

Living an
EXAMINED
LIFE

Wisdom for the
Second Half of the Journey

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Chapter 1

The Choice Is Yours

We are flung from the amniotic sea into this life—tied to matter, to gravity, to mortality. A fire burns in each of us, a tungsten intensity that flares and flames awhile and then departs. From whence and whither to remain mysteries. And who we are on this planet, and for what purpose, remains a mystery as well. Although the world is full of people who will tell you who you are, what you are, and what you are to do and not to do, they wander amid their unaddressed confusion, fear, and need for consensual belief to still their own anxious journey.

Whether you show up as you in this brief transit we call life or are defined by history, or context, or shrill partisan urgencies substantially depends on you. No greater difficulty may be found than living this journey as mindfully, as accountably, as we can, but no greater task brings more dignity and purpose to our lives. Swimming in this milky sea of mystery, we long to make sense of things, figure out who we are, wither bound, and to what end, while the eons roll on in their mindless ways. It falls then to us to make sense of this journey.

So what could be more obvious than point one: *the choice is ours*. And yet, is it? We survive in this life by adaptation. We learn from our world—families of origin, popular culture, world events, religious training, and many other sources—who we are, what is acceptable, what is not, and how we have to behave, perform, in order to fit in, gain approval from others, and prosper in this world into which we were thrust. Historically, all cultures have claimed that their values, their institutions, their marching orders come from the gods, sacrosanct

scriptures, and venerated institutions. These “givens” are laden with presumptive powers and punitive sanctions for transgressions of any kind. A child raised today in the world of virtual reality and video games is just as susceptible to these acculturating and directive images. We become too often a servant of our environment, given our need to fit in, receive the approval of others, stay out of harm’s way.

When I was a child in the 1940s, for example, there were pretty clear social definitions of gender, of social and economic class, of racial, ethnic, religious identity, and defined acceptable choices. To deviate from these prescriptive templates was to trigger sanctions of enormous proportion. The most common socializing sentence my contemporaries and I heard was, “What would people think?” A familiar proverb in Japan declares, “It is the protruding nail that gets hammered.” In the face of such sanctioning power, what child does not begin to adopt the prejudices of his family and tribe, fear the alien values of others, and stick close to home in almost every way?

Since the 1940s and ’50s, all of those categories, reportedly created by the gods themselves, have been deconstructed. While sex is biologically driven, gender is socially construed, and constricting definitions for men and women then have proved still another of many fragile fictions. Today we know that the range of choices for any of us is infinitely greater. We know that all races are mixed, that genetically we track back to a few progenitors in central Africa. We know that religions are mostly mythosocial constructs that arise out of tribal experiences that are institutionalized to preserve and to transmit and that the ontological claims of one tribe are no better, really, than the mythosocial constructs of other tribes. We know further that social practices, ethical prescriptions, are subjective value percepts and have no authority outside our tribe. Such a thought would have led any of us to the stake in an earlier era, and still will in many quarters.¹ When an idea occurs as an alternative, forces within the psyche rise to combat it, for our egos are very insecure and prefer clarity, authority, and control at all costs.

To say that any of us has a choice, really, is still a dubious statement. While we celebrate social license, revel in eccentricity, and

accept changing social structures, reports from the behaviorists and the neurologists and the geneticists narrow the window of freedom more and more. In fact, the older I get, the narrower that window has become, despite having spent a life in education, in study, travel, and reflection. The powers of the unconscious cannot be underestimated. Our ego consciousness—namely, who we think we are, or what we believe real—is at best a thin wafer floating on an iridescent sea. In any moment, we view the world through a distorting lens and make choices based on what the lens allows us to see, not what lies outside its frame.

The more conscious we become, the more we become aware of unconscious influences working upon our daily choices. Why did you make that choice and not another at a critical juncture in your life? Why hook up with that person? Why repeat those family-of-origin patterns? These are disconcerting questions, but unless we ask them, we remain at the mercy of whatever forces are at work autonomously within us. These confrontations with the ego's fantasy of sovereignty are truly intimidating, but they remain a summons to greater awareness. How haunting is Carl Jung's observation that whatever is denied within us is likely to come to us in the outer world as fate? (That thought alone keeps me at this work.)

I am not in any way suggesting that our cultural values, our religious traditions, our communal practices are wrong; that is not for me to judge. Many of those values link us with community, give us a sense of belonging and guidance in the flood of choices that beset us daily. I am saying, however, that the historic powers of such expectations, admonitions, and prohibitions are to be rendered conscious, considered thoughtfully, and tested by the reality of our life experience and inner prompting. No longer does received authority—no matter how ratified by history, sanctioned by tradition—automatically govern. We are rather called to a discernment process. We are summoned to ask such questions as: Does this align with or make sense of my experience? If not, it may be well intended and right for someone else, but it is not right for me. Does this value, practice, or expectation take me deeper into life, open new possibilities of relationship, and accord

with the deepest movements of my own soul? If not, then it is toxic, no matter how benign its claim. Does this value, practice, or expectation open me to the mystery of this journey? Jung said in a letter once that life is a short pause between two great mysteries. Beware of those who offer answers. They may be sincere, but their answers are not necessarily yours. Adaptive loyalty to what we have received from our environment may prove an unconscious subversion of the integrity of the soul.

So, to say blandly then, “The choice is yours,” is not as simplistic as you may have thought at first. Amid the plethora of voices imposing themselves on you at any moment, which voice amid that cacophony is yours? Which voice rises from the depths of the soul, which from complexes and cultural templates, and how can you know the difference?

This *mélange* of messages is so profuse. How can we ever choose? And yet, we make choices on a moment-to-moment basis, and not to choose is of course a choice with consequences. So, then the task of this carbonized bit of matter we call our bodies, this tungsten spark we call our soul, is waiting upon us to realize that we serve life when we step forth and begin to take on that responsibility, that accountability, and choose a life that makes sense to us. The choice is ours, and if we are not exercising that choice, someone else is choosing for us—if not the splintered personalities of our complexes, then the perseverating voices of our ancestors, or the noisy din of our cultural tom-toms.

Our life begins twice: the day we are born and the day we accept the radical existential fact that our life, for all its delimiting factors, is essentially ours to choose. And the moment when we open to that invitation and step into that accountability, we take on the power of choice. Perhaps the world as such is meaningless—atoms assembling, disassembling, in a random concatenation of proximities. Perhaps everything is guided by a supreme being whose powers are absolute and whose thought process strikes us at best as arbitrary, surely as inscrutable. Whatever the case, we are the animal that suffers disconnect from meaning. Our system produces a complex series of interactions—feeling responses, dreams ranging from the turbulent

and troubling to the transcendent, symptoms, patterns, sudden jolts, insights, recognitions, regressions—and then ineluctably surges forward again and forges new connections. And somewhere in all that complexity is the fantasy of, the possibility of, choice. The argument of whether we are actually free or not goes back into the mists of primal human imagining. But, as Jean Paul Sartre argued, we must act *as if* we are free, take on the “terrible” burden of choice, and be accountable. Whether free or not, we are obliged to act as if we are free, and all systems, philosophies, moralities, and juridical dicta expect accountability.

Years ago a very thoughtful woman who had been raised in a conventional religious setting asked the question that had awakened her at the hour of the wolf: “What if,” she said, “Jesus is not divine, not the son of God?” Respectfully, I replied, “What difference does it make?” Of course I knew it meant a great deal of difference to her. But I continued: “You still are accountable for your life. You still have to make choices on a daily basis, and you still are a person who must decide which values, which choices, are worthy of your election.”

What stands in the way of the exercise of that power of choice is essentially two things. First, we learned early that trying out who we are in the world often produced negative reactions. So we learned to curb our desires, adapt, perhaps even hide out, and fit in. It is so much safer that way. Tiny in a world of giants, we reason that surely the world is governed by those who know, who understand, who are in control. How disconcerting it is then when we find our own psyches in revolt at these once protective adaptations, and how disillusioning it is to realize that there are very few, if any, adults on the scene who have a clue as to what is going on. Our projections and expectations dissolve in time and are replaced by confusion, dismay, cynicism, and sometimes a frenetic search for trustable authorities.

To say that the choice is ours is both simplistic and profoundly difficult. Sorting through the thicket of admonitions, prohibitions, agendas, and adaptations is neither easy nor common. And yet, each of us has an appointment with ourselves, with our own soul. Whether we keep that appointment and step into the largeness of the summons

is another matter. Rilke describes this dilemma in his enigmatic poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” The speaker in the poem is examining a battered classical sculpture of Apollo. Each crack and crevice is examined, until the examiner gets the uneasy feeling that he too is being examined. He ends by breaking off into a seeming non sequitur: “You must change your life!”

My understanding of Rilke’s poem is that once the observer has been in the presence of the large, the timeless, the imaginatively bold, he can no longer be at peace with his own small purchase on life. When we have had our lives reframed and see them as they often are—fear driven, petty, repetitive—we either anesthetize ourselves, distract ourselves, or realize that something has to change. It is usually through numinous moments, as the poet describes, or moments of desperation, or moments when the world gets in our face, forcing us to show up, finally. If we are to show up, we must make choices and stop whining. In those moments, something shifts inside. We experience our life as more fully alive than it has been at any other hour. We realize that we cannot remain bound by fear, convention, or adaptation. We realize that we now have, and have always had, choices. We can say yes or no, but we cannot say we have no choice in the matter.

Can any of us really argue, despite the terrible powers of fate and the impact of others upon our lives, that we are not also the central character in our life drama and that we are making choices every day, whether consciously or not? Can any of us seriously argue that at the end of the journey we have not played some substantial role in the outcome of the journey? Can we continue to argue that our lives are an unfolding novel written from afar, the meaning of which will be revealed to us on the last page only or in some cloudy afterlife? Are we not, on that last page, dead? Are we not writing the script interactively throughout this novel, page by page by page? In the end, are we not impelled to acknowledge the choice is ours, and life waits for us to show up and lay claim to what wishes to be expressed through us?

Chapter 2

It's Time to Grow Up

What does it mean to grow up? Did we not become grown-ups when puberty arrived, when we stepped into large bodies and large agendas? Did we not grow up when we left our familial homes and stepped out into the world and said: “Hire me—I can do that job,” “Marry me—I will hold my end of the deal,” “Trust me—I can carry that responsibility”? Have we not been grown-ups through responsibly exercising parental, fiduciary, relational, and societal roles for years? And yet, when I have asked people in workshops—reasonable, accomplished, responsible people—“Where do you need to grow up?” why has no one yet asked me to explain that question, why has no one challenged the legitimacy of the assignment, and why has everyone begun writing in a matter of minutes, if not seconds? So, how is it that we play all these mature roles yet know in our heart of hearts that we still have to grow up?

In traditional societies, hanging tenuously to this whirling planet, surviving the onslaught of the elements, harsh conditions, and hostile agencies of all kinds, growing up was a matter of survival. The tribe could not afford to have children idling about. So, without a central committee sending out printed instructions, each civilization evolved rites of passage designed to ensure the transition from the naiveté and dependency of childhood to adult sensibilities that sacrifice comfort and sloth in service to the common interest. After all, social conditions and structures evolve, and technology evolves, but the same human psyche, the same psychodynamics manifest in our ancestors, courses through our current lives. For the bulk of recorded history, we

have all had to face the summons to grow up. The difference is that our ancestors were keen observers who understood there is scant motive to sacrifice comfort and dependence unless one is required to do so. So, independently, without a central committee advising them, they came up with something useful: rites of passage.

All passages provide a transition from something that has played out, died, or ceased to be productive. That is what psychotherapy seeks to do in so many cases. Since few, if any, would willingly leave the security of home for the insecure status of adulthood, young people were not asked. They were removed, sometimes forcibly. The six stages of passage varied in form, intensity, duration, and cultural accoutrements, but essentially they were comparable around the world. They involved departure from home, not with an engraved invitation, not with a polite request, but suddenly and decisively. Second, there was a ceremony of death, ranging from being buried in the earth, to immersion, to an effacement of one's known referents. Third, there was a ceremony of rebirth because an emergent being, a differentiated psychology, was dawning. Fourth, they were given the teachings, in three categories: the archetypal stories of the creation, of the gods, of the tribal history; the general roles and polity of adulthood in that culture; and the specific tools of hunting, fishing, child-bearing, and agriculture unique to that tribe. Fifth, there was an ordeal of some kind, often involving isolation in order that one learn to cope with fear and find internal resources. And sixth, after prolonged separation, there was the return to the community as a separated adult. Only in this way did young people transition from the naiveté, dependency, and avoidances of childhood to the expectations of adulthood.

When we examine contemporary culture, we find these rites of passage missing. Instead of tools for personal strength and survival, we teach computer skills. We allow children to abide within the bosom of a protective culture, and accordingly, we have very few initiated, separated, independent persons of adult sensibility. Aging alone does not do it; playing major roles in life does not do it. What is it that shifts one from a needy, blaming, dependent psychology to one of psycho-spiritual independence? What characterizes our culture better than a

needy, whiny clamor for instant gratification, a flight from accountability, and an inability to tolerate the tension of opposites, rather than learning to live with ambiguity over the long haul and transcending the desire for rapid resolution of life's quiddities?

Life's two biggest threats we carry within: fear and lethargy. Every morning we rise to find two gremlins at the foot of the bed. The one named Fear says, "The world is too big for you, too much. You are not up to it. Find a way to slip-slide away again today." And the one named Lethargy says, "Hey, chill out. You've had a hard day. Turn on the telly, surf the Internet, have some chocolate. Tomorrow's another day." Those perverse twins munch on our souls every day. No matter what we do today, they will turn up again tomorrow. Over time, they usurp more days of our lives than those to which we may lay fair claim. More energy is spent in any given day on managing fear through unreflective compliance, or avoidance, than any other value. While it is natural to expend energy managing our fears, the magnitude of this effort on a daily basis cannot be overemphasized.

On the other hand, lethargy takes so many seductive forms. We can simply avoid tasks, stay away from what is difficult for us, find ways to numb our days through the thousand soporifics and analgesics the world provides, or possibly worst of all, fall into fundamentalist forms of thinking that finesse subtlety, fuzz opposites, seek simplistic solutions to complex issues, and still our spirit's distress with the palliative balm of certainty. Indeed, we have a vast wired culture to help us in this task, a connected twenty-four-hour distraction whose hum both stills anxiety and dims the plaintive cries of our spirit to be served. Drowning in distractions, palliated by simple solutions, and lulled by patronizing authorities, we can sleep our life away and never awaken to the summons of the soul that resounds within each of us.

In *The Eden Project: The Search for the Magical Other*, a book on the psychodynamics of relationships, I noted that all relationships are characterized by two dynamics: *projection* and *transference*. A projection is a mechanism whereby our psychological contents leave us and enter the world seeking an object—a person, an institution, a role—upon which to fasten. Because this occurs unconsciously, we

then respond to the other as if we know it, rather than its refracted distortion. Similarly, we transfer to that other—person, institution, role—our personal history in regard to that kind of experience. So, we infantilize our relationships with our intimate other, church, government, organization, or any role that carries presumptive authority with it. In re-evoking our earlier experiences, we unwittingly diminish our adult capacity and present interests by approaching the new moment with avoidant, controlling, or compliant behaviors from our past.

Given the power, the ubiquity, and the subtlety of these projected contents, these transferred historic strategies, we expect others to take care of us, while we cavil against the inadequacies of our affiliations and wonder why our roles alone fail to confirm our maturity and provide continuing satisfaction. From this gap between the expectations of our projections and transferences, we may from time to time come to realize that we are accountable for how things are playing out. When that realization occurs, a heroic summons follows: What am I asking of the other that I am not addressing myself? I suspect that all of us have a sneaking suspicion that we are deferring this question, this responsibility, and have done so for a long time.

I call that question heroic because it embodies a shift in our center of gravity from the other “out there” to the other “within.” In other words, something in each of us always knows when we are shirking, avoiding, procrastinating, rationalizing. Sometimes we are obliged to face these uncomfortable facts when our plans, relationships, expectations of others collapse, and we are left holding the bag of consequences. Sometimes others get in our face and demand we deal with what we have avoided. Sometimes we have interruptive symptoms, troubling dreams, meetings with ourselves in dark hours, and then we have to face the fugitive life we are perpetuating. Something within us always knows and always registers its opinion. Naturally, we will avoid this subpoena from the soul as long as we can, until it knocks so forcibly that we have to answer the door. The moment we say, “I am responsible, I am accountable, I have to deal with this,” is the day we grow up, at least until the next time, the next regression, the next evasion.