

Choice—The Force That Shapes Our Destiny

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*“Tell me, what is it **you plan to do** with **your one wild** and precious life?”*

—MARY OLIVER, *The Summer Day*

When Jack Parr hosted *The Tonight Show*, one of his frequent guests was the accomplished journalist and screenwriter Adela Rogers St. Johns, who lived to the age of 94. On one visit, Parr noted that St. Johns had led a rather incredible life and asked her if there was anything she wanted to do that she had not yet done. St. Johns replied, “I just want to live long enough to see how it all turns out.”

Although some of us may contemplate our demise, I don’t think most of us think about how our lives will actually turn out—I don’t. Probably because there’s no way for us to know. Maybe we think it’s just a matter of fate, completely out of our control. And while our death may be totally random, our life is more under our control than we’d like to admit.

The other night, I was watching the BBC series *War & Peace*, for the second time in a week. It’s eight episodes—six hours long! My excuse was that I was sick and had no energy for anything but to hang out on the couch. In one scene, Pierre Bezukhov is sitting at a table that looks much too large for him, laying out what appear to be Tarot cards, when his stepmother, wife of the dead count who left his entire estate to

his son Pierre, enters the room and says derisively, “Playing with the cards—again?” Without looking up, Pierre says, “I’m consulting my fate.”

I had begun to worry that my illness-induced lethargy of several days might become habitual. But when I watched this scene, I thought, no, you can always change your fate — not by consulting an oracle but by making conscious decisions about how you want to live your life. It’s not about goal setting: For me, goals are difficult to bring into focus, let alone fruition. And they can create a false sense of knowing, when self-knowledge is a fluid *process*, not a finished *product*.

Remember the saying “You are what you eat”? Well, I don’t know about you, but that saying never resonated with me, I guess because it was almost an advertising slogan meant to get us to change our behavior around eating. But after watching Bezukhov deal the cards, a new slogan sort of asserted itself on me, one more suited to my values: “You are the choices you make.”

Every time we decide to do one thing over another, we are expressing our free will. And I’m not referring here to the big life choices — which college to attend, whom to marry (or whether to marry at all), whether to bring children into the world and how many, which career path to pursue — but the daily moment-by-moment ways we choose to spend our time — what we devote ourselves to in the time that’s open to our own discretion. What we make of those moments ultimately determines what we make of ourselves. Knowing this is kind of a daunting responsibility, isn’t it? If we’re

inclined to blame others for life's setbacks, it becomes pretty clear fairly quickly how many opportunities we have that are completely within our own sphere of power.

For instance, this last week, the ideas I'm talking about with you today *were* very prominently in my consciousness every time I had to decide between watching the Democratic National Convention or working on a paying project. I managed to do both, but I surprised myself by watching much more of the DNC than I would have anticipated. It was a conscious choice. I asked myself, will this matter in the future? I felt sure it would, so I decided it was important enough to devote my attention to it. I'm glad I did. It inspired me as I know it inspired many of you.

The nice part was that once I brought it into the realm of conscious decision-making, I was able to quit feeling guilty about 'wasting' so much time.

I am sure you all know of a person who seems to accomplish several times more than most people are capable of in a lifetime. Nobel Prize winners, writers, artists ... I've always been fascinated by Steve Jobs, for instance, who not only revolutionized the way we live and work but how we listen to music, the way we take and share photos, and how we communicate with each other. His work, driven by his uncompromising passion for excellence, has had an effect on people the world over. Though he died almost five years ago, the ripples from his work can be still be felt — most recently in the realm of social justice. Because if it were not for cellphones with cameras — and most people never leave home without their cellphones — there would possibly be no Black Lives Matter movement. Now the scales of justice are tipped by individuals

who have immediate access to evidence that can be used in a court of law. We no longer rely on the scrupulousness of the prosecution. Regular people with cellphone video cameras now serve as both reporters of the news and indisputable eye witnesses. Steve Jobs' destiny is also his legacy.

Think of Albert Schweitzer, Eleanor Roosevelt, Tolstoy — Hillary Clinton. (If you caught Bill Clinton's speech about his wife's years in public service, you've got to marvel at how much she's accomplished in a single lifetime.) There's a reason these people are timeless and famous. Because measured against the rest of humanity, they were not only brilliant, they were focused. And I doubt any of them wasted much of their free time.

But I'm not really talking about creating a Nobel Prize-winning destiny for ourselves. And I'm not trying to persuade you to be productive every waking moment.

Productivity for its own sake is almost worse than frittering time away. We all need and value relaxation ... freedom from stress. So how can we know what is personally important enough to make it worth sacrificing our leisure time? It helps if we know something about ourselves. Socrates is credited with the advice "Know thyself."

Knowing oneself, I think, does not come from introspection but accumulates over time by noticing the choices we make. Our decisions, consciously made, are the touchstones of self-knowledge. Why do we choose to spend time doing one thing over another? How does that change when we keep at the forefront of our minds the knowledge that our choices matter? That they shape us, shape our destiny?

Destiny is a big word, imbued with world-historical meaning. The very first definition includes the words “predetermined” and “foreordained.” As if none of the choices we make of our own free will can change the nature of our destiny. And we do all have a destiny, by the way; some destinies just have a more powerful and longer-lasting effect on the world than others. And although the word sounds somewhat elevated, destiny is not always righteous: Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., *and* Martin Luther each had a destiny, but so did Hitler and Stalin.

Unlike the way I used to think of destiny, though, I now believe it’s not at all preordained. Believing that our fates are somehow predetermined by a higher being cheats us our free will. And it dilutes the hard work done by those who do achieve a life that, in hindsight, might look like it was divinely cast at their birth.

My destiny may not be to reverse the effects of climate change or end racism in the world, but I feel sure I have a reason to live, a purpose for my life. The only way I can discover that purpose is to live fully, to ignore the trifling distractions and answer the universal invitations with an emphatic YES! and to be conscious that every choice I make contributes toward shaping my destiny. If that choice resonates with reaching my highest self, then I know I’ve made the right one. Caveat: I still sometimes make decisions to let myself get distracted, but, I tell myself, at least I’m now aware of it.

Postmodernist novelist and short-story writer John Barth said that “Everyone is necessarily a hero in their own story.” Which is another way of saying that, deep down, we are all in touch with our highest self. It may become obscured —

sometimes for years at a time — but I believe it is never completely concealed from us. If you can't put it into words, then consider this: Each choice is between two roads, like those in Robert Frost's poem *The Road Less Traveled*. Only you don't have to arbitrarily take the road less traveled; you can just take the road that feels most attuned with who you see as your potential best self. The trusty adage "Let your conscience be your guide" is incredibly powerful when it comes to seeking our higher purpose. We can't each go out and save the world (or make a billion dollars if that's what's important to us), but we can be aware that the choices we make either align with our higher purpose ... or don't. Hemingway wrote, "I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after." So choosing can be a moral action.

It seems kind of old-fashioned to talk about morality, doesn't it. Because it's definitely gone out of style over the decades since the sixties. But I noticed it came up a lot in the Democratic National Convention. Maybe it's *time* for morality to enjoy a resurgence.

A friend of mine asked me, "How do you know which invitations are just distractions and which are truly divine?" It's fairly simple. If you have a will — and we all do or we wouldn't be sitting here in this congregation today — we make constant choices. (For me it's things like *Do I want to read yet another Trump story? Or would my higher self be better served by spending time in nature, reading a good book — or better yet, volunteering to serve the greater good?*) The choices I make express my will and ultimately manifest my destiny.

How it turns out depends on even the small choices we make every day. And we always have a choice — if not in the actual event at least in our attitude toward it. Keeping this awareness at the forefront of your mind can change your life. The journey is made all the more exciting when the destination is a mystery to be revealed, one choice at a time. You truly will become the culmination of the choices you make — each moment, every day. In the process, you will come to know who you are. And if you're lucky, you might even live long enough to see how it all turns out.