

**IGNITE YOUR POWER,
YOUR PURPOSE & YOUR WHY**

**YOU
OWE
YOU**

ERIC THOMAS, PhD

FOREWORD BY CHRIS PAUL

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You Owe You

Ignite Your Power,
Your Purpose, and Your Why

Eric Thomas, PhD


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Acknowledgments

*If you can't fly then run,
if you can't run then walk,
if you can't walk then crawl,
but whatever you do,
you have to keep moving forward.*

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

FOREWORD

The first time I heard ET's voice, I became an instant fan. There's something about it—the passion, the drive, the dog. Every time it gets me. For years, E has been sending me messages before games or when he knows I'm going through something, and when his voice comes on, it always has an impact. E's work is timeless. You can go on YouTube and watch one of his speeches and the only way you can tell when it's from is by looking at the time stamp. When he talks, it's like a sermon. If you've ever been to church and you hear the pastor speaking, and you think, *Man, he must be talking to me*, that's how it is to hear ET speak. It always feels like he's talking directly to you.

E's work and legacy make me think of my grandfather, who opened the first Black-owned service station in North Carolina. It makes me think of my father, who coached me and my brother through sports and through life. It makes me think of my own kids, who I want to be proud of me and have the experience of success I've had in life. E talks about having a why. For me, my why used to be that I hated losing more than I liked winning. Over the years it's changed. When I first came into the NBA, I felt like I had to prove myself—to the league, to my family, to everyone I grew up with. Now I get a chance to show my kids what hard work looks like. I get to show them what preparation looks like. I get to show them what commitment looks like. I think E does that for all of us. Shows us what hard work and commitment look like.

In my own career, I'm drawn to people like me. I'm in my seventeenth season and I still feel the way I felt in the beginning—you will not outwork

me. I'm drawn to people with the same work ethic. Sometimes you can just look in a person's eyes and tell they're a dog. People like that can be on my team any day. You can look at ET and see his grind. You can see his passion and his commitment. He's flown across the country to come see me play. He's come to speak at my youth leadership camps all over the United States. He shows up 100 percent every time without asking for anything in return. And it's not just for me. It's for everybody. I've seen him give his phone number out to kids because he could tell they needed someone to talk to. He does it because it's his calling. It's his calling to coach us all in whatever way we need it. It's his calling to be on *our* team.

We have this in common—E is on your team, too.

*—Chris Paul NBA All-Star,
philanthropist, and entrepreneur*

INTRODUCTION

You Are The Only One Who Can Change Your Life

If you're holding this book in your hands right now, this book is for you. I wrote it for you. You might think that sounds crazy, that thousands of people are holding this very same book in their hands, reading this very same line, but it's true. I'm speaking directly to you.

You Owe You is a manual to help you understand your power and your purpose. It's a guide, illustrated with many of my own struggles and triumphs, to lead you toward your why and bring you closer to fulfilling your potential. This book is for you, wherever you are on your journey toward greatness. It's a book with an urgent message to stop waiting for the stars to align, to stop waiting for inspiration to strike, to wake up and take hold of your own life. Today. You owe it to yourself to become fully, authentically you. To live your life in the way that only you can live it.

I wish that I'd had this kind of blueprint to put me on a path toward greatness. I spent so many years lost. I spent so much time without intention. I spent much too long not pursuing my purpose. Maybe, if I had had this book, I would have seen my gifts and my power for what they were much earlier in my life. Maybe if I'd had this book, I wouldn't have spent so many years feeling like a victim, feeling alone, consumed with what other people thought about me.

Through much stumbling and many missteps, I finally found my path toward purpose. And today I am blessed to speak to an audience that is as large as it is diverse. I am now an internationally known speaker and motivational coach. And I am fortunate to work with rich people. Poor people. Black people. White people. Middle-aged people. Octogenarians even. I speak to famous people and people who stop me on the street because they know my name.

But the first people to start following me were kids. This is because, way back in the day, I started working with kids first. In college, I spoke to my peers at Oakwood in Huntsville, Alabama. And then I started helping high school dropouts get their GEDs, just as somebody helped me years before. I worked in elementary schools and middle schools. I visited juvenile detention centers and foster homes. I taught English and drama and speech in Huntsville, and I tutored kids who struggled in school, just as I did. Through all this work, I became known as ET, the hip-hop preacher.

When YouTube started, kids were the first ones to pick up on my videos. And, eventually, some of those kids got successful. They became college athletes or professional athletes. They became entrepreneurs and educators. They became comedians and actors and musicians. Those kids grew up and they took me with them. Kids are the ones I owe this book to. Especially kids who grew up without fathers, kids who struggled with learning disabilities or trauma, kids who were troublemakers like me.

When I go to schools, when I go to prisons, when I go to NBA locker rooms and NFL training camps, when I go to Australia or LA or Detroit or London or Alabama or France, the reaction is the same: They all hear me, and they all know I'm speaking to them. Telling them that *this* is the moment. This is life or death. This is the time you get up and change your life. It's not about money, it's not about fame, it's not about the degree or the touchdown or the check at the end of the grind. It's about getting up every day, understanding your power, walking in your purpose, knowing what you want, and spending every minute of the rest of your life going after it.

This book is informed by so many books I've read before it: Dennis Kimbro's *Think and Grow Rich: A Black Choice*, Dr. Na'im Akbar's *Visions for Black Men*, M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*—and my own experiences self-publishing books like *The Secret to Success* and *The Grind*—but I hope that my book is unique in its delivery. So much of the work I've read before is difficult, academic, and complex. My message is deep, but it's also simple. I want you to be able to read this book and understand its message if you are twelve years old or forty years old. I want you to be able to read this book no matter where you're from or how far you've gone in school. I want my message to be clear to everyone.

My message is that you are the only one who can change your life. You are the only person who determines your value. You are the only person who can truly choose your purpose and find your path to greatness. You are the only person who can identify your difference and use it to your advantage. You are the only person who can help yourself.

I have been where you are. I am speaking to everyone who feels that they are living on the outside. Everybody who feels that the world wasn't built for them. There is common experience in struggling to understand a language that you don't know exists. There is common experience in feeling life or death urgency for whatever it is you have going on—raising your kids, making the rent, caring for your sick spouse, playing the most important game of your life, taking a test that makes the difference between staying in school and getting kicked out. We are human. We all feel these things if we allow ourselves to. So, when I'm speaking to my people, I'm speaking to you.

Because my work is inextricable from me, my work has always been about what it means to be a Black man in this country, trying to attain the American dream. But this does not mean playing the victim to any factor of my circumstances—race, gender, age, or socioeconomic status. This means writing your own narrative and claiming your place in the world, no matter what the world's perception of you is. I have acted like a victim before. I thought the world was happening to me. I became homeless. I turned my back on my family and refused to take responsibility for my choices. I ate out

of trash cans. I slept in abandoned buildings. I made decisions that put me in those positions, and I denied my part in all of it. I took on a victim mentality, and eventually I saw my way out of it to become a victor.

In reality, there are many secrets to success. One of them is wanting to succeed as bad as you want to breathe. But this is only the beginning. Being successful is also about knowing that the only person in the way of your success is you. It's about seeing your power, and then finding your purpose and walking in it. It's about getting to know yourself, and seeing so clearly who you are that you can respond to the world around you and discover opportunity in return. It's about finding your why—your reason for getting up in the morning and grinding. It's about knowing when you have to give up something good for something great. It's about stretching toward your potential. It's about seeing that, at some point, you owe it to yourself to be great.

Even if you just became aware of me, I've been around a long time. I've been grinding at this speaking thing for over thirty years. But I'm also a pastor, an educator, and a counselor. I coach professional athletes one-on-one. I work with members of my community through marriage and family counseling. I pray with thousands of people every week, all around the world. I teach at universities and in prisons. I work with CEOs of Fortune 500 companies on team-building and personal growth. Every part of my work comes from having done my own personal work, struggling through my own issues, getting educated, and grinding toward excellence. I've been figuring out who I am and what my purpose is my whole life. Every day, I am reaching toward my potential, waking up for my why, giving up good things to get to great things. Truly, it has been a long road. I'm here to tell you that it was worth it. The journey is everything. The whole point is the journey. I didn't get here by wishing for it. I got here because I took myself on a trip. And I'm still on it. And, now, so are you.

CHAPTER

1



**It's You
versus
You**



WHEN YOU TAKE OWNERSHIP, YOU BECOME THE CEO OF YOUR LIFE.

Today, I walk into places of unimaginable privilege, from NBA locker rooms to the boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies. But my younger self would never have dared to imagine that the boy playing on the block in Detroit could have such a life.

When I was growing up, there weren't many expectations for me. I was born in Chicago, and raised in Detroit in the 1970s. Back then, if you were blue collar in Detroit, your destiny was already dictated: You graduated from high school; got a job at Ford, General Motors, or Chrysler; started a family; worked on the assembly line for the next forty years; retired; and collected Social Security. That was how my life was supposed to go. And that wouldn't have been a bad way to do it. That's how my parents did it. That's how plenty of people did it back in the day, and that was a sweet life.

Here's what you have to remember: There weren't many expectations because it was just good that we were living. My great-grandparents were sharecroppers. Their parents had been enslaved. That my parents owned a house and had cars, that my mom had a garden to tend and a job at Ford Motor Company to go to every day, was beyond any expectation her ancestors had ever dreamed of. When survival is the goal, how can you even think about what your higher purpose might be?

Just so you can understand how I grew up, I have to tell you about how my mom, Vernessa Craig, grew up. If you ask Vernessa what was expected of her, she'll tell you: nothing. She'll tell you about how she made it in the 1960s in Chicago at the height of segregation. She'll tell you that as one of

fourteen children in an eight-hundred-square-foot apartment on the South Side, there were no expectations of her because there wasn't a lot of hope for her to begin with.

Her grandparents were born in the Jim Crow era, a time when African Americans were bound by the color of their skin, and weren't allowed to share space with white people. Train cars, water fountains, restrooms, hotels —my family was barred from the dignity of communing in public places with white people. My mother's father was from outside of Selma, Alabama. Her mother came from Sardas, Alabama. These places were impoverished, rural, and still operating on a system that was basically slavery in all but name. Their families scraped together a living based on indentured servitude, giving up a share of their crops to the landowner in order to survive. But, like six million other African Americans over the course of about sixty-five years, they eventually picked up their lives and struck out for some better future up North.

Both of my grandparents, Jessie McWilliams and Mary Craig, and their parents landed in Detroit around 1940. They'd all traveled by train as children up from Alabama, and settled in a neighborhood called Black Bottom, which was famous for its tight-knit Black community. There, they all worked together, fed each other, and looked out for one another.

One of eight children, Jessie McWilliams—the son of Eva and Aaron McWilliams—came over from Ireland with his parents during the potato famine. Jessie was biracial and lighter skinned, passing as Cuban or Italian, so he could move through the world more freely than a Black man might.

My maternal great-grandmother, Kate Gardner, died giving birth to my grandmother, Mary Kate Craig. My mother talks about what a large hole it left in Mary's spirit, and how she was withdrawn and distant most of her life. She never spoke about her past. The only child of her parents, Mary was raised by a stepmother who was essentially her wet nurse and had ten other children with Mary's father, Fred. She always felt alienated; she couldn't connect to the rest of the family. I can remember it as a kid, feeling that my grandmother was serious and businesslike—a true provider, focused on

getting her family what they needed to make it to the next day. Of course, as a child I didn't understand why my grandmother seemed distant. But thinking about how these women grew up and raised children and raised themselves without the help of anyone else, I can see now how it might have kept them from expressing their full range of emotions.

My grandparents Mary Craig and Jessie McWilliams met in Detroit, had three children, and never got married. Eventually, Jessie took off. Mary met Mr. Braxton, my mom's stepfather, and they moved to Chicago and had eleven more children. My mother grew up thinking that her father was dead, until one day he showed up when she was ten or eleven years old, and she didn't know him from Adam. She remembers how her father looked white and the woman he came with, her stepmother, Bernice, was white. It took her a long time to accept who he was, but eventually they got close and Bernice fought to normalize their relationship. Her stepfather's family favored his kids, who were darker, more than her and her two sisters, but despite the complicated bloodlines, the kids grew up treating each other as full siblings and disregarding the politics of the shades of their Blackness.

My point in explaining the tangled dynamics of my family tree is to show you how my own personal history was built on a foundation of instability. There was no certainty for my family in society, just as there was no certainty for them in their private lives. There was constant upheaval, constant worry about having the very basics of survival. There was a pattern of men disappearing while the women were left to fend for themselves and their children. It created a dynamic of dysfunction and a cycle of unpredictability. How can you think about creating a life of fulfillment when you're living in abject poverty?

Vernessa Craig got pregnant at seventeen and gave birth to me at eighteen. She was top ten in her class at Dunbar High School, a vocational-technical school, where you were accepted based on exceptional test scores. But they kicked girls out of high school for being pregnant back then. Luckily, one of her counselors let her in on a secret that the school didn't like to share with pregnant girls: You could still graduate if you took and passed

your tests. So she did. She tried to make it work with my biological father, a boy named Gerald Munday she met at Dunbar. She remembers him as different from the rest of the young men in her neighborhood. He wasn't a gangbanger and he wasn't a troublemaker. But, ultimately, he wasn't interested in helping her raise me, Eric Munday.

When Mom met Jesse Thomas, a 6-foot-8 man who had played basketball at Texas Southern, they started off as friends. It was 1972. She was twenty years old with a two-year-old son. Jesse thought he was gonna be with a tall woman, a volleyball player type. A housewife type. Mom is 5-foot-2, and she definitely isn't a housewife. But eventually they started talking, and he understood her and was drawn to her will and her intelligence. He said he wanted children, which meant I wasn't a deal breaker. In fact, he wanted to adopt me. They were married, Mom became Vernessa Thomas, and after Jesse convinced her to move to Detroit—a place where, if they worked hard, they could own a house, have a yard, find good jobs—Jesse petitioned the court for adoption. In 1974, I became Eric Thomas, Jesse's son. They never told me I had a different biological father. That's just the way it was. And that's what I grew up thinking.

In Detroit, they rented for a while, but eventually settled at 8 Mile and Braile in a three-bedroom brick house on a corner lot. Mom had never imagined that she could own a house or have that kind of life, but she'd worked hard to get it and she loved it. Back then, there were still racial boundaries. The city, like most American cities, was segregated. You weren't supposed to go two blocks north of 8 Mile. We would venture as far as 7 Mile on occasion, but we didn't go to 6 Mile or 9 Mile. There was an unspoken one-mile-radius rule.

While I was growing up, Detroit was beautiful. It was vibrant. We had pride for the city that ran deep. The middle American ideal *was* Detroit. The whole world was listening to our music and driving our cars. In those days, Coleman Young was the city's first Black mayor and Motown was at the top of the charts—the Temptations, the Supremes, the Isley Brothers, the Clark Sisters. We'd hear that Diana Ross was in town, or that Michael Jackson was

rolling in, and my friends and I would hang around the corner, looking into the distance, pretending we might catch a glimpse of a limo on its way to Berry Gordy's blue stucco studio. My grandma lived around there, and just being in proximity of it made you feel a buzz. Detroit was also all about civil rights in those days. You'd hear about Rosa Parks being downtown speaking, and sometimes the adults would talk about the time that Martin Luther King Jr. gave his Walk to Freedom speech. The memory of Malcolm X, who'd spent time in Lansing and had been assassinated only a decade before, was still very much alive.

As I still do today, I used to wake up before everybody else. Crack of dawn I'd be out on the block waiting for my boys to get up, waiting for the old-timers to roll out of bed. All summer long, we would be gone all day, riding around, or playing football in the street. I thought I was going to be the next Carl Lewis, running the 100-meter dash in the Olympics. Or, if not that, then play in the NFL.

Almost every weekend, my mom would take my sisters and me back to Chicago to visit with family. Her siblings were all still there, and they were close. Summers in Chicago were lit. At night, people would bring their sound systems out to the corner, and everybody would be up in the joint, techno music blasting, dancing in the street. Chicago was a little rougher than Detroit, but my oldest cousin Randy was cool with everyone, so we knew we were safe. We'd go out to the docks to fish, to Dominic's for candy, steal boxes of cereal from the trains delivering groceries, watch the girls jump double Dutch. Life was comfortable, and I didn't know any different.

But around the time I got to be eleven or twelve, I was starting to question some things. I'd been hearing my neighbors talk. I listened to my aunts saying things. Some of the kids on the block used to tease me, telling me my daddy wasn't my daddy. Whenever we got competitive with one another, playing cards or basketball, we'd shoot the dozens and make "your mama" jokes. The comeback to me was always "That ain't your real daddy." Eventually, you start to question if there's a grain of truth in these things.

So one day after school, I went through the house. I went through shelves and boxes and closets until I found what I was looking for. There it was in my mom's bedroom in a top drawer: my birth certificate. The name under the "father" box was not Jesse Thomas. I was crushed, but I knew it was true. It was a truth I'd been avoiding because I didn't want to know. At the same time, I was also in disbelief. All I could think of was that I had been lied to. My whole family had been lying to me. The most devastating thing, though, was that my mom, the single most important person to me—the person who made me—had been lying to me all along.

I needed to hear it from her. So I called her at work. When I ask my mom about that day, she says that my voice sounded different when she picked up the phone. She says she knew something was wrong immediately. I told her I had to ask her a question. I told her that I would believe whatever she told me. So I asked her, point blank: Is my father who I think he is? And she told me what I already knew.

Looking back, it was pretty obvious. I grew up with three grandmas. My dad was 6-foot-8 and I was always the smallest kid in the neighborhood. He's darker than I am, and we look nothing alike. There were whisperings and innuendos. But when you're that age, you believe what you're told until you can't anymore.

Truth can make or break people. That day, something inside of me broke. Nothing was the same after that. A piece of knowledge fell into place and it choked out everything that felt good and right in the world. That feeling has stayed with me and become embedded in the fabric of who I am. Even today, I have to fight hard not to let it destroy me. What I felt was that I'd been deceived in the most fundamental way—that everyone had turned against me—and instead of facing it and working through it, I pushed away everyone who could help me and turned inward. This is where things started to go wrong for me.

When I found out that the father who raised me wasn't my biological father, I felt like something had been taken away from me, and I became aware of a part of myself that had always been missing. All of a sudden, it