

HARD PIVOT

Embrace Change.

Find Purpose.

Show Up Fully.

APOLO OHNO



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INTRODUCTION

What Now?

The journey of a thousand miles starts
from beneath your feet.¹

LAO TZU

I was just twenty-seven years old when I walked away from my dream, from the only life I had known for the previous fourteen years. Just twenty-seven when I shed the skin (or *skinsuit*) that had come to define my entire identity: Apolo Ohno, Olympian. The fastest man on ice. *Sports Illustrated* cover model. Phenom. Champion.

I didn't make any sort of big announcement. There was no teary press conference, no parade in my hometown of Seattle, Washington. No major media interviews. In fact, I didn't really tell anybody what I was doing. But I knew I was done.

I had no doubt in my mind that I could still compete at a high level. If I'm being honest, I still feel that way. My confidence, which is one of the things that fueled my success as an athlete, hadn't wavered when I walked away from the sport. What changed was what was in my heart.

I knew how close to the sun I had flown all those years, and I remembered all the sacrifices I had made—all the outrageous things I'd demanded of myself in pursuit of my Olympic dream. And because I knew everything it took to achieve what I did on the ice and the toll those sacrifices exacted from me over four Olympic cycles—physically, mentally, and emotionally—I also knew what it would take for me to maintain and surpass that level of performance. And when I looked into the mirror, I knew it was time for a change.

I didn't know what it meant at the time, but I was headed for what I'd later call "the Great Divorce."

As an athlete, especially an Olympian, I knew that I'd been fortunate. I had the incredible honor of representing my country in three Olympic Games, and I had achieved my dream of becoming a champion. If they're lucky, most Olympians sacrifice and train like I did and only make one Olympic team, and most athletes who aspire to make the team give it everything they've got for years and years only to fall short of that goal.

Regardless of how much longevity and success one finds as a competitive athlete, the harsh truth is that all of us have a relatively short shelf life. The average NFL career is less than four years; the average professional baseball career is rarely more than six. And no matter what sport you're in, it hardly ever ends on your own terms. So many athletes reach the end of the line due to a limiting injury. Others get unceremoniously cut from the team, are traded to squads in locations they'd never choose to live, or stick around in diminishing roles as their abilities continue to decline. No matter how it happens, the end of an athlete's career rarely goes the way they'd planned. And when an athlete loses the one thing that's provided structure and purpose to their lives since they were a small child, they're forced to look into the mirror and ask questions that aren't easily answered. Questions like, *What now?*

Typically, we don't ask, *What now?* because we don't know how to *do* anything else. We ask because we don't know how to *be* anything else.

Losing a long-held identity can be frightening, even terrifying for some. I know it was for me. Although I was excited to embark on the next chapter in my journey, I was racked with self-doubt. I also felt lost and vulnerable in a way that I had never experienced before, and I responded by retreating into myself. Although I yearned for external guidance and approval—from a coach or my father—or at least to be understood by someone who could relate to what I was going through, I shut myself off from the outside world. I felt like an alien in a new land. I suffered many sleepless nights, trapped in the downward spiral of negative thoughts. In short, it felt like I was going to die.

In a way, part of me did. I had no idea how I was going to live with the gaping void that skating once filled in my life. *What now?* was merely

the first in a series of seemingly impossible questions: *Who am I? Who do I want to be? What really matters in life?*

To discover the answers, I had to plunge into the unknown and make more mistakes than I care to remember, fail time and time again, and act in ways that I now consider embarrassing or foolish (more on all of that later in the book). I was twenty-seven—an age when many people have gained their first foothold in their professional and personal lives—but I felt like a kid, like I was starting life all over again.

HARD PIVOT

In speed skating, a *hard pivot* is an aggressive, high-speed turn executed at the corner of the rink. In a split second, a skater has to generate enough force, momentum, and pressure to carve a new path in the ice heading in the opposite direction—all while speeding up to forty miles per hour balancing on one leg and a sharpened blade barely a millimeter thick. I practiced this move countless times in training because messing it up in competition would spell disaster.

I didn't know it at the time, but the thousands of hours I spent practicing that turn—pivot after pivot, day after day—helped prepare me for my life's next act. Because pulling off that move required me to be utterly present and in the moment, every time. I wasn't thinking about the finish line. I wasn't keeping an eye on my opponents. It was just me and the blade and the ice.

Hard Pivot, this book, is a guide for anyone seeking to adapt and reinvent themselves in our rapidly changing, chaotic world. It's not a book only for athletes; it's for anyone who might find themselves at a crossroads in their life. Maybe you feel stuck in your job or chronically unfulfilled. Maybe your career path has been detoured by automation, corporate consolidation, or a deadly pandemic. Maybe you suffer from debilitating stress, anxiety, or conflicts in your personal relationships. Maybe you just want to mix things up and start fresh. Maybe you want to carve out a path for yourself that doesn't sacrifice your family life—time with your parents or children, for example. Whatever it is, *Hard Pivot* is meant to help you to identify what it is you want out of life and what it is that life wants out of you.

Hard Pivot is full of the tips and techniques I leaned on to make the most of my own period of self-analysis and transition, the same ones I use now in my work helping others navigate their own transformation. Along the way, I'll invite you to take a closer look at the concept of identity and explore the reasons why so many of us feel defined by our careers and relationships. After that, we'll take a closer look at goal setting, motivation, maintaining perspective, accountability, belief, and purpose, as well as how these things can help us reinvent ourselves and live with more happiness, good health, joy, and wonder. You'll also find lots of exercises and actionable takeaways designed to keep you on track, helping you steer clear of old habits while cultivating new ones. I'll also invite you to view challenges as opportunities for growth, learn to better address your fears, value your process over the end result, and develop your own definition and criteria for success. In short, it's going to be a lot of work, but it's also going to be a lot of fun.

THE FIVE GOLDEN PRINCIPLES

Reinvention is a process. There's no magic pill or shortcut and very few straight lines. That's why I came up with the following framework (covered in more detail in chapter 8)—to help keep me going in the right direction when the road starts to zigzag. I use these five principles daily because I've found that they work, even when I stumble. And because they work, I stumble less.

Gratitude Expressing gratitude as a daily practice enables us to maintain perspective, cultivate empathy, and alleviate stress.

Giving Selflessly giving our time, attention, and resources to others helps us transcend the limitations imposed by our egos.

Grit When we develop the mental stamina, resilience, and toughness to persevere through difficult challenges, we grow even stronger.

Gearing Up Preparing ourselves mentally and physically for the challenges ahead, we can level up our expectations and perform at our best.

Go We learn by doing, by taking the shot, by diving headfirst. By actually doing—by taking a *go* at it—we realize that failure isn't what we

once thought it was, and we make a habit of picking ourselves up and trying again.

My hope is that these five principles (and the rest of this book) will help you get across the finish line and bring about the positive changes you yearn to make in life. It won't be easy, and there might be times along the way when you feel tempted to return to your old ways of living because pushing ahead toward the new you can be disorienting and disheartening. It's natural to doubt yourself from time to time, to convince yourself that the voices are right—that you aren't good enough, smart enough, wealthy enough, or whatever your particular "enough" is. And when that happens (as it will), I invite you to do something different: let your inner critic have its say, keep going, and remember that struggle is just part of the larger process.

As Douglas Malloch says in one of his poems, "Good timber does not grow with ease."² Sometimes our challenges and struggles are exactly what we need in order to grow and change, and there's always risk involved when we've decided to pivot. That's why speed skaters wear helmets. Of course, quite often our challenges are beyond our control (as much of life is), and when that happens, it's important to remember that we still have a say in how we respond. By harnessing our focus, our intentions, our will, and the incredible potential of the human mind, we can learn to make new choices, reinvent ourselves, and achieve way more than we ever thought possible.

Are you ready?

CHAPTER ONE

The Great Divorce

When we are no longer able to change a situation,
we are challenged to change ourselves.¹

VIKTOR FRANKL

Before you can reinvent yourself, you first have to decide who you want to be. I don't mean who other people want you to be or who you think you *should* be or who you think you deserve to be. You get to decide who you truly *want* to be, and you get to do so with your own criteria.

Most of us who grew up in the United States have been conditioned to define ourselves by our professions, even when our inclinations, desires, and skills aren't necessarily in line with our job title. Instinctually, we know that our work is only one part of who we are and that there are other less publicly recognized identities (as parents, volunteers, gardeners, or musicians) that are closer to our hearts. And even those labels don't tell the whole story.

PRACTICE**LISTING YOUR LABELS**

This is a short exercise that we'll be revisiting a little later in the chapter. Simply jot down two lists on a piece of paper. On the first list, write down some things that people know you as: your job titles and roles in your community, for example (this list includes labels such as "FedEx driver," "unemployed accountant," "kids' soccer coach," and "guy

with all the pink flamingos in his front yard”). For the second list, put down all the roles and labels that you identify yourself with (“father of two,” “avid reader,” “biker,” “pinball enthusiast”). The two lists might overlap in some places, but you might be surprised at how different they are.

THE FIRST CHAPTER

Early on in my career as a speed skater, my father told me that life is a series of chapters, one leading to the next and that we lean on the lessons and insights we gain along the way to move forward into whatever comes next. That’s hard to see when you’re so immersed in one particular chapter of your life. I spent years and years believing that being an Olympian would be the primary identity that defined me, and it would take a long time for me to understand how limiting that perspective was. Of course, winning those medals opened doors for me that just aren’t available to most people, and I’ll be forever thankful for those earlier chapters of my life. And although some people will always know me first as an Olympian or a winner on *Dancing with the Stars* no matter what I do, I can now see those parts of my life with the first Golden Principle I listed a few pages back: gratitude. I might not identify as an Olympian anymore, but my father was right—those earlier chapters led to where I am today. And for that, I’m grateful. They were springboards that empowered me to pursue new paths, interests, and opportunities.

It took me a long time to gain this new perspective. I had pursued my competitive goals with such single-minded purpose that I didn’t think too much about what the future held. On one hand, that single-mindedness is one of the reasons I was so successful as a speed skater; on the other, it’s also why I was so ill-prepared for life when I retired from the sport. I was twenty-seven years old, but inside I felt seventeen. I had no academic education to speak of, no work experience, and no training in finance or business. I’d never developed other parts of my personality, gained any other skill sets, or pursued any source of purpose or meaning outside of speed skating. I had ignored or pushed everything else away from me (including intimate relationships) in pursuit of my ultimate goals.

The Olympics were my first great love. Even now, I can close my eyes and hear the hush that descends on the arena just before a race, so quiet I could almost hear my competitors' hearts beating as we took our marks. At that moment, I had no doubt whatsoever about my purpose or meaning in life. As a representative of my country, I was part of something bigger and more substantial than myself, and eight different times, I found myself standing on top of the world with millions of eyes on me, as an Olympic medal was placed around my neck. Those moments defined the entirety of my existence. I'm telling you all of this just to convey how profound the Great Divorce actually was for me.

I HAD CHOSEN TO DIVORCE MYSELF FROM
MY PREVIOUS IDENTITY—THE ONE I FOOLISHLY
THOUGHT WOULD CARRY ME THROUGH
THE REST OF MY LIFE—BUT I HAD NO IDEA
HOW TO GO ABOUT FORGING A NEW ONE.

My first aha moment was when I realized that my skills inside the ice rink weren't exactly transferable to other arenas in life. In business meetings, for example, I was eager and focused, but I was also lost at first, and my lack of experience in the industries I wanted to be involved with made me feel insecure and small. And then I noticed that the further I got away from skating, the less frequently I was asked to do speaking engagements (and be paid for doing them). On top of it all, I struggled with the basics of how to arrange my day. For the longest time, my days had been structured around the team's training program, and I was no longer in the same world with those teammates and coaches—people I'd leaned on for years and years.

In short, the reality of the Great Divorce hit me harder each successive day. Everything I had accomplished—everything I *was*—seemed relegated to the past, mere scratches on a result sheet that would be eventually forgotten in time. It's hard to describe the confusion, uncertainty, and fear I experienced as a result of that realization.

I didn't know what else I was good at doing or if I was good enough to succeed at anything else. I had chosen to divorce myself from my previous identity—the one I foolishly thought would carry me through the rest of my life—but I had no idea how to go about forging a new one. I didn't know if anything could ever replace the passion I once had, the drive to succeed, or the incredibly powerful sense of identity I had with my sport. But I did know that whatever I was going to do next would be done away from the ice.

When I retired from skating, the thing I craved most and hungered to show the world was that there was so much more to me than what I did on the ice. I desperately wanted people to recognize me for the skills and strengths that I had outside of the Olympic sphere, even though I wasn't quite sure what those were just yet. I didn't want to go out to eat and just be recognized as Apolo Ohno, "Former Olympian Speed Skater." I didn't want people to look at me as just another dumb jock. I didn't want to be just the latest face on a Wheaties box, one that would be replaced in short order and eventually vanished from public consciousness.

What I'm pointing out is that my pursuit for a new identity didn't have the healthiest start. It was reactionary, ego-driven, and fueled by my *FOPO* (fears of other people's opinions). Going back to the opening of this chapter, I wasn't looking into who I truly wanted to be; I was focused on what other people thought of me and what I mistakenly believed they expected from me. I was still terrified of letting others down—my father, my friends, my teammates, and my fans. Basically, I forgot about me. I forgot about the one person I should have been prioritizing the whole time.

A NEW PIVOT

Right after the Great Divorce, the first thing I did was sprint as far away from the United States as I could, mostly to Asia. I'd always been enamored of other cultures—the food, people, sights, and sounds. I loved being near the Buddhist monks in Thailand, gazing out upon rice fields in China, and enjoying the peace and tranquility of *onsen* baths throughout Japan, where my ancestors on my father's side are from.

While I was in Asia still working out what I wanted to do next in life, I haphazardly began pursuing various business interests, none of which I knew anything about. I started with rare earth minerals, and then I moved into cross-border investments, manufacturing, real estate, infrastructure, mining, shipping, and tech (among other industries). Although my experience in these arenas was quite limited, my curiosity and willingness to learn was quite high. Furthermore, I'd long since practiced the art of surrounding myself with experts, and immersing myself in their expertise jump-started my education and helped me cultivate important relationships along the way. Once I got started, I said yes to basically everything that came my way. That time in my life was quite disorienting and sometimes frightening, but it was also exhilarating. I was starting from scratch, something I hadn't done since I was a kid.

As I'd shown with skating all those years ago, I proved to be a quick study. And because I'd trained as a sprinter for so long, I was accustomed to going really fast to figure out what I had to accomplish and how. I worked at warp speed to learn everything I could about these businesses so I wouldn't walk into a meeting with, say, a bunch of investment bankers and encounter puzzled looks on their faces when I opened my mouth—looks that would signal that I didn't belong in the room, that I was out of my depth, that I should go back to doing what I was most familiar with.

I wanted the respect of my business partners. I yearned for them to see me as a peer, as someone who knew what he was talking about, as someone whose perspective brought value to the conversation. To that end, I spent my waking hours studying these businesses, teaching myself everything I could about the various industries, and immersing myself in their worlds. It didn't take long for me to notice that the drive and relentlessness that enabled me to win Olympic medals was transferable to these new ventures. I was beginning to see that I was way more prepared for my reinvention than previously expected. Just because you pivot, it doesn't mean you should leave all your hard-earned skills behind. All your strengths and experiences are part of your transformation.

It dawned on me that I had become a great speed skater not simply because I was gifted as an athlete but because of my approach to