



THE WORKBOOK COMPANION TO

THREE PIPE PROBLEMS

The Casebook

Work One Problem. All the Way Through.



By Jason VanLue

*Companion to Three Pipe Problems: The Art of Seeing What Others Miss and
Solving What Others Won't*

A Note Before You Begin

This is not a reflection journal, or a chapter summary. This is a casebook. The kind Holmes kept, though if we're being precise, Watson did most of the writing. A working record of a real investigation, with real stakes, applied to a real problem you actually care about.

This workbook is for the person who sees a problem and thinks, “*someone should do something about that,*” and is ready to become that someone. *Three Pipe Problems* doesn't just ask you to think differently, it asks you to act differently. In a world where AI can execute almost anything, the scarce skill is knowing which problems are worth solving, and having the courage to solve them. That's the whole game.

Here's how it works. First you'll find your problem. Not a hypothetical, not a someday project, but the one that sits in your gut and won't leave. Then you'll work that problem through five phases, the same model that structures the book:



THE ARC OF THE CASEBOOK — PHASE ZERO AND THE CASE FILE BOOKEND THE FIVE PHASES

By the time you reach the end, you'll have a **Case File** — a one-page brief you can hand to your team, your board, your spouse, or whoever's holding you accountable. You'll have a concrete plan, a measurable first move, and a way to track whether you actually did it. Most importantly, you'll have done the hard thinking almost everyone skips.

Holmes didn't close cases by being smarter than everyone in the room. He closed them by observing more carefully, staying honest about what he didn't yet know, and sitting with a problem long enough for the real answer to surface. That's what this casebook asks of you.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Work in pen. Be honest, especially where it's uncomfortable, because the gap between what you wrote and what you meant is where the real answers hide. Pick one problem and carry it the whole way through. The work is paced for roughly ninety days, with a tracker at the back to keep you honest. And when you finish, you don't close the book — you choose another case and run it again.

One problem. Five phases. Let's begin.

PHASE ZERO

Open the Case

Core question: What is mine to solve?



Before you light the first pipe, you have to choose the right case. This is the step most problem-solving books skip, and it's the one that decides everything downstream. Solve the wrong problem brilliantly and you've still spent your best years on the wrong thing.

There's a temptation to reach for the biggest, most heroic problem you can name. Resist it. *The enemy of making a difference is trying to make too big of one.* You're not looking for the problem that sounds most impressive at a dinner party. You're looking for the one that's real, that's within your reach, and that you'd still be willing to work on ninety days from now, when the novelty is long gone.

The best problem for you to solve lives at a specific intersection: the place where what burns in you meets what you're good at. Outrage without ability is just frustration. Ability without conviction fizzles the moment things get hard. Where the two overlap, you get traction. We'll find that intersection in three moves. First the burden. Then the gifts. Then the overlap.

EXERCISE 0.1

The Burden Scan

Most discovery tools ask what you're passionate about, which is a slippery word. Passion sounds like enthusiasm. What we're actually after is heavier than that. In the book I call it a *healthy discontent* — the thing that genuinely bothers you, not in a scrolling-past-a-headline way, but in the way that sits in your stomach and keeps coming back when nobody is asking you to think about it.

What problems in the world make you angry, restless, unable to look away? *Don't filter for whether you could solve them. Just name what bothers you.*

In your own work or community, what friction do you hit so often you've stopped noticing it?

What do you keep complaining about, or hear others complain about?

Where do your money and attention already go? *What causes do you give to, follow, volunteer for, read about? Our wallets and browser histories tell the truth.*

If you had a free afternoon and total permission, what would you work on?

THEN

Now circle back through everything above. What won't leave you alone? **Star the two or three that carry the most heat.**

EXERCISE 0.2

The Gifts Discovery

Here's where most of us get it backwards. We're trained to hunt for our weaknesses and grind on them. The research Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton popularized in *Now, Discover Your Strengths* flipped that instinct: you'll create far more value sharpening a real strength than dragging a weakness up to mediocre. So before you ask what you'd need to fix in yourself, take an honest inventory of what you already bring.

This isn't bragging, it's data. Holmes catalogued tobacco ash and bootprints not out of vanity but because he was good at those things, and enjoyed doing them. Name yours.

What do people consistently come to you for? *When something goes wrong, what kind of problem lands on your desk because you're good at solving it?*

What feels easy to you that others seem to find hard? *The easiest strengths to miss, precisely because they cost you nothing.*

When have you lost all track of time, completely absorbed? What were you doing?

What's your unfair advantage? *A skill, a network, a perspective, a kind of stubbornness, a lived experience no one can replicate.*

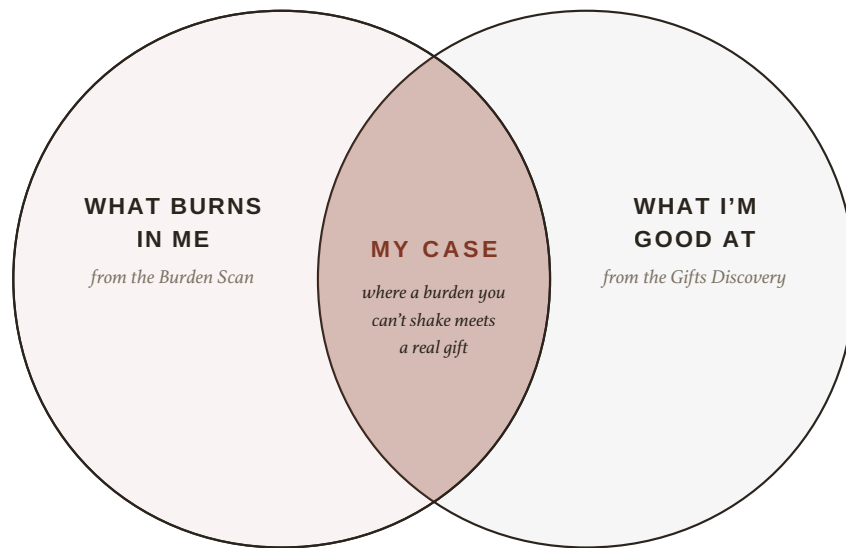
From all of that, name your three to five **signature strengths**. *Plain words, not résumé language.*

PHASE ZERO 0.3

The Intersection

Now lay the two lists side by side. On one side, the burdens that carry the most heat. On the other, your signature strengths. The candidate problems worth your time are the ones where a burden you can't shake meets a strength you actually have.

Paige Chenault couldn't stop thinking about kids in shelters who never got a birthday, and she happened to be a professional event planner. Veronika Scott was outraged that people slept outside through Detroit winters, and she was a product designer. The intersection in those stories isn't a coincidence. It's the whole engine.



OUTRAGE × GIFTS — YOUR CANDIDATE PROBLEMS LIVE IN THE OVERLAP

Write up to three candidate problems that sit inside your overlap. *A burden and a gift in the same sentence.*

Candidate 1 _____

Candidate 2 _____

Candidate 3 _____

TRUST THE PULL

Circle the candidate that keeps pulling your attention. You'll run all three through the scorecard next, but your gut already knows something — note it here before you start scoring.

PHASE ZERO 0.4

The Problem Worth Solving Scorecard

Three candidates, one decision. Run each through the five questions below, scoring 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely). Read each question, sit with it honestly, then fill the grid at the end.

1. Does it matter to real people?

Not in theory, not in the abstract. Are there human beings whose lives are tangibly worse because this problem exists? If you can only explain why it matters using jargon and org charts, it might not be worth your best effort.

2. Can I actually affect it?

This isn't about whether you can solve it entirely — almost no problem gets solved entirely by one person. It's about whether you can move the needle. Do you have access, influence, skill, or proximity?

3. Am I willing to commit to it?

Not in a burst of weekend enthusiasm. Are you willing to commit time and thought, and persevere through setbacks, boredom, and the moment a shinier problem tries to steal your attention? Commitment separates problem solvers from problem noticers.

4. Does it draw on my gifts and convictions?

You don't need to be an expert, but it helps to bring something real — a skill, a perspective, a network, a stubbornness that won't let go. And it helps even more when it connects to something you believe deeply, because conviction carries you when motivation fades.

5. Could it lead somewhere bigger?

The best problems teach you something, connect you to people, and open doors to adjacent problems. Daron Babcock started with a garden in South Dallas. That garden became Bonton Farms, and Bonton Farms became a catalyst for a whole community's transformation. Choose a problem where the path might go somewhere.

CRITERION	CAND. 1	CAND. 2	CAND. 3
Matters to real people			
I can actually affect it			
I'm willing to commit			
Draws on my gifts & convictions			
Could lead somewhere bigger			
TOTAL (/25)			

SCORE EACH 1 (NOT AT ALL) → 5 (ABSOLUTELY)

DECIDE

The highest score is your case. If two are close, go with the one that scares you a little more. That's usually where the most important work lives.

PHASE ZERO 0.5

Sharpen the Case

A candidate problem and a workable problem aren't the same thing. "Hunger" is a topic. "Homelessness" is a topic. You can't investigate a topic — it's too big and too vague to get your hands around. The enemy of making a difference is trying to make too big of one, and that starts right here, with how you write the problem down. Before you investigate your winning candidate in Phase I, sharpen it into a problem you can actually work.

Right-size it

If your problem names "the world," "people," or "society," zoom in until you can picture one real person it affects. Name the smallest, most specific version you could actually start on. You're not shrinking your ambition — you're finding the door into it.

Write it in this shape

[A specific group of people] struggle to [do or achieve something specific] because [the barrier or likely cause], which means [the human consequence].

TOO BIG "Solve childhood hunger."

WORKABLE "Kids at Lincoln Elementary come to school hungry on Mondays because weekend food support ends Friday, which means they can't focus and fall behind."

Now write yours

MY SHARPENED PROBLEM STATEMENT

KEEP IN MIND

Don't worry about nailing the cause exactly yet — Phase I will pressure-test it with the Five Whys. Right now you only need it specific enough to investigate. If you can't picture a real person on the other side of that sentence, it's still too abstract. Keep narrowing until you can.

The Case File

You've done the work — now distill it. The Case File is a one-page summary of everything you built across the five phases: the document you hand to your team, your board, your mentor, your spouse, your accountability partner. It's the thing you tape to your wall or pin to your desktop.

CASE FILE

THREE PIPE PROBLEMS · THE CASEBOOK

PROBLEM SOLVER · NAME

DATE OPENED

WHY THIS CASE IS MINE

The intersection from Phase Zero — the burden that won't leave me, meeting the gift I bring.

THE PROBLEM

Revised statement from Phase 1.

WHO IT AFFECTS

From your Phase 1 conversations.

ROOT CAUSE

From the Five Whys.

MY READINESS

Honest one-sentence read from Phase 2.

WHAT I BRING

Top strengths & resources, Phases 2–3.

WHAT I NEED

Top gaps from Phase 3.

MY TEAM

Key people from Phase 4.

THE STRATEGY

Where we'll play · How we'll win (Phase 4).

90-DAY OBJECTIVE

FIRST MOVE

Your Minimum Viable Move from Phase 5.

START DATE
