

Guideposts to Meaning

**Discovering What
Really Matters**

by Joseph Fabry

An Institute of Logotherapy Press Book

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Chapter Eight

Guideposts to Responsibility

Responsibility, the fourth area where meaning can be found, is less acceptable than the three we have discussed so far. *We want* to find meaning by personal choices that express our true and unique selves. But if those choices are not made responsibly, they will not be fulfilling. Just as pleasure without meaning is empty, and power without purpose is corrupting, so choice without responsibility is meaningless.

Unfortunately we are in the midst of a responsibility crisis. Although in western societies we have far more freedom of choice than our ancestors had, responsibility has not kept pace with liberation. Frankl has suggested that we supplement our Statue of Liberty on the East Coast with a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

People are free to “do their own thing” without concern for others—that is, without responsibility. They blare loud music through open windows, litter beaches, spray slogans on buildings, drive under the influence of alcohol, snatch handbags, rob gas stations to support their drug habits, and terrorize neighborhoods. Without commitment they marry and divorce, create children and then abort or neglect them, take jobs and then quit, change careers, hire and fire, abandon the elderly. Freedom without responsibility results in emptiness, frustration, despair, addiction, violence, neurosis, suicide.

There are three pathways to finding meaning through responsibility: by responding to the meanings of the moment; by making responsible choices where choice exists; and by *not* feeling responsible when there is no choice.

Response-ability

Responsibility can be understood quite literally as response-ability, the ability of each person to respond to meaning offerings in each new situation. The guideposts to this form of responsibility can be found in a general philosophy as described in Chapter One. This philosophy states that in most circumstances the meaningful response is to follow the values of your society—what has been found by others to be the proper response. In situations where these values don't fit, you have to listen carefully to the voice of your conscience—even if it conflicts with established values.

Example

A striking example of going against societal values to find the meaning of the moment occurred in March of 1938, when Hitler's troops marched into Vienna. That night two Jewish comedians, Karl Farkas and Fritz Grunbaüm, boarded a train to Czechoslovakia. When that train containing imperiled people reached the Czech border, an official declared that the border was closed and that the train was to go back to Vienna. While the other passengers sat in terrorized silence, Farkas stepped up to the official, slapped his face, and called him an idiot. Farkas was arrested and taken off of the train. The train returned to Vienna with the other passengers. The next day the Czech government officially declared the border closed, but decreed that foreigners already on Czech soil could remain. Farkas, in a Czech jail, was permitted to stay. Later he emigrated to the United States, and after the war he returned to Vienna and again became a popular comic. His partner Grunbaüm, following the values of society ("do as you are told"), had not slapped the official, and ended in a concentration camp.

The story demonstrates that there are moments and situations where one has to reach into one's spiritual unconscious to find specific responses to new situations. It is true that what occurred at the Czech border was unusual. It is also true that it required an unusual response.

The Drumbeat of Conscience

We live in a time of changing values. Increasingly we face situations in which individuals find that traditional responses are not suitable, situations where people have to be aware of their response-ability to go against societal values. In such situations, the individual must be aware of the voice of conscience. Conscientious objectors resist the traditional call to arms. Women reject the mandates of their churches and use birth control or abortion. Minorities, women, and the young demonstrate against traditional values; they march, as Henry Thoreau said more than a hundred years ago, to different drummers—to the drumbeats of their consciences.

How do you know whether the drumbeat is that of your conscience or of your egoism? You may find an answer by exploring the consequences of either choice:

What are the consequences of following societal values?

What are the consequences of going against those values? You can explore the consequences with a Socratic dialogue, list making, or unguided fantasy.

What are the consequences of either choice for yourself and for others who are affected by the choice?

Are you prepared to take the consequences of your choice?

How do you feel about these consequences? How will others feel?

How do you see your life a year from now if you have followed traditional values? If you have gone against them?

Are compromises possible? List them. Do they offer solutions you can live with? Which one will you choose?

This is an age of crumbling traditions and changing mores. Each of us must, from time to time, choose between traditional values and individual conscience. Such conflicts *can* but *need not* lead to neurosis. How would you respond to each of the situations below?

Your father wants you to take over the family business; you want to be an artist.

You live with your partner; neither of you wants to get married.

You want a child, but you are not married.

You are married, and you fall in love with someone else.

Your husband wants you to take care of the house and the children; you want a career outside of the home.

You have a secure job that pays well, but you want to start a new career doing work that would provide less income but more satisfaction.

Your old mother lives with you and has become feeble. Should you find a nursing home for her?

A New Type of Neurosis

Frankl discovered years ago that a responsibility conflict may result in a new kind of neurosis. Traditionally, neuroses have been thought to be produced by repressed trauma or past conflict. A neurosis produced by a responsibility conflict has a different source and does not respond to traditional psychotherapy. Worldwide research, reported in the logotherapeutic literature, has shown that about one-fifth of today's neurotic patients suffer from a repressed responsibility conflict—from a conflict between two sets of values, or a conflict between societal values and personal conscience. Such a conflict can also produce psychosomatic illness.

Example

May suffered from weekend migraines for which no physical or a psychological reason could be found. She had been brought up by loving parents, was happily married, had two small children and a beautiful home. Her headaches started when her older child was about three years old.

Some exploration revealed that it was at about that time that May's mother had asked her if she planned to send the children to Sunday school. May and her husband were members of a church. But her husband preferred to spend Sundays with his wife and children and friends, sailing, skiing, or hiking. May was torn between the values of her parents and those of her husband. Her Sunday headaches were produced by her value conflict. When she realized that, she became consciously aware that it was her task to respond to the "meaning of the situation" as she saw it. May found a solution to her dilemma by talking it over with her parents and her husband. And then her migraines disappeared.

Often the most important step is to realize that you have the "defiant power" to take a stand, so that you no longer feel like a victim, but instead are in control of the situation.

Responsible Choices

Meaning results from taking responsibility in situations that you can control, and from not taking responsibility in situations you cannot change. This is an important distinction, one that Frankl often described to students. He told them about Naomi, an overweight woman. She was depressed and suicidal, and she refused to go out because she was ashamed of her extreme obesity.

Frankl learned from the woman's medical records that her obesity was caused by a malfunctioning gland, a condition that could not be cured. And so Frankl talked to Naomi, not about will power and diets and exercise, but about her favorite activities—listening to music, reading biographies, cooking, having intellectual conversations with friends. Then he told her:

"You are *not* responsible for being overweight. Your body does this to you. But you *are* responsible for how you live as a woman whose body has destined her to be obese. Rock climbing and ballet dancing are beyond you—you have to accept that. But all the things that you said you like to do you can do even if you weigh 250 pounds." Later Naomi said that those few sentences helped her more than years of psychotherapy.

This principle—that it is wise to take responsibility in situations you can control, and unwise to take responsibility in situations that you cannot change—can be applied to many predicaments. People often feel responsible even when they have no control. This leads to frustration, depression, and needless guilt. Others who take no responsibility in situations in

which they *are* in control feel unfulfilled and justifiably (though perhaps not consciously) guilty.

You cannot change your genetic makeup, your psychological drives, your innate character, your society, or your past. But you can change—and are responsible for—how you live with your genetic limitations, your drives, your past. You can take a responsible stand within, even against, your fate. Mental health depends on the ability to distinguish between areas of fate (where efforts to assume responsibility will cause dis-ease, perhaps even disease) and areas of freedom (where not assuming responsibility will cause spiritual discomfort and, in the presence of value conflicts, possible illness).

Excuses

Ours is a permissive society. It has become fashionable to blame the past, the environment, and genetic and psychological weaknesses for failure and misconduct. A violent student is excused because of the jungle-like conditions of his home, an alcoholic because of his genetic makeup, a wife-beater because of his aggressive character. True, you cannot change your past, your genes, your drives. But you do control how you live within your limitations. The violent student must see that it is his responsibility not to pass the dog-eat-dog attitudes of his parents on to those around him. The alcoholic must see that it is his responsibility to not take that first drink, which will trigger his genetic response to alcohol. The wife-beater must see that while he may not be responsible for feeling aggressive impulses, he is responsible for what he does with them.

When the spirit is not blocked, when the resources of the spirit are at least somewhat accessible, you are able to exercise your will to meaning through responsible choice-making. Our society has gone far to excuse irresponsibility, especially within the family. Parents are responsible for small children. Grown children are responsible for aging parents. Couples are responsible for each other. Too many people blame “mistakes made by parents” for their own unhappiness and misbehavior. Elisabeth Lukas speaks of the “bad parents” complex that prevents many adults from taking responsibility for their difficulties. She writes: “Parents are blamed for being too strict, too authoritarian, too indifferent, too unsupportive, too protective, too demanding, too democratic, too insecure, too inconsistent.” There is hardly any parental behavior that cannot be used as an excuse. When children shift the blame to their parents, the children seem to be relieved of the responsibility that really is their own.

A Word of Caution

The defiant power that enables you to change what you can control, to take responsibility when it is appropriate, lies in the dimension of your spirit and may be blocked by physical or psychological illness. When this is

true, a helper—most likely a professional—must remove or reduce the block, so that your spirit will become accessible. Medical, pharmaceutical, psychotherapeutic help may be needed.

List Making

Lists can help you to clarify not only your choices but also your responsibilities. For instance, the list discussed in Chapter Six directly clarified your responsibilities. And in other lists mentioned in this book attention is focused, at least indirectly, on responsibility.

Elisabeth Lukas' five-step approach to problem solving includes lists:

1. What is your problem?
2. Where is your area of freedom? (This step requires that you list aspects over which you have control and aspects that you have to accept.)
3. List your choices within your area of freedom.
4. Which of these choices is the most meaningful to you?
5. What is your first step in the direction you have chosen?

This five-step exercise covers all three aspects of your search for meaning through responsibility. The second step eliminates the areas where you need not feel responsible. The third step concentrates on the areas where you can make responsible choices. The fourth step focuses on your response-ability to the meaning of the situation.

Logodrama

One way to bring out solutions that slumber in your unconscious is to go through a logodrama. This process is helpful in situations where you feel that responsibility is being piled on you from an outside source (for instance, mother or father— they may not be living, but their voices may still echo with "shoulds" within you.)

To explore your "shoulds," select attitudes of "important others" that still have an impact on you and which you may have misunderstood or misinterpreted.

Suppose the important other is your father. Place two chairs—one for you, one for your invisible father—so that they face each other. Sit in your chair and tell your father about your problem. Switch to the other chair and (as if you are your father) tell yourself what you "ought" to do. Then go back again to your chair, and tell your father the ways in which you agree, and disagree. By switching back and forth, you will soon become aware of your true intentions about what you want to accept responsibility for, and what you feel is not your responsibility. Sometimes an "obvious" solution will emerge that the seeker was, until the logodrama, unable to see. Jill had always wanted to be a fashion designer. But she

married when she was a sophomore in college and soon had three children, the youngest only two months old. She loved her husband and children, but she resented spending all her time on child care and housework. Recently she had gone to fashion shows with a friend and had neglected her work at home, and that had led to conflict with her husband. He said that she shouldn't be going out with friends, that her place was at home. Jill argued that she was not about to make the same mistake that her mother had, that her mother had "worked herself to death" taking care of her family.

Jill sought the help of logotherapy, to resolve her conflict about what she should be doing. In a logodrama, her mother (via Jill's unconscious insights) made Jill realize that her situation was different from her mother's, and that the "shoulds" and the rebellions against those "shoulds" had to be reexamined in terms of Jill's situation. Jill thought back and realized that her father had often been sick and unemployed, that her mother had had to take on the burden of keeping the family going. Jill had an area of freedom that her mother had not had—she could afford to hire household help. But during the "dialogue" with her mother in the logodrama, it became clear to Jill that as long as her youngest child was a baby, her place was in the home—although during that time she could plan a career in fashion design that she could pursue when the youngest child entered school. After Jill had redefined her areas of freedom and responsibility, she was able to make short-term and long-term plans that satisfied her commitments to her family and to herself.

Dreams and Guided Fantasies

Dream interpretations, as discussed in Chapter Two, may contain hints from your conscience. Fantasies may be guided to the areas where, deep within yourself, you think your responsibilities lie.

Socratic Dialogue

The dialogue, by itself or in combination with other methods, is a crucial device for exploring your insights about responsibility. Below is a list of topics that can be used in a dialogue to help clarify responsibility:

Everybody expected me to act in a certain way, but I chose another.

I did what was expected, and felt good.

I did what was expected, and felt bad.

I forced myself to do something, and felt good afterward.

I forced myself to do something, and felt bad afterward.

I accepted responsibility and was glad.

I accepted responsibility and regretted it.

I learned from something I did wrong.

No one could tell me what to do. I had to decide for myself.
I chose something that was worth saving for.
I decided that something was worth making a sacrifice for.
I learned something by myself.
I succeeded in spite of difficulties.
I did something I am proud of.
I finished something that was hard to start.
I used my anger in a positive way.
I was angry at someone and took it out on someone else.
I overcame my anger.
This is my favorite excuse.
I took on a new responsibility.
I made a promise and kept it.

These topics are, of course, only starting points, but each one can be the beginning of a valuable dialogue to discover areas of responsibility that contain guideposts to meaning.