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"I AIN'T MUCH,
BABY—BUT I'M
ALL I'VE GOT."

BY

JESS LAIR, Ph.D.

A FAWCETT CREST BOOK

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Connecticut

"I AIN'T MUCH BABY—BUT I'M ALL I'VE GOT."

THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE COMPLETE TEXT OF
THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER EDITION.

A Fawcett Crest Book reprinted by arrangement with
Doubleday and Company, Inc.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 78-180086

Printed in the United States of America
November 1974.

DEDICATION

My name is Lair from the German lehrer—teacher—and while I am the man in the front of the room and the name on the front of the book, you who are my students and friends and loved ones are the teachers and the author. The miracle is that so much of so many of you are here. Each time I reread this book I feel your presences and I am deeply moved by your speaking again across the span of days, weeks, years—even from the grave itself. The honor and joy for me is in having been with you. And in having such a family, friends and students who were ready and waiting to love me. But first, last and always, this book is dedicated to my wife, Jackie, who so lovingly opened my eyes to most of these things and who so gently helps me down many of these paths.

CONTENTS

1	This Is All I Know	11
2	Why Are We So Afraid of Ourselves?	25
3	Love—From Your Deepest Heart	41
4	Accepting Yourself—Five Minutes at a Time	57
5	To Change—Go Beyond the Classroom	71
6	Controlling Behavior	79
7	Anyone for Sexuality?	85
8	Letting Go as a Life Goal	101
9	Trust—the Self-fulfilling Prophecy	113
10	Accepting Grief and Death	125
11	If There's a Problem Here—I Caused It	133
12	When We Go in Search of Ourselves	143
13	Touching People	151
14	Youth—and the Generation Gap	157
15	Love—Come Fill Your Cup	171
16	Higher Power and Spirituality	187
17	How to Die—at a Very Early Age	199
18	Teaching These Ideas—I Am an Expert Only in My Own Story	203
19	To Be Continued in Our Lives	217
20	Our Magic Cards	233
	Books I Use	252

"I AIN'T MUCH,
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ONE

This Is All I Know

The ideas in this book reflect a search that I began when I was thirty-five years old. I had an advertising agency in Minneapolis. I also did some marketing consultant work; I told businessmen how to make out plans for their business, and in some cases, executives how to plan their lives. And I had the world's greatest plan for my own life. I was going to work ten to fifteen more years at a business I hated and detested. But I was going to work a lot harder and faster so I could make a lot of money and I could retire. I had that plan all written up and one day at lunch I showed it to my financial consultant and adviser.

He looked at the plan and made some suggestions on it, but I felt funny about the whole thing. And on the way back to the office, all of a sudden I had this very strange feeling. I think what happened was my heart said to my head, "Now look, if you are crazy enough to throw your whole life down a rat hole, chasing something that you don't believe in, that's fine. You can throw your whole life away for money and material gains. But this Norwegian heart, it ain't going to go along with you."

I had a heart attack on the way up the elevator. I staggered to my office and slumped forward on my desk until the worst of the pain went away. I got hold of a doctor in the building across the street and foolishly told him I felt well enough to walk over.

So I walked over. He laid me out flat on an examining table and found I was right in the middle of a heart attack. He called an ambulance, they put me on a stretcher and hauled me to the hospital.

As I lay there in that hospital bed, I thought to myself, "Boy, some way you've gone a long, long way down the wrong path through a whole, long series of rotten sick, destructive choices. You've gone into things that you've got no sense in being in. There is almost nothing left in your life of what you really are." And the resolution that I made, in one of those lucid moments when one is intensely calm, was *from this time on I am never again going to do something that I don't deeply believe in.* And that decision, made under that kind of pressure, has stuck with me pretty much ever since.

I went home from my heart attack. I sold my business. We had a big, five bedroom colonial in the richest suburb in the United States and I had given my wife a sports car for Christmas. We had a liquor bill that was higher in some months than what we now spend for groceries. We gave up all of that. And if I hadn't had the wife I had, I could never have made such a drastic change.

My wife and I and our five kids, two to twelve, moved to an old farmhouse that rented for \$60 a month. The only way the heat got to the upstairs bedrooms was through a hole in the living room ceiling. The kids slept in sleeping bags because the cold upstairs would freeze water. We rented a couple of horses so we could have a little fun and I went back to college.

By moving to the farm, we had enough money to help get me through graduate school. The first year I earned a Master's Degree at the University of Minnesota. I found I enjoyed school so I stayed on and got a doctorate in psychology in the next two years. During these two years, I started teaching writing at the St. Paul campus and enjoyed that. When I finished my Ph.D., I stayed on two years at the university, but I kept wanting to move to Montana, so as soon as we could we did. My grandparents had pioneered in Montana and I had always wanted to live there.

But all during that time, I can see now, I was constantly looking for the principles of change. How do you take your life, when you've got it all bent out of shape, and make it into

something halfway decent? And the thing I started looking for hard was the kind of ideas that would help get this life of mine back into some kind of shape, to help reverse some of the wrong trends in my life.

Socrates said, "know thyself." But what is striking to me as I look back on this process that started seven and a half years ago now, is that there are some new ideas around today to help me change and to help you change. There are some things in psychology now that really work. And most importantly, there is a lot of common sense psychology in us and all around us that we just need to open our eyes to.

I have seen people who had sunk to the rottenest, lowest levels man can possibly imagine, such as alcoholics lost in skid row. Some of them were so shaky they had to send a runner out for their wine. They were even afraid to go out in the street. They were so afraid of all people. And if the runner didn't come back with their wine, they had to figure out a way to get another buck and a half together so they could get somebody else to go out.

Every once in awhile a man in that kind of trouble who had hit bottom would look at his life and say to himself, "I'm going to grow. Because if I don't, I'm going to die." And he sees, "In my egotism and in my self-centeredness, I have put myself here. I was escaping all responsibility for my actions."

By hitting bottom and being hit as hard as he was by life, he is forced to concede, "Nobody else is to blame for this. None of the people I blamed are around me any more. I'm to blame for this. I caused this." And when he sees that, he is on his way. People like that can really turn their lives around.

I have walked into groups of people like these at Emotions Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous where the acceptance they had of me was like the warmth coming from a stove. (Emotions Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous are organizations for the emotionally troubled and alcoholics. They also have open meetings anyone can attend.) You could feel it. Absolutely, positively feel it. I'm not talking about some nebulous psychological notion. I'm talking about something I have experienced and that others have experienced and that is commonplace. You, and anyone else, could walk into one of those open meetings and you would feel the same acceptance that I have felt.

These people in Alcoholics Anonymous and Emotions Anonymous have found and are using the same basic ideas being explored by some psychologists today. The core idea can be expressed simply as an acceptance of yourself. Related to that is acceptance of others. This notion of acceptance works tremendously well.

I used to think that these ideas worked only because alcoholics and neurotics were in such extremely critical situations. It was life or death. And I thought, "How are you going to hit everyone on the head with a heart attack, or with alcoholism or with neuroticism so that they can turn their lives around, too?" But recently I have found I was wrong about this, and that not-so-troubled people can use these ideas to improve the quality of their lives.

My initial experience of ten years ago reflected some of my searching. I have found that college students are quite ready and able to take hold of their lives and make some changes so they reverse some of their self-destructive trends. They find they can grow a little in a day, instead of die a little, so they are the more beautiful people which each sees potentially within. As I watched my students grow, I thought, "Sure, but that's because college students are more open. They are more open-minded, not hardened like we adults."

A change in my thinking came when I spoke for three days to nursing supervisors from five states and got an even better response. I thought, "Well, that's kind of strange." Then I thought about it and it really wasn't. The older you get, the more experience in living you have. And the clearer the end result of some of these destructive tendencies becomes.

When you are younger, you can't see the implications of saying, "To heck with taking care of me, baby, I'm going to get that money, man. I've got to have that money to calm my nerves down. My need for money overwhelms me and I'll do anything for it." So you start down that path and at first you don't see any consequences of your decision. But when you've been around for thirty or forty years and seen more of the results of your mistakes, you can say, "There really isn't, in material things, what I thought was going to be there."

Then I realized these are ideas that both young people and old people and all the ages in between already believe in and can handle. You don't need to be sick and down and out to see the urgency and the necessity of them.