



The Craft of Choosing Well

The Ultimate Success

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“Wealth is the product of a person’s capacity to think.”

– Ayn Rand

Do you remember the “good old days”? At least it seemed as if our parents’ or grandparents’ lives were so much easier. Those were the days when life seemed to work in a straightforward, linear fashion. You went to school. You chose college or a technical trade. You got married. Maybe you had kids. You retired. You died. Today, only death remains of that progressive march of time. And now, with advances in medicine, you can even lengthen (or shorten) the inevitability of death.

When I started my company in 1980, I had many colleagues approach me with the same questions: “How did you get up enough courage to do what you are doing?” “How could you leave a corporate structure?” “How did you know what you should be doing with your life?” “Where will your business grow?” Those questions of long ago continue to echo today for the simple reason: I still have lots of choices.

And so do you.

From our careers to our lifestyles, from our life partners to our life's legacy, we have a vast array of possibilities facing us. Our ability to think clearly, to make wise choices in our life has everything to do with creating a world of our own choosing—the ultimate success. I wish I could admit that I knew this craft of “choosing well” from the outset. Not so. Like many of you, I have experienced divorce, work failure, and at times, a less than healthy body. I have found my crammed 24-hour day consumed by things that—at face value—have been “chosen” by others. But along the way, I have also learned some lessons which, when I practice, assist me in choosing well.

Notice the phrase “when I practice”. Like all of you, there are days when I don't follow the path of wisdom. I forget. The heat of the moment and that demon Guilt take over so that I unconsciously make less-than-smart decisions. Please know, therefore, that as I write to you I am also writing for myself so that I can again remember what it takes to choose well.

With a degree in communications, I found my career life first in education and quickly moved to the marketing and advertising part of the business world. An avocation for psychology and a journalistic stint allowed me to quickly pick up the nuances of an enterprise. I worked as the marketing head for a real estate development and an internationally recognized resort property. I handled corporate and investor relations for a health care corporations. I became a public relations consultant responsible for handling primarily multinational companies. And I fried. I burned. I sizzled out in one big heap of misery and unhappiness. Something just wasn't right!

I left. I opened up my own company. And I realized the first skill in choosing well: Know what you don't want.

Practice Reverse Goal Setting

For many of us, the admonition to “set goals” is simply not doable. We don't have a clear idea of what we want. Therefore, I have found benefit in practicing reverse goal setting. Specifically, sit down with a paper and begin to itemize all the things you truly do NOT want in your life. Begin with your career. I knew that I did not want to write another press release. I knew that I wanted to be able to chose my own clients rather than being forced to take some which I knew, in my heart of hearts, we truly could not serve in the best fashion. I knew that I did not want someone else controlling what I delivered in exchange for money. I did not want to be hamstrung by corporate politics, or by the hours on a clock which translated “face time” as the only measure of value.

Try writing reverse goals for the other areas of life: physical, emotional, material, and spiritual.

In the physical arena, I determined that I did not want to be overweight, out of shape, and unable to travel easily.

Emotionally, I learned much from a failed marriage. I learned that I did not want to be anything less than an equal partner in a relationship—from the financial to the intellectual. again my thoughts or feelings for the sake of peace and quiet. I did not want to hide and I did not want to feel unattractive and unappealing.

On the material side, I did not want to live life in a penurious manner, always afraid that there would never be enough. I did not want to inherit the Depression mentality of my relatives. And spiritually, I did not want to feel estranged and empty in a relationship with God or disenfranchised by narrow religious thinking.

Once you begin to write reverse goals, an amazing thing happens: you realize what you do want. I realized that I wanted to be my own boss in a creative endeavor that makes a difference in the world. I realized that I wanted to practice the exercise and nutrition essential for health. I wanted a life partner with a strong sense of self-esteem, humor, and a capacity to love deeply and widely. I wanted to give whatever I want as gifts and live in a place that nurtures me with its beauty and peace. And I wanted to work on a spiritual quest.

Having written all this, there is another step to the process: you must chart your course for the journey.

Determine your “true north” based on values.

When I lecture on the concepts in my book, *Work for a Living & Still Be Free to Live*, I ask participants to close their eyes, hold their hand over their head, and on the count of three, to point to where they think “true north” lies. When they open their eyes, they see fingers pointed in every direction. And everyone in that room is absolutely correct. Each of us has our own “true north”.

I think of life as a journey, a sailing voyage to be exact. Decisions to help us “balance” must be based on both our individual sailboat as well as the chart we navigate. If we haven’t charted a course, all the navigation skill might still put us in the wrong place. What could help all of us on such a journey is a process, a formula, whereby we might take stock of our decisions, weighing them against our personal values.

Step 1:

Answer these questions to help you determine what is of value to you. Value has more to do with who you are and how you live your life, not what you have achieved. For example, you might value life-long learning, financial security, service to others, loving relationships, and spiritual growth. Once you have identified what is of value, you have a screen with which to filter through goals and activities.

One of the best ways to identify values is to create an imaginary sounding board composed of 4-5 people whom you value and admire and who, in turn, sincerely respect and like you. If each one were to give eulogy, what type of person would they say you were and why. What values arose? What goals or activities supported those values? Isolate those values and write them down. You might even be able to rank order the values.

Step 2:

For the period of one week, keep a pad of paper handy and make a note of every task you perform and what role you play. For example, my roles are professional speaker, writer, wife, mother, friend, office worker, manager, daughter, sister, student, volunteer, and just plain ME. The latter refers to a role that nurtures and cares for me, not necessarily anyone else. Amazingly, I’ve discovered that every task is related to a role and that almost all tasks come in 15 minute increments.

Step 3:

On a scale from minus 5 to plus 5, rate these roles and accompanying tasks according to enjoyment and personal value. In looking at the tasks of a week, interesting discoveries arise. Are the various tasks and roles you’ve played congruent with the values you’ve identified? Are you putting more time than is reasonable into some tasks and roles? The operative word here is “reasonable.” For example, a special friend lost her husband and had no one to help her

with grief and anger, not to mention funeral arrangements and lawyers. My value of service and loving relationships and the role as “friend” and also surrogate “daughter” created many tasks and demands. For me, it would have been unreasonable not to spend considerable time with Jeanne. The sailboat headed in her direction.

Another example. I discovered that I was putting far too much time in the role of “office worker” rather than in the role of “manager”. Instead of assigning tasks and growing others, I was taking work on that did NOT need to be done by me. Time to alter course and allow my associates to hold the tiller.

Finally, by putting so much emphasis on the role of professional speaker and its tasks, I had let drop ME. Time to make decisions for overhaul and repair, saying “yes” to a day off, to a day of contemplative silence. I realized that without the silence, all I bring to the platform and my audiences are echoes of words rather than insights. Let me say that again, “without silence.” Here’s another ingredient in the craft of choosing well: a silent retreat.

Retreat in order to advance

“The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only she who listens can speak.”

I remember the thud in my stomach when I read these words by the late Secretary General to the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld. Here I was: trying to grow a speaking and counseling business by surrounding myself with busyness, a constant influx of chatter, and an absence of any true internal “listening”. My business had not grown as I had hoped, everything seemed an effort, and I wasn’t getting the sense that my internal compass still pointed to truth north.

I knew I needed to take time away. But there was so much to do. I hated giving up what little time I had at home since it took me away from my beloved husband Bill (yes, he meets all my criteria). This time, Bill insisted. And he was right. I have learned the value of taking a 3-day silent retreat so that I can rethink, renew, redirect, and refresh my choices. Amazingly, the family survives without me, no client disappears, and I return re-energized for the year.

Many of us have difficulty with being alone. And silence scares us. In world bombarded by sound, some of us promptly turn on the television or radio as soon as we enter an empty house. I have discovered the deep necessity for silence and alone time. Even if it means

checking into a local motel, unplugging the phone and ordering room service, choosing well demands that we spend time thinking and writing.

Yes, writing. When thoughts stay only in our head, I am convinced we do not receive the full power of our thoughts. The writing is for you alone. Use a spiral notebook, a blank book, a yellow pad. But write in ink. Write the question you are trying to answer. Write free form all your thoughts and fears and dreams about that question. Wake up in the middle of night and record a dream you have. Then read it back. Keep the notebook. Pick it up after some time has passed. You will be amazed at the wisdom found there—wisdom that sometimes we don't get on the first reading our words. If you wish to learn more about journaling as a method for self-discovery, check out the Intensive Journal Workshops offers around the United States by facilitators trained in the Progoff Journal Workshop method.

Experience the call of the wild

John O'Donohue in his book *Eternal Echoes* writes "When you find a place in Nature where the heart and mind find rest, then you have discovered a sanctuary for your soul, Nature calls us to tranquility and rhythm. When your heart is confused or heavy, a day outside in Nature's quiet eternity restores your lost tranquility."

In the creativity process, there is a stage called incubation. Answers arise after a period of gestation, a period marked by NOT actively discussing the problem but rather letting the mind focus on other areas.

Nature is the perfect gestation place for seeking wisdom about our choices. In the call of the wild, it is possible to find a clarity not found in the confusion of our houses and offices.

Now I am not talking about backpacking in the High Sierras, though this is certainly an option. Rather I am talking about taking mini retreats in whatever is the natural setting which is closest to you and which calls to you. My best friend walks in the cemetery near her house. There, amid the trees and flowers and grasses, wending her way around the head stones placed more for the living than for the deceased, she finds peace and clarity.

I live near the ocean. I place a problem requiring a decision in the back of my head and I walk. On more than one occasion, as my feet feel the cold tingly water and my eyes gaze at whatever debris the ocean has offered as treasure, I find a metaphor replete with meaning.

When I was torn about my first marriage and feeling frail, small and inadequate to do anything on my own, I stumbled with broken heart to face the gale of a Nor'easter. With tears and fear streaming down my face, I plunged into the

wind's fury. As foam scudded at my tennis shoes and huge broken shells littered my path, I suddenly spied a perfect sand dollar the size of a dime. This fragile form, amid the destruction of a fierce storm, has made it through precisely because it was small. I knew at that moment I could make the decision I needed to make and survive. What a powerful message from the wild.

Find whatever place calls to you and take the time to listen, with eyes wide open. I am confident you will find information you need.

Know your season and grow your season

There is the wonderful line that says "to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven."

Our ability to choose well also rests on how truthful we are about the "season" of our life. If we are at the beginning of our career, our marriage, our family, choices will need to take these things into account. I remember how I thrilled to the excitement and challenge of my first job after leaving teaching. I loved the adult company, the ability to be creative, the challenge of so many things to learn. I accept requests to do anything and everything because I was learning. Today, I am more selective in my learning-- asking now if it furthers other goals I have.

Our body also has a season. I have discovered that unlike many of my colleagues, non-stop travel is exhausting and not fun. My body requires seven hours of sleep, regular exercise and down time. I can take only so many back-on-back engagements before I must say "no". Trusting that I can say "no" is a lesson I struggle to learn.

Accept irresistible offers

"Irresistible" means that without a doubt I would say "yes" and that the request comes without compromise or force from either the offeror or me. There is no emotional blackmail, no "should", no social obligation. Irresistible requests are gifts to be gratefully accepted. If our time is filled only with "resistible" demands, how we will ever be able to accept the irresistible?

Does it support my value for life-long learning and make a difference? Will it stop another person from growing? Will it stretch my abilities?

I recently accepted an assignment that will cost time, money and effort as well as time away from home. I accepted it because it will move me into trying something that I have never done before... an activity directly related to my role of professional speaking and service.

Does it allow me to be with people whom I care about?

How often have we all said “yes” to an engagement because we feel “guilty”? The reality is that we find the people tedious, demanding, and downright boring. I have finally determined that if I have limited time with my family and friends, it is perfectly fine to periodically decline such invitations.

Is it fun and will it allow for creativity and a change of pace? Will it create organization and structure in my life? Am I the only one who can do this? Is it authentic to me and of service to others?

I was asked if I would run for the Board of a non-profit. Knowing I have strong organizational and leadership abilities not to mention an ego-- saying, “yes” to serve the membership SEEMED appropriate. However, when I tested the request against the other questions listed above, more negative responses appeared. I turned down the nomination.

Think “give” not “get.”

In a spot of a ranch we once visited, an old hand pump stood amid the weeds. I learned that it would yield water AFTER it had been primed. At the time, it almost seemed as if we were offering an oblation to some underground water spirit, begging it to open the spring. I now don't think I was all that wrong.

Experience has taught me that when we make choices to give because it is the right thing to do, without any thought of getting back in return, we do receive in full measure, pressed down and overflowing.

Easy to do? No. When we are the bill payers, it is so easy to get in the place of scarcity, wondering what different actions will cost us. So practice small. My beloved brother-in-law, Noam

Pitlik, always said, “it’s only money”. His decisions to give time and resources to his colleagues, his family, and his “customers” gave him not only a fabulous career as an Emmy Award-winning director, but also earned him the love and devotion of a wide Hollywood community. His untimely death caught all of us by sorrow and grief, and the outpouring of love spoken volumes of his ability to chose well how he lived.

Invest in the future

The craft of choosing well demands that we take also a long-term view of our work and life. Investing in the future can mean everything from education to actual investments. It can mean choosing to spend time with our family and community because the future rests in their hands. As a grandmother, I have made a deliberate choice that I will spend at least one week every other month with my granddaughters who live in Oregon. Since I live in Southern California, this is no small effort and yet, I am investing in our future so we can have a relationship. Celebrate daily.

Give thanks.

“No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars or sailed to an uncharted land or opened a new heaven to the human spirit.” – Helen Keller

The ultimate success is to live lives by design, not by default. When we continually refine the skill of choosing well, we see opportunities and events in a different light. There is much to be thankful for. One cannot be a pessimist if you are constantly focused on gratitude. Gratitude opens the heart and mind to see more than what sits before our eyes. Gratitude soothes the edges of disappointment and fear. When we realize the many riches that exist in our life, we feel stronger, more confident, and incontrol. Sarah ban Breathnach was right when she recommended keeping a gratitude journal. Without fail, I daily write five things that occurred that day for which I am grateful. Even on the bleakest of days, this practice has carried me through.

In Conclusion

Doing what you love and staying in love with what you do means staying on the path by on making authentic decisions-- the craft of choosing well



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