wide variety of contexts, and has come to denote those things that exhibit in paradox and all at once the very best of everything and nothing: Elegant simplicity. Effortless effectiveness. Understated excellence. Beautiful imperfection.

James Michener referred to shibumi his 1968 novel *Iberia*, writing that it can't be translated and has no explanation. Soetsu Yanagi in his 1972 book *The Unknown Craftsman* talked about shibumi in the context of art, writing that a true work of art is one whose intentionally imperfect beauty makes an artist of the viewer. The author Trevanian (the nom de plume of Dr. Rodney William Whitaker) wrote in his 1979 best-selling novel *Shibumi*, "*Shibumi* has to do with great refinement underlying commonplace appearances."

Sometimes these moments of shibumi register in our consciousness. Yet when they do, we don't really search for an explanation, think about a deeper meaning, learn from them, or even give thought to how we might extend the experience.

What if we are constantly being sent signals and offered opportunities, but because we are so

involved in our mad rush to survive the day, we simply don't receive them? What if we're stuck, asleep at the wheel, and we just don't know it, because our conventional ways of thinking, rigidly structured routines, and solidly set minds block us from discovering what the universe is calling us to do?

And what if there was a way for us to actually engineer some sort of personal process that lets us break through those barriers and discover how to live a life in pursuit of *shibumi*?

One way to answer these questions is to examine more closely the events that direct us this way and that, treat them as learning moments in order to draw lessons from them, and then think about the kinds of steps to take and connections to make—in our work, in our personal lives—that might precipitate a breakthrough and put us on the path in pursuit of shibumi.

Perhaps this simple fable helps shed some light. While it is purely a work of fiction, the story is an amalgam of real experiences, some relayed to me over the years by friends and family, others of my own (I became familiar with the various concepts supporting the pursuit of shibumi over the course of an eight-year engagement with a

Japanese company). And although the events are fictional, the philosophies, principles, and practices revealed in the story are quite real, grounded in both ancient Eastern philosophy and current Western neuroscience.

With any luck, it will touch a universal chord while enabling you to find your own uniquely personal interpretation.



the
fable

the commitment

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. The moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in ones favor all manner of unforeseen incidents, meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.

—W. H. MURRAY

The news wasn't good. In fact, to Andy Harmon, it couldn't have been any worse. Rumblings that Mega Box Electronics was moving its customer service call center out of Twin Falls, in fact out the country, had been circulating through the company grapevine for weeks. Some people thought it was inevitable, given the dismal state of the national economy and the accompanying cost-cutting measures, like outsourcing, that large companies were taking. Still, Mega Box wasn't in serious financial difficulty the way many big corporations were, at

least not yet, and most thought it wouldn't happen. When it did, the 150 telephone sales and service representatives and 10 managers who received the rather distant memo from Mega Box headquarters in their final paychecks that Friday morning were in a state of shock. Andy was among them.

"Effective Immediately," the memo read. That meant grab a cardboard carton, clear out your personal belongings, and do not report to work come Monday morning. Andy sat in his small office watching things fold up and fall apart. Everyone was dazed and confused. His team of fifteen associates alternated between packing up and glancing his way for some sort of sign or guidance. The sad part was that he had none to offer. Shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders in a faint-hearted attempt at empathy only made matters worse.

I'm just no help at all, he thought.

Andy moved like a robot as he packed his own boxes. It didn't take very long, and when he finished, he sat down for the last time at his desk. He massaged his temples, rubbed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to make his sudden headache go away. He couldn't quite describe the feeling, but part-panic and part-paralysis

came pretty close. The walk from his office to his car was the longest of his life. Later, he wouldn't even remember all the handshakes, good-byes, and apologies.

Andy drove the short distance home as if on autopilot. The familiar tree-lined streets and storefronts and neighborhoods of Twin Falls were one big blur. Pulling into his driveway before noon felt strange, the empty house seemed foreign, and he was at a complete loss as he walked into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. He was thankful that no one was home, that the kids were at school. He needed time to think.

I have no idea what I'm going to do.

Besides Mega Box, Twin Falls didn't exactly have a lot to offer in the way of jobs. Most of its industry, if you could call it that, was somehow related to agriculture or printing. Twin Falls was in the center of a fertile lower Midwestern valley. There were a number of large flower and tree farms, supplying major retail nurseries. Produce growers dotted the valley floor, as did sheep and cattle farms. There were even a few local vineyards. There were a few low-cost printing plants, and then the typical mix of small shops

and necessities: markets, salons, professional services, and the *Twin Falls Sentinel*, the weekly newspaper. Until that day, the biggest story for the *Sentinel* had been when Mega Box Electronics had broken ground on a national call center facility nearly ten years prior. Today's announcement of the closing would now lay claim to the record for biggest feature.

The questions began running through Andy's head. *What in the world will I do for work? Will we have to move? I'm forty-seven, f'goshsakes—what am I to do? How will my family take the news?*

Calm down, he thought, take a breath. He walked outside to the small deck he'd built two summers ago, and which had now become a favorite family gathering place when the weather was good. The deck looked out over a shallow slope that led to the woods that edged their property. Andy often sat out there; the peacefulness had a calming effect on him. As he sat trying to clear his thoughts, something his father once told him popped into his head: *"Two kinds of people in the world, Andrew. Those who let things happen, and those who make things happen. Be the second kind."*

Andy and his wife, Lizzy, had moved to Twin Falls eight years ago to escape the mad dash of the urban scene.

They had been the quintessential modern professional couple, living in Chicago. Andy had progressed up the ranks to regional sales manager for a global pharmaceuticals corporation. Lizzy had been the science editor for academic publishing company. Neither of them saw Chicago as the ideal place to raise a family, so they investigated the country living scene, finally settling on Twin Falls, several hundred miles southwest of downtown Chicago. Mega Box had just announced its facility, and with Andy's sales background, the opportunity to manage the center seemed like a perfect fit. They had fallen in love with what they called "their little acre of heaven," and soon put down deep roots in the small community. Lizzy was now the volunteer high school librarian. Both of their children had been born in the Twins Falls Hospital. Scotty was now nearly eight years old, and Sandra, five, had just started school.

Now this.

What are my options? Andy thought as he sat staring out at the woods. *Do I even have any? Yes, of course, there are always options. Think.*

Andy had a way with people and liked connecting with others, that much he knew. It seemed to energize him. Sales had provided him a great way to live out his role as a “people person.” It was the relationship-building part that he really liked, not so much the deal transaction part.

That’s as good a place to start as any, he said almost out loud. He immediately found a notepad and pencil and began scratching out possibilities. The physical movement of taking action, any action, felt good.

Unfortunately, the list was short, assuming that they were going to stay in the area. The nearest same-size town to Twin Falls was fifty-five miles further south, with the one decent road there being an old two-laner, and no real industry to speak of either. As far as Andy could see, there were only two choices: stay in Twin Falls or move back to Chicago. He knew moving back would change their lives dramatically, and not for the better. Moving back meant moving backward.

The only place he knew of that might be hiring was Mainstreet Motors, the town’s only car dealership, which sold new and used cars of all makes, models, and brands. He winced at the idea, an

instinctive reaction, remembering his two experiences buying cars there.

But he had to try. He couldn't move his family away from their dream. The last thing he wanted to do was deliver frightening news. *I lost my job today and I don't know what we're going to do.* He simply could not face them empty-handed. For everyone's sake, if he had to tell them about Mega Box shutting down, he needed something, anything, to grab on to—something that gave them all a little bit of hope and assurance that things would be all right. It didn't need to be perfect. It just needed to *be*.

Andy made up his mind on the spot: *We're staying. I've got to get a job, today.*

He grabbed his keys and headed back out the door, determined to land work before the day was through.



As Andy pulled into the customer parking of Mainstreet Motors, he noticed the band of salesmen gathered outside the front door. He knew them all by name. *Fortunes of a small town*, he thought.

“Jerry. Bill. Mike,” he muttered, nodding as he walked straight past them as quickly as he could.

“You buyin’ today, Andy?” asked Bill. The others instantly shot Bill a warning look. They had heard the news. Bill hadn’t.

“What?” Bill shrugged.

Andy ignored him. “Which way is Grady’s office?” he asked, to no one in particular. Grady Carver was the general sales manager, and one of the first peo-

ple Andy had met when he moved to Twin Falls.

“Through the showroom, upstairs, left corner,” replied Mike. “Good luck,” he said, knowingly.

Andy headed toward Grady’s office, not knowing exactly what he was going to say or do. He saw Grady through the glass wall, just hanging up the phone. As he was about to knock, Grady glanced up and waved him in.

“Andy Harmon! Howyadoinhowzitgoingoodtaseey a! Long time no see!” He smiled, adding, “What can I do you for?” Grady had that certain confident salesman-like quality about him, all smiles, all the time.

When you have decided what you believe, what you feel must be done, have the courage to stand alone and be counted.

-ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Andy motioned to the chair. “Hi, Grady, do you mind if I sit?”

“Not at all,” answered Grady, motioning to the empty director’s chairs facing his desk. “What can I help you with?”

“Might as well cut right to the chase,” Andy replied. “You heard about Mega Box shutting down, right?”

Grady nodded. He had heard the rumors. And he didn’t like the news. It would hurt sales, he figured.

“Effective today,” confirmed Andy.

“Man, that’s rough.” Grady’s face took on a rare frown, somewhat exaggerated.

Andy nodded back, looking Grady in the eyes. “Which is why I’m here. I have a hunch that most of the Mega Box folks are going to be leaving. I’m not. My family is staying put. So I’m asking you, can you use another salesman?”

Grady sat back, thinking, appraising Andy. He hooked his hands into his belt, then took them out again and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk and lacing his fingers together in that rigid way people do when they’re delivering bad news or explaining something difficult in a serious way.

“Honestly,” Grady began. “No. Correction . . . I can’t use another man in sales, but I can always use another *great* salesman. Times aren’t as good as they used to be. Cars aren’t exactly flying off the lot. The sales team is already lean as it is. Adding another body might not be the best idea.”

Andy remained silent, nodding his understanding of Grady’s predicament.

“Look, Andy,” Grady went on, “I know you’re a professional. Sales manager at Mega Box, and all. But this business is tough. It’s totally different. And it’s not that I couldn’t use a star player down there, but the question is, are you really up for it? You ever sold cars before? And what happens when something better comes along for you—what am I supposed to do?”

Andy took in Grady’s answer, then countered it. “The most important thing to me is staying here, making sure things are steady and stable for my family. I’ll commit myself to doing whatever it takes, for however long it takes me. I’m asking for the opportunity, that’s all.”

Grady sat back again. *Not a bad answer*, he thought.

“Hmm. . . . It’s a commission-only deal, you know that, right?” Grady said. “And the benefits don’t kick

in for ninety days, and then only if you hit your number on a regular basis.”

“You’re saying it’s up to me to make things happen,” said Andy. “I can live with that.”

“Tell you what,” Grady offered, “I’ll give you a month, trial basis. On-the-job training, no favors. You gotta be selling two a week by this time next month. I’ve got a business to run here. Mind you, you make a go of it, and you can make a damned good living here. Sell five a week, you’re living large in Twin Falls. No easy challenge, though. One, maybe two guys have ever done that. Yours truly being one.

“Game?” asked Grady, standing and extending his hand.

“Game,” confirmed Andy, taking it.

“Good.” Grady smiled. “You’re here bell to bell, starting tomorrow. Saturday’s our biggest day. Trial by fire, baby. Be here early, 7:30 sharp.”

“Thanks, Grady. I appreciate this, really. Means a lot to me. You don’t even know.”

Grady waved him off. “Yeah, yeah, what do they always say? Be careful what you wish for? See you in the morning. Bright and early.”

Andy left Grady’s office, and walking back through the showroom, he saw the entire sales team occupied, busy on the phones, heads down.

If you don't make a total commitment to whatever you're doing, then you start looking to bail out the first time the boat starts leaking. It's tough enough getting that boat to shore with everybody rowing, let alone when a guy stands up and starts putting his life jacket on.

-LOU HOLTZ

*T o m o r r o w
should be interest-
ing,* Andy thought.
And that was just
one of the hun-
dred or so thoughts
that were humming
through his mind
as he came out of
the door and drifted

across the parking lot. He didn't see the small car coming his way, and nearly jumped out of his skin as the driver slammed on the brakes and honked the horn, missing Andy by inches.

Heart pounding, Andy took a few deep breaths, tried to compose himself as best he could, and looked through the windshield at the driver. He recognized her immediately.

"Mariko?" he asked, stepping around from the front of the car to approach the driver's side.

"Andy-san!" she cried, rolling down the window. "You were almost a pancake!"

Mariko Tanaka Simpson was Scotty's martial arts instructor, and doubled as Lizzy's yoga instructor. Mariko owned the only martial arts and yoga

studio in town, which she had opened a few years back, shortly after coming to Twin Falls. She called it simply The Dojo, which in Japanese meant “place of the way,” and in the martial arts world was used to denote the central gathering place for learning and training. Mariko was a *sensei*, or master, of a number of disciplines—*kung fu*, *aikido*, *jujitsu*, *win chun*—as she had grown up at the feet of her grand champion father. She taught her own unique blend of favorite techniques drawn from each discipline, but because she liked it that the word meant “way of balanced life energy,” she called the method simply *aikido*. Most of her martial arts students were children and teenagers, but her yoga classes were popular among the adults. Like the Harmons, Mariko had moved to Twin Falls from Chicago, and at just around the same time, but for slightly different reasons. She was married to Axel Simpson, the service manager of Mainstreet Motors. Everyone called him Ax.

Mariko was tiny, barely over five feet tall, but she was a fierce competitor gifted with unrelenting tenacity and blazing speed. Andy had seen her in action during her periodic demonstrations at The Dojo, easily dispatching opponents twice her

size using movements that Andy could barely see. She used the force and energy of her attackers—exploiting it, redirecting it, bending and blending it with her own to her advantage, safely and without any injury to her opponent.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” said Andy. “Got a lot of stuff on my mind.”

“Car trouble?” asked Mariko. “Ax will fix it.”

“Trouble, yes,” replied Andy. “Car trouble, no. A bit worse, I’m afraid.”

He hesitated a moment, deciding whether this was the time and place to go into detail. But the Mega Box move might affect Mariko somewhat as well, since some of her students were from Mega Box families.

“Mega Box is moving. Everyone is unemployed, as of today. It’s a terrible situation.”

Mariko was quiet and solemn for a moment, taking in the news and noting how dejected Andy appeared. Then she brightened a bit, sat forward, and leaned out of the window. “*Kiki*,” she grinned.

“It’s not funny,” replied Andy, frowning, a bit annoyed.

“No, no, Andy-san,” Mariko corrected. “Not hee-hee, *kiki*. It means *crisis* in Japanese.”

“Sorry. Then why the smile?” Andy asked.

Mariko quickly explained.

“The characters used to write *kiki* have two sets. One set means *danger*. The other set means *opportunity*. My father taught me to think about it like a rainstorm. After the thunder and lightning and rain, everything is fresh, green, renewed, and there is growth.”

“Ah,” replied Andy.

“You see only the danger now. It is visible and easy to see. You can feel it. It is harder to see the opportunity.” Mariko paused a moment. “*Do* you see it yet, Andy-san?”

“To be honest with you, no,” Andy answered.

“Hmm. Why are you here?” asked Mariko.

“Well,” Andy hesitated, wondering how much to say. But he realized there was no point in keeping it a secret. “I asked Grady Carver for a job as salesman. I guess you could call it a job. Desk, chair, phone. No salary, all commission. He’ll train me, though. It’s something, anyway. Lizzie and the kids don’t know I lost my job yet.”

The corner of Mariko's mouth curled slightly. She waited, saying nothing, nodding. She gave it a moment, just watching and waiting. Andy was silent, biting his lip, not knowing what to say or do next. Mariko was patient. She felt sure Andy would realize what he had just described.

Suddenly Andy's eyes widened as the recognition dawned on him. "I get it," he said, nodding. "The closing has an upside. This may be it. I get it, I get your meaning. My father once told me the same sort of thing, make things happen, don't just let them. I get it!"

"*Kiki!*" repeated Mariko.

"Kiki it is," Andy agreed.

Mariko started her car and put her seatbelt around her once more, pleased and satisfied that Andy understood. "The most important thing is that you took a step, Andy-san. The storm will pass and things will grow." She put her car in gear, then stopped and put it back in neutral. "Later, you bring Scotty to class, okay? I have something to give you. Don't forget."

"Uh, sure," Andy said with a puzzled grin, asking, "What is it, some special yoga meditation thing to give me strength?"

“No, no. That’s silly. You’ll see. Don’t forget.” Mariko drove away, heading for the service drive to have lunch with Ax.

Andy stood in the parking lot, scratching his head as he watched her go. *Go figure. Parking lot wisdom. Kiki. Danger and opportunity, two sides of the same coin. Good thought. I like that. But what in the world is she going to give me?*



Andy got in his car feeling better than he had all day, which wasn’t saying all that much. But on the drive home he started to relax, mulling over the Mainstreet Motors meeting, and his new so-called job. *That was easy. Maybe too easy. There goes Saturday with the kids. It’s not ideal, but I’ve gotta make this work. We’ve got some money put away, we’ll be fine. But not forever. I’ve got to make this work. I can sell. Can I sell cars? How hard can it be? What’s Lizzy going to think? She’ll be happy just knowing we’re staying put, right?*

As he pulled into his driveway for the second time that day, he noticed that everyone was home from school. It wasn’t even four o’clock, and he

knew they'd all want to know why he was home so early.

He walked through the front door and into the kitchen, where the after-school snack roundup was in high gear. Lizzy, Scotty, and Sandra all stopped what they were doing and looked at him.

Challenges make you discover things about yourself that you never really knew. They're what make the instrument stretch, they're what make you go beyond the norm.

-CICELY TYSON

"Daddy!" chorused the kids, racing over to give him a hug. "You're home!"

"Honey?" inquired Lizzy, tentatively.

Andy sat down at the table and said in a quiet voice: "Hi, guys. Listen, I've got some good news, and some bad news."