Imagine how much better the world could be if every idea could have its shot, not just the ones that come from expected people and places. Which long-intractable problems would we solve, what new levels of creativity would be unlocked, and who might innovate a breakthrough that could benefit ourselves, our communities, and especially our economy? This boundless potential of onlyness has already been recognized by Thinkers 50, the Oscars of management, which cited it as one of the five ideas that will shape business for the next twenty years.

Why do some individuals make scalable impact with their ideas, regardless of their power or status? *The Power of Onlyness* unravels this mystery for the first time so that anyone can make a dent. Even you.

NILOFER MERCHANT

is the author of two previous books and is ranked by Thinkers50 as one of the world's leading thinkers. She has personally launched more than 100 products, netting $18 billion in sales, and has worked for companies ranging from Apple to Autodesk and advises many others. Her visionary ideas have been recognized by *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *Fast Company*, *Fortune*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue*, *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Bloomberg*, *CNN*, *Time*, and *Mashable*. Her 2013 TED Talk, "Sitting Is the Smoking of Our Generation," is in the top 10 percent of TED's most viewed talks.

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"ONLYNESS SHOWS US A BRAND-NEW PATH TO POWER: one that is accessible to the young and the old, the quiet and the forceful, the sanguine and the troubled."
—SUSAN CAIN, bestselling author of *Quiet* and cofounder of Quiet Revolution

"For any would-be activists who hear the voice 'not me' or 'not now,' Merchant MAKES THE STRONG CASE FOR 'YES YOU' AND 'YES NOW'— and even shows you how to jump in."
—VAN JONES, host of CNN's *The Messy Truth*, and author of *Rebuild the Dream* and *The Green Collar Economy*

"This is AN ILLUMINATING BOOK about the context in which great, world-changing ideas emerge and take root, with stories and insights galore."
—ELI PARISER, cofounder and co-CEO of Upworthy

"Nilofer Merchant's spectacular gift is to make tangible what we already feel to be instinctual: the power of the individual alongside the power of a community in the service of one idea can change the world. But Nilofer also explains what may not feel so instinctual: that all of us have the capacity to create change, no matter our social, racial, gender, or economic status. This book is ONE OF THE MOST HOPEFUL PIECES OF WRITING I'VE READ IN A LONG TIME. Nilofer defines and explains the value of individuality and collaboration in equal measure. It's a true celebration not just of humanity but of all the possibilities we can accomplish together."
—STACY LONDON, style expert, TV personality, and author of *The Truth About Style*

"THE POWER OF ONLYNESS IS THE WAKE-UP CALL THAT THE WORLD NEEDS SO BADLY RIGHT NOW. It's a reminder that, quite simply, we all matter. That each perspective has inherent value. That each person's unique vantage point is literally a position of power. That each voice matters and should be used. Be warned: after reading this book, you won't be able to ignore that voice again. You will be compelled to speak up and to use it, in bigger, bolder, louder ways than ever before."
—JESSICA JACKLEY, cofounder of Kiva

"A BOLD, INSPIRING BOOK THAT WILL LEAVE YOU FEELING INFUSED WITH POWER AND READY TO TAKE ON THE WORLD."
—DAN PINK, author of *Drive* and *To Sell Is Human*

"With *The Power of Onlyness*, Nilofer Merchant passes all three tests of A MASTERPIECE: 1) memorable stories; 2) actionable insights; and 3) urgent relevance to now."
—TOM PETERS, author of *In Search of Excellence*

"Through twenty powerful stories, Merchant SHOWS HOW EVERYONE CAN USE THEIR OWN IDEAS TO MAKE A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION. She expertly guides us in how to capitalize on our 'onlyness'—our unique knowledge and experience— to transform our lives and the lives of others."
—CAROL DWECK, Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, Stanford University, and author of *Mindset*
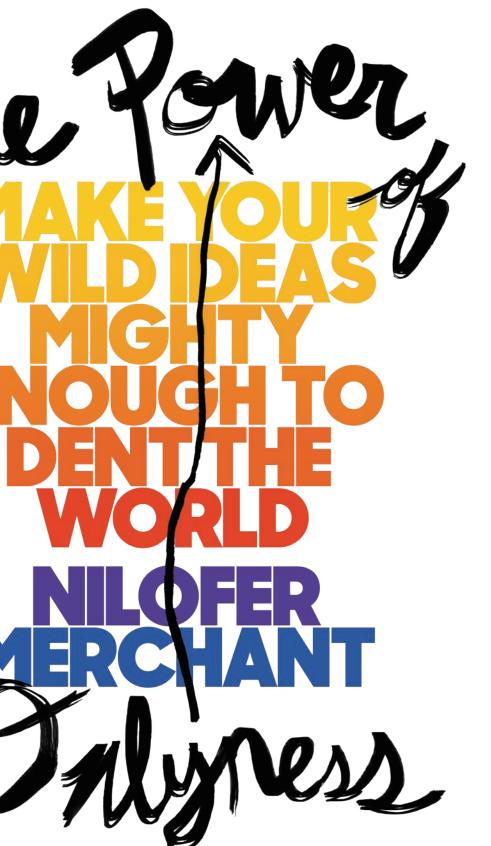
"Merchant discovers her onlyness when she walks out on an arranged marriage. At first, she doesn't know what to call it, but a lifetime of encouraging men and women to summon the best of themselves teaches her how to nurture it—in herself and others. NOW WE NEED HER EMPOWERING WORK MORE THAN EVER. Onlyness doesn't mean you work alone; you train yourself, sometimes against the odds, to recognize your own value and increase your chance of finding allies!"
—SHERRY TURKLE, author of *Reclaiming Conversation* and *Alone Together*

"No longer do we need to worry about how our ideas will be judged. By showing us how to mobilize communities around our ideas, Nilofer Merchant SHOWS US WHY AND HOW WE CAN ELEVATE THE POWER OF OUR IDEAS TO LIMITLESS HEIGHTS unfettered by conformity."
—AMY CUDDY, author of *Presence*

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NILOFER MERCHANT

VIKING

The Power of Onlyness

The Power of
MAKE YOUR WILD IDEAS MIGHTY ENOUGH TO DENT THE WORLD
NILOFER MERCHANT
Onlyness

AN INNOVATION EXPERT ILLUMINATES WHY YOUR POWER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IS NO LONGER BOUND BY YOUR STATUS

If you're like most people, you wish you had the ability to make a difference, but you don't have the credentials or a seat at the table, or can't get past the gatekeepers, or aren't high enough in any hierarchy to get your ideas heard.

In *The Power of Onlyness*, Nilofer Merchant, one of the world's top-ranked business thinkers, reveals that, in fact, we have now reached an unprecedented moment of opportunity for your ideas to "make a dent" on the world. Now that the Internet has liberated ideas to spread and scale through networks rather than hierarchies, power is no longer determined by your status, but by "onlyness"—that spot in the world only you stand in, a function of your distinct history and experiences, visions and hopes. If you build upon your signature ingredient of purpose and connect with those who are equally passionate, you have a new lever by which to move the world. Dent by dent, the world can be reshaped to include you and what you believe in.

This new ability is already within your grasp, but to command it, you need to know how to meaningfully mobilize others around your ideas. Through inspirational and instructive stories, Merchant reveals proven strategies to unleash the might of a new idea—no matter how weird or wild it may seem—so that you, too, can disrupt the status quo. Nearly thirty stories show onlyness in action. Some are inspiring, like how Franklin Leonard's Black List opened up Hollywood's elite doors to script writers outside the establishment and how Talia Milgrom-Elcott's 100kin10's tiny staff mobilized the training of a hundred thousand STEM teachers against the odds. Other stories reveal the lessons of failure: why the Occupy Wall Street movement fell short in uniting people, and why we need to ask more of tech companies like Google, Twitter, and Facebook to deliver on the promise of the Internet to democratize ideas. And in the stories of PatientsLikeMe and Ushahidi, Merchant reveals how to build the one thing we need most to create change in these turbulent times: trust.

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CHAPTER 1

Arriving at the Question

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your
one wild and precious life?
—MARY OLIVER

VALUABLE IDEAS

Three teenage boys get the Boy Scouts of America to change its discriminatory policies. An older brother trying to save his sick younger sibling makes the entire health care industry address previously "incurable" diseases. Complete strangers come together to obtain justice for a seventy-year-old war crime.

The young, the sick, the neglected—these are not typically the people whose ideas are heard. Most often, whether ideas are considered or dismissed is based on who contributes them, and how powerful their sponsors—not the ideas themselves—are. So if the young, sick, and neglected can succeed in making a dent, what does their achievement mean for the rest of us—those of us who are told that our ideas can't be heard because our voices are too shrill, or because we lack certain

credentials, or simply because the idea we're proposing is "too much"? Couldn't our ideas have a chance, too?

And don't they need to?

When I first began to write about this concept, in 2011, I struggled to describe it. I didn't want to argue only that new ideas and perspectives mattered to the modern creative economies—which they do—or that people gathered in networks could now scale projects that once only large hierarchical organizations could manage, or that changing times meant that we no longer had to "fit in" to organizations as a way to get things done. What I was seeking to propose, rather, was that anyone's—quite possibly everyone's—ideas mattered.

The key concept was that every one of the 7.5 billion humans on this planet has value to offer. How? You're standing in a spot in the world that *only* you stand in, a function of your history and experiences, visions, and hopes. From this spot where *only* you stand, you offer a distinct point of view, novel insights, and even groundbreaking ideas. Now that you can grow and realize those ideas through the power of networks, you have a new lever to move the world.

I tried to use existing vocabulary to express this concept, but nothing sufficed. The word I was searching for had to be a noun, one that would convey how value creation can come from anyone, and how even wild ideas now have a chance to flourish because networks allow anyone to bypass the standard gatekeepers and the frameworks they hold as true. As Sarah Green Carmichael—my editor at *Harvard Business Review*, for whom I was writing an article—and I twiddled back and forth, we finally realized no standard term worked.* Yet, because

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* "Talent" was disqualified because it is typically a measure of labor that is credential dependent. For example, when someone has a degree, or they've already done the job and therefore have relevant experience, or their test scores are high enough to show aptitude, they are viewed as "talented." Thus, "talent" as it is often used fails to describe what I was addressing in the new ways of creating value, which is that anyone can contribute. In onlyness, there is always inherent capacity, with or without credentials.

Another word that seemed close to onlyness was "uniqueness," but the reason it can't serve as well as "onlyness" is because it is often contextual. You can be, for example, the "unique" person in the room if you are the twenty-five-year-old in a room full of

both of us had been the "only one" at different stages of our careers, moments when the dominant culture told us our particular "only" made our ideas marginal rather than meaningful, we thought, *Let's invert that. Let's reclaim the idea of each person's "only" as a strength*. With that flash of insight, the term "onlyness"* was born. Through the power of onlyness, an individual conceives an idea born of his narrative, nurtures it with the help of a community that embraces it, and, through shared action, makes the idea powerful enough to dent the world.

The storm that created that particular lightning bolt had in fact been brewing for some time. I had often wondered whether anyone could actually be eligible to have a shot at success, or whether people had to fit a particular profile to have their ideas be valued. The tension between those two alternatives had profound effects in my own life, so let me share three stories of how I discovered my own onlyness.

EIGHT BOOKS AND TWO OUTFITS

I didn't know my life would never be the same when, one day in 1986, I walked through my suburban Cupertino, California, neighborhood and into the local Winchell's Donut House. I thought I would be back at home in an hour, maybe two—four hours at most. I turned out to be deeply wrong.

Earlier that day, at age eighteen, I had come home to an unexpectedly full house of aunties making the fragrant, buttery rice and chicken dish Indians call *biryani*. It was impossible to identify amongst the medley of voices which one of them announced it to me first, but my

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over-fifty-year-olds. But given that 50.5 percent of the world's 7.5 billion people are under thirty, youth is not that "unique," so the word lacks sufficient distinction. Onlyness says each of us 7.5 billion humans has the capacity to contribute, something *only* they have to offer.

* While a Google search returned no specific uses of this term at the time, I later learned "onliness" (note the different spelling) was a word Johnny Cash used in a song: "I'm giving you my onliness; come give me your tomorrow." I like the juxtaposition that onlyness is that which deeply connects you.

arranged marriage was now apparently a done deed. My future hus-
band, a widower, was to give my mother a house, and she, an Indian
divorcée with three children, would no longer have to worry about
her finances. These tumbling sentences pronouncing my entire future
were both a relief to hear and the start of a new chapter of my life.

Even though I had been raised in America since I was nearly five, I
had always understood it was my duty to marry in this fashion. I don't
know when or how exactly that message was conveyed, but it was
clear that this would be my fate. I respected my mother enough to
want to do this for her, for our family—to do "right," especially given
all the sacrifices she had made as an immigrant to bring us to America
and the better life it promised.

Still, I did have my own private yearnings, so I turned to my pro-
gressive uncle, Zafar, for help. Zafar had come to America to attend
college and was now an executive at a big pharmaceutical company in
Palo Alto. He had been the family's male representative at the mar-
riage negotiations, as my father had long been out of the picture. "Does
he [the groom] know I want to go to university?" I asked him. I was
attending community college, having deferred my entrance to the
University of California at Berkeley for a year. "No," my uncle replied.
"Your mother would not let me bring it up. You can discuss it with him
after you are married."

The implications of this went rattling around in my brain, as it
would mean a delay of at least a year, maybe more, before I could be-
gin university. As is traditional in arranged marriages, I would not be
allowed to get to know the groom before we were wed. We might say
hello, or sit in the same room together in the company of others, but
he would not have any notion of my life goals, nor I of his. To tell
him what I wanted for myself would be quite out of the ordinary—
essentially impossible.

Given that was the case, I argued with, and may even have whined
to, my uncle. I knew from listening to the aunties' chatter that my

proposed groom had a housekeeper, a cook, a nanny for his child from his first marriage, and a big house on the hill nearby, so he was certainly not marrying me to help with the household. I felt confident that he would agree to my getting an education if it was understood up front that that was my intention. But if I had to wait and slowly build a relationship with him to the point where I could ask such a thing, the outcome would be uncertain. Certainly the one-year deferment to Berkeley I had gotten without my mother's permission would expire. Would he even let me keep going to community college?

Of the many things I value, education stands apart. In my own culture, it is too often reserved for the boys, who are expected to make the decisions. But I wanted that equal footing, and with it the ability to direct my future.

But the conversation was closed, my uncle stated. I could tell he was on my side, but he was also powerless in the dynamic. "There is nothing to be done," he pronounced.

My spirit was sputtering, and any gumption I had was dissipating. Over the next few hours the activities in my house wrapped up and everyone left. But I had one more—desperate—plan of action.

In a theatrical display, I told my mother that I was leaving home and began packing a disproportionate ratio of books to clothes into a cardboard box—but no toothbrush. It didn't matter; these things were all just props in this little drama. As she stood in my room watching, I exclaimed, "I am the product, and the deal can't happen without me!" *Just promise to ask him about my attending school*, I insisted as I departed.

Sometime that afternoon, after eating an apple fritter and a donut hole, my cardboard box in hand, I trudged over to De Anza, the community college campus where I was going to school, to use the phone.

By now, my mother couldn't construct full sentences, but *oh*, could she raise her voice. Ours was the dialogue of the deaf; neither could hear the other. So I hung up and called my seven-years-older, married

sister. "Mom says she's going to kill herself if you don't come home," she warned. That's when I knew that this wasn't going to be easy. Even after that conversation with my sister, I figured I'd be home by the following morning, or maybe the one after. But that day never came, and nearly thirty years have passed since then.

THE CHOICES THAT DEFINE

In a matter of hours, my life had changed irreversibly. Everyone in my family called me disobedient and disrespectful. It hurt, but it was also true. But I was at least going to have the courage of my convictions. I had claimed what mattered, with both feet and a madly beating heart.

Looking back, this experience is when I first learned something crucial about life: Choices define us. The hand we're dealt is just a starting point; it's our choices afterward that reveal what genuinely matters to us.

How many of us have faced such situations—crossroads where we encounter immovable forces, where we must decide between making someone else's choice or our own? It's understandable how anyone can let the pressures of given situations, circumstances, or people around them define their next step.

But it's powerful to make your own choices, find your own path, open up your own door of opportunity—not just for yourself but for your purpose.

In my case, I was fighting not only for my own education but also implicitly for the value of education for everyone. I had plenty of examples in my life in which education was the key to opportunity. My uncle benefited from it, and even my mother was a positive example: As a divorcée in India, she didn't have the right or capacity to earn money and raise her three kids on her own, and so surely would have lost us. Leaving her children temporarily in different cities with different people, she moved alone to America, where she lived with my uncle and studied for a two-year degree in respiratory therapy.

My biggest concern at that particular moment, though, wasn't advocating for a big, purposeful cause but whether, in pursuing my "only," I would wind up being deeply lonely. My family, after all, had just ejected me. As it turns out, I found another family at De Anza: fellow teachers and students on campus who, like me, believed that an education is critical, whatever one's gender, age, religion, or heritage. The school's admissions officer, Lew Hamm, helped me find a few jobs with flexible schedules. I ushered at theater performances, did bookkeeping at the on-campus history museum, and coded a program in BASIC for the matriculation department. The support of those around me, far too many twenty-packages-for-a-dollar ramen meals, and the fact that community college courses were incredibly cheap kept me going, slowly but surely.

Discovering others on campus who, like me, valued education as the gateway to opportunity provided a sense of solidarity. Most were likewise piecing together jobs into a sufficient scaffold on which they could build more possibility into their lives. I took great comfort in realizing, finally, that I was no longer "the only one." I would later see this pattern repeated hundreds of times in business and in life: Finding "your people" sometimes means having to walk away from places you don't fit in rather than trying to squeeze yourself into a too-tight space with the aim to belong. It isn't *until* people make that choice that they are able to find others who share something meaningful with them.

It turned out that signaling my purposeful passion to the world led to the chance to make a dent when I was invited to advance the concept of educational access for all. At the age of nineteen, I was appointed by California's then governor, George Deukmejian Jr., to help "reform"—actually, radically reinvent—how California's 105 state community colleges worked. From 1987 to 1989, I served as the student board member on a committee that consisted of commissioners, judges, business executives, and state senators who sponsored the passage of reform bill AB 1725,* which transformed community colleges from

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* Professor Tab Livingston's "History of California's AB 1725 and Its Major Provisions" can be found here: http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED425764.pdf.

two-year vocational trade schools into an entryway to higher educa-
tion. It made community college credits transferable, thus carving a
foothold for students to climb up to the next level.

Up to that point, attending community college had been a negative
in my mind. I thought it made me less than those high school friends
who had gone off to Harvard, MIT, or UC Berkeley. Yet this particular
experience turned out to be the key to my unique contribution. I
would later come to understand that it's not the "perfection" of your
experience that prepares you or earns you a seat at the table but rather
simply what you, and only you, can contribute—what you, and only
you, have seen, or what you, and only you, know. So many aspects of
my profile—my education level, my age, my income level—were un-
like those of the other members of the college-reform committee, yet
it was precisely those elements of who I was that helped me contribute
something fresh.

So here was an early foundational lesson in how to make a differ-
ence: Bring what you distinctly have, align with others who share your
purpose, and make it happen, together. The problem is that this ap-
proach wasn't a doorway of opportunity that would always be propped
open, but a lucky, random coincidence that granted access that one,
singular time.

What most people do to give their ideas a solid shot is to climb high
enough in an organizational hierarchy to direct change. That's what I
did next—but not, as you'll see, particularly well.

SOMETIMES YOU FAIL SO YOU CAN REMEMBER

When Carol Bartz, who would later become CEO of Yahoo, described the
job arrangement I was being asked to take on at the software company
Autodesk in 1997, she called it "two peas in a pod," with me operating as
the "complementary half" of the Americas vice president, Michelle Pharr.
Michelle would be the market-facing executive, while I would serve as

the "revenues manager" of this more than two-hundred-million-dollar business. Convincing me took only Carol's assuring me, "You'll be among my top-one-hundred leadership team, you'll fix anything that can and will go wrong, and you can steer every new strategy to drive our market growth."

Even though my former boss at Apple, John Osborne, warned me that this arrangement would end badly, it seemed perfectly suited to me. After completing community college in 1989, I had advanced from an administrative assistant position to running a major-channel program at Apple. In 1996, when Steve Jobs famously returned to Apple, I left to join a start-up called GoLive (later bought by Adobe), where the business had grown to $4 million annually, as vice president of sales and channel marketing. When the Autodesk opportunity came along, I was between jobs, and though I felt competent at some things, I did not consider myself to be capable and proven yet in many things. This would be my first leadership role in a big organization, custom created by one of the few female CEOs of a Fortune 500 company. My ego heard this offer as "you are finally *enough,*" and of course I jumped at the chance.

My mistake was in judging only what that role would mean for me and overlooking what everyone else would think about such an unconventional position. I didn't think about how a finance director might feel slighted by my having a title of "revenues manager." I didn't stop to wonder if the talented head of sales operations might be threatened by my oddly overlapping responsibilities. The results would speak for themselves, I reasoned.

As it turned out, my hiring quickly caused a kerfuffle. Human Resources was called in and a complicated "matrix model" written up to explain when the staff should come to me and when they should go to Michelle. Carol's promise that I could fix problems turned out to be true—any time people didn't agree, I was called in to mediate. I would learn later the many nicknames I had been given, including "the fixer"

and "the queen's taster," but I approached my duties with passion, wanting to prove I was worthy—worthy of this job, of big ideas, and of the opportunity to sit at the table.

At one point, while preparing a multiyear growth strategy that would be presented to the board of directors, I disagreed with the marketing lead on how to spend the following year's budget. We disagreed privately, then publicly. I spent my energy making sure my argument was tight and then lobbied others to point out the flaws in my counterpart's argument. I did some serious spin.

Our disagreement eventually came up at the executive meeting. Instead of saying something neutral, I used what in the business world is the equivalent of the nuclear option: I warned that about $40 million of revenue was "at risk." These were effectively code words informing the CEO that she would fail because she'd miss Wall Street quarterly expectations. I then advocated for how the marketing budget *should* be allocated—in other words, my plan—thus throwing the marketing lead under the proverbial bus.

After the board meeting, Carol called me in for a chat, during which I fully expected to be congratulated. Carol agreed that I had done what it took to get results. But, she pointed out, I had alienated the team in the process with my negative personal machinations. There was no denying I was in the wrong, on so many levels, but I rationalized my decision by stressing the importance of the bottom line and arguing that having the *right* idea mattered above all. Carol countered that the way I had gone about winning meant not only that the team would never trust me again but that they wouldn't execute the plan because of how it came about. Regardless of how "right" the idea might be, it was effectively worthless.

I was fired soon afterward. It was my biggest professional failure.

It was also an epic personal failure. The person I had argued with, the person I had taken down, was a friend, whom I had worked with at Apple for many years before Autodesk. We were more than just former colleagues; we had trained for and run marathons together. When

I approached the finish line of the California International Marathon, the crowd was chanting my name, and I realized it was because of my friend: She had finished her own race some thirty minutes earlier and had gotten the crowd involved so I could finish strong. It was an act of generosity and love.

Of course the team would no longer trust me. I had been willing to take down a friend in the name of winning.

LOSSES AND LESSONS

In my departure from Autodesk I lost not only my job but also my conviction that being right, or having the right idea, was everything. In the deep hole of loss, I had only questions.

Clayton Christensen, the business guru, says that without new questions, there's no place for new answers. Where I had once believed that the theoretically best idea was the only goal, I now began to ask *how* to get the best results. Ten years later, after asking refined questions and finding clarifying answers to them, I felt I was able to reconcile the fundamental tensions inherent in collaborative work. There were many right answers, not just one. It wasn't enough for one person to advance an idea by a thousand steps—better to have a hundred people co-own an idea as their own so that each could move it forward a hundred steps. Co-ownership of an idea is what leads to successful execution, which, in turn, transforms that idea into what matters: a new reality. I wrote my first book, *The New How*, to explain what I had learned. I finally understood, through deep practice and shipping nearly a hundred products with many teams, that the future is not created but, rather, cocreated.

An idea is simply a steering wheel pointing to the future, and as such needs thrust and fuel to be realized. Thrust comes from the deep ties formed by many others wanting that idea to become reality, and their collective action is the fuel that moves the idea into the stratosphere. These facts would come to inform my understanding of how onlyness could work.

The final piece of the puzzle became clear and meaningful when my husband* asked me a rather strange question.

HONEY, CAN I QUIT MY JOB?

Most of us ache to make a difference—to leave the world better than it was the day we were born. But most of us also have jobs and commitments. So I was completely floored when my husband, Curt, announced one day that he wanted to quit his job as a technologist to get a PhD and focus entirely on what he could only describe as "world peace."

While his boss at the time was difficult, for the most part Curt seemed to genuinely enjoy his career. He explained that he wanted to do meaningful work, finding ways to help the people of developing nations help themselves. He was sheepish about his lack of clarity in his goals, mumbling about the inadequacies of the global economic model. Meanwhile, all I could think about at that moment was the personal economics of this decision. There were the not-so-small matters of our having one more kid to raise and put through college, our Silicon Valley mortgage, health insurance, and a myriad of other financial responsibilities.

If I was making a movie of that moment, it's here that I would insert a flashback to Curt at about ten years of age.

Because it wasn't my forty-seven-year-old, accomplished technology/chief architect/executive–type husband trying to tell me something. It was, rather, the kid my husband had been, who liked not only to solve puzzles other people created but to design complex puzzles himself. He was a kid whose family of eight siblings was the product of three different fathers. His school nickname was "Curt Dirt," because he was often neglected and because the household's dirty dishes often piled up by the back door instead of being cleaned in the kitchen sink. He would grow up and buy one sister a home to stop her from

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* Yes, I did get married—twice, in fact, and both by choice, not by arrangement.

being homeless and help a brother to fix missing teeth to improve his job prospects. Curt had always noticed that people sometimes needed a scaffold to help them rise. He didn't seek to offer charity but to enable others to build solutions. Having "made it" despite many obstacles, he simply wanted to help others by contributing everything he knew about technology and the value of sharing information.

I wish I had seen all the personal meaning in his question at that moment. It's so obvious now. Before he embarked on such a venture, I suggested that he get a career coach, who asked him, "Why wait? A PhD will take years and won't really make much of a difference." Volunteering at a local food bank was probably what she had in mind, but as a systems thinker, Curt was aiming to make more of a global impact—a *real* dent with a measurable difference. He imagined doing something that would improve the lives of thousands—even millions—of people around the world.

He did follow his coach's advice by beginning with a simple act: blogging about what he cared about most deeply, namely, ways to improve conditions for people in economically challenged developing areas.[1] Even though he had virtually no readership, the blog enabled him to develop and express his own ideas more clearly. Next, he created a collaborative website (a "wiki")[2] where he could share his passion with a like-minded community. He had no idea if such a community even existed, but he dared to hope and acted accordingly. After a few weeks, Chris Watkins, an amateur importer/exporter in Indonesia, discovered Curt's writing and invited him to join an existing three-month-old wiki that was slightly further along in the same direction. Lonny Grafman, an instructor at Humboldt State University, had started that wiki.

No member of this motley crew was a leading expert in the field of development; what united them wasn't education, expertise, or credentials. Instead, they had something else important in common: a shared purpose about which they were equally passionate. Purpose can achieve something that money alone cannot, as it motivates the best *in* people and brings *out* the very best people.

ARMCHAIR ONLYNESS IN ACTION

Within a few months, Curt and his partners started to mobilize, forming a nonprofit, the Appropedia Foundation, and building the website Appropedia.org. The purpose of the foundation was to gather, organize, and make available useful information about how to solve such real-world problems as obtaining clean water and reducing the spread of malaria. They had discovered that a large portion of projects (as much as 50 percent[3]) was actually repetitive work, looking for solutions and answers that already existed. Appropedia made the necessary know-how accessible. People could modify it for their needs, share their experiences, and find others with the same interest. In short, an extended network of people could now achieve real results faster and with less effort, without requiring anyone to be "in charge" to make it happen. The Appropedia founders still have day jobs and have never received a salary from their organization. Each of them spends several hours a week on the project—less time than most people spend watching TV. The funding for server fees and such is largely covered by personal donations and some small grants.

The Appropedia team's success in making a difference while devoting only a few hours a week struck me then as a crucial factor, as it meant that, enabled by modern technologies, anyone could begin making a dent in the world. At first, I thought of this as a way to shape the modern understanding of jobs and labor. But then I realized it could also change how any one of us could do something that mattered. Witnessing modest effort result in something significant and transformative showed me the power of what is now possible.

In the nearly ten years of Appropedia's existence, it has enabled many people to create outcomes that matter: increased crop yields in Uganda, the use of solar power to improve water sanitation in rural India, the prevention of deforestation by the use of better, more efficient cookstoves in southern Sudan, and the construction of safer play structures in New York City. Today, Appropedia.org offers information

about more than twenty thousand solutions, helping more than twenty million visitors a year and improving lives around the world. The thousands of people around the world who have participated by translating the site's content into different languages or adding their own solutions were doing so not as passive followers of some directive but as active agents who cared deeply about the issues involved. This type of following represented a new way to scale that I'd never encountered before. Previously I had only experienced scale in the corporate world, where scale was often about sameness: The ability to deliver hamburger number one thousand at the same quality level as hamburger number one was accomplished by routinizing tasks so it didn't matter who specifically performed them; people were simply cogs in a machine. Appropedia grew in size and impact not by asking any person to do the known thing over and over but by enabling each person to add their bits of what only they could, and have it add up to something meaningful.

For Appropedia, scale happened because people passionately took responsibility for whatever they could. Instead of seeing chaos, which I might have expected, I watched in awe as an entirely new system made things happen. *Seemingly powerless people, fueled by their deepest—even sometimes unnamable—sense of meaning find those who share a cause or purpose and act together, without needing to be told what to do, to make a dent.*

Without permission or needing to be appointed by someone.
Without specialized expertise.
Without a ton of money.
Without the external credentials of titles or education.
Without investing loads of time.

WHY NOW, REALLY?

Think about what's new and different in the Appropedia story: Could Curt and his colleagues have achieved what they did until recently? Likely not.

Each big technology shift changes the structure of society, and the Internet is just the latest. Individuals today have access to information that was previously available only to the establishment, if it was available at all. Now everyone can find, friend, or follow people who share their interests and passions using a variety of social media, whether Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn. Where once geography or social class limited us, we can now write to anyone and say, *I've been following your work and I have an idea for how we can create value together and get something done.* We can now raise money for a worthy cause on Kickstarter or Funding Circle. We can share ideas through near-ubiquitous Internet, mobile, and 3G access, via vehicles like Dropbox or wikis. Even language no longer presents a barrier, given the widespread availability of free translation tools.

Technology is the mechanism that now makes it *easy* enough, *fast* enough, *cheap* enough, and *efficient* enough to gather together people who share a purpose and galvanize them to act. It has also made possible a major shift in how we organize to create scale. Before the rise of the Internet, most people had to join a large organization—business, military, religious, governmental, or nonprofit—to attain the position and power that could enable them to change the world. That typically meant "fitting in" to a given organizational culture. New, fresh, and original ideas—born of different "onlys"—tend not to thrive in these contexts. Despite all the love talk in our culture toward disruptive ideas, they are more often viewed as unruly and untamed and so are easily targeted and killed within organizations, which also tend to avoid hiring genuine rebels, misfits, and black sheep.

Today, networks offer a new way to get things done. Any collection of people can pursue ideas together without organizational authority or hierarchies.* When value creation is institutional and hierarchical,

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* How does one define "network"? Some people make it really complex. I prefer how Joel Podolny and Karen Page defined it, as any collection of people ($n > 2$) that pursues things together while lacking organizational authority. Published in 1998, their article "Network Forms of Organization" (*Annual Review of Sociology* 24:1–554) is a good resource for this model.

the vast majority of people are treated as cogs, dispensable and replace-able. But when value creation is networked, the distinct ideas, judg-ments, and decision making of individual players—you and I—matter more as the fundamental building blocks of value creation. This seems the ultimate game changer: While organizations and hierarchies con-tinue to serve many useful purposes, we no longer *need* them to attain big goals.

MORE WHERE THAT CAME FROM

Watching my husband do the seemingly impossible from his red-checkered armchair made me ever more aware of other seemingly powerless people achieving comparably remarkable results. And the more I observed, the more clear the fundamental scope became.

Could it be that there was a new power at hand?

A new way in, even for seemingly wild ideas?

At last, a path for ideas born of our "one wild and precious life" to have a shot?

For many years and in the course of two books, I've explored how breakthrough ideas are discovered and valued, and why doing so is important. My first book examined how that process occurs within the context of firms. My second argued that value creation could in-creasingly come from outside the perimeter of the organization, so the key to success wasn't being competitive but, rather, being collabora-tive, including ideas from anywhere. That's where I first introduced the onlyness thesis, arguing it would be centrally important in an ideas-based, creative economy. So I have long been advocating that ideas do and can (and should) come from anywhere, and from anyone.

In *The Power of Onlyness*, I've pursued a new set of questions. First, instead of continuing to study firm-centric examples, where I was effectively pleading, cajoling, and convincing leaders to let new ideas in, I've now focused on the compelling forces of change: the ideas themselves. This led me to different domains, including education,

filmmaking, coworking spaces, social justice, and, yes, even business. Despite dropping the jargon of innovation, the stories that follow embody innovation to their core by showing exactly how new ideas turn into new realities. Second, because the power of the person bringing an idea can either *liberate* or *limit* that idea, how to change those power dynamics became key to understand. That meant asking how new ideas can emerge and scale despite the relatively low power status of those who have them. What are their strategies, and what are the precise reasons why those strategies work? And how can others emulate them?

What became clear after researching nearly three hundred dent makers is that there *is* a new path forward. Studying these people taught me a lot about how ideas can start out small yet make a huge dent. This book tells twenty or so of their stories. These accounts are personally inspiring and, at the same time, highly instructive. Each illustrates useful principles and practices, independent of story and place, and my hope is that together they will serve as a guidebook for you that is both practical and motivating.

All of these stories reveal how ordinary people who would once have been unable to make a dent in the world have done so by acting from their purpose, finding meaningful allies, and then mobilizing many to act as one. Among them are:

- André Delbecq, a former business school dean. Delbecq pursued a question that was downright heresy in the business curriculum: Can faith be taught alongside the pursuit of fortune? His quest instantiated a completely new field of study: spirituality in business.
- Franklin Leonard, a twentysomething binge-watching film lover who began a Hollywood career at the lowest level, yet got the entire industry to reconsider how scripts were picked to become films.

- Talia Milgrom-Elcott, who with a staff of only ten has managed to mobilize hundreds of organizations to train a hundred thousand STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) teachers in ten years, establishing the kind of learning and risk-taking context required for people to solve previously unsolvable problems.

While each story is different—spanning young and old, low tech and high, novices and experts, ranging across the world and a variety of subjects and types of dent—each demonstrates how, because of onlyness, new ideas end up getting their shot to make a difference. No matter what the person's age, or gender, or color, or so on, the ideas had a shot. To reshape industries. To advance agendas. To right wrongs. To invent things. To address age-old problems. To simply get things done. These stories not only give us hope but show us a pathway to the future.

Wild dreams now end up making a difference. They show us that it is possible for each of us to do the same, but only if we know *how*. This is where *The Power of Onlyness*, this book, fits in.