

## Choosing Your Future Self

In the classic work *Alice in Wonderland*, the following conversation is had between Alice and the Cheshire cat:

**Alice:** Oh, no, no. I was just wondering if you could help me find my way.

**Cheshire Cat:** Well that depends on where you want to get to.

**Alice:** Oh, it really doesn't matter, as long as...

**Cheshire Cat:** Then it really doesn't matter which way you go

The essential message of this exchange is that where you go has a path, a path has a consequence; and if you don't know the path you want to take then you will end up wherever you are going- wherever that may be! Apparently there are different paths that lead to different places and so likewise, there is a version "A" of you and then there is a version "B". You are one of those versions of yourself now, and it is the only one you know thus far. For the purposes of discussion let us call your present self the "B" version. Each set of choices you make confirms and establishes either one version of yourself or the other. These are not just fundamentally different from one another, but they are different in quality also; with version "A" resulting from the most maximizing choices leading to the growth and unfolding of your highest potential, together with seeking and embracing those experiences which will allow this self to emerge. The key is that whatever you choose fosters a direction toward one or the other. If "A" is the higher manifestation of self, then any moving away from that brings us to be version "B" by default, or remaining in version "B" of yourself (when you could move to another plane) is default through inaction.

One of the great messages of the academic discipline of Sociology is that location, context, experience, environment, culture- and all that results from these- foster in large measure the self that emerges; therefore, change any of these factors and a different result is likely to come forth. It is easy to understand how this is possible if we compare living in the United States with its opportunities and advantages compared to living in a poverty stricken, 3<sup>rd</sup> world environment; but it is less clear to see the difference in the small adjustments that you make in what you cause yourself to experience in your life and the subtle ways that they may move you toward one version or another of yourself. This is at once both the most sobering and the most exhilarating news coming from this academic discipline.

The pivotal question which seeks an answer from within you is what version of myself am I becoming? If I continue to foster within myself the results that come from the path choices I am making, where will I be in 5 years, and more soberly, who will I be? To open yourself up to such questions pre-supposes that you are willing to accept the results of what you are doing as being largely of your own making and that you have the power in the present to change the course of your future. It is probably easier to believe that life is more of an accident and that we as people are not that powerful. You may be bent strenuously on the value of making your own choices and act with tenacity in making them, but less inclined to believe that you could be going somewhere you do not really want to be when you get there. And what is more, the future consequences of present choices cannot be completely altered at that time by a simple regret about a choice you have made. If version "A" of you is vastly superior to version "B" it can hardly be imagined that if you embrace the choices leading to "A" that you will find yourself lamenting the result and wishing you had become "B"! *Not so.* The lamenting, regretting and frustration will come when you have arrived or remained at version "B" of yourself and realize that you have missed the unfolding of your greater potential and that your life experience is now a mere shadow of what it could be.

If a lesser version of you and I can be created by default it would be wise to explore how it is done so when we observe it happening in ourselves we can first recognize it, then stop it and move in another direction. Here are some of ways this happens. Refusing to choose to embrace your best environmental context when you have the power to do so will lead you by default to version "B". Labeling yourself as incapable of change in any matter of improvement will lead you to accept less than your best self. Taking the easier path so as to avoid work, toil, hardship, change or refining will find you defaulting to something less noble within yourself. Believing that someone else is responsible for the quality of your life diminishes your own personal power to

choose what is best. Refusing to leave an environment which downgrades your potential will not lead you to embrace an experience, new environment, or change of perspective that will lead you out of default. These, along with a myriad of others, when combined with the acceptance of any path of least resistance, will lead to different results.

The crucial question at the onset is simply this: could I be wrong in my current chosen direction? What does my direction tell me about myself? Though you and I possess no crystal ball which gives us the ultimate picture for life, the end point of any direction can be investigated, predicted and speculated upon beforehand to see if it propels us firmly toward our highest desires or whether it is just a default direction. The personal honesty required in this case is daunting; as you may find a new direction frightening, leaving you with a sense of insecurity toward the outcome. Becoming your best is risky business. It may be easier to take a more comfortable path; one you cannot fail in, or does not challenge what you are made of. This will never do if you are to be all you can be. You will live with at least one unalterable truth: you may choose the path, but not the consequence of the path. So you ask yourself whether you want the consequences of your path and this becomes the only crystal ball you can use.

Consider the experience of the following individual. While growing up, he had difficulty with reading, but that struggle was largely accepted by his family as he grew and the possible impact of his reading weakness was minimized. What had become a weakness had little plan of action to change the situation. As he grew into manhood he was fortunate to gain some skills which allowed him to support himself without having to deal directly with his reading difficulty. For many years he successfully supported himself and his family, making a significant income. However, due to some economic and competition factors in his main line of work, it became obvious that he needed a particular kind of license to expand his services and to remain competitive and profitable. However, to do so would require that he pass a fairly arduous exam in order to obtain the license, which would not only involve extensive reading to prepare for it, but also reading under pressure during the licensing exam itself. What to do? He seemed clearly into his default self, simply moving along adequately up to this point, but now will he embrace his new opportunity, or will his reading weakness cause him to shrink from what he can have in the future if he pursues the licensing direction? This story has a fortunate ending. Over a period of several months he made a decision to tackle the knowledge base required for the upcoming exam, which decision propelled him to face his difficulties head on and develop a new relationship with reading. He passed the exam with an adequate score and obtained the license. Thus a new relationship with reading was formed as well as a new definition of what he himself was capable of. He embraced in that aspect of his life, Version “A” of himself.

So what if you can't imagine a different path for yourself? You find yourself ill-prepared to strike out in new directions, lacking confidence in your choosing; having no evidence from your past that your choices to this point have been all that fulfilling. Furthermore, perhaps you have had no one around you who believes a path of destiny awaits you; and perhaps would be more comfortable being around your “default” self, rather than the person you could be; thereby also keeping themselves hidden from a view of their own potentialities, which would be extremely uncomfortable for them if they are unwilling to be more than they are. The good news is we all have our emotions- those monitors of discontent that when we listen to them, they inform us that something is wrong- or at least not terribly right yet. When you ask yourself if your current efforts or situation represent the best within you and you receive a resounding “No!”, or when you find yourself behaving again in a manner that leaves you frustrated and unfulfilled- and that for the umpteenth time- you can rest assured that your own personal barometer of the quality of your life is speaking to you loudly. Listen to those feelings; for the path of discontent, boredom, restlessness, purposelessness, and flatness may be the very agitations which point that a directional change is needed.

Sometimes you cannot seem to feel your discontent; your feelings seem indiscernible and all you know is that everything seems normal for you; you are in the “zone”, it is a comfortable place, and you seem unable to imagine a different state or path. You just don't seem that upset about the current state of affairs. You can ask yourself if you really like where you are at and will you be satisfied with this current state of affairs when looking back from the vantage point of 20 years from now? Perhaps you sense a loss of dreams of what could

be, and in your dull but active awareness of your present situation you feel no urge to get up and change anything. This is the tremendous gravity of habit taking its ugly toll on your possible destiny. You will need to take out your wildest dreams and dust them off so your imagination can be unleashed towards the possibilities of a new you through the embracing of new experiences, challenges, goals, directions and thinking.

What you will need is a **new context**; meaning new experiences, environments, associations, relationships and atmosphere; coupled with a new way of seeing things in your mind. If you are not experiencing what you want to experience, where is it to be found? Find it...or find someone who is experiencing it and embrace it! You will need a mentor or a significant new group experience that propels you forward. As you seek the new and reject the old you will let go of the fear of risk and begin to receive the benefits of your new choices. This will not be altogether comfortable since you are morphing into a new reality; a new paradigm of thinking, new feelings, new thoughts and will be making mistakes natural to your learning process. Of course this is a stress-filled experience because you are now traveling in virgin territory- not uncharted necessarily by others- but definitely by you. There will come those times of satisfaction through your strivings that you are not taking the easy roads or selling yourself short; and like trying on a new set of clothes your new life and experiences will eventually fit comfortably and your images of your potentiality will expand. This is your reward for stepping into the realm of your own possibilities and not shrinking back from them.

This then becomes the central focus of your energies and will: not to define yourself by your genetics and background, nor merely by your present environment; but rather by an informed and inspired vision of the interplay of both as they are combined with the power of your own choosing. Then as the famous life stages theorist Erik Erikson pointed out in his 8 Stages of Man, later on down the road you will look back on your choices with a sense of integrity in your older years, and not despair. Let it not be said, then, of you or I, "For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been'."

**From the book "Growing Beyond Your Family of Origin Experience, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition- John C. Pulver, Ph.D**

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