

CHOICES

by Joe Smerkers

Imagine driving along the highway of life and coming to an intersection - a "T" In the road. Your destiny lies to the right, if you make the choice to pursue it. To the left lies the challenges and rewards that society promises if you obey the rules. The time for a decision is at hand.

Over the last week several friends of mine, with wide disparity in age, have been struggling with this decision. Do they turn right, pursuing what they want out of life, ignoring what society and many around them think they ought to do? Or do they turn left, and play the role of good stewards to all but themselves?

These are not easy questions to answer, regardless of one's wisdom or age. Complicating this decision are many unknowns. Are the roads straight or curved? Is this a once in a lifetime decision? How many chances do we get? What is the cost, to ourselves and our loved ones, of pursuing our destiny? What do we give up? What will we get in return?

Or, is this really a decision at all? Decision implying some form of logical choice where we understand and weight the consequences. Maybe those who turn right never really choose in the traditional sense but one day find themselves wandering down the path of destiny. Never really knowing how they got there. Never really knowing why. When asked they search for answers to appease others. But out comes only simplistic statements that, for others, lack sufficient explanation.

At first, turning right seems such a logical thing to do. Follow your destiny. Make a difference. Be all you can be. Become the hero. Become a leader. Be different. Be unique. Go where others fear to tread. Why would anyone abandon what they have been created to do? Why would anyone abandon what HE has laid out for them?

But there are no promises of heroism. Of saving the world. Of inventing the next vaccine.

Of leading the next crusade. We, each of us, journey uniquely toward our destinies. Mine may lie in a simple act, that in my lifetime, is inconsequential and unknown. It may lie in seeds planted in my children - or in my children's children. Or it may lie in simple daily acts of friendship.

It is the knowledge and hope that we are pursuing our destiny that nurtures us forward. Not the expectation of the end result. For along the path of destiny there are no goals. There can be no dreams of glory. For only when we rid ourselves of these vestiges of ego and materialism can we reach our true potential.

In truth the journey toward destiny is a path of pain and suffering. I was speaking recently with a friend who has a severe heart problem. We were chatting about 'things' when we both sort of reached the same conclusion. Those who are sad for us miss the point. Death is easy. Life, living, is difficult. Choosing to live is hard. Choosing to pursue our destiny is even harder.

Where then does one get the strength to travel such a bumpy road? A road without a destination. A road without promises of reward. Some say we will get our rewards in heaven, in the afterlife I just don't know. I have no expectations. I travel this road because it's the only road I know. I have ever known. And I owe a great deal of thanks to those who have nurtured and supported and given me this opportunity.

Last week I got my second round of Chemotherapy. It has hit me harder than the first. So last weekend I was very tired. I didn't ask the 'why me' question but started to wonder about this destiny stuff.

Monday I was especially tired, both mentally and physically. It seemed like the more rests I took the more tired I became. Tuesday morning I awoke expecting another draining day. What I discovered instead is what the Alchemist promises. (Paulo Coelho, The

Alchemist] That when you are in pursuit of your destiny, the "Soul of the World" provides."

On Tuesday the phone calls began early in the day. Friends just wanting to say hello - how are you doing. A call, not much of a thing by most measures. But what an impact it had on me. My friends and I chatted, not about anything important, just about life. And after each call I felt better. Stronger. More ready to deal with the real issues and circumstances of my day.

Then one of my friends said, "What are you doing around noon." I answered, "Nothing." So he suggested he come over and we take a walk. I said, "ok." We walked for about thirty minutes sharing our experiences, our hopes, our dreams, our frustrations. We shared our deepest thoughts. Openly and honestly Afterwards I felt rejuvenated - mentally and physically.

On Wednesday the calls continued. By now I was almost back to my old self. I got a call from a friend who wanted to talk. So this time I invited him over for a walk. And like the day before, two friends walked and shared, providing new energy to each other.

Friends and loved ones provide us the strength we need And to my friends and family I say a heartfelt thank you.

I am at times jealous of those who play by the rules. Those who work hard, advance, provide for their families. My actions, on the other hand, have inflicted pain and suffering on those I love the most. In early October Maggie and I had a chance to talk about 'things,' Asking Maggie "How are you feeling?" One time is not enough to get a deep response. So I have learned to ask this question three times, And when that same question is asked the third time I better be ready for an outpouring of emotion and truth.

The stresses on Maggie of what I have been doing, and not doing, have been great. During our talk she said, "You spend all your time helping others that you have forgotten your responsibilities to those closest to you.

I realized at that moment how selfish I had been. Sure I help others. I make a difference.

But I do it for me. It's what *I* want to do. When was the last time *I* did something that *I* didn't want to do to help another?

With great cosmic intentions I have forgotten those who love and need me the most. I have selfishly hurt the most self-less person I have ever known.

For this, Maggie, I apologize and hope that somehow God will show me the way to make amends. I wish that I had been able to give you more, more of what you deserve. I wish that the pain and suffering that I inflict on you would go away. I wish, sometimes, that I had taken the other path.

If God would grant me one wish, I wish that all your dreams come true.

My path was pre-destined many years ago. I am now but a slave to HIS will. My hope is that whatever lies before us brings you happiness and joy. And while the stresses of our journey will not disappear, you and the children are the joy of my life. And yes I still believe in Chamelot and windmills and dreams.

Confronted with dreams. Confronted by reality. Confronted by expectations. How then does one choose? There are no simplistic models so I leave you with some reflections of my father. He was an immigrant born in 1895 in Hungary. He was a hard, tough man who dropped out of school in the sixth grade to support his family. Whether he achieved his destiny or not, I do not know. But this I know for sure - he truly enjoyed life. He enjoyed his music. He enjoyed his cigars. He enjoyed the holiday gatherings. And he enjoyed the company of his family,

And when he stopped enjoying life, he died.