

THE ART OF PASSAGE

*Four Steps to Moving Forward
When There Is No Other Way*

Sam Mousavi

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*For my mother,
who never stopped in the face of any storm,
and by never stopping,
taught me what Passage really means.*

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Foreword

In today's world, "creativity" is everywhere. Executives demand it, universities promise to teach it, corporations plaster it across their mission statements, and social media is flooded with hacks on how to "think more creatively." Yet, if we look closely, a bizarre paradox emerges: the more we talk about creativity, the vaguer and more superficial our understanding of it becomes.

Most of what is peddled as creativity is merely a collection of clichés and motivational quotes: "Think outside the box," "Trust your gut," "Don't fear failure." These phrases might inspire, but they rarely explain how truly valuable ideas are forged. They don't reveal how the human mind frames a problem, how it selects from thousands of possible associations, or why some ideas thrive while others never survive the spark phase.

This book is an active rebellion against those simplistic narratives. Here, creativity is neither a mystical talent nor a bumper-sticker slogan. It is examined as a complex, yet entirely decipherable process—one that takes shape at the exact intersection of cognition, experience, limitation, judgment, and execution.

A significant part of my personal experience shaped the perspective of this book. Living and working as an entrepreneur in Iran—especially for someone obsessed with ideation and problem-solving—is an unintentional, high-stakes laboratory for creativity. In an environment where resources are painfully scarce, paths are rarely smooth, and existing structures are practically designed to stifle innovation, simply *having* an idea is never enough.

In such a pressure cooker, you quickly realize that creativity is less about sudden lightning strikes of inspiration and more about the ability to spot patterns hidden within constraints. Ideas often sprout from the very things that look like dealbreakers: resource shortages, glaring contradictions, and questions with no clear answers. Constraints, contrary to popular belief, are not the enemies of creativity; they are its highest-octane fuel.

One of the central premises of this book is astonishingly simple: *A lack of ideas is rarely the actual problem.* The human brain is hardwired to generate novel associations. The real bottleneck lies elsewhere:

Identifying the *right* problem.

Selecting the *valuable* idea.

Paving the path to execute that idea.

That is why this book treats creativity not merely as “brainstorming,” but as an end-to-end operating system. You might find that some concepts here directly contradict what you’ve been taught: that absolute freedom doesn’t always foster creativity, that deep expertise can be both an engine and a roadblock, and that the most profound breakthroughs stem from relentless iteration, not sudden epiphanies.

Before We Begin: What Kind of Book Is This?

The book you hold in your hands refuses to follow dry, conventional formats. *Passage* is neither a purely academic textbook nor a self-indulgent memoir. It is a hybrid built for those who want real-world lessons extracted from real-world survival.

Between these chapters, we will track a true story step-by-step: the journey of one of my own ideas, starting from absolute zero,

navigating through market launch, customer acquisition, fierce resistance, brutal failure, and eventual resurrection. This isn't a sterile case study; it's a living, breathing narrative of the concepts we discuss. This story acts as the invisible thread stitching the entire book together.

Simultaneously, I will introduce a four-step framework you can deploy against any dead end—be it personal, professional, or organizational. This framework wasn't born in a vacuum; it was forged in the fires of these exact real-world trials. I call it **Passage:**

Observing: Observing the actual problem and unearthing hidden assumptions.

Reframing: Shifting your angle of attack.

Creating a Path: Creating new possibilities, rather than obsessing over a final fix.

Advancing: Taking micro-steps forward, even when the complete solution remains elusive.

If you are looking for an authentic story of resilience and innovation under extreme pressure, this book is for you. If you need actionable tools to shatter your mental roadblocks, this book is also for you. The only prerequisite is an open mind, ready to accept one fundamental truth:

Problems aren't always solved—but you can always find a way through them.

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Introduction

It is a crisp winter morning in Tehran. The sun has barely risen, and a biting chill hangs in the air. Outside an old government administrative building, a line of people has already formed. Some clutch folders tight against their chests, others nervously double-check their documents, and the rest stand with their hands shoved deep into their coat pockets, visibly irritated.

The line creeps forward—one agonizing step every few minutes. In lines like this, regardless of geography, everyone quickly reaches the same bleak consensus: *We are powerless*. The system is rigid, the bureaucracy is soul-crushing, the rules are the rules, and all you can do is wait.

The murmurs in the crowd reflect this collective resignation.

“It’s always like this here,” one mutters.

“If you’re missing a single paper, they make you start all over,” another warns.

Someone sighs heavily, “By the time we get to the front, they’ll probably just tell us to come back tomorrow.”

A few minutes pass. A man standing near the front steps out of the line and pushes through the glass doors of the building. The doors swing shut, and the line falls back into a tense silence. People watch him go, curious but quiet. Everyone is waiting to see what happens.

Moments later, the man returns. He pushes the doors open, walks down the steps, and heads straight back to the line. The people closest to him immediately ask, “What happened?”

With complete nonchalance, the man replies, “They said if you have your original ID and a photocopy ready, it goes much

faster. If you don't have the copy, they'll probably send you to the back of the line."

Suddenly, a strange energy ripples through the crowd. People start unzipping bags and frantically flipping through folders. Phones are pulled out.

"I have my copy!" one person announces.

"There's a print shop at the end of the block," another points out.

Instantly, half a dozen people break formation and sprint toward the corner shop.

The physical line is exactly the same. The dreary building hasn't changed. The rigid bureaucratic laws are firmly intact. But the *atmosphere* of the queue has fundamentally transformed. Now, the people know what action they can take. The overarching problem hasn't been solved, but a path forward has been illuminated.

When we think about creativity, we usually imagine grandiose things: world-changing inventions, strokes of genius, or visionaries pulling entirely new paradigms out of thin air. But in real life, creativity often takes a much humbler shape. Sometimes, creativity is simply this: observing a detail everyone else missed and opening a path that was previously invisible.

Most situations we label as "dead ends" mirror that bureaucratic queue perfectly. The problem is looming, but the ultimate solution is out of reach. The rules haven't changed, resources are capped, and the circumstances are what they are. In these moments, our brains default to fatalism: *Nothing can be done. The problem can't be solved, so we must stop.*

Yet, the history of science, business, and everyday life tells a wildly different story. The most significant breakthroughs almost always occur *while the core problem is still unsolved*.

At its simplest, creativity is the ability to forge new paths forward—especially when the familiar roads hit a brick wall. In those critical moments, a creative mind asks a different question:

If this problem cannot be solved right now, is there still a way to move forward?

This book is about those exact moments. The moments where the problem is massive, but the complete answer is missing. In these situations, the most vital skill you can possess is the ability to *navigate through*. Because in life's highest-stakes scenarios, the primary goal isn't necessarily to fix the problem completely.

The real goal is figuring out how to keep moving forward.

Chapter 1:

The Mental Dead End — Why We Can't See the Real Problem

"The main problem isn't that we can't find the path. It's that the path we see is the only one we know how to look for."

I was 9 years old when I lost my father. He was a math teacher—the kind who went to school every morning with genuine enthusiasm, the kind his students called a "genius." In Malayer, our small town in western Iran, he was a familiar, respected face. One day, his heart stopped, and just like that, everything was over.

In those days, our house was filled with people hugging me, using that specific tone of voice reserved for pitied orphans: "Poor thing, having to face this stage of life so soon." My siblings were older, but the worried glances mostly gravitated toward me.

A few weeks passed. The house still carried the heavy scent of grief, but I had found a safe haven for myself: the world of video games. Unlike many kids my age, I thrived on high-stress, challenging games. The harder the level, the greater the thrill. Sometimes, I would intentionally tweak the game's settings on manual—reducing my resources, multiplying the enemies, and complicating the conditions. Then, I would push forward with those bare-minimum assets. No whining, no asking for help. I had discovered a simple rule at that age: "If you can manage a brutal level with minimal resources, the normal levels become an absolute cakewalk."

One day, right in the middle of one of these games, my hands froze on the controller. A thought struck me like lightning: *Wait... maybe this life is a game, too. The main character is currently stuck in a brutal level. His resources are scarce. He's lost a major part of his inventory. But in strategy games, even on "Ultra-Hard" mode, you don't get to complain or hit pause to beg for more*

resources. You just have to keep going. With what you have. And figure out how to clear the level with the highest possible score.

Right there, in a dimly lit room facing a screen where the main character was on the brink of a "Game Over," a 9-year-old boy made a decision that is still woven into the fabric of his life decades later. But while that spark—the idea of treating life like a game—was born in that dimly lit room, the lesson of *continuing* came from somewhere else. From my mother. A woman who now had to raise four children on her own, without ever letting anyone see her crumble. She never spoke about "Passage." But every morning she woke up and set life back in motion, she was living it. In those days, I had two teachers: my father, whose death showed me that reality could be reframed, and my mother, whose quiet persistence showed me that you could keep going—even when nothing had been solved yet. So, I didn't bring my father back, nor did I change the circumstances. I simply changed my definition of the situation. And that is the exact micro-shift this entire book is about. Here is the takeaway: With one tiny shift in my mind, those bitter days morphed into a mission. A level in a game.

What I discovered at age 9—without knowing its name—is exactly what Nobel laureate economist Herbert Simon later summarized: "Most human problems are, in fact, problems of problem definition."

I don't share this story to elicit sympathy, but for a very specific purpose: I want you to see that "redefining" a problem isn't some abstract psychological concept. It is a survival skill that even a 9-year-old can wield. If he could do it, so can you.

1. The "Default Definition" Trap

The human brain loves to oversimplify. When confronted with a complex situation, we subconsciously force it into a familiar

mold, defining the problem the only way we know how. This is often an efficient shortcut, but it has a massive blind spot: we lock onto that initial definition and become entirely blind to the actual shape of the problem.

Cognitive psychologists have identified two distinct phases of this phenomenon. The first is the **Mental Set**: getting stuck on familiar solutions because they've worked in the past. The second is **Cognitive Tunneling**: the narrowing of our attention field to the point where fresh, out-of-the-box information is completely filtered out. First, we lock ourselves in a box; then, we forget that a world outside the box even exists. The end result is the same: the default definition takes the wheel, and the real problem remains hidden in the shadows.

Mohammad's Story: When the "Lazy Worker" Was an Illusion

An old friend of mine, Mohammad, used to work at an auto parts manufacturing plant in the suburbs of Tehran. He mentioned that their assembly line was constantly facing delays—specifically at one particular station where parts had to be lifted off a conveyor belt and assembled on a workbench.

The factory managers had made their diagnosis: "The workers at this station are lazy. They're too slow." Their solutions matched the diagnosis: written warnings, threats of pay cuts, and even swapping out shifts. Nothing changed.

Mohammad, however, was a keen observer. One day, instead of shouting from a distance, he walked over to that exact station and just watched. After half an hour, he spotted a simple pattern entirely absent from the management reports: to pick up a single part, the workers had to bend down 40 centimeters

and twist their bodies 90 degrees. They weren't inefficient; the conveyor belt was simply installed at the wrong height.

Mohammad went to the plant manager: "The problem isn't the workers. The belt is 30 centimeters below standard height. Put a platform under it." They didn't believe him. But after two weeks of bargaining, they welded a basic metal platform under the belt. The station's processing time dropped by 40%.

Systemic Lesson: The factory managers had fallen squarely into the "Default Definition" trap. They defined the problem as: "Why are the workers lazy?" But the real problem was: "Why is the workstation design suboptimal?" A tiny pivot in the angle of the question revealed a solution that had been hiding in plain sight for months.

Your Tool: When you are stuck in a situation—at work or at home—ask yourself: "Am I framing this as a 'people' problem or a 'system design' problem?" More often than not, the bottleneck is in the system, not the personality.

The Crowded Building Riddle

Let's look at an everyday example.

In a relatively large, older residential complex, a bizarre issue had emerged. Almost every week, arguments and complaints broke out among the neighbors. Some residents claimed there was too much noise in the hallways in the afternoons. Others complained that the elevators were always chaotic and overcrowded. A few were furious that kids were playing in the lobby, ruining the peace and quiet.

A meeting was held between the residents and the building manager. Various proposals were thrown around: stricter noise curfews, installing more security cameras, restricting elevator

usage. Every proposal sparked a new wave of pushback. The debate dragged on, and the problem persisted.

Finally, one resident suggested that before drafting any new rules, they should just observe the building's rhythm for a few days—no judgments, no jumping to conclusions. After a few days of observation, a pattern emerged: the bulk of the chaos happened in a specific window, roughly between 3:00 PM and 7:00 PM. During this time, several things collided: families were returning from work, kids had pent-up energy to burn, and older residents were heading out for groceries or walks.

The problem wasn't that the people were unruly or breaking rules. The problem was that the building had zero designated space for kids to play or for residents to briefly gather. The ultimate solution was remarkably simple: a section of the outdoor courtyard was converted into a small play area, and a few benches were placed in a corner. After that, the hallways quieted down, the elevators cleared up, and the complaints essentially vanished.

The fascinating part is that during all those initial heated meetings, no one had uttered a word about the "lack of common space." Everyone was talking about "people's behavior," not "spatial design." The problem was originally defined as: "Why won't these neighbors follow the rules?" But when the definition shifted and the question was reframed as—"How is this building actually designed for the daily lives of its residents?"—a solution materialized out of thin air.

Systemic Lesson: This story is a microcosm of a universal pattern. We default to defining issues in terms of people—John is disorganized, Jane isn't a team player. But the real friction is usually in the structure. Shifting the lens from "people" to

"systems" is one of the most powerful redefinitions you can master.

Why Does This Happen?

Changing the definition changes the intellectual playing field. This is exactly what Theodore Levitt warned American railroad executives about in his classic 1960 article, **Marketing Myopia**. In the 1950s, US railroad companies faced a catastrophic decline in passengers. The executives assumed their problem was competition from cars and airplanes. Levitt argued their actual problem was different: they had defined themselves as being in the "railroad business," rather than the "transportation business." If you define your problem narrowly, your solutions will be narrow. If you see yourself purely as a "railway," the invention of the airplane destroys you. But if you are a "transportation company," you can just go buy airplanes.

Back in Iran, I passed the entrance exam for the gifted and talented high school, and like 90% of the kids in my generation, I majored in experimental sciences. "You have to become a doctor." I heard this sentence so often it felt like the only permissible path in life. But there was a glaring glitch: I had zero interest in medicine. I actually hated it. Yet, I went ahead and took the grueling national medical entrance exam—and failed to get into my desired field.

That failure, bizarrely, became a window. It forced me to ask myself: Is my actual problem "getting into med school," or is it "finding the right life path"? That shift in questioning—from "How do I succeed on this specific track?" to "Is this even the right track?"—changed everything. In an environment like Iran, where nurturing individual talents can be more structurally challenging than in other places, this was a radical,

foundational question that dismantled everything I thought I knew about success and the future. (I will definitely dive deeper into this in later chapters).

Systemic Lesson: Changing the definition changes the mental playing field. If I had accepted "medicine" as the sole definition of success, I never would have become an entrepreneur.

Your Tool: Think of a problem you are currently wrestling with. Ask yourself: "Is this the absolute only way to define this issue? If a total stranger stepped into my shoes, how would they define the situation? Am I looking for the flaw in the 'people' or the 'system'?"

2. Cognitive Tunneling: Why Even Experts Go Blind

If you think messing up the problem definition is a rookie mistake, consider this story.

In a massive European manufacturing plant, a critical machine kept overheating, constantly halting the production line. In a war room packed with veteran engineers, everyone was fixated on one premise: the defect is inside the machine. Components were stripped and inspected, the cooling system was rigorously analyzed. Mountains of data were collected: temperature logs, downtime stamps, system pressure gauges. Everything was meticulously charted. Yet, no solution worked. The meeting dragged on for hours. More charts were scrutinized. Every proposed fix just spawned a new technical headache.

A few weeks later, a junior engineer, instead of obsessing over the parts, started looking at the downtime timestamps. He spotted a trend: the machine almost exclusively overheated during a very specific window of the work shift. He stayed on the factory floor for a few days to watch the line up close. He

realized that during that specific hour, the raw materials feeding into the machine were slightly different—not in quality, but in temperature. They were a few degrees warmer than usual. These materials were stored in a warehouse near the factory's loading dock doors, and during specific hours of the day, direct sunlight hit that exact spot. When the warmer materials entered the system, internal friction spiked, causing the machine to overheat.

The solution wasn't high-tech: they just reorganized the warehouse inventory layout.

Systemic Lesson: The kicker here isn't just the simplicity of the fix. It's that everyone in those war rooms was an elite expert. They had all the data. But they shared a massive, unexamined assumption: "The flaw must be inside the machine." No one challenged it. The problem was boxed into "Why is the machine overheating?" instead of "What in the machine's environment might be causing it to overheat?" One slight pivot in the question blew the doors wide open.

Your Tool: When tackling a stubborn problem, ask yourself: "What assumption have I accepted as so blindingly obvious that I haven't even thought to question it?" Yank that exact assumption out and see what new paths appear.

3. A Brain Not Built for Creativity

To understand why even the sharpest minds fall into the default definition trap, we have to look at the hardware.

The human brain is the product of millions of years of evolution. For the vast majority of that history, the priority wasn't being highly creative; it was making split-second decisions to survive. If our ancestors paused to carefully

analyze the nuances of a sudden rustling in the jungle, they probably wouldn't have lived long enough to pass on their genes.

A highly useful model in cognitive science maps out a cycle that looks like this:

Search for Safety → Halt → Threat

When the brain perceives a situation as complex or dangerous, it triggers three responses: 1) It drastically narrows attention, 2) It limits mental options, and 3) It hunts for the fastest route back to safety. This mechanism is spectacular for dodging predators. It is an absolute disaster for solving complex, modern problems. Because the most critical issues in our lives sit right in the zone where there are no obvious, immediate answers.

Neuroscience research shows that ambiguity is physically uncomfortable for the brain—the regions associated with threat and error processing light up. But the second we latch onto an explanation—even a deeply flawed one—activity in these stress centers drops. Simply put: having a bad answer feels much safer to your brain than having no answer at all.

This is why the mind scrambles to cling to the first plausible explanation. And if that explanation solidifies into the "definitive problem statement," it can march us down the wrong path for months—just like I almost wasted years chasing a medical degree simply because "Doctor" was the first definition of success my environment handed me.

Systemic Lesson: Your brain is not your enemy—it is just doing its evolutionary job. But you can consciously spot this cognitive shortcut and override it. Step one is awareness. Step

two is deliberately hitting the brakes and sitting with the ambiguity, rather than sprinting toward the first available exit.

The Challenger Disaster: When the Tunnel Turns Deadly

One of the most tragic manifestations of this phenomenon is the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster.

On the morning of January 28, 1986, the Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff, killing all seven crew members. It was later revealed that engineers had frantically warned management the night before about a component called an O-ring—a rubber seal that lost its elasticity in freezing temperatures. But the prevailing narrative at NASA was: "This system has flown multiple times and it works." Red flags were raised, but they were interpreted through the lens of the old, comfortable story. Sociologist Diane Vaughan later coined the term "**Normalization of Deviance**" for this: when a high-risk behavior occurs repeatedly without catastrophic consequences, it gradually becomes redefined as "normal."

Systemic Lesson: Challenger wasn't just an aerospace failure—it was a textbook case of cognitive tunneling on an organizational scale. And that same tunnel is one we walk into every single day in our own lives.

Reza's Story: When Sanctions Became a Window

But the mental tunnel doesn't always end in disaster. Sometimes, an external crisis is exactly the jolt we need to get kicked out of the tunnel and forced to look at a new path.

A few years ago, Reza—a close friend who ran a small logistics and ride-hailing tech startup—was hit with a massive shock. Google Maps, the technical backbone of his platform, blocked access to Iranian companies due to international tech

restrictions. One morning, his drivers couldn't see their routes. Customers couldn't track their rides. The entire operation ground to a halt.

What was his tech team's initial reaction? "We have to find a way to bypass the block and reconnect to Google." They started hunting for VPNs and workarounds. Every fix was a band-aid that would break a few days later. Pouring energy into "bypassing the restriction" was just bleeding the team dry.

Reza left the office for a few days. He went away and just thought. He came back and asked a very strange question: "We can't lift the geopolitical restrictions. But we can ask a different question: Do we even need Google in the first place?"

That redefinition—from "How do we bypass the block?" to "How do we operate without Google entirely?"—changed the game. The engineering team pivoted to researching alternatives. They discovered OpenStreetMap, a global, open-source project built by thousands of volunteers, similar to Wikipedia. But having a map was only step one; OSM doesn't have a native routing engine. They had to build their own. They utilized open-source libraries like GraphHopper and OSRM, spun up their own internal servers, and customized the raw map data to fit the specific traffic constraints of Iranian streets. A few months later, their platform was running flawlessly on a fully localized, open-source mapping architecture. Not only was the block issue permanently resolved, but their operational overhead—which previously bled millions of Tomans a month in Google API fees—plummeted.

Reza told me later: "Losing Google felt like the worst thing that could possibly happen to us. In reality, it was the best. Because it forced us out of our tunnel to build an infrastructure we never

would have considered otherwise. That crisis was our ultimate creativity coach."

Systemic Lesson: External crises—service blocks, sudden restrictions, massive life disruptions—are sometimes the exact blunt-force trauma required to knock us out of our cognitive tunnels. Not because crises are "good," but because they vaporize the familiar routes and force us to see options that were previously invisible.

4. Functional Fixedness: When the Mind Stays in the Box

In the 1940s, psychologist Karl Duncker designed an experiment that remains a cognitive psychology classic. He asked participants to attach a candle to a wall in a way that the wax wouldn't drip onto the table below. The available tools: a candle, a book of matches, and a box of thumbtacks.

Most people completely failed at first. Their brains viewed the thumbtack box strictly as a "container for tacks." But what's the solution? Empty the box, use the tacks to pin the box to the wall, and place the candle inside it. The moment someone saw this, the puzzle was instantly solved.

Duncker called this **Functional Fixedness**: the mind's stubborn tendency to view objects only in terms of their traditional, familiar functions. Modern research shows this cognitive bias is heavily active in engineering design, creative problem solving, and everyday decision-making.

And it's not just a lab trick. In 1991, two researchers proved that if you show designers existing examples of a product before they start a new design task, their creativity nosedives—their brains lock onto the provided templates. They called this "**Design Fixation.**"

Personal Experience: Functional fixedness doesn't just apply to objects—it applies to situations, to people, and even to ourselves. Ask yourself: What in your life are you viewing through a single, rigid lens? Do you see your day job merely as a "paycheck," or could it be a "learning laboratory"? Do you see your college major purely as a "career track," or is it a "toolkit for a broader skillset"?

Years later, when I finally entered university to study Industrial Engineering, I fell into this trap again. For the first few semesters, I despised my major. I was on the verge of dropping out. My brain viewed "Industrial Engineering" strictly as "an academic degree"—not as a toolkit for launching a startup. It wasn't until I forced myself to ask: "What tools does this program give me that I can't find anywhere else?" that my eyes opened. I saw it: systems thinking, process optimization, workflow design—the exact mental models I needed for entrepreneurship. That exact same major, with those exact same classes, suddenly transformed into a masterclass for my real dreams.

Systemic Lesson: Every seemingly irrelevant or unpleasant situation can become a toolkit if you are willing to strip away its "default function" and ask: "What else can this be used for?"

The 9-Dot Problem: Walls We Build Ourselves

Let's do a quick mental exercise that has been a staple of creativity workshops for decades.

Imagine 9 dots arranged on a page in a 3×3 grid, forming a square.

Your task: Connect all 9 dots using exactly four straight lines, without lifting your pen from the paper.

Most people trap themselves by drawing lines strictly within the boundaries of the imaginary square formed by the dots, and they inevitably get stuck. But there is absolutely no rule in the prompt stating that the lines must stay inside the square. That wall was built entirely by the mind. You simply have to draw your lines outside the perimeter of the dots to solve the puzzle.

Systemic Lesson: This is exactly the pattern we repeat in life: we graft non-existent constraints onto our problems, and then we sit around complaining about the very constraints we fabricated.

5. The Illusion of the Perfect Solution: The Myth That Paralyzes Us

One of the most deep-rooted beliefs that keeps us at a dead end is the absolute faith in the "**Perfect Solution**." School taught us that every problem has one right answer—it's either 100% correct or it's wrong. That binary logic is fantastic for a math test, but disaster strikes when we project that logic onto real life.

In the real world, most massive problems don't have definitive answers or clean finish lines. Yet, we sit around waiting for "perfect information." We wait for all our doubts to evaporate. We wait for a blazing sign from the universe to give us absolute certainty. The result: instead of moving, we paralyze ourselves.

In all those years—from age 9 through university—I never once found a "perfect solution" for my life. Not for my father's death, not for the societal pressure, not for my academic doubts. But I did learn that there is always a navigable path forward—even if it's flawed. And this is the very concept I call **Passage** in this book: the act of moving forward with 70% of the information, with a rough draft, making decisions that you can course-correct along the way.

6. From Diagnosis to Exit: Three Exercises to Break the Mental Tunnel

So far, we've established a simple but harsh truth: most of the dead ends we hit aren't born from a lack of intelligence or effort—they are birthed from flawed definitions and cognitive tunneling.

But the very second we have the audacity to ask, "What if the problem is actually something else?" invisible doors swing open.

Below are three highly practical exercises. Apply them to a real problem you are facing right now.

Exercise 1: Fact vs. Interpretation

One of the most vital mental skills is separating raw data from the story we tell about it. A fact is what a security camera would record. An interpretation is loaded with judgment, labels, and absolute words like "always," "never," "bad," and "good."

Most of our "problems" are actually just the brain's rapid-fire interpretations. To kill ambiguity, the brain slaps on a label: "He is disrespectful," "My team is lazy."

Your Task: Pick a current problem. Divide a piece of paper into two columns. Column 1: Only the things a camera could see (e.g., "In the last three meetings, my coworker interrupted me three times"). Column 2: All your interpretations (e.g., "He doesn't respect my authority"). Now, look strictly at Column 1. How does the problem shift? It goes from "He is out to get me" (unsolvable) to "I have been interrupted three times" (solvable). This new version can be managed.

Exercise 2: Mapping Hidden Assumptions

Every problem rests on a foundation of unspoken assumptions—invisible walls.

Ask yourself these four questions:

What am I treating as an "absolute given"? (Example: The engineers treated it as a given that the flaw was inside the machine. Mohammad's managers took it as a given that the workers were lazy.)

What have I decided is "unchangeable"? (Example: "The budget is zero, period.")

Who am I trying to "blame"? (Warning: Our brains love hunting for a scapegoat—it's a cheap cognitive shortcut.)

What am I viewing as entirely "out of my control"?

Pick just one of these assumptions and consciously delete it. Redefine the problem as if that constraint didn't exist. What new path suddenly appears?

Exercise 3: One Problem, Three Definitions

Write down the problem you are wrestling with in a single sentence. Now, force yourself to rewrite it three different times from entirely different angles.

For example, "I don't have enough time to exercise" could become:

"I am not prioritizing fitness in my daily schedule."

"My daily routine lacks structural flexibility."

"I have an overly rigid definition of exercise—maybe a 5-minute mobility drill counts."

Pay close attention to the sentence that triggers the most internal resistance. That sentence is almost certainly where you've done the least amount of thinking—and your **Passage** likely starts exactly there.

Chapter Summary: Three Skills You Learned Today

First: Your problem isn't a lack of solutions—it's a flawed problem definition.

From the 9-year-old boy who reframed grief as a high-stakes game level, to Mohammad discovering the conveyor belt height, to the residents realizing they needed a playground, to Reza turning a tech embargo into an infrastructure upgrade—every story proves that changing the definition exposes invisible paths.

Second: Your brain was not engineered for creative problem-solving in ambiguous spaces—it was built to survive immediate threats.

The Challenger disaster and the 9-Dot Problem prove that this evolutionary shortcut carries a heavy toll. The good news is that by simply being aware of it, you can override the system. Tolerate ambiguity instead of fleeing from it.

Third: To see clearly, you must first hit the brakes.

Mohammad at the factory, Reza at his startup—neither of them rushed the solution. The master key to escaping a dead end is a deliberate pause—the moment you dare to think: "Maybe the problem I'm trying to solve isn't the actual problem at all."

In the next chapter, we will confront our next adversary: the language, beliefs, and thought patterns that keep us locked in a dead end even after we've defined the problem correctly. And

we will learn exactly how to break out of those invisible prisons.