



The Napkin, The Melon & The Monkey

How to Be Happy and Successful by Simply
Changing Your Mind

by Barbara Burke

Meet Olivia, the newest hire at Mighty Power's customer service call center. Excited to have a stable job and a good salary, Olivia starts out with a sunny disposition and a can-do attitude. However, the constant barrage of angry calls from frustrated customers soon wears her down. Instead of handling these irate customers in a calm, professional manner, as she was trained to do, she loses her temper and strikes back.

Terrified that she will be fired for her behavior, she asks Isabel, an experienced rep and the call center's wise woman, for help. The extraordinary advice she receives changes her life, and may change yours, too.

In this modern-day parable, author **Barbara Burke** introduces 22 unforgettable life lessons that are the framework for living a happy, struggle-free life. We learn that while we have no control over much of what happens to us in life or the behavior of others, we can choose our reaction. The secret to success is being able to stop long enough to see situations clearly—to see "what is." Making this one small change gives us the power to make better decisions and get better outcomes. Being more mindful enables us to handle even the most challenging interactions with customers, co-workers, friends, and family with grace and ease. *The Napkin, The Melon & The Monkey* serves as both a powerful resource for business professionals looking for easy-to-use tools to sharpen their "inner game" and as an inspirational tale for those who want better relationships and a happier life.

About the Author

Barbara Burke is an internationally known consultant, speaker, and author specializing in the "people side" of customer service management. At the core of her philosophy is the belief that exceptional customer service is only possible when the employees providing the service feel valued and engaged. In the last 25 years, thousands of front-line employees and their leaders have benefited from her innovative training programs. Her clients include Honeywell, Progress Energy, Alltel, Microsoft, Estée Lauder, Target Corporation, Portland General Electric, the State of Minnesota, the State of Pennsylvania, Procter & Gamble, Cox Communications, Vertex, Time-Warner, and Austin Energy. Website: www.barbaraburke.com

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**Q & A with Barbara Burke, author of *The Napkin, The Melon & The Monkey:*
*How to Be Happy and Successful by Simply Changing Your Mind***

1. “The Napkin, The Melon & The Monkey” that’s an intriguing title. What’s the book about?

It’s about a woman who, like many of us, is trying to figure out how to live a happier life. Olivia, the main character is a new customer service representative who loses her temper with the angry customers who call. Terrified that she is going to get fired for yelling at her customers, she seeks the help of the call center’s wise woman, Isabel. The title is drawn from the imagery of three folk tales that Isabel shares with Olivia to teach her 22 important life lessons, or Aha’s, which provide the framework for living a happier life.

2. In the story the wise woman, Isabel, tells Olivia that the way to handle irate customers is to have a “SODA.” I’m guessing she didn’t mean Olivia should drink a can of her favorite soda.

You are right! Actually, SODA is an acronym for Stop, Observe, Decide, and Act. It is a four-step process for handling emotionally-charged situations more easily. When we are forced to deal with a difficult, irate person at work—someone whom we feel is *attacking* us—our natural response is to become defensive. This primal “fight or flight” response was what cave men needed to react quickly to being attacked by predators. But today, that reaction is no longer appropriate.

There’s a simple trick to curb this instinct and respond more effectively. First, you need to realize that the person is angry about the situation. It isn’t personal. You just happen to be on the receiving end. Once you take yourself out of the equation you can focus on coming up with a solution to the customer’s problem:

Stop.

Observe what is really going on.

Decide on the solution.

Act with confidence.

3. In this example, you use SODA in the workplace. Can SODA be used in other situations?

Absolutely! SODA can be applied to interactions with anyone in your life—co-workers, family members, even complete strangers. I apply it frequently when I’m driving on the freeway. I used to get very angry and upset, not quite to the level of road rage . . . but pretty angry. When I started using SODA I stopped taking the other drivers’ actions personally. Now I try to take whatever happens in traffic in my stride. I know that I have a choice as to how to react—I can either get mad and let it ruin my day, or I can tell myself “it is what it is.”

4. Another piece of advice that Isabel gives Olivia to help her de-stress is to “unplug her mind” for a few minutes a day. What exactly is “unplugging?”

Since the story takes place in a customer service call center, I use the term “unplugging” as a metaphor for unplugging the headset that Olivia wears on the job. When she unplugs her headset, all the noise and chatter stops, and only then does she get some peace and quiet. The same thing happens when she “unplugs” her mind for a few minutes each day.

But sitting quietly with your eyes closed isn’t everyone’s style. When I teach classes, I encourage people to find whatever unplugging technique works for them: take a walk, listen to relaxing music, say a prayer. It doesn’t matter what you do. It’s about taking a few minutes out of your day for a little mental vacation. Even 5 minutes of centering practice can leave you refreshed. But, there’s another benefit of unplugging

besides relaxing—the better you get at centering your mind the easier it becomes to apply SODA when you need to. Both unplugging and SODA require you to remaining the present moment.

5. When you talk about “being in the moment,” it sounds like another way of saying, “being mindful.” So is that what you are talking about—mindfulness?

That’s right. Most of us live such crazy, busy, stress-filled lives! Every day is packed with an endless list of things that we need to accomplish. The problem is the list never ends. Mindfulness allows us to take a moment to be more fully present to what happens in our life. No other action is required. There’s no judging whether an experience is a good one or a bad one. I think that if we all stopped to be in the moment more often we’d be a lot happier and lot less stressed.

6. Olivia has 22 Aha!s or insights by the end of the story. There is one that I’m curious about—Aha! #5. There’s no such thing as a difficult situation. What do you mean by that?

This Aha! sums up the central idea of the book. When we say there’s no such thing as a “difficult” situation, we mean that (as much as we’d like to think otherwise) we have very little control over what happens to us. Things like being laid off, losing our money in the stock market, or getting sick are beyond our control. So is the behavior of other people.

However, we do have the power to control one thing, which is our reaction to those events and people. Like many of us, Olivia went through life trying to control *everything*, and got frustrated when things hadn’t gone the way she planned. With the help of Isabel, she discovered that the best thing to do was to give up all that unnecessary struggling. Olivia realized that a situation is simply that—a situation—and that she was the one to decide if it was “bad” or “good,” “difficult” or “easy.” After that *everything* got a whole lot easier.

7. What prompted you to write this book?

For last 24 years I’ve made my living as a management consultant working with customer service call centers. During that time I have had the chance to get to know thousands of service representatives. These are the problem-solvers within a company who answer the phone when you call with a question about your bill or are dissatisfied with a product or service.

Talk about a stressful job! Imagine what it’s like to take upwards of 100 calls a day; not knowing if the customer on the other end of the phone is going to be friendly and cooperative, or downright mean and abusive. Working in customer service is one of the most emotionally demanding jobs there is.

I saw firsthand the toll the constant barrage of negativity had on these people. So, when I discovered the SODA idea and saw how well it worked with the service representatives I introduced it to, it just seemed logical to write a little story in the hopes that more people would learn about the technique and use it.

8. I understand you published the book yourself initially.

Yes. I self-published the book in 2006 and it became an instant sensation with people in the customer service field. By 2008 the book was on its third printing and garnering attention from all kinds of people—in and out of the field. In 2008, Hay House bought the rights to the book and will be releasing it this February. I couldn’t be more thrilled with the reception it is getting.

9. What is it about the book that resonates with people?

I think readers like the book because it offers simple, practical advice (in under 200 pages!) that they can put to use right away. The concepts in the book are the same ideas and teaching stories that have been around for over 2500 years, yet they are presented in a way that is accessible to the modern reader.

10. Who do you think would benefit the most from reading your book?

I think there are two audiences. Certainly anyone who is looking for practical ideas and easy-to-use tools that will enable them to take more control of their life, feel less stressed and enjoy their life more. Corporations and other organizations comprise another group of readers who enjoy the book. Over the last few years I've worked a lot with businesses who have given the book to their employees as a motivational tool. I think the book serves incredibly well for supervisors who want to promote team building, boost morale, and lead an open discussion for employees to communicate their concerns. The end result has been an improvement in employee engagement, which companies are recognizing as critically important. Just about every day I hear of examples of how the book is being used in different industries such as healthcare and education.

11. To what extent is the book autobiographical?

I think a great deal of Olivia's story was drawn from my own. We both worked in customer service, were married with children (she had two kids and I had one) and after a series of trials and tribulations, figured out that we were making life a lot harder than it needed to be. But, for the most part, Olivia is a composite of all the hard working service reps I've known over the years. I also would like to think that I'm a bit like Isabel, the wise sage who has it all figured out. I wish I had more of her qualities. Isabel is the type of person I aspire to be.

12. If you could leave us with one piece of wisdom or advice from the book, what would it be?

I'd pick Aha! #22: *Generous hearts make a difference*. That's my mantra. I believe that if we treated one another with more kindness and compassion, that the world would be a better place in which to live.

An Excerpt from:
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by Barbara Burke

Chapter 5
Have a SODA, My Dear

That morning I had a smile on my face and a bounce in my step as I made my way to the cafeteria. I ran into Isabel at the coffee machine. "Well, hello, Olivia," she chirped. "You look unusually happy for this early in the morning. What's up?"

"I have some good news," I whispered. "Whatever you said the other day gave me the kick I needed. I finally unplugged yesterday. It was an amazing feeling."

"I'm so glad, Olivia. I knew you would get there eventually. It was just a matter of time."

Isabel paused for a moment. Then with a twinkle in her eye, she asked, "I am curious about something. You and I talked about many things in our last conversation. Was there anything in particular that you found to be useful?"

I didn't miss a beat. "Absolutely! The one thing you said that I kept repeating over and over in my head was the part about my needing to 'stop to observe, and then decide how to act.'"

"Hey, congratulations! You discovered my favorite acronym: SODA!" she giggled.

I thought back to what I had said.

I repeated it to myself: *Stop, observe, decide, act.* "Of course! I get it!" I exclaimed. "SODA stands for Stop, Observe, Decide, and Act. I like it!"

SODA was an acronym I would never forget.

"Isabel, I have to tell you about what happened to me on the way to work. I surprised even myself!"

I described my encounter with the little old lady on the freeway. I told her I was surprised that I didn't fall into my usual habit, which was to jump to the conclusion that she was just another inconsiderate driver. Instead, I stopped myself from reacting automatically. When I stopped long enough to observe what was really going on, I could see that the woman was in a dangerous situation. Instead of getting angry, I responded with kindness.

Aha! #6:

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, HAVE A SODA.

I didn't expect my little story to get such an emotional reaction. Isabel had tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Olivia," she said. "You learned such an important lesson from that little old lady. You not only applied SODA when you stopped to observe what was happening—you went beyond that. You resisted judging her. Instead of stereotyping her as just another pokey driver, you withheld judgment."

"You are right," I beamed. "When I did, I could see that the best thing to do was to show her some understanding and to treat her with compassion."

"I used to be very judgmental," Isabel confessed. "That was until I realized how harmful it was. When I started at Mighty Power 25 years ago, one of the senior service reps took me aside. She informed me that it was a 'known fact' that anybody who lived in Terrace Pines, the local trailer court, was 'trouble.' As she put it, 'They are all deadbeats, every last one of them.' Eager to learn whatever shortcuts I could to make a complex

job simpler, I went along with her stereotyping. I soon discovered how unfair it was to judge somebody on the basis of where they live, or, for that matter, anything else so arbitrary."

Aha! #7:

WITHHOLDING JUDGMENT ALLOWS ME TO OBSERVE WHAT IS.

Then it dawned on me. I was guilty of the same thing! I jumped to conclusions about my customers all the time. I had to admit that the woman with the five kids never had a chance with me. As soon as I saw her address was in Terrace Pines, I pegged her as just another irresponsible deadbeat. I showed her no mercy.

My judgmental attitude wasn't reserved just for my customers. I applied it pretty freely to myself. During my failed unplugging session the day before, I had categorized myself as one of those people who had such a busy mind that it was beyond my control. I had decided that I was not only a failure at learning to unplug but also a failure at every attempt at self-improvement.

I vowed to be more patient with myself next time.

I thought back to a morning last week when I had lost my temper with Nate and Natalie. Their crime? Dawdling over breakfast. Their chattering and teasing had slowed down their progress toward finishing their breakfast. I had decided that if that continued they were going to be late for the bus again. I had given them the ultimatum: "Finish those Cheerios, or else!"

I could see that if I had applied the SODA formula to the situation, the outcome would have been much better. Giving myself time to stop, observe, and then decide how to act would have helped me realize that two minutes at the breakfast table wouldn't have made the difference between being on time for the bus or not.

I needed to be more patient. I had to face the fact that my kids weren't little adults. They were kids. Kids tend to play at inconvenient times and pay no attention to the clock.

I vowed to be more patient with Nate and Natalie next time, too.

Then there was Jake, poor guy. According to me, he couldn't do anything right. No wonder he was so defensive. Being criticized for every move you make would make anybody paranoid.

When he and I started dating, I thought his idiosyncrasies were endearing. Not any more. Instead of accepting him as he is—the man I fell in love with 12 years ago—I had set out to change him into somebody else.

The problem was that had I actually succeeded in changing him, he would have lost those very characteristics that make him who he is. Maybe if I eased off of the criticism he would spend more time with me and less time working in his workshop in the garage. I vowed to be more patient with Jake in the future.

I could also see that somewhere along the way I had appointed myself the General Manager of the Universe. My attempt to control everything and everybody had to change or I was never going to be at peace with myself or with the rest of the planet. I could see now that once I let go of my need to be in control, all my relationships would improve. My customers would be happier and so would I.

I made another decision. I resigned from my self-appointed position as the General Manager of the Universe. Effective immediately.

I continued to discover the power of letting go. Once I let go of the notion that everybody needed to meet my impossibly high standards, my life got a whole lot easier. I began noticing it when I talked to my customers. I thought it was odd that all my customers were in such great moods one day. Instead of arguing with me, every customer was friendly and cooperative. I had to laugh when it dawned on me that they were responding to my more positive, patient approach.

I recall a couple of customers in particular. Both started out wanting to tear me (or anybody at Mighty Power, for that matter) limb from limb. But by the time we hung up, they were as happy as could be. In each situation the problem was due to a mistake somebody at Mighty Power had made. Both errors were doozies.

*Aha! #8:
THE NICER I AM TO MYSELF, THE NICER I AM TO OTHERS.*

Walter had done what he was supposed to do. He had called us several weeks in advance to place his order for new service for the home he was having built in a new development outside of town. Whoever took the order must have transposed a couple of numbers in the address. The result? Our field crew installed the new service not at his house but the house next door. So, when the day came for the contractors to start on the next phase of the project, they couldn't work because they had no power. The couple of days it took to get a crew out there to install the new service resulted in the whole project falling behind schedule.

The other issue was our fault, too. When I spoke with Steve, he was so upset I thought he was going to have a heart attack. I couldn't blame him. Someone on our end had neglected to notify him that we were coming out to chop down a tree that had grown dangerously close to one of our power lines. Steve was horrified when he pulled into his driveway and discovered that his beautiful, stately oak had disappeared.

Before my epiphany a few weeks ago, I wouldn't have even considered apologizing to these customers for the inconvenience we had caused them. In fact, when the woman who trained us in customer service techniques had told us that that was what we should do, I had protested. I remember saying, "Heck, why should I apologize? It wasn't *my* fault!"

When I applied the SODA idea to dealing with my customers' problems, I could see that apologizing for the inconvenience we had caused was the right thing to do. I found myself spending less time talking and more time listening. Instead of *telling* customers what I could or couldn't do for them, I was *asking* them questions. I let them explain and didn't interrupt. I learned a lot.

Once I said the words "I apologize," I noticed that the customers' demeanors did an about-face. They instantly stopped yelling and calmed down. Drake was right. All any customer really wants when they call is for someone in the company to listen to their problem and take responsibility for fixing it. I discovered that once I stopped being so defensive, the customer and I ended up on the same side. We worked together to find the best solution to their problem.

*Aha! #9:
A SIMPLE APOLOGY WORKS WONDERS.*

After those two calls, the rest were the typical mix of setting up electric service and dealing with complaints. Not one difficult customer among them. At break time I went in my "private office" to unplug.

April 20, 10:05 A.M.

Relax . . . Breathe in . . . breathe out . . . I'm getting the hang of this stop-and-observe thing. I can see how it applies to life in general . . . (sigh) . . . That's a thought. Let it go. Watch it go, like a cloud passing overhead. Breathe in . . . breathe out . . . Slowly . . . breathe in . . . breathe out. Another cloud . . . Let it go. Breathe in . . . breathe out . . . breathe in . . . breathe out . . . Thought—let it go . . . Whoa! Look at the time—it's 10:15 already! I must have gone to that quiet place again.

10:15 A.M.

Olivia, girl, you've got the power, I smiled to myself. Being able to stop to see *what is* was the greatest power of all. I knew that my newfound happiness was the direct result of unplugging every day and applying the SODA idea. I realized that the power I thought I had when I was trying to micromanage everyone and everything was just an illusion. This was *real* power.

Aha! #10:
THE LESS I TALK, THE MORE I LEARN.

Once I shifted my perspective from critic to observer *everything* changed. Take my relationship with Jake, for example. Once I stopped being so critical of him and stopped my nit-picking, we got along much better. We started laughing more and arguing less. We were back to having fun together.

I knew Jake was feeling better about us when he asked me out on a date for Friday, the night he usually reserved for working on projects in the garage. We got a sitter and went out to dinner and a movie, just like old times.

I found myself relating to my children differently, too. I discovered that the more I listened and the less I talked, the more I learned. For example, I discovered that two older boys on the afternoon bus were bullying Nate. I felt awful that I hadn't picked up on it, and I called the school principal the following day.

I also hadn't realized that we had a budding environmentalist in our house. One evening as Natalie and I were unloading the dishwasher she brought me up to date on what she was learning in school. She told me that her class was discussing energy conservation and the impact one family's garbage on the environment. We talked about the fact that we really didn't recycle as much as we could. We now have four bins in our garage reserved for recycling.