

Guideposts to Meaning

Discovering What Really Matters

by Joseph Fabry

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Chapter Six

Guideposts to Choices

The second area where you can hope to find meaning is choice. You always have choices, but often you are not aware of that. A situation where you don't see choices, where you feel trapped, will seem meaningless. Whenever you are aware of choices, you no longer feel like a helpless victim of the situation, and so you are able to see meaning.

As mentioned before, you must distinguish situations you can change from those that you must accept. As a rule, if you don't like a situation that *can* be changed, "the meaning of the moment" is to change it. Even in an unchangeable situation, you have a choice: you can change your *attitude* toward the situation. Aldous Huxley proclaimed that "The choice is always ours." Certainly this is true of the choice of attitude.

It is not always easy to distinguish between what can and what cannot be changed. The fateful nature of a situation resulting from death or an incurable illness, from divorce or retirement is obvious. Can a particular family or job situation be changed or must it be accepted? Sometimes a Socratic dialogue can help you determine the answer to this question.

The Japanese logotherapist Dr. Hiroshi Takashima distinguishes illnesses (and situations) that you can master from those that you have to learn to live with. A situation you can master is like a poisonous snake that is locked in a cage with you. The meaning of that situation is found in the act of killing the snake. A situation from which you cannot escape is like a strong but good-natured ox that you are locked up with. The meaning in that situation is found in learning to live with it.

Changeable Situations

Today, in our affluent and permissive society, more choices are available than have been available to any generation before now. You can choose

your major in college, your career, your partner, your lifestyle. Simultaneously, meaning changes during your lifetime. What seems meaningful at 18 may not be so when you are 40 or 65. To continue in a situation you no longer find meaningful may result in frustration, neurosis, depression, psychosomatic illness, addiction, even suicide. And in many situations you continue to have opportunities to change.

The first step toward mental health is to become aware that you do have choices. The second step is to determine what is most meaningful for you at this time in your life.

The Basic List

The most direct way for you to become aware that you have choices is for you to make a list of possibilities. From that list you can select what is most meaningful for you.

First describe your “trap” in a sentence or two. Then list possible solutions to your problem. Include even those possibilities that at first do not seem practical, even those that seem ridiculous. Then list the positive and negative consequences of each choice as advantages and disadvantages. The list will show you that you are *not* trapped, and the humor in the ridiculous possibilities can be therapeutic.

MY POSSIBILITIES

My trap is: _____

My choices are:
Choice 1 _____
Choice 2 _____
Choice 3 _____
Choice 4 _____
Choice 5 _____
Choice 6 _____
Choice 7 _____

Consequences:	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
<i>Choice 1</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 2</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 3</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 4</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 5</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 6</i>	_____	_____
<i>Choice 7</i>	_____	_____

Look over your list and select the alternative that is most meaningful for you. You can use a Socratic dialogue to help you make this choice. In that dialogue, consider the four other areas where you are likely to find meaning:

Self-discovery. Does your choice represent your true self, or is it based on a “should,” a response—perhaps unconscious—to an outside demand (from mother, peers, society)? Do not automatically reject these outside demands, but examine each one to determine if you agree with it.

Uniqueness. Consider whether your choice will place you in a situation in which you will not be easily replaced.

Responsibility. Consider the impact of your choice on others.

Self-transcendence. Remember that your choice is likely to be most meaningful if it transcends your self-interests.

Example

Max was an engineer, 35, married, with two children ages 8 and 10. He had a good salary, chances to advance, and fringe benefits that included health insurance and a pension plan. But he hated his job—the company was part of a war industry and polluted the environment. His wife shared his concern about those two aspects of his job. Lately he had begun to doubt his choice of career. He regretted not having become a teacher, so that he could have an immediate influence on the development of children. He had become irritable and depressed, suffered from sleeplessness, and had started to drink. All of this was affecting his marriage. After talking with a helper, Max wrote out his list:

MY POSSIBILITIES

My trap is:	My present job
My choices are:	
Choice 1	<u>Keep the job</u>
Choice 2	Find another <u>job as an engineer</u>
Choice 3	<u>Become a teacher of children</u>
Choice 4	Wife will <u>work to support family</u>
Choice 5	<u>Get a loan</u>
Choice 6	Find a <u>job teaching engineers</u>
Choice 7	Find <u>part-time work while I study</u>
Choice 8	Same as 7, but wife would also <u>work part time</u>

Consequences:

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Choice 1	<u>Good salary</u>	<u>Value conflicts</u>
Choice 2	<u>Work more satisfying</u>	<u>Cut in salary</u>
Choice 3	<u>Satisfying work</u>	<u>No salary while studying</u>

Choice 4	<u>Living expenses are covered</u>	<u>Strain on family</u>
Choice 5	<u>Wife can take care of children</u>	<u>Financial obligation</u>
Choice 6	<u>It is a teaching job</u>	<u>Not what I really want</u>
Choice 7	<u>Gets me where I want to be</u>	<u>Reduced income in the meantime</u>
Choice 8	<u>Gets me where I want to be</u>	<u>Some strain on family</u>

Max looked over the list and favored choice #5. However, after talking things over with his family, they decided on #8. Max, his wife, and his children made another list in which they divided the household duties. The results of these actions were not only beneficial for Max—who now had a meaningful goal—but also for his wife, who had been bored as a homemaker, and for the children, who now had meaningful tasks within the family.

The search for meaning does not end with list making. Once the choice is made, steps have to be taken to make it a reality. More lists had to be made. Max listed possible part-time jobs, and so did his wife. The children made lists of their self-chosen duties. Max looked over the colleges where he could get the education he needed to become a teacher. He began to sleep better, and he stopped drinking. “I really have no time for depression,” he said.

Rephrasing

Max was willing and able to make a change. He just didn’t know where to begin. Some people think they don’t have the strength to get out of their traps. They are convinced that they “can’t do it.” If you think that you “can’t do it,” a Socratic dialogue can lead you to recall past experiences when you “did do it,” when you did change an undesirable situation. An unguided fantasy can lead you into a future where you see yourself in a desirable situation that will motivate you to try to change your present situation. Then you can rephrase your expression of attitude, from a negative emphasis to a positive one, as seen in this sequence:

“I can’t find a new job.”

“I don’t want to find a new job.”

“I’d like to find a new job.”

“I can find a new job.”

“I will find a new job.”

At that point it is time to take the first step from intention to reality. Make a list of first steps:

- Look at employment ads in newspapers.
- Place your own ads.

- Go to an employment agency.
- Ask friends and acquaintances if they know of any appropriate jobs.
- Apply for jobs at promising companies.
- Send out resumes to prospective employers.

Now it is time to answer ads, write letters and send resumes, and go for interviews. If you are apprehensive or lack self-assurance, the “as if” method (Appendix B) can be used. Briefly, this is how the “as if” method works: During the short time of the interview, you act as if you are as self-assured as you would like to be—and, deep within you, you are. The first impression you make becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. When it is one of self assurance, the interviewer responds to your self-assurance, and that response reinforces the trait in you.

Rehearsing Your Choice

Even after you have made your choice, listed the steps to follow, and learned about the “as if” method, you still may not feel ready to go out into the world and try. If so, a dress rehearsal in the form of logodrama (see Chapter Twelve) is helpful. In a logodrama, the helper plays the part of the feared “ogre.” For instance, the helper can play the part of a job interviewer who has all the characteristics you fear—a person who is aggressive, distrustful, negative, and cold, someone who tries to trip up each candidate for the job. In the rehearsal, if you react the wrong way, you can change your behavior until you find a way that suits you. After this rehearsal with a helper, you can use your newly developed confidence in a job interview.

Responsible Choices

When you make choices in a situation you can change, you are likely to use your freedom in a way that suits you. And that, of course, is all right. But meaningful choice must also consider others who are affected by the choice. If you do not think about others, you may create conflicts and feelings of guilt. A meaningful choice is free and responsible. (This aspect of choice making is more fully discussed in Chapter Eight.)

Elisabeth Lukas has developed a simple form to use when dealing with a situation in which it is important to consider the feelings of others.

Problem situation: _____

Consequences

<i>Person Involved</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
_____	_____	_____

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Example

A woman, 35, with two children, came to Dr. Lukas with a problem that is all too common nowadays. Her husband was a good man but the marriage had become stale. The woman had met an exciting man who promised her the life she had always wanted. After the woman had talked at length about her situation and her values, Dr. Lukas had the woman make lists of people and consequences, as outlined on the form above.

Problem situation: If I get a divorce and marry my new friend,
what will the consequences be?

Consequences

<i>Person Involved</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Me	_____	_____
My husband	_____	_____
Tommy (10-year-old child)	_____	_____
Sue (8-year-old child)	_____	_____
Rod (my boyfriend)	_____	_____
My parents	_____	_____

After the woman had written out the positive and negative consequences, on herself and on other people — of each possible action — it was easier for her to make her decision.

A Socratic dialogue is crucial in helping an individual who is making a choice in a situation for which there are various solutions. The dialogue helps the seeker to explore his or her innermost hopes. Here are some suggestions for opening and facilitating that quest:

- What are some of the daydreams that you enjoy?
- What makes you feel good about yourself?
- Tell me about a difficult decision you made.
- How did you do it?
- Tell me about a decision you made and regretted.
- What did you do about it?
- Have you ever had to unmake a decision?
- What did you do?
- Tell me about a decision that you made that was challenged — but that you stuck to anyway.

Tell about a time when you didn't realize that you had made a choice, but found that you had.

What would you like to succeed in?

What do you wish you had tried?

What would you like to do someday but haven't done yet?

Tell about a time you put off something that you should have done right away.

Was there ever a time when you wanted to say something but didn't?

Tell about a time when it was hard for you to say "no" but you did.

Tell about a mask you chose but didn't like.

What do you hope your profession will do for you?

Tell about a time when part of you wanted to do one thing and part wanted to do something else.

Unchangeable Situations

Some situations must be accepted. Then the choice that is open to you is not to change a meaningless, often painful, situation. Rather, you can choose to find a meaningful *attitude* toward a situation that in itself is painful and meaningless, like any blow of fate.

The meaning behind unavoidable suffering is not immediately evident. You need to go through a period of grieving and acceptance. Only then will you be able to ask yourself questions like these:

- What have I learned from this?
 - Has it given me new tasks and challenges?
 - Has it made me a stronger, more perceptive person?
 - Can I use this experience to help others in similar situations?
 - Can the way I endure my situation serve as an example to others?
 - Does this experience make me appreciate things I have taken for granted?
- What choices do I still have?

Areas of Fate and Freedom

In any unchangeable situation there is an area of fate that you have to accept. But there is also an area of freedom where you still have choices. In the area of fate you have to find meaning through modification of attitudes, as discussed in Chapter Four. Here the choice is not whether to accept or reject the painful situation, but whether to be crushed by the cruel reality or to get comfort from some positive aspects.

Examples

A woman suffering from incurable and painful emphysema talked about how her illness reduced her participation in family affairs and her

enjoyment of her children. The helper asked her: "If fate had given you a choice—to have your sickness and healthy children, or to be healthy yourself and have children who suffer from *amphys'ma*—which would you have chosen?"

A man who had lost his wife after thirty years of marriage was asked: "If you could choose between having lost your wife after thirty years and having never met and married her, which would you choose?"

These are hypothetical questions, but they elucidate meaning that is hidden by the pain of the situation. In cases of unavoidable suffering, the helper cannot cure but can comfort the seeker.

Even in unchangeable situations, there are areas of true freedom where choices can be made and actualized. Again, examples are helpful.

Examples

A woman died of cancer and left a husband and two teen-age daughters, 14 and 16 years old. The woman's death was an irreversible blow of fate. The situation that resulted contained problems that presented a need to make choices. The widower's job left him little time for housekeeping. The daughters had to go to school, shop, cook, and do the dishes. They felt as if they were trapped for years to come. The father and daughters sat down to work out this problem, and they made a list:

Alternatives

Consequences

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
1. Hire a cook	Little work for us	Too expensive
2. Eat in restaurants	Little work for us	Too expensive
3. Father/daughters take on various chores	Work is distributed	Each person works alone
4. All 3 go shopping shopping Saturday, cook seven dinners, and freeze them	6 "free" days	Much work one day
5. Stop eating	No work	Starvation
6. Get invitations from friends	Little work	Loss of friends

The list went on. The father and daughters had fun thinking up possible and impossible alternatives. Eventually they choose alternative #4. Each Saturday the three of them made a menu for the coming week, shopped together, and prepared and froze six of the meals, all in one afternoon. When they made the list, including even the ridiculous alternatives, they freed themselves from feeling trapped. And after they made their choice, the older daughter commented: "We don't have to keep our system forever. We can always change it."

The court denied a divorced woman, Melanie, custody of her children. This decision was, for the foreseeable future, irreversible. The helper explored with the woman her areas of freedom. During their dialogue the helper heard a logohint: This woman loved her children, but her alcoholism made her an unfit mother. Her body chemistry condemned her to alcoholism, and a single drink was too many. Where was this woman's area of fate, and where was her area of freedom? She could not change her body chemistry. But she could choose to not take that fateful first drink. Was she prepared never again touch alcohol, to make that major change in her life and so increase the likelihood that she would get her children back? Separation from her children depressed this woman so much that she sought comfort in the bottle. But the love she expressed for her children gave the helper permission to make suggestions. The helper described situations in which Melanie could use her love, not only to be in contact with children, but also to prove to the court that she was capable of caring for her own children.

The helper discussed scenarios in which Melanie would help in a nursery, a children's hospital, a dancing school, a playground, as a babysitter or teaching assistant, with pay or as a volunteer. Melanie listened to the helper's description of a day in a nursery, where she would watch the children, play with them, prepare snacks, and supervise the naps of preschool children (about the same ages as her own children). She became excited about this prospect and was encouraged to take steps toward finding such a position. Since then she has been able to stay off of alcohol. And she hopes for a new ruling on custody of her children. This is one of the fortunate cases when a blow of fate became reversible.

The Irreversible Past

One area where choice making is important is your past. The facts of your past are unchangeable. You cannot go back and redo your parents, early upbringing, past mistakes. What you *can* change is your attitude. You can take the events of your past as millstones around your neck, or as a life-belt of experience that keeps you afloat, and even as a challenge to learn and do better.

Examples

This is a true story about two women—one was lonely and unhappy, the other was surrounded by friends and cheerful. The two had similar pasts. Anna explained: "My mother never loved me. I have no role model. I don't know how to love." Mary said: "My mother never loved me. I know how bitter it is to be unloved and have made a special effort not to pass on this feeling of not being loved."

The same early experience, but with different results. Growing up unloved had made Anna withdrawn and had led to loneliness. It had made Mary reach out to others and make friends.

Anna was introduced to Mary and gained awareness that a past lack of motherly love could be a challenge instead of an excuse. A Socratic dialogue helped Anna to become aware of what had been buried deep in her subconscious—the reasons for her mother’s behavior. This was an opportunity for a logodrama (see Chapter Twelve). Anna asked an empty chair on which she visualized her mother (now long dead): “Why didn’t you love me? Why didn’t you spend more time with me, as my school-mates’ mothers did with them?”

Then Anna switched chairs and played her mother’s part. She heard herself say: “Your father was killed in the war three months before you were born. I raised all five of you children by myself. During the day I worked in a factory, and at night I took in laundry to make ends meet. I wish I could have spent more time with you. I just didn’t have the strength.”

Anna began to cry. “Yes, mother always was tired,” she said. “But it was because she loved us that she worked so hard. She died young. I was too small to understand.”

A basic change took place in Anna’s behavior and in her relationships to others. The facts of her past had not changed, but her attitude toward her past had changed.

When I visited my native Vienna after 27 years, I was amazed by the fluency with which my old high school classmate, Hermann, spoke English, and even more amazed that he spoke French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian, and was learning Arabic. He was an attorney with no special need for languages. Hermann reminded me that our French teacher had repeatedly told him that he had no talent for languages. That kind of experience is, for many people, an obstacle to development, a mistake that cannot be undone, made by someone in the past. Hermann—although he did not know the term—had used his “defiant power of the spirit.” For 27 years he had worked to prove that our professor of French was wrong, to prove that he did have a talent for languages. Similarly, many people live out their lives wanting to prove to their parents—dead or alive—that the parents’ negative judgment was wrong. Many such people become successful in the very area in which their parents had predicted that they would fail.

Making Your Life Mosaic

To see clearly what parts of your life are unchangeable and where you still have choices, draw a mosaic of your life. Not a life map of your past, but a mosaic of your life as you see it now. Sketch your life, with symbols and stick figures to represent situations and persons. With crayons or felt-tipped pens of many colors, draw in the pieces of the mosaic: your first memories, your school years, events that had impact. How many pieces did you draw in dark colors? How many in bright colors? Are the dark ones balled together like thunder clouds? Do they have silver linings? Give each

mosaic piece a name, a memory. Do you see a pattern underlying your life? Did you color some events dark because you have always considered them negative? Are they really still dark? Would you want to recolor them? You cannot change their position in your life, but you can change their colors. You may find that you have empty spaces in your mosaic that you still can fill. These are the areas of your freedom. You cannot redo the entire picture, but it is good to see what you can still do.

The Bag of Your Past

Take a paper bag and fill it with slips of paper on which you have written brief phrases signifying events in your past, such as:

- painful childhood episodes
- happy moments
- first memories
- present experiences that remind you of your past
- something you are proud of
- something you never told anyone
- a great disappointment
- a pain, fear, hope, pleasure
- turning points

You can add whatever seems important. You can dramatize this exercise by pasting the slips of paper on rocks that seem appropriate—stones that are large, small, smooth, rough, precious, common.

Then take one paper (with its stone) at a time and talk (or think) about the event and your present feelings about it. Has your evaluation of the episode changed? Has something good come from something negative? Has the significance of the event faded? Has the good feeling about it intensified? Has a bad experience lost its terror? Is what you have kept secret still worth hiding? You will realize that you have, in the past, changed your attitudes, that you can become caught in attitudes of your own making, and that you still have wide areas of freedom to change your attitudes toward events in the past.

If you are to gain meaning from a changed attitude, you may need to follow the change with action. Perhaps you cannot forget, but you can forgive. Make friends with an old enemy. Break an old pattern. Start something new that you never before thought you could do. Choices—in action or in attitudes—often require risk taking.

It is useful to examine the past from time to time, and to see where your choices are now. As Shakespeare has Hamlet say, “The past is Prologue.”