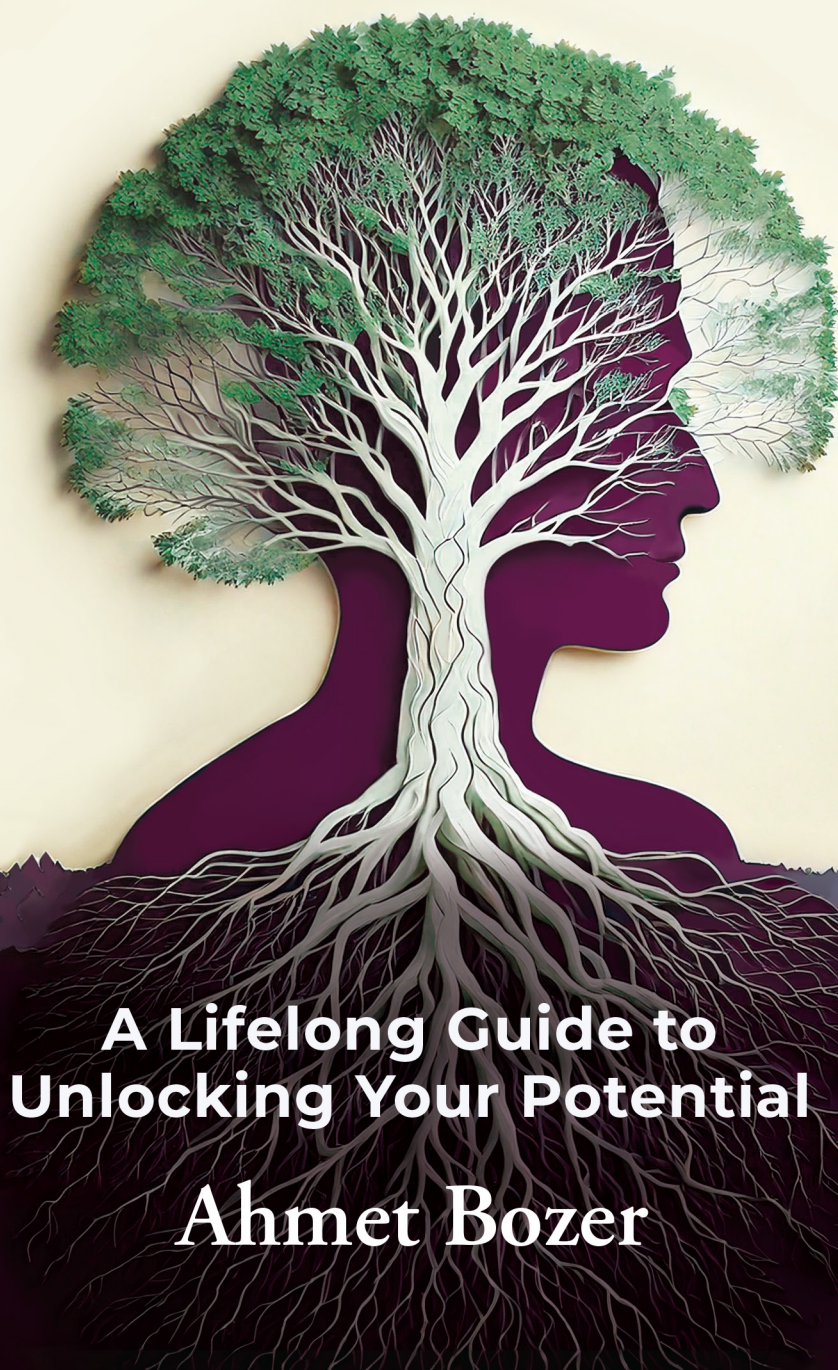


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SOULGERY

Self-Surgery of the Soul



**A Lifelong Guide to
Unlocking Your Potential**

Ahmet Bozer

SOULGERY

Self-Surgery of The Soul



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Unlocking Your Potential**

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*To those who gifted me the freedom to chart my own course,
to the invisible currents that have guided me along the way,
and to all who seek to savor the taste of growth.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Years of working as an executive trained me to move fast, make decisions, and deliver results. I assumed writing *Soulgery* would follow the same pattern—a clear vision and a focused effort would lead to a finished product in a couple of years. Reality was far from that. Developing *Soulgery* turned out to be a marathon, complete with philosophical rabbit holes, surprise obstacles, and serendipitous discoveries. I finally finished it after eight years and eight thousand hours.

Though I stayed with it for all those years, this book wouldn't be what it is without those who encouraged, supported, and challenged me along the way. *Soulgery* is a product of countless interactions, moments of guidance, and the generosity of many who shaped it into something far richer than what I could have created alone. Words fall short in doing justice to their true contribution—one they may not fully realize, but that I feel and appreciate deeply.

My dear wife, Fatos, and I have been married for nearly 40 years. Living together for so long turns individual emotions into a shared undercurrent; you don't need words to feel each other's ups and downs—you feel them in real time. In developing *Soulgery*, the ups were intense, but downs were just as frequent. Throughout this journey, her support never wavered. As I have never felt its absence, I fear taking it for granted. I thank her from the bottom of my heart for standing by me and for sharing in this labor of love that brought *Soulgery* to life.

My children, Kerem and Esra, have been an unexpected yet continually inspiring source of wisdom—not just in the creation of *Soulgery* but throughout my life. Gaining deeper insight into their perspectives and benefiting from their diverse skills has been a true blessing. My late father, Ali Bozer, my mother, Nurten Bozer, my dear brothers Fevzi and Ömer Bozer have also helped me in more ways and more significantly than they may ever realize.

Sebastian van der Vegt, my longtime colleague and friend, played a pivotal role in this journey. When we began working together, I wasn't even a novice writer. Through his coaching I have grown into a more confident one. His sharp insights and relentless effort to elevate the quality of the content were key to me feeling as good as I do about *Soulgery*.

Sebastian also introduced me to his friend Frank Armstrong for professional editing. Frank's edits elevated the quality even further. Just as importantly, working with him made me feel that I had moved to a new level as a writer.

Having dedicated so much effort to developing *Soulgery*, I was determined to be just as diligent in launching it. In searching for a firm that could support me in all facets of the launch with a long-term approach, I found Weaving Influence. Working with them has been a rare privilege—being part of a team of experts who not only excel in their fields but also collaborate effectively and care genuinely.

I am deeply grateful to Aubrey Pastorek, my account executive; Elizabeth Mars, Laura Finch, Trenae Williams, and Franchesca Conner for their support in media relations; Isabel Thornton, for her gentle and inspiring support in building *Soulgery's* social media presence; Wendy Haan and Juliet Koubek for their meticulous and open-minded approach in developing the *Soulgery* logo and web-site; Rachel Royer, for her passion and creativity in design; Lori Weidert for flawlessly managing the book production process; Meredith Mix and Keri Hales for their sharp edits; and Molly Kellie for helping us feel like family when we had our meeting in Lambertville, Michigan.

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As *Soulgery* is the culmination of my lifelong learning, I am grateful to countless individuals who have meaningfully contributed to its creation. To acknowledge them is to acknowledge the very fabric of *Soulgery* itself. My heartfelt thanks go to my extended family, my friends in the US, Türkiye, and around the world, as well as my colleagues from The Coca-Cola Company

and the companies within the Coca-Cola bottling system. I am also grateful to those I have met in my post-executive life whose insights have enriched this journey—fellow board members, incredible teams of the businesses and NGO's I have served, as well as my mentees.

Finally, while this is a moment to acknowledge those who helped bring *Soulgery* to life, I know that books truly come alive through their readers. I thank you—the one holding this book—for making *Soulgery* a part of your growth journey.

THE SALT CEDAR

*What human beings can be, they must be.*¹

—Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 1954



Salt cedars are remarkable trees. They thrive in arid climates and salty soils where most plants struggle to survive. Despite being invasive in certain environments, these tough trees with their feathery leaves and colorful flowers are a sight to behold.

I have developed an intimate relationship with one of these salt cedars on a beach that I frequently visit in Bodrum, a popular summer destination in Türkiye. Sitting under this tree, you avoid sunburn, yet comfortably absorb the sun as its rays seep through those feathery leaves. This tree stands only a few feet away from the shore, so in a southwesterly breeze, you feel refreshed as sprinkles from the Aegean Sea land on your skin.

My relationship with this salt cedar goes beyond those physical sensations. Whenever I am around it, a sense of calm takes over, as if nature itself is offering a moment to step away from the daily grind. In these quiet times, I often find my mind wandering to philosophical questions.

One of these questions has followed me for years: What really matters in life? For as long as I can remember, I have been a goal-driven person, setting targets for my work, family, and well-being. These goals provided direction and kept me motivated, yet they left me with a lingering void—a sense

¹Adapted from the original quote, “What a man can be, he must be.”

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that something essential was missing. I could best describe it as the absence of an overarching goal in life. This void felt more pronounced as my intense focus on advancing in my career and developing as a leader began narrowing my perspective. During one salt cedar moment, as my mind flowed freely through philosophical deliberations, I came to truly understand that life must hold more than these pursuits. This awareness, in its quiet unfolding, revealed my paramount goal for life: to discover my potential as a human being—not merely as a business professional or leader.

Initially, I wasn't entirely sure what this broader idea of growth entailed. Despite this vagueness, I felt uplifted by a vision of a lifelong journey of self-discovery. My mind kept sifting through ideas about growth, but the more I tried to piece them together, the more elusive a cohesive narrative became. I quickly realized that I first needed to identify what was most fundamental to my growth, and then allow everything else to fall into place.

Around this same period, I became deeply intrigued by Sufism—a mystical path rooted in Islam. I was particularly intrigued with its concept of “transforming the *nafs*” to achieve a divine connection. As I delved deeper into this idea, a foundational theme for personal growth began to take shape.

In Sufi philosophy, *nafs* is considered one of the cornerstones of the human being. While definitions vary, it is generally understood as the inherent traits and tendencies of the self that hinder one's progress. Transforming the *nafs* is seen as a lifelong journey—dissolving these self-imposed barriers and gradually fostering a deeper connection with the divine.

I found this concept to be equally relevant and vital for personal growth, even outside a divine context. The essence of transforming the *nafs* lies in the ongoing work of refining the inner self—a process that involves deepening one's awareness of thoughts, emotions, and actions, laying a strong foundation for lasting growth.

The question I then grappled with was this: How does the *nafs* get in the way of our growth? A commonly understood explanation is that the *nafs* compels us to pursue earthly desires, often to our own detriment and at the expense of others. While I saw the merit in this perspective, I was more curious about the deeper psychological dynamics behind how we impose limitations on our own growth. Reflecting further, I began to suspect that the answer to

my question lay in the sense of self—the thoughts we hold about ourselves. Shaped over a lifetime, these thoughts define what makes us unique, what we identify with, and how we judge ourselves. We clearly can't live without a sense of self, but could it also quietly inhibit our growth?

To clarify this suspicion, I decided to conduct an experiment: Could I become more aware of how my sense of self was holding me back, and learn to manage its influence? If I could, would this awareness meaningfully accelerate my growth?

The experiment required nothing more than setting aside time for meaningful self-reflection and remaining open to feedback. The timing was fortuitous. I was in my mid-forties—a phase marked by career stress, intensifying family obligations, emerging health concerns, and a deeper quest for fulfillment. Life itself provided no shortage of case studies.

Shortly after starting the experiment, I began noticing moments where my thoughts about myself were, indeed, holding me back. I realized this only after some introspection. At first, this limiting influence surfaced as counterproductive emotions: arrogance in disagreements, jealousy when comparing myself to others, or anger when receiving criticism. Reflecting deeply on these experiences through the lens of my sense of self, I finally came to see that they stemmed from an over-dependence on external recognition.

Over time, I came to describe this as an impulse to “serve” my sense of self—to preserve or elevate it—often without my awareness. Whenever this impulse took over, it clouded my psyche, distancing me from the task at hand and the people involved, fueling counterproductive emotions, and ultimately, hindering my performance.

Recognizing this, I challenged myself to control this impulse, even when I felt my identity was threatened. Could I replace it with a drive to accomplish something more meaningful? For example, could I focus exclusively on doing the right thing, or seeking truth, rather than serving my sense of self? My attempts yielded mixed results. In some cases, I managed to redirect my focus, leading to positive effects on my performance. In others, my sense of self continued to hold me back despite my best intentions. I share personal stories about these experiences throughout this book.

This experiment to understand the influence of my sense of self revealed three valuable insights. First, I understood that my sense of self holds me back

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whenever I give in to the impulse to serve it. Second, I learned that while this impulse may never be fully controlled, it can be kept in check. Each small victory, however incremental, contributes to meaningful progress.

Finally, I recognized the profound and far-reaching influence of my sense of self on my thoughts, emotions, and mental models. This awareness convinced me that managing its limiting effects is central to my growth. At last, I had identified the foundational theme of my journey and was ready to develop a model around it.

I realized that fully developing this model required space for reflection and experimentation. Stepping away from an executive role provided that space. During this phase of my professional life, I decided to take on different roles in business, non-governmental organizations, and academia, while also engaging in entrepreneurial ventures, philanthropy, and mentoring. The diversity of this portfolio offered even more case studies for refining the model.

Feeling compelled to share it more broadly, I envisioned the model as a flexible framework for understanding one's self and life that would be adaptable to individual needs rather than a dogmatic formula. I named this model *Soulgery*, inspired by the metaphor of performing "self-surgery" on one's soul to foster growth and transformation.

By this, I don't mean that we can directly "operate" on the soul itself, something I believe is beyond our reach. Instead, I see the soul as something we can only connect with. Our psyche—encompassing thoughts, emotions, and mental models—plays a vital role in either obscuring or enhancing this connection. Therefore, the concept of self-surgery here refers to managing our psyche to cultivate a fuller human experience—one enriched by greater self-awareness, meaningful connections, and a sense of meaning.

SOULGERY

Soulgery defines growth as the lifelong journey of becoming an increasingly capable, impactful, and resilient person. Its fundamental assumption is that the keys to discovering our better selves exist inside us, but we are somehow distracted from recognizing them, or even from seeking them out. It guides the growth journey through a *Self Map*, a model which I developed to reflect the

essence of being human, and what I call the *4 Acts of Growth*. These provide a comprehensive perspective on how we can leverage our real-life experiences to accelerate our development.

The 4 Acts constantly draw us into our depths, where we can find the keys to unlock our potential. They are based on four core beliefs about what makes the most significant difference to one's growth. These are:

1. Sourcing inspiration from life.
2. Focusing first on the impact we make.
3. Striving for performance excellence in all life roles.
4. Leveraging life's challenges for growth.

We will talk about the 4 Acts first in chapter 3 and then cover them throughout the book. The Self Map is fully explained in chapter 3.

In conversations with friends and family, a remark I often heard was how difficult it would be to achieve what Soulgergy is asking of us. I agree that being honest about and ultimately changing one's self are among the hardest challenges in life. Yet, reassuringly, anyone motivated to do this kind of work gets progressively better at it. What matters isn't one's current capability but making consistent progress.

Two points deserve to be highlighted in this context. First, I acknowledge that the emphasis on working on our inner selves can at times feel overwhelming. Having said that, it is up to each of us to decide on the scope and pace of our journey to utilize Soulgergy in the most productive way. We discuss this more in chapter 19, once we have covered all of the 4 Acts. Second, Soulgergy requires a level of self-discipline, but it's less about following a strict regimen and more about maintaining a rhythm of engagement with it. Naturally, everyone's rhythm will be unique.

Soulgergy accelerates growth as a natural consequence of our experiences. As a flexible model, it empowers us to chart our own course, assess our progress, and make adjustments to keep moving forward. It will help us grow like salt cedars. Just as they have deep root systems which tap into ground water sources and an ability to adapt to salt, working with Soulgergy helps lay

deep roots within ourselves so that we can thrive in challenging environments. However, there is one crucial difference.

The salt cedars are very domineering trees. As their deep roots monopolize the ground water sources and they discharge salt into the soil, they make it almost impossible for other species to survive around them. SoulgerY does just the opposite. It will help us engage with our human ecosystem in a mutually beneficial way.

THE JOY OF GROWTH

A lifelong journey of growth will help us discover more of our untapped potential, bringing rewards in terms of real-life outcomes. The growth experience itself is no less rewarding. Among its many joys, what stands out for me are two apparent paradoxes.

The first is a simultaneous feeling of amazement and normalcy. You are often amazed at the difference between your current self and a previous version that has receded into the distance; but at the same time, it feels normal because you have evolved naturally to that point. The other feeling is one of fulfillment and a drive to keep moving forward. You feel contented and paradoxically, that contentment becomes a driving force to do more and to discover more about yourself.

Personal growth has always been important. Now that the technological revolution of our times seems to be taking us into a more uncertain future, it has become critical. This new phase unfolding before us is demanding we step up our game in our own growth like no other period in history. The next chapter makes the case for that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ahmet Bozer is a global business leader with a distinguished career spanning over 30 years. During his tenure at the Coca-Cola Company, he served in many senior leadership roles, including as president of the Eurasia and Africa Group and president of Coca-Cola International. Working across continents and cultures, he developed a passion for unlocking potential—both in his teams and within himself—gaining profound insights into personal and professional growth.

Following his corporate career, Ahmet became involved in nonexecutive roles in businesses, NGOs, and academia, as well as in philanthropy, mentoring, and entrepreneurial ventures. These experiences deepened his understanding of individual potential and fueled his desire to share the lessons from his journey to benefit others. Since retiring from the Coca-Cola Company in 2016, he has devoted himself to developing *Soulgery*.

Having lived and worked extensively in both Türkiye and the United States, Ahmet's life reflects the interplay of collectivist and individualist cultures. This dual perspective inspired him to integrate the best of both worlds into his approach. His quest for meaning has been deeply influenced by Sufi philosophy. Along this journey, he came to understand that the essence of the Sufi path—raising consciousness through awareness and reflection—is also pivotal to fostering growth. Embracing this timeless wisdom, he made it the core of *Soulgery*.

With his extensive leadership experience and decades-long dedication to *Soulgery*, Ahmet is uniquely positioned to present this distinctive model—one that bridges the practical and philosophical while seamlessly blending Eastern and Western wisdom.

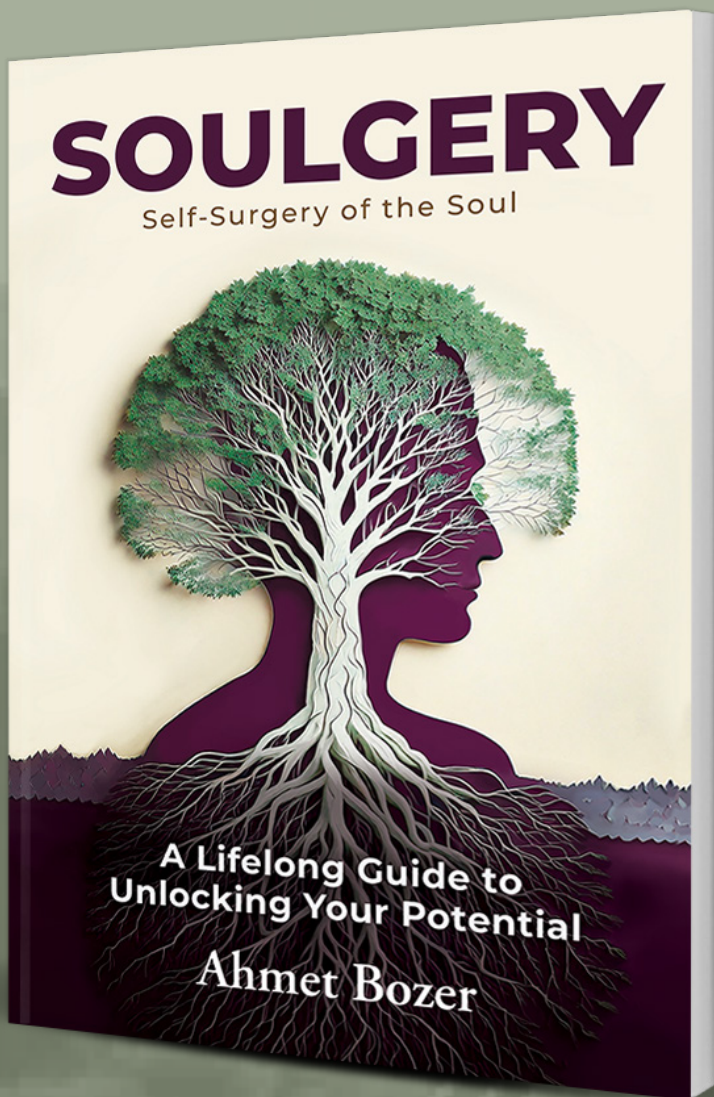


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