

# *The Healthy Management of Reality*

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## Preface: The Origins of This Book

Ever since I can remember, I have been intrigued by the question of how to live life in a good way. An important element of this search has been to move toward this goal while taking into account the potential and the limitations of human beings. I am now a psychologist, a student of what is called "the science of mind and behavior." Since 1970, when I took my first university course on psychology at Stanford University, I have studied with great interest what scientists and practitioners have written about human development and human functioning. I have read about how our thoughts and actions affect our feelings, and how these three elements can lead to satisfaction or despair.

As a senior, during the academic year 1971-1972, I had the great fortune of working on my senior thesis under the supervision of Albert Bandura. His writings on personal agency and self-efficacy provide the foundations for the ideas presented in this small book. For those interested in examining the original sources of these ideas, I recommend Bandura's books *Principles of behavior modification* (1969), *Social Learning Theory* (1977), *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory* (1986), *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control* (1997), and his 2001 *Annual Review of Psychology* chapter "Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective."

In 1972, as I was beginning to work toward my doctorate in clinical psychology at the University of Oregon, I came across the concept of the prevention of mental disorders. James G. Kelly, one of my mentors during graduate school, encouraged my interests in this area. Those who write about prevention argue that the mental health professions spend most of their time treating individuals who are already suffering from often debilitating emotional

problems. Prevention advocates argue that it is vitally important to direct more of our efforts at providing our communities with education and other services that could avert the portion of these problems that are preventable.

Since 1977, as a professor at the University of California, San Francisco, I have worked at San Francisco General Hospital, one of our teaching hospitals, and the city's public hospital. For twenty-eight years, I have seen at close range the many ways that people with very few economic resources can live their lives.

I have seen the admirable ways in which so many people deal successfully with adversity, as well as the disastrous results of personal choices. In my work with patients, I have become ever more intrigued about how the way we think and the things we do affect our feelings, our daily lives, and our relations with others; in short, how our day-to-day actions mold our personal reality.

I worked with hospitalized psychiatric patients for six years and saw at close hand the major disorders that I wanted to prevent. I learned that many of these disorders have strong biological components, and gained great respect for the pharmacological and other medical interventions that are so important to help individuals resume their lives. But even here, choices made (including continuing with their treatment after leaving the hospital) seemed to affect the kind of life each patient and their loved ones would live. I then found that if I wanted to intervene before individuals developed psychiatric problems, I needed to work with primary care medical patients.

Depression is one of the most common problems seen in primary care medical settings. It turns out that most people suffering from depression do not seek mental health services. They go to primary care physicians. So, in the early '80s, I developed the Depression Prevention Course, which focused on reducing depressive symptoms in people who had not yet developed a clinical, that is, a

serious depression. The course was based on work I did for my dissertation, under the direction of Peter M. Lewinsohn, and in collaboration with Toni Zeiss and Maryann Youngren. Our book *Control Your Depression* (1992) describes the methods we developed for the lay reader. This program of research, the San Francisco Depression Prevention Research Project, is described in the book *The Prevention of Depression: Research and Practice* (1993), with Yu-Wen Ying. Our project, which took place in the early 1980's, was awarded the National Mental Health Association's Lela Rowland Prevention Award in 1994. During the project, we found many patients in the general medicine clinics who already had serious depressions and who were not receiving treatment. Therefore, in 1985, Jeanne Miranda, Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, and I founded the Depression Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital. The clinic provided cognitive-behavioral individual and group therapy in English and Spanish. The clinic is now part of a larger outpatient service of the Division of Psychosocial Medicine. Much of what I talk about in this book is based on my experiences with patients at San Francisco General Hospital, from those who are doing well and want to continue healthy life styles, to those with the most severe mental disorders one could imagine. Some of the manuals we have developed for the prevention and treatment of depression at San Francisco General Hospital are available for downloading from:

<http://www.medschool.ucsf.edu/latino/manuals.aspx>.

Another source of ideas has been the adaptation of our Depression Prevention Course to help individuals who are trying to give up addictions, especially those who want to quit smoking. In 1987, I began working with Sharon Hall on her Maintaining Nonsmoking project. We developed a mood management intervention that blended her smoking cessation methods with the Depression Prevention Course. We have done several treatment studies using these ideas in the

past thirteen years. I have also collaborated with Eliseo Pérez-Stable and Barbara Marín in a Spanish-language mood-management smoking-cessation intervention ("Tomando Control de su Vida") that we implemented entirely through the mail and which yielded encouraging results. We have also adapted these ideas to web-based stop smoking interventions that we are testing at [www.stopsmoking.ucsf.edu](http://www.stopsmoking.ucsf.edu) (in English) and at [www.dejardefumar.ucsf.edu](http://www.dejardefumar.ucsf.edu) (in Spanish). Through these research studies, I have learned that the mood management ideas have relevance beyond depression itself. For example, I recently coauthored *Controlling Your Drinking* (2005) with William R. Miller, in which we apply some of these ideas to problem drinking.

Based on these experiences, I began to develop the concept of *the healthy management of reality*. I began teaching this approach to the advanced trainees I supervise in cognitive-behavioral therapy for depression at the University of California, San Francisco, and to the group leaders who run the smoking cessation groups in our research projects. I have found that many people are able to use these ideas in ways that make a significant difference in their lives. I am one of those people. The ideas in this book have been very influential in my own life, and in the way I am raising my children. The more I use these ideas, the more I find ways to make them practical. This way of thinking about life helps me make decisions, without being constraining. In this book, I share this concept, and illustrate many of the practical implications of the concept in the hope that others will also find them useful.

## Introduction: Sculpting Reality

In my native Perú, one can see large mountains literally sculpted into life-giving fields for crops. The Andean people who accomplished these marvelous feats of irrigation and engineering inhabited these difficult geographic locations long before they were conquered by the Inca Empire and the European colonists. More importantly, they still maintain the waterways and reservoirs that make these mountains a living sculpture of awesome proportions.

What one sees as one approaches these terraced mountains from afar is, at first, a smoothly curved green mountainside. Gradually, the eye can distinguish the angular shapes of vertical stonework walls, creating gigantic steps down the mountainside, with the greenery of growing crops filling in the horizontal part of the terraces. As one walks among the terraces, one notices the many details that make these eminently practical structures true works of art. For example, one notices the care with which stones were put together, or the almost playful way in which longer slabs of rock, flat on top, are inserted at just the right places in the terrace walls so as to create steps leading from one level to the next.

These "andenes" or Andean terraces are impressive examples of the human ability to sculpt one's objective reality. The magnitude of the effort to build these horizontal surfaces in a predominantly vertical setting is mind-bending. One wonders how the idea first took hold, and how this glimmer of a potential way to feed one's family was transferred from someone's internal reality into the actualized reality of the first terrace. The individual internal reality gradually was passed on to others. The massive works of cultivation throughout the Andes speak loudly to the need to involve large numbers of people in the process, and to the

patience it must have taken to complete each mountain's sculpting. More astonishingly, the ability of the Andean communities to keep the terraces alive and fruitful from prehistoric times to the twenty-first century speaks to the way in which material reality, once shaped by a human idea, itself can shape the internal world of human beings far into the future. It has been said that a mind once stretched by an idea, never regains its original shape.

For several years now, I have been attracted to a similar process: the sculpting of personal reality. I am intrigued by the way human beings mold our lives, starting with our selves, moving on to our family, our work settings, our communities, and beyond. There seem to be infinite possibilities of living life, even when individuals start out in very similar situations. And some of those result in fulfillment, while others lead to pain.

For example, some individuals who live alone have found peace and tranquility in their life style, while others feel constantly lonely, anxious, and distraught. Some feel that until they can find someone with whom to build a relationship, they cannot be happy. Others, already in a relationship, feel that as long as they remain in it they cannot be happy. There are parents who feel that their children have wrecked their lives, while others feel that unless they have children, their lives will not be complete. Obviously, living alone or with others, or being a parent or not having children can each lead to satisfaction or distress.

The people of the Andes found themselves in a particular situation, and responded to that situation by sculpting their environment in a way that has sustained them for centuries. So also, each of us finds himself or herself in a specific time and place, with a limited amount of resources. The question is how to increase the chances that, with that starting point, one can fashion a life that is rewarding and meaningful in the long run.

It is this task, which all humans confront in one way or another, which I refer to as "managing reality." This book is intended to consider how this can be done in a "healthy" way, that is, a way that leads to good outcomes for oneself and others.

Chapters 1 through 6 consist of definitions and descriptions of the key ideas on which this approach is based, including a helpful way to think about reality and things to consider as one sets a direction for one's life. Chapter 7 focuses on the part of reality that is found only inside our mind. It describes four levels of internal reality that I have found useful to address when working with depressed patients, and suggests methods to mold these four levels so they bring about a greater sense of well being. Chapter 8 focuses on external reality, that part of your reality that can be observed by others. It describes several elements that are worthwhile considering as you think about your life and suggests methods to mold each of these elements into health-engendering influences for yourself.

The epilog presents a framework for living with a mind that is fully conscious, aware of where it is headed, and how each step along the way leads closer to or farther away from one's destination. In it, I borrow an intriguing concept from a little-known individual from the Middle Ages, and attempt to adapt it to a perspective that could be useful as we enter the twenty-first century.

My intention is to serve as a catalyst for considering how we lead our lives, and how our actions can move our life in positive or negative directions. My hope is that out of this consideration of alternatives, some readers will choose to take action to sculpt their realities, and that their actions will lead to satisfaction, inner peace, and a sense of lasting happiness.

## Chapter 1

### On Managing Reality

The universe is infinite. We are finite.

Each day, we come in contact with a small part of the universe. We see, hear, and are touched by "little chunks" of this infinite reality. We feel emotions, think thoughts, and do things in response.

This book is about what we feel, think, and do and how these human activities affect our personal reality. Sometimes, those feelings, thoughts, and actions fill us with satisfaction. At other times, they fill us with boredom, discomfort, anxiety, or pain.

Those around us are also affected by our feelings, thoughts, and actions, as we are by theirs. We can be peaceful, supportive, and a source of strength and energy for others. Or, we can be "vexations to the spirit," a source of disharmony, demoralization, and a drain on others' enthusiasm and joy of living.

Our feelings, thoughts, and actions become part of the infinite universe. First, they become part of ourselves, of the reality we carry inside ourselves. Then, they can become part of those closest to us: our spouses and children, our partners, our co-workers, our students, our neighbors, the people we pass on the street. So, our feelings, thoughts, and actions, eventually become part of our external reality.

We can think of the way we react to our universe as the way that we manage reality. There are so many things happening around us all the time that we can only focus on a few of them. By choosing which we will focus on, we are already "managing" our reality. We are sculpting the type of reality that we will have inside of our minds.

An example: At our workplace, we may find coworkers who greet us with genuine warmth, with a smile, and a caring word. We may also find coworkers who ignore us when passing us in the hallway, or, worse, who actually show disdain by their facial expression or tone of voice. As we pass these individuals, we can choose to allow our thoughts and feelings to dwell on one or the other. If we focus on the one who is warm and caring, our image of our workplace will be more heavily weighted with warmth and caring. If we focus on the one who pulls for feelings of worthlessness, our image of our workplace will be more heavily weighted with contempt and indifference. The workplace is objectively the same. But our experience of its reality is markedly different. It is by focusing on different aspects of the objective reality that we sculpt our subjective reality.

Managing reality is not merely an exercise in positive thinking. The way in which we sculpt our internal perception of our world has a measurable influence on how we will shape our objective reality. The image of the world that we hold inside ourselves leads to a desire to protect and improve it or to neglect it and eventually abandon it.

To continue with the example: If our internal reality involves a greater amount of felt warmth and caring, we are more likely to share that felt warmth and caring with others. We are more likely to become the kind of person who notices others and shows by our actions that we value those with whom we work. Though each of our individual interactions may be a small part of our workplace, the combined effect of multiple contacts can amplify their impact. As the day progresses, the total amount of warmth and caring in our workplace will be greater or lesser depending on whether each of us focuses on and passes on the warm greeting or the disdainful one. By sculpting our internal reality, we will have begun to sculpt our external reality.

Small acts of managing our internal reality can lead to gradual improvement or deterioration of our external reality. Acts that improve our world are referred to in this book as "the healthy management of reality."

The purpose of this book is to consider the possibilities and the implications of the concept of the healthy management of reality. We begin by laying out some of the basic ideas, illustrating each with an example. Then we examine how these ideas could be used in day-to-day life. We examine how they can first be tested within our own mind, within our internal reality. We then proceed to how they could be practiced so that they affect our objective reality, that is, how we lead our daily lives.

These ideas are designed to be tested before being accepted. If you find that they work at the personal level, perhaps you and your partner can try them as a team. You can test whether this reality management approach has a substantial positive impact on your relationship, on your shared reality. See whether this perspective is helpful in raising your children. Does it give them more of a sense of responsibility for what they become? Eventually, if communities of individuals put these ideas into practice, the resulting group reality could be evaluated to decide whether the ideas in this book are worth using on an ongoing basis.

Testing these ideas involves more than evaluating whether they have impact on those who practice them. Of course, the healthy management of reality ought to have a positive effect upon the individuals who are implementing these ideas. But it should also improve the lot of those around them. A practice that causes better physical and emotional health in oneself but the diminishment of physical and emotional health in those around one lacks a basic element of that which is truly healthy.

We will now turn to describing what is meant by some of the key terms in this book, such as reality, internal reality, and external reality.

## **Reality**

I begin with the assumption that there is one reality. Different individuals may think about it differently, or may interpret parts of it in varied, even contradictory ways. But, if we were infinite and eternal, we would see only one reality, one way in which "things are."

But, given that we are finite and limited in time, we can each see only a small aspect of reality. Even if we put all of the perspectives on reality together from all the humans who have ever lived, we still would not have a complete picture of reality.

If we agree that human beings have only an incomplete picture of reality, it is important to note that even that incomplete picture is inaccurate. We know that much of what we now consider truth, even scientific truth, will someday in the future be found to be incorrect. During the last few decades we have radically corrected images of the world and the universe which were once believed incontrovertible by the then most learned minds in the world.

### **Internal and external reality**

From a human point of view, there are two large aspects to reality: Subjective or internal reality, and objective or external reality.

*Subjective or internal reality* refers to our mental image of reality. It is reality from our viewpoint, from our perspective. (In this sense, there are as many realities as there are thinking beings.) Therefore, this reality is both incomplete and biased. Nevertheless, it is with us at all times, and, in many ways, influences our lives more than external reality. Internal reality involves our memories, beliefs, and expectations. It includes **facts** such as where we were born, who our parents are, our religious and political training, our identities as parents, friends, workers, and so on. It also includes **judgments** about these facts and the **feelings** that accompany both the facts and the judgments that are stored in our mind. For example, we might be proud or embarrassed by the fact that we are tall. We live in this reality continually, and it affects our well being in a massive way. Therefore, it will be an important focus of our discussions. What enters our internal reality

and how we treat that which is in our minds will be the focus of the management of our internal reality.

*Objective or external reality* refers to those aspects of reality that are observable and measurable. They include such elements as how many people live with you, how much money you have, the illnesses you have experienced, your genetic makeup, the crime rate in your neighborhood, and the number of miles of coastline near your home. Although these elements of objective reality appear to be more important in certain ways, because they appear to be less amenable to your control, it is important to realize that they, too, are partially malleable. For example, many of the elements we listed above provide a **potential** environment that can be **actualized** in a number of ways. The number of miles of coastline in your city is a fairly objective measure. However, the likelihood that you will enjoy a walk by the water may be greater or less than that of your next-door neighbor depending on whether you mentally consider engaging in this activity and actually take the necessary steps to do so. You both live in the same **objective** environment, and the same **potential** environment, but may experience vastly different **actual** environments. *The management of external reality involves to a large extent the actualization of potential environments.*

The **objective environment** refers to the physical and social surroundings. It can be measured. We can count how many trees there are in your block, or the level of air pollution in your neighborhood, or, as in our example above, how many miles of beaches by the ocean, lakes, or rivers there are near your home.

The **potential environment** refers to the part of the universe that is accessible to you. It can also be measured. We can find out how many minutes it would take to walk, bike, drive, or take a bus to the nearest body of water from your home.

The **actual environment** is the "little chunk" of the universe that actually "touches" you in some way. It is the part of reality that you allow to influence you in some way, or the part that forces itself upon you. Again, it can be measured. For example, you could keep track of how often you walk by the water each month, and how many minutes you spend there each time.

External and internal reality affect each other continually. We live in **both** realms of reality, and ignoring either will reduce our chances to manage reality in a healthy manner. There are few things that are "all in our head." Most of the time, the worries or internal discomforts we experience are related to some aspect of external reality. On the other hand, objective facts do not completely determine how our lives will be experienced. It is the way that we react to these facts that leads to joy or despair, to physical and emotional health, or to illness and demoralization.

Thoughts and memories appear to be entirely within the realm of internal reality (that is, cannot be observed as a thought or a memory by anyone other than the person having them). Physical actions are in the realm of external reality, that is, they are potentially observable and measurable.

Feelings, on the other hand, straddle the boundaries of the internal and external realms of reality. For example, emotional reactions can often be accurately perceived by others. Their physiological aspects can certainly be measured. Yet, the core aspects of emotions are only experienced by the individual. Only you know the depth of your sadness at hearing bad news, even though your face may betray that you are feeling sad. You are certainly the only one who knows the myriad of additional feelings that may be present during such an event. Similarly, we can measure the electrical or biochemical activity that takes place within our brain when we are engaged in the act of seeing, hearing, thinking, or remembering. We can represent this information in numbers, and translate these numbers into amazingly realistic "pictures" of the brain in action. However, the actual experience can only be described by the person having it.

Throughout the book, we will address all three of these major human activities: thinking, feeling, and acting. It is these activities which comprise the bulk of human experience. If these activities are within a healthy range, it is very likely that one is living life at an optimal level.

### **Summary**

For all practical purposes, we find ourselves in an infinite universe, and thus, an infinite reality. Our task is to learn to live as good a life as possible within this reality. Given that we cannot know or understand all of reality, we can focus on those parts of reality that affect us directly. Our personal reality has two major aspects: Our internal (or mental) reality, and our external (or objective) reality. By choosing what we allow to enter our internal reality, and by choosing which aspects of our external reality to actualize, we can, to some extent, manage our personal reality.

## **A look ahead**

As we begin to conceive of how we can manage our reality, we must consider the direction toward which we want to head, that is, what kind of reality do we want to sculpt. Chapter 2 addresses some possible ways in which we can choose a direction for our lives. The human need to seek after goodness or after perfection is discussed. Chapter 3 introduces the notion that certain ways of managing our reality might be counterproductive. Thus the concept of the "healthy" management of reality is put forward. Chapter 4 tackles the problem of human suffering, and how it must be acknowledged to make the healthy management of reality a reasonable objective. Chapter 5 takes on the issue of how our past influences our present and our future, and suggests a way to think about this potential limiting factor. Chapter 6 grapples with the fact that no way of living is a panacea. No matter how careful one is, there is always the probability of meeting with problems. The concept of "the healthy management of reality" involves the conscious intent to increase the probability that good events will occur in our lives and the lives of those around us. Although there may be no guarantees, the potential for good in life is infinite.

Chapter 7 describes four levels of change that can be used to manage internal reality. These are changes in specific thoughts, self-instructions (or "being your own coach"), analyzing your beliefs, and deciding on a philosophy of life. Chapter 8 describes several areas that are useful to consider when managing external reality. The epilog presents a potentially useful concept to provide direction and a goal as one uses these ideas. It is intended in part to create an ethical context in which to use these methods.

## Chapter 2

### Choosing a Direction

"If you don't change direction,  
you'll wind up where you are headed."

Unknown

Chuck Garrigues, a social worker who helped to establish the Depression Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital, liked to emphasize that when we were helping our patients set goals for their treatment, it was good to also set a **direction** for their lives. His point was that, even if specific goals or objectives were not met, if in the process of moving toward these goals and objectives, the patient moved his or her life closer to what they considered good, progress had taken place. And that progress ought to be acknowledged.

I tend to agree with this way of framing human life. Although it is important to pay attention to objective measures in life, it is at least as important to be aware of the general direction toward which one is heading.

*When one is applying for a job, each application, each interview, and, yes, even each time one is not offered a position, is a step in the direction of being employed, of being able to support oneself and one's loved ones, and of being able to be creative and to contribute to one's community.*

*When one wants to be a writer, each idea for a story, each draft, each submission, and yes, each rejection slip, is a step in the direction of being an author.*

*When one wants to build a life-long relationship, each friendly glance, each "hello," each conversation, each date, each act of affection, and yes, each time things do not work out, is a step in the direction of becoming a couple. Once one becomes a couple, the goal has not been accomplished. Each day, each interaction, each act of kindness or rudeness becomes a step toward or away from the direction of becoming and remaining a happy couple.*

Choosing a direction for one's life would seem to be relatively straightforward. There are certain things we all need to live, such as air, water, food, and shelter, and things which are related to better health, such as physical safety, caring companionship, dignified work, and a sense that one's life has meaning.

However, if one examines the way we and others lead our lives, we rapidly notice that human beings do many things which not only do not seem to have much to do with our basic needs, but which actually get in the way of our achieving them. Much human suffering can be traced to human actions: the leading cause of the death in the United States is tobacco use, the second is diet and activity levels, and the third is alcohol. In each of these cases, long-term self-damage is a major aspect of the picture. But self-damage is also present in terms of actively caused death. Most people are surprised by the fact that, in the United States, most deaths directly caused by human beings are suicides, not homicides. But of course, the injuries and deaths caused by murder or by armed conflict throughout the world are also horrifically high. The increasing levels of divorce show us that building a lasting relationship is at least problematic. Even if, at a theoretical level, one does not see a problem in adults changing mates as often as they like, it is hard to ignore the trauma involved when relationships end in both each member of the couple and any children involved. And since not all couples with problems divorce, we can well imagine that the level of everyday pain or at least discomfort in homes throughout our communities is probably substantial.

If we can agree on what we need, what is good for us, why are so many of us finding it hard to move in that direction?

## **The concept of "the good"**

One of the most useful ideas that human beings have formulated throughout their development has been the concept of "the good." Many believe the concept of the good is too controversial to serve as rallying point. I disagree.

Part of the reason some people see this concept as problematic is because reasonable people sometimes disagree dramatically on what is good. This is in part because the concept encompasses many complexities. It can refer to that which is physically good for us, as well as that which is morally good. Something that tastes good can be bad for us. Something that is good for some segment of the community may be achieved by exploiting another segment.

One of the reasons the concept of "the good" has come under suspicion is that many groups throughout history have appropriated it to justify their self-serving actions. Thus, many religious and political movements defined themselves as being "good" and all others as "bad." Their supposed moral superiority then allowed them to criticize, oppress, persecute, and even physically attack other groups. The fear, then, is that those who think they are good are likely to want to impose their beliefs on the rest, thus taking away their personal liberty.

Thus, "the good" has been identified with religious and political ideologies. The result has been that those who do not belong to these groups prefer not to use this term, and those who do belong to such groups tend to define "the good" only according to what their own belief systems teach them.

But "the good" is a higher concept than those of specific religious or political beliefs. Religious, political, and other philosophies of life each strive to define and practice what is good. Thus, they can be seen as tools to reach the good. They can be judged according to whether the consequences of following their teachings result in actual good. Few Catholics would defend the Inquisition.

Few Christians would support the religious wars that wracked Europe, the religious persecutions that prompted so many to flee to the New World, or the Salem witch trials. Few believers of the major religions wish for a return to the armed conflicts between them that have marred most of our history and are still causing death and suffering today.

Even the human perception of god has been molded in part by the development of the human idea of good. The early conceptions of gods with human imperfections, or bloodthirsty gods who required human sacrifices, or who ordered the annihilation of entire peoples, have gradually been moving toward a concept of god as just, then of god as merciful, and, more recently, as totally benevolent (that is, totally good).

As humans continue to develop the concept of good, this concept is shaping even our most fundamental beliefs. It is my hope that, as long as the leaders and the influential thinkers of the great religions and the great civilizations remain open to their perception of the good and to the continual development of this concept, we will gradually find that there is more and more common ground across these currently widely different perspectives.

The concept of the good may be one of the most universal of human concepts. Osgood, a psychologist interested in measuring meaning across many different cultures found that the "good-bad" axis was the strongest dimension of meaning that people used in thinking about people, things, and even concepts. The dimensions anchored by the concepts of "strong-weak" and "active-passive" were two other such axes. I believe that if we recognize that this concept is basic to our makeup and begin to use it in a conscious manner, it will be extremely helpful to us. Putting together these dimensions of meaning, I believe most human beings would agree in moving toward an active and strong actualization of the good.

### Perfection as a guiding star

One of the problems in actively seeking the good is that many of us have a tendency to envision only the extremes, and to be dissatisfied with anything else. In the case of the good-bad axis, many people act as if unless they reach perfection (the extreme end of goodness), they have failed (that is, they are bad).

An antidote to this toxic way of thinking involves a metaphor: The ancient mariners used guiding stars to navigate toward their destination. But they did not expect to ever reach those stars. Similarly, the images of what we (or our lives) would be like if perfect can serve as very useful guiding stars. These images of perfection can take us closer to our desired destination, and help us get back on course if we stray. And, throughout our lives, they can help us reach the ports toward which we set sail: good grades in school, lasting friendships, satisfying jobs, happy homes, a peaceful death. They only become harmful to us if we expect to actually reach and remain forever after in a state of perfection on this earth. As far as I know, that is not possible. But I know that it is possible to spend shorter and shorter periods of time in the midst of emotional pain, and longer and longer periods of time at peace. Toward this end this book is dedicated.

## Chapter 3

### The Healthy Management of Reality

This book is about managing one's reality. But it is also about doing so in a healthy manner. I am aware that the quest to control one's life can lead to disappointment and demoralization. Therefore, it is important to be explicit about the limits of control and the desirability of achievable objectives.

#### On Control, Management, and Healthy Management

In earlier books (Control Your Depression, Controlling Your Drinking), we have used the word "control" in the title to describe the process of gaining more freedom to choose how one wants to live and how to grapple with problems that stand in the way of that freedom. However, in recent years I have realized that, for many people, the word "control" implies complete control over themselves. What happens, then, is that they can become discouraged when they try the ideas in the books and find that they do not achieve complete control.

I have begun to use the word "management" to describe a more realistic type of expectation when it comes to making changes in oneself or one's life. Management implies working with a fluid situation, in which unexpected things happen, complete information is not available to make decisions that must be made, and even when you make specific decisions, you do not always carry them out as you planned. Management implies a probabilistic process, in which you do that which is most likely to result in a good outcome. But a good outcome is not guaranteed. I find this meaning much more accurate in terms of practical approaches to life.

The "healthy" aspect of "the healthy management of reality" refers to the fact that even if one could have complete control over oneself and one's life, it is unclear to me whether that much control would be desirable. There appears to be a range of control that is optimal for human life. Too little control leads to demoralization and depression, too much control can lead to obsessiveness, rigidity, and oppression.

In the use of medications, there is a concept called the "therapeutic window," which refers to a moderate dose range which is neither so little that it has no effect, or so large that it can have too many undesirable side effects or the possibility of dangerous overdose. A physician prescribing a medication must achieve this "therapeutic window" in order for the condition to improve.

In order for the management of reality to have beneficial results, it will probably have to be done within a healthy range. At one end of the continuum, lack of any control over one's reality often leads to a sense of being overwhelmed and powerless. As long as things go well, there might be little discomfort. As long as one has few expectations, there might be little or no disappointment. But few people are able to truly live for the moment and be content with whatever befalls us. Most of us have some sense of what we would prefer and what we want to avoid. Thus, some sense of control and predictability is generally welcome. At the other end of the continuum, attempts at obtaining excessive control are probably also unwise. Even if we were able to achieve it, too much control over our reality is likely to backfire.

Consider the following example: In working with depressed individuals, one of the problems I have encountered is a severely negative image of themselves. Depressed people have a hard time coming up with positive adjectives to describe themselves, but have no problems generating a list of negative adjectives. One of the tasks of therapy is to help the person achieve a sense of balance: we work on coming up with a view of the patient that gives her credit for the things she is or does which she can justifiably feel proud of. At the same time, we question each of the negative elements that she ascribes to herself, and attempt to either disprove their accuracy, or limit their applicability. Rather than labeling herself as "totally irresponsible," she might change the label to "procrastinator." And then, we might pinpoint the fact that she procrastinates only in the area of responding to personal letters, while, for example, she routinely pays her bills on time.

However, it would be unwise for a person to take the above example and determine that, if thinking well of oneself is helpful in treating depression, thinking terrifically well of oneself in all areas would be even better. This can lead to unrealistically positive assertions about oneself, which would be hard to maintain for very long. Also, thinking "too well" of oneself is likely to bring forth negative reactions in others. Finally, beliefs that one could accomplish anything one wishes might lead to unwise investments of time and resources in projects that are very unlikely to succeed. All of these reactions are actually seen in many cases of manic-depressive illness. During what is called the "manic" phase of this disorder, individuals go to the extreme opposite of depression, and become abnormally energetic, believing that they are extremely intelligent, that their ideas are likely to change the world, and that they have unusual powers and abilities.

It appears, then, that there is a range of self-esteem within which one can function in a healthy manner. Molding one's internal reality so that this range is accessible most of the time would be a worthwhile goal. Similarly there is probably a range of activities that are healthy -- but too few or too many are likely to cause problems. And there is probably an optimal level of social contact: having no friends or confidants is related to greater levels of illness and dysfunction, but one could as well imagine being overwhelmed with social activities, leading to either running oneself ragged, or being unable to have other than superficial contact with many people.

### On the Desirability of "Control"

There are many traditions that speak to what is desirable in terms of seeking control. Some appear to suggest that the best path is one of complete surrender to God, to fate, or to reality, and that attempts to achieve one's goals are a bad sign of human pride ("hubris"), a possibly tragic way of tempting fate, or merely an illusion of control rather than a recognition that things merely are the way they are.

Belief systems such as these often portray the more active ones as leading its proponents into futile struggles which are either destructive, doomed to failure, or both.

The more active ideologies espouse the value of self-determination, the dignity of "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps," and the need to actively create one's future.

At first glance, this book, beginning with its title, appears to have a lot more in common with the latter than with the former. But it is important to see that it draws much from both camps.

The first set of ideologies remind us of how limited we human beings are.

Whether we were created by an intelligent and omnipotent being, or by the workings of an impersonal nature, we are mere specks in an infinite universe. We can hardly expect to make much of a dent in the totality of existence. It falls to us, then, to become conscious of our place in the universe, and to either place ourselves at the mercy of its creator, or, at the very least, to acknowledge the enormity of existence in a mindful and reverent manner. In either case, these perspectives recommend a change in our consciousness that can only take place if we practice such a change in a devout manner. This practice is very similar to the conscious change in our internal reality that this book recommends. In fact, many of the mental disciplines found in these traditions, such as acceptance of God's will and detachment from the material can be very useful and are fully compatible with the message of the book.

These traditions often involve a strong value of serving others. Such a value is most compatible with the concept of shaping external reality. Our behavior makes a difference. If we were to merely accept God's will or accept the fact that things are the way they are and detach ourselves from wishing they were different, there would be no need to show compassion, no need to help others, no need even to follow the teachings of these traditions.

Once one becomes aware of oneself and one's surroundings, there is a potent process of judging what we perceive and, for many of us, a pull to place our limited resources at the service of what we see as good.

The more active ideologies do preach a message of limitless possibilities. At first glance, they imply that everything is modifiable, especially human beings themselves. But, as one delves more into them, one notices a strong element of conscious and detailed study of their subject matter. A basic element in many of these ideologies is a directive to "face reality." There is an injunction to learn what really is, to accept what is, and then to use this knowledge to move toward the person's goal. The truly effective change agents must first bow to the "will" of the phenomenon they are addressing. They must achieve detachment from their own wishes about how things ought to be, and see things clearly and objectively. Only then can they intervene and hope to succeed.

Similarly, this book recommends that we examine how human beings function, and then use the knowledge gained in this process to develop a plan to shape our reality in a healthy manner. Shaping our reality involves shaping ourselves first. Thus, the message of the book involves an acceptance of the limitations as well as the potential of human beings.

Control, in the sense of managing the many aspects that make up reality, and of a probabilistic give and take between the individual and the universe, is a given. Individuals do have some control over their thoughts, actions, and feelings. The question is how to use this control. Even "letting fate decide" involves a decision to give up control. Paradoxically, such a decision involves a great deal of control. Few people are able to approximate this degree of detachment.

## **Summary.**

Human beings have the existential experience of choosing among many possibilities. This book is dedicated to helping us think about how our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings help channel reality in certain directions. This chapter explicitly acknowledges that we do not have absolute control over our thoughts and actions, and that, even if we did, that much control might backfire. The ideal is not complete control, but a give-and-take that gradually leads our reality in healthy directions.



## Chapter 4

### Unnecessary Suffering

Human life involves some degree of joy and some degree of suffering, and large amounts of normal states of mind. This chapter deals with the negative aspects of experience, that is, with suffering. There are certain things that are part of being a biological organism. Our body can be hurt, our body can become sick and our feelings can also be hurt. Human beings are motivated to reduce suffering, not only in themselves but also in their loved ones and another human beings. That is why we have physicians and others who take care of people when they are feeling sick or in pain. That is why we have psychologists and other therapists and that is why we have priests and ministers. Therefore, when are talking about the healthy management of reality we are talking not only about trying to bring about those things that we wish do happen, but also to try to avoid those which cause pain.

As we think about human suffering, we can divide suffering into two types: the first is what I will call necessary suffering, and the second unnecessary suffering. Necessary suffering is the suffering that is built into the way we are. For example, if we fall, we can scrape our knees and feel pain, where our skin is scraped and where our bones were jarred. If someone we love leaves, or dies, we miss them, and there is emotional pain involved in not having them with us any longer. If certain basic needs are not met, such as food, warmth, safety, human beings suffer. They suffer from hunger, from cold, and from fear. These aspects of human experience that can be painful and therefore can produce some suffering

are what I mean by necessary suffering. They are part of the way that we are constructed. If our body is in good working order, some events will result in feelings of discomfort or pain.

In my work as a psychologist I have been able to see many examples of how in addition to these types of necessary suffering we, human beings, add additional suffering which is really not necessary. For example, when someone has an illness, it is possible to react to it in more than one way. Let's say that person (A) and person (B) both have the same severity of an illness, let's say diabetes. Person (A) decides that diabetes is an unbearable tragedy, one that will keep him from living a full life. He develops resentment that envelops his being and colors his experiences from that moment on by labeling himself as somebody who is severely limited in what he can do. He refrains from doing things that could bring him pleasure. So, in addition to the illness and the objective effect that the illness has on him, he adds his perception of the illness to his definition of himself and his life, what he can and cannot do, what he can and cannot enjoy. Person (B) on the other hand, says: I am obviously not happy that I have developed diabetes, but I am going to try to limit its effect on my life as much as I can, and try to live as full a life as possible. If we think of these elements of suffering in terms of numbers, we can say that, because of the diabetes, person (A) has a hundred points of suffering that those of us who do not have diabetes do not have. Person (B) also has a hundred points of this type of suffering, which I will call the necessary type. (What I mean here is for example, that they have to give themselves insulin injections each day, and be careful about the kinds of foods they eat). Now, person (A) in addition to those hundred points, may add another 100 points which are the result of the resentment that he feels, the results of limiting himself and not doing things that may have given him more pleasure. Person (B) adds no additional

suffering to her life. So the total amount of suffering for person (A) is 200, and for person (B) it is 100 points. Person (A) suffers twice as much, even though both of them have the same objective physical condition.

Similar examples can be imagined in terms of such common situations as individuals wanting to have a relationship and not being able to find someone with whom to share their lives. Again, let's say person (A) is single and would like to develop a romantic relationship. So would person (B). Both of them are disappointed that they have not found someone with whom to share their lives. Let's say their disappointment causes a hundred points of suffering, because of not having something that they wish for. In addition, person (A) focuses on thoughts about his not being sufficiently attractive, of having bad luck, and of the limits that being alone places on him. Person (B) on the other hand thinks about the freedom that he has because of not being in a relationship, and the fact that he can do some things which he would not be able to do or will not be able to do once he does find a relationship. He also thinks about the possibility of never finding someone with whom to share his life in a romantic sense and develops images of himself as a single person throughout his life. These images include fulfilling types of experiences, perhaps travel, perhaps dedicating himself to a cause to which he can devote a lot of time, reading, and learning skills that bring pleasure to him. The total amount of suffering for person (A) includes both the suffering due to being single person while wanting to be part of a couple plus the suffering of labeling himself as being unattractive and limited by his situation. The amount of suffering for person (B) includes only the first part. The point, again, is that the total amount of human suffering is the sum of the suffering that is unavoidable plus the suffering that we add ourselves by the way that we perceive our lot and the limits that we place on ourselves because of these perceptions. The latter part is

unnecessary and can be prevented.

The important message here is that as we see the difficulties of life, it is important to try to tease out which of those difficulties is an integral part of being human. These must be borne as part of life. Other difficulties are burdens that we do not need to bear, because they are under our control at least to some extent.

Let's look at another aspect of suffering: that which involves relationships. It is not uncommon for two people who are entering a relationship to notice things about each other that they do not like or value, but to ignore them during the early phases of their relationship. One or the other hopes that their eventual partner will change. This might have to do with the use of drugs or alcohol, for example, or the way that a person treats others. Someone who is insensitive and cruel to other people is likely to be insensitive and cruel toward his or her partner. By entering into a long-term relationship with someone who is very likely to cause pain, one is at least increasing the chances of having large amounts of suffering in one's future life. In relationships in which there are no noticeable negative habits that could develop into chronic vexations to one's spirit, sometimes interactions occur which gradually rob the relationship of its positives and start to add, unnecessarily, a negative flavor which can grow worse and worse over the years. For example, two people who are in love with each other can, as it happens with all people, at times be cranky, thoughtless or selfish. If during these times one labels one's partner as "bad," rather than as "having behaved in a selfish manner in that particular situation," one begins to build an image of one's partner as someone who is inherently bad. One is much less likely to be affectionate, to be caring, to be thoughtful towards someone who is so labeled. So when other difficulties come along, one is much more likely to react in a negative fashion. Then, one's partner will begin to think of one as irritable, difficult, as not being caring. This vicious

cycle begins to weaken the relationship and to take away the positives that brought the two people together in the first place. What then begins to happen is that their interaction begins to get more and more negative. As each one receives negativity from the other one is less likely to respond with caring. The vicious cycle continues until pretty soon they have turned what was originally a positive social bond into a bond that brings pain to them and which becomes a burden that they must carry, rather than a source of support.

### Avoiding unnecessary suffering

As in other parts of this book, it is useful to focus on those three things that human beings do: think, act and feel. In terms of thinking, the kinds of thoughts that add unnecessary suffering are usually thoughts that label oneself or others. These thoughts, such as "unattractive", "bad", "uncaring", "inept", and so on, are descriptors that often have a permanent, global quality to them. These kind of negative descriptors can mold one's view of oneself or others in ways that take away value from that individual. Descriptors that are more objective are often necessary to understand what is occurring. Descriptors that are more judgmental are usually not necessary to define someone. I have found it useful to emphasize or note those aspects of others or myself that are positive, and to enjoy them, and to try to limit my use of descriptors that are negative in a global way as much as I am able to. This does not mean that I completely avoid having an opinion of others, or of things that people do. I do try to focus on those actions that I find unacceptable or unpleasant, as exactly that: actions that are unacceptable or are unpleasant to me, rather than labeling the person who did those actions as himself or herself unacceptable or unpleasant.

The second place upon which to focus attention is one's actions. Many of

the things that cause human suffering are things that people do to themselves. For example, the largest number of deaths in the United States is due to smoking, an activity that is completely unnecessary and which most people realize is hurtful to their health. It is very hard to stop smoking once one has started and become addicted to cigarettes. Therefore the wisest course of action is never to begin smoking in the first place. Once one has begun smoking, stopping as soon as possible is, again, the wisest course of action and the one that is most likely to prevent the most amount of suffering. Diet and exercise are other ways in which we affect our health. The use of alcohol can affect not only ourselves physically, but also our relationships with others and even the safety of people who are complete strangers to us, for example in the case of driving under the influence of alcohol.

Sex is another activity that can have major consequences. These consequences begin with danger to one and one's partner in the form of sexually transmitted diseases, including the HIV virus. In addition, there is the effect on a third person who has nothing to do with the decision of having sex: the child that can be engendered by this act. It is sobering to realize that most human beings are the result of unintended pregnancies. Only a very small percentage of us were born as a result of a sexual act intended to bring about a pregnancy. The stress brought about by an unplanned pregnancy can be very disruptive to the parents' lives and can have a major impact on the child's development and, therefore, the rest of his or her life. These effects, of course, affect our communities and our society as a whole. The amount of suffering that would be avoided if we reduce the proportion of unintended pregnancies significantly is unimaginable.

Life can bring pain and suffering. There is enough pain and suffering to go around even if we do not add any more to it. The irony is that, often, it is what we do that adds the most amount of suffering to our lives. One of the goals of a healthy management of reality would be to try to reduce unnecessary suffering to the smallest possible level.



## Chapter 5

### Changing the Past-Yet-to-Be

Our past has an influence on our present and our future. Growing up in an environment in which one feels protected and loved can produce a sense of confidence and predictability. On the other hand, living through difficult times and traumatic events can produce anxiety and a reluctance to let one's guard down. The fear that painful events will occur in the future is much more than a theoretical possibility for someone who has actually experienced such events before. The memories of those events can intrude and disrupt moments of hope and peace.

When I work with individuals who have lived through a childhood filled with deprivation, or even worse, of actual emotional or physical abuse perpetrated by those who were supposed to take care of them, I wonder what these people might have been like if they had been spared these experiences. What if they had had loving parents, a safe environment, and if their intellect and spirit had been nurtured? It is at times like this that the concept of the healthy management of reality makes the most sense to me. I don't doubt that genetics and other biological influences can have major effects on one's development. We are biological beings, and our psychological functioning depends on our nervous system, our senses, and the health of our body. But one of the major characteristics of the nervous system is its ability to change. As far as we know, in order to learn, certain physical changes must occur inside us. And those changes are the result of our experiences. And it is this mechanism that provides the entry point for changing the past: the

past that we remember (that is our mental or internal representation of the past), and the objective past that is yet to be.

### Changing the Past We Remember

I became acutely aware of the importance of changing the past we remember while working with a Central American woman whose teenage son had been tortured and killed by one of the many factions in an ongoing struggle in her country. His body had been found with many cigarette burns. Although this event had taken place several years before, our patient still suffered from a severe depression which had been disrupting her work and family life, and which made it difficult for her to care for her remaining children. One of the most disturbing of her symptoms was that when she remembered her son, her mind filled with images of his lifeless body and the evidence of torture.

One of the things a psychologist learns when working with individuals with real problems, such as victims of extreme cruelty, is not to trivialize the person's pain, or, in this case, the fact that an unspeakable tragedy had occurred. Acknowledgment of the enormity of the event, the excruciating pain that was involved, and the fact that her inability to shake off the pain is understandable must be made before attempts to intervene begin.

When a patient appears to be drowning with the weight of his or her subjective or objective burdens, the therapist must first dive into the water with the patient, experience as much as one can the desperate feeling of imminent asphyxiation the patient is undergoing, and only then attempt to guide the patient to the surface. One does this by listening to the patient, trying to obtain not only the facts, but also the meaning these facts have for the patient. And then one must say these things back to the patient, so the patient can hear that someone else has understood not just what happened, but the impact of what happened on his or her being.

But it is also important not to stay underwater too long. Once the patient has seen that we have followed them to the depths, they must also see that we can show them a way out. We must help them swim to the surface and help them get that gulp of air that tells them that there is hope still. Only then will they be able to begin swimming to shore.

The treatment of the patient involved many interventions. But changing how she remembered her son was a very important one. What we did was to have her imagine her son's life as though it were a line, from his birth to his death. The line was 17 years long, and it did end in tragedy. But, as she remembered her son, she had gotten used to looking at his lifeline as though looking through a telescope. And, because his death had shocked her so much, it was this horrifying eyepiece that filled her field of vision, blocking out the bulk of his life. We asked her to visualize turning the telescope, so she could see it from the side, to notice how long it was, and how many things had happened throughout the son's life, and to be able to remember those things without filtering them through his death. She was able to remember that he was a prankster, a kid with a good sense of humor, with a hearty laugh. The memories triggered a smile in her, for the first time in therapy.

The objective past had not changed, of course. But she now could remember it from a different vantage point. And she could access those aspects of the past that linked her with her son in a way that was much healthier for her, and more fruitful for their ongoing relationship. For even after we lose someone, we do retain a connection to him or her, even if only in our minds. And the nature of that connection, of that relationship in the realm of our internal world, has an influence on how we feel about ourselves, and how we relate to others. In this patient's case, I surmise that her ability to be emotionally available to her younger children had been impaired by the severe trauma she had undergone. I imagine that fears about losing another child may have made it hard for her to truly bond with them. Changing the past she remembered might have had a major impact on shaping her current reality as an individual and as a mother.

Since then, I have been more alert to how the way we remember past events affects our current stance toward the world. And I am much more likely to remember that our memories are not carved in stone. They are malleable to some extent, and it is often worthwhile to test how malleable they are.

## Changing the Past-Yet-to-Be

One of the exercises we ask the Depression Prevention Course students and our Depression Clinic patients to do is to write down their goals for the next six months, the next five years, and their lifelong goals. We have found that making explicit some of our yearnings increases the probability that we will do what is necessary to fulfill them. (We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.)

In the process of doing these exercises, I sometimes think of how helpful it would have been for our students or patients to have engaged in this process at earlier times during their lives. Often, one finds choices made, or not made, which have led one down a path filled with difficulties, or which closed off possibilities that the person would have treasured. On hearing these personal stories, one often has the feeling that correcting a slight detour taken years ago is going to take considerable effort at present. If only we could go back and change the person's past!

There is a type of past that one can change: the past-yet-to-be. To do this, we ask Depression Prevention Course participants to move mentally forward in time for, say, five years. We want them to imagine actually being five years hence, and looking back at the last five years (which, of course, are yet to happen). Then we ask them to think about the things they wish they could look back on: what do they wish they had done? Where? With whom? What kind of things do they wish they had learned? How do they wish they had spent their time? What kind of memories would they like to recall? What kind of memories would they like not to have for those five years?

The fact is that five years hence, the next five years will be their past. And, though they may be able to do nothing about the past they've had so far, the "future past" can be molded. This is another example of the healthy management of reality. By becoming conscious of the way our past affects us, we can help create a past which will contribute to feelings of satisfaction and pride, which will provide us with the particular combination of excitement, meaningfulness, security, creativity, and affection which we most desire.

The specific areas that we recommend that our participants concentrate on are in the two major realms of reality we have already mentioned: Internal or mental reality, and external or objective reality. Chapter 7 will address the former, Chapter 8 the latter. Here we will briefly glimpse at how to construe them in terms of changing the future past.

**Internal reality** includes

- Specific thoughts we want to increase and specific thoughts we want to decrease. Just like any other human activity, one can create thinking patterns, or habits, which either help or harm our emotional and physical health. If there are thoughts that currently provide us with a sense of enthusiasm, meaning, or peace, then we may want to have more such thoughts in times to come. Conversely, if there are thoughts that make our life miserable, or we find painful, we may want to reduce their frequency. (See Chapter 7).

- Ways of "coaching" ourselves. Human beings often use their ability to talk to help guide their behavior. We often talk to ourselves, instructing ourselves to focus on something, and not something else, or to do this and not that. Again, learning to systematically use this natural process over the next five years will provide us with a very experienced "coach" at our side in the future. (See Chapter 7).

- Our beliefs. This is a potentially delicate area to address, especially around political and religious beliefs. Psychologists are carefully taught to respect their patients' values and beliefs, and not to impose their own on others. But there are many beliefs that are not directly tied to either a political or religious context, and which can be questioned when they seem to be causing unnecessary pain. These generally have to do with subjective judgements regarding oneself or others, beliefs about how things work in human life, and beliefs about the likelihood of good and bad things happening in one's life. And even political and religious beliefs can be tapped in terms not so much of their accuracy, but in terms of whether the person is aware of their consequences and whether they are consistent with their intended effects. It isn't rare for a person to have a strong commitment to some value, such as the golden rule (treating others as one would like to be treated), and not realize that one is constantly ignoring an implied aspect of the rule, for example, treating oneself with the same respect and thoughtfulness as one strives to treat others. Having reconsidered or recommitted to the beliefs that influence one's life helps clarify one's priorities (See Chapter 9).

- The meanings we have accepted or constructed to make sense of our lives.

We are given a great number of already-constructed meanings for human life through our parents, teachers, peers, and our society's traditions and cultural heritage. Out of all of these, we pick some, discard others, and create our own. The cocoon of meaning we weave for our families and ourselves is extremely important for our development and fulfillment. Its creation is a never-ending process. Realizing that it need not be haphazard and actively shaping its form can provide a strong existential base from which to venture.

(See Chapter 7).

**External reality** encompasses:

- The structure of day-to-day time. Our days are made up of a limited number of hours. It is what we do during these hours that determines our objective reality. Actively shaping the nature of how we spend our time results in the shaping of our life itself. (Chapter 11).

- The structure of the space that we inhabit. The places we live in determine to a large extent the kinds of behaviors that are possible for us. Our environment constantly influences our behavior, and our behavior, in turn, reshapes our environment. Moreover, we have some control over which environments we will enter and how long we will stay in them. Over time, these day-to-day choices will determine the nature of our activities. (Chapter 12).

- The nature of our social environment. The people with whom we share our life provide much of what is enjoyable about living. They also help shape our thinking and what we do. Their encouragement increases the chances we will do something again. Their criticism makes us think twice about repeating an action. Creating a social network that supports the life style we want to lead can be one of the most important projects we undertake. Having such a network in place five years hence would be a great use of time. (Chapter 13).

- How rewarding life is. The daily rewards and hassles we encounter shape our view of life and the things we do. Unless we notice what we are being rewarded and punished for, we are at the mercy of chance and of others' influence. Learning to build in self-rewards, or placing ourselves in places where we will be rewarded for those things we find worthwhile, will create the type of person we become. (Chapter 8).

## **Molding the past of our children**

The effect of our parents on our lives is dramatic. Although our parents cannot determine how we will lead our lives, the things our parents do and do not do, the things they say, and the way they think, all influence our view of reality, and the way we lead our lives at the time and in the future. Given that children take a while to realize that they can mold themselves, for a large part of their lives, they are dependent on their parents to mold their reality. Thus, as they look back on their past, what they will see is, to a great extent, up to us.

Aspects of internal reality that will affect them include:

- Thoughts they learn from you. Just as they learn language from you, the phrases you use to describe their world will be learned. The amount of value or disdain reflected in those words and phrases will be incorporated in their mental images representing their world. Therefore, the words themselves, as well as the attitude behind them, begin to build the internal world that they will carry around for most of their life. Give them the type of foundation which will serve them well, and which will not have to be reconstructed in order for them to live happy lives.

- How they give themselves directions. Psychologists have found that small children often talk to themselves (using phrases they have been told) when they are alone and want to control themselves. So, for example, a toddler might say "No! Don't touch!" when reaching toward a delicate vase or "Hot!" when approaching the stove. This is a way in which they incorporate rules about how to behave and how to make their way in a very complex world. Knowing this, it is important to consider what kind of rules to convey to them. For example, prohibitions and

limits that rely on one's presence ("If you touch that, I'll punish you") are less likely to be of long term use than those that rely on natural consequences ("If you touch that, you will get burned"). Similarly, rules that rely on their positive characteristics will have a double positive effect than those that rely on negative characteristics. For example, "It would be really thoughtful of you to share your candy with your cousins," as opposed to so "Don't be greedy, share your candy."

The former provides not only a rule about candy or sharing, but also a general description of a desirable trait (thoughtfulness) that will shape the child's self image for a long time to come. The latter is a blunt command dependent on your authority, and adds a negative trait (being greedy) that could lead to feelings of guilt or reduced self-esteem in the future. Moreover, the nature of the interactions and the feelings elicited in the child toward the parent are also quite different. The first is a suggestion and implies kindly feelings toward both the child and the cousins. The feelings elicited in the child toward the parent are likely to be that the parent is giving advice to help the child be good, but that if the child does not comply, the parent will still be positively disposed toward him. The latter feels coercive, and could be interpreted as pitting the child against the cousins. The feelings elicited toward the parent are that the parent is a disciplinarian. To ignore the parent's injunction, the child must disobey. If the child does disobey, the unintended lesson is learning to minimize the importance of the parent's displeasure. Such a lesson could cause a lot of grief in future years.

- The child's core beliefs. Though a child has many instinctual characteristics and genetic predispositions when born, his or her initial set of beliefs about the world are learned at home. It is important to consider the consequences of the beliefs one inculcates in the child. For example, one such belief of many young children is that the parents know everything and make no mistakes. And a belief connected to this is that what the parent says must always be accepted (because the parent is always right). The danger of this set of beliefs is that, once the child becomes able to catch the parents making mistakes, his or her faith can be shaken enough to lead to the opposite set of beliefs: that the parent doesn't know anything, is always wrong, and that nothing that the parent says should be accepted. (This is a clear case of "all-or-nothing thinking.") To avoid this development, one should consider actively teaching the child that one makes mistakes, helping the child catch one making one, and showing pride in the child when he or she does so. One's advice or directives then become important because they are reasonable, not merely due to parental authority. This is the best way to increase the chances that they will be used once the child is not in the parents' presence.

- Learning to create meaning. This crucial human ability must be a key aspect of our makeup, but it is still subject to learning. For a child to learn that life has meaning, that human beings have innate and incalculable value, that love is real, that truth, knowledge, and justice are worth dedicating one's life to, these messages must be woven into their everyday lives. They cannot be merely mouthed or read at special occasions. And, above all, they cannot be foisted on them to control their behavior, but ignored by the adults in their world. This means that parents must teach their children those things that are truly a part of their own philosophy of life, their own existential stance toward life. And, if there are doubts

or uncertainties in their worldviews, these doubts or uncertainties must be clearly and calmly shared, in a way that is appropriate for the child's age and ability to understand. Part of the structure of meaning advocated here is that human beings, being finite, cannot know and understand all aspects of the universe or of our own existence. Whatever our political or religious traditions, there are areas that are beyond our ken, and always will be. Even so, we can be wholehearted about many things, including actualizing our love for our families and friends, and continually seeking the good. This quest alone can fill one's life with meaning.

Aspects of children's external reality include:

- Their sense of time and how to spend it. The importance of taking into account the child's developmental stage is never more clear than in how we structure time. At the very beginning, the child's immediate needs take precedence: he or she eats, voids, sleeps, and interacts whenever its body so determines. Gradually, we mold the infant to our schedules. To thrive in our society, the child must eventually learn to harmonize its body's daily rhythms to those of the people around him or her. At the same time, the parents or caregivers need to be sensitive to the child's ebbs and flows. For example, if the child is engrossed in a joyful activity, or is about to "get" a new skill, it may be worthwhile for the adult to let him or her complete the process, even if it interferes somewhat with the household chores. At the same time, it is important for the child to be explicitly instructed about the time demands on the parents. Not only is this good preparation for future demands on them, but it also helps to justify for them why it is that parents cannot satisfy their every desire. The earlier one begins to explicitly set aside time for the parent's needs (including rest and relaxation), as well as the child's ("if you help me have some time to read by myself, I'll take the time to read

your favorite book afterwards") the earlier the practice of molding one's day will become part of the child's repertoire.

- Their sense of space. The child begins life completely dependent on adults. A baby is carried, placed in a crib, carried again, fed, given toys to play with, changed if wet, and so on, totally according to the judgement of its caregivers. From the baby's perspective, people and objects appear in a somewhat random manner. As the child begins to control his or her own movements, it discovers that it can approach or avoid certain parts of the room. As it learns to walk, this ability becomes exciting (and sometimes dangerous). Gradually the toddler learns that there is some predictability to location: he or she can find the same things in the same place in the house. As time progresses, the child learns to identify certain places with pleasant feelings: a cozy couch, a sunny corner, the room with music or the TV. He or she gradually learns to create environments: throwing pillows together, stacking boxes, hiding under the table. The ability to find pleasant environments, as well as to modify them to make them even more inviting, is a key aspect of learning to sculpt one's reality. As the child begins to talk, explicit games about creating fun settings can provide the child with experiences that can later turn into a sense of mastery over environments.

- The people in their life. The key thing babies need to learn is that they can have an effect on other people. From the time they are born, it is essential that their parents and other caregivers be responsive to their facial expressions, their movements, the sounds they make. The interaction between the baby and the parent is a two-way street. The parent's sounds and facial expressions, the way they carry, hug, kiss, and caress the child, will elicit in the infant reactions that will be with them the rest of their lives. Obviously, the more loving and pleasurable these interactions, the more the developing individual will learn to see human

contact as desirable: a source of warmth, excitement, and security. As children grow and are able to choose with whom and how to interact, the key lessons are how to pick playmates and friends who build them up instead of tearing them down, how to elicit positive reactions from others, and how to prevent or reduce to a minimum negative reactions. At times when negative interactions are unavoidable, it is important to teach them how to reduce the effect of such interactions, and how not to attribute negative feelings entirely to themselves: there are individuals who are vexations to anyone's spirit. Our social reality is one of the most important parts of our personal reality. Learning to appreciate it and actively build it so it is a source of strength for us is a major task in managing reality.

- Learning to be rewarded by life. Adults are the primary source of reward in young children's lives. The amount of positives they shower on the children they care for will determine for these children their first impression of how good life can be. As the children mature, they can begin to reward themselves, at least mentally. They can begin to appreciate their accomplishments, the expression of certain traits, their ability to get through tough times, or to find enjoyable pastimes. For individuals to learn to manage their personal reality, it is crucial that they learn to reward themselves. Two aspects of the reward process are important: the total amount of reward received, and the kinds of activities that are rewarded. The former determines how rewarding life is. To retain zest in life, it must have at least a minimum level of reinforcement. If such reinforcement does not arrive naturally, it is important for the individual to arrange it. On the other hand, reinforcement has an impact on behavior, and if we want to use this fact, it is important to learn to reinforce oneself for those aspects of one's behavior that one wants to strengthen, and to avoid reinforcing oneself for those aspects that one wants to reduce. The healthy management of reality, in terms of rewards or reinforcements, involves

making sure that one's daily reality contains sufficient health pleasant events to keep one's enthusiasm for life within a healthy range, and using available rewards to influence the continuous shaping of oneself in the directions one has chosen.

## Chapter 6

### A Probabilistic Approach

Just as the mountains are constantly being carved by the wind, the rain, and by the movements of the landmasses of the earth, so is each of us constantly shaped by the daily events that affect us. For both, change can be very sudden. The impact of a new idea can cause a major change in a person's life overnight. The impact of a major loss can, at least temporarily, produce massive changes in our ability to perform even well worn routines. But, for the most part, change is so gradual that it is hard to notice it. It jumps out at us when we meet a friend we have not seen for some time. At times like this, we wonder how much we have changed ourselves. But then we generally go on with our daily routines, usually oblivious to how life is constantly sculpting us.

The message of this book is that we can have a hand on sculpting our reality. We can have a hand in sculpting ourselves. Because we are always changing, we have little choice regarding whether to change or not. By becoming aware of how we are changing, and what produces change in ourselves, we do have some choice in the direction of change.

Change can move us toward a healthier, more desirable state, or toward a harmful, less desirable state. Because change can be so gradual, it is possible to move significantly in an unhealthy direction for a long time, without being aware of doing so. Therefore, it is advisable to bring into our consciousness the awareness of how we are constantly changing. This consciousness then makes it possible to insert our mind into the middle of the change process. We can then exert some influence into the direction of change.

One of the goals of the healthy management of reality is to test the limits of what can be accomplished within the realm of conscious reflection and choice. There is no question that we are influenced by a multitude of factors, most of which are clearly outside our control. We had no say on being born, on being engendered by the two particular human beings who passed on to us the gift of life. Out of the immense number of possible combinations of genes that our parents could have passed on to us, one set of 23 chromosomes from each joined together into our unique biological master plan. The geographical and political reality into which we were born (or brought to as a child), and the particular year and historical era into which we were born were all determined in some manner that is beyond the known. Yet here we are. And, once we develop the ability to think about ourselves, we must advance in some direction.

This book was written to support the efforts of those who want to have a say about where they are headed; to increase the chances that each of them will find a direction leading toward what is good in life; and to increase the chances that they will reach many of the objectives they glimpse in the distance.

It is important to remember that choosing a direction does not predetermine where one will end up. The beauty and the mystery of life is that picking a direction merely opens up certain possibilities. As one pursues that direction, one comes across vistas that one could not have imagined at the outset of the journey. So, in molding oneself, and in molding one's reality, there is a great deal of discovery. One never knows the final shape that one's masterpiece will embody. It is probably more accurate to speak of this process as self-directed change, but not self-determined change. Thus, the healthy management of reality does not imply a reduction in possibilities, but rather a concerted effort at increasing the chances that desirable and meaningful possibilities will be perceived and experienced.

### **The search for certainty**

The search for certainty seems wired in to the human brain. We seek sure-fire methods to get what we want. We seek guarantees of avoiding pain and tragedy. We seek predictability.

This need for certainty can come in very handy for those who are sure that they have found panaceas, or who are willing to promise anything to gain money or fame. A myriad of advertisements promise success, health, and wealth if one only buys a certain product or takes up a certain lifestyle.

Realistically, we can only be promised a greater or lesser chance that this or that will happen. If we exercise, we are more likely to have more strength, to control our weight better, to remain healthy. But, of course, it is possible to exercise faithfully and still get sick, and even to die while exercising.

Similarly, behaving in an exemplary manner does not guarantee success, or even respect from others. Nor does acting in reprehensible ways always result in becoming disliked. In fact, sometimes the latter increases one's popularity, at least with some segments of the population.

Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. How does one think about this fact and yet keep on trying?

A probabilistic way of looking at life can be very helpful, in that it simultaneously recognizes the fact that most of the events that resulted in our personal reality are out of our control and the fact that the choices we make each day have a real impact on our personal reality. Both of these apparently contradictory statements are true. Human decisions had little to do with our unique genetic code, the time and place in which we were born, and the many events that have shaped the way we think, talk, and behave. Recognizing this helps to give us some humility regarding how much of what we have is due simply to good fortune. On the other hand, the choices we have made throughout our lives have contributed to many of the specifics of our current condition. Acknowledging this can result in a sense of pride for what we have accomplished, a sense of responsibility for what we have done, and a sense of hope that we can influence what our life will be like from now on.

Influence over our lives is not the same as having complete control over them. Influence means the ability to change probabilities in one direction or the other. We rarely move probabilities all the way to either zero or one hundred percent. Thus, we cannot be certain that any choice we make will definitely result in the desired outcome, or prevent an unwelcome fate. But we can be certain that our thoughts and actions will have influence. And as we learn to choose among the

infinite of thoughts and actions available to us, we can gain greater and greater influence over our lives.

Cycles: On the concept of reciprocal determinism.

I first heard of the concept of reciprocal determinism from Albert Bandura's work at Stanford University. He was trying to address the conundrum of how to retain a scientific approach to human behavior without proclaiming that our behavior is completely determined by our genetics and our learning history. Skinner had recently published his Beyond Freedom and Dignity, a radical behaviorist account which argued that the environment determines our behavior, and thus, that human acts are not free, and therefore do not earn us dignity. Psychoanalytic thought also had a similar deterministic bent to it, suggesting that many of the factors that mold our personality are not accessible by conscious thought. Later, genetic approaches to human behavior would also imply that much of what we do is determined by our heredity.

The concept of reciprocal determinism acknowledges that our environment does have an influence on us. It teaches us certain types of thinking and behavior. In that sense, our environment does determine much of what we do. The simplest example is language: We speak the language of the people who raise us. You can take a baby with any genetic loading and, by adopting him into a specific cultural environment, you can completely determine the language that baby will eventually speak. At the same time, individuals also influence their environment. As that baby grows, he or she could choose to study certain other languages, seek friends who speak those languages, or travel to an area where those languages are spoken. The choices the individual makes will increase or decrease the chances that he or she will speak other languages, or even continue to speak his or her native one.

Similarly, it is true that certain types of environment encourage certain types of behavior. However, the people in those environments can choose to change them, and, in changing them, they will change their influence on them. Reciprocal determinism refers to this process of continual back-and-forth influence, in which the environment “determines” human behavior and human behavior “determines” the nature of the environment. In this way, human behavior creates new environments, which, in turn, “determine” human behavior in a new way.

This concept was very freeing for me. It allowed me to retain an empirical stance toward human behavior, including, of course, my own, while leaving room for dreams of making a difference, having an impact on my world, and being able to mold my life in a way that would bring me nearer to the goals I valued.

#### Practical implications of a probabilistic approach

There are several simple implications of this probabilistic approach. To practice the reality management approach, it is important to ensure that one’s external and internal reality both remain healthy. The most immediate segment of external reality is our body. To increase the probability that our body will remain in a healthy state, we need to engage in behaviors known to produce health. These include getting sufficient sleep, eating well, and exercising regularly. In all three of these areas, it is important to remember to strive for a healthy range: Too much sleep, food, or exercise can be as damaging as too little.

Our physical environment is the next layer of our external reality. Its ability to keep us warm, physically safe (for example, away from second-hand smoke), and to provide us with sufficient (but not too much) stimulation, increases or decreases the probability that we will experience a sense of well-being. The social environment contained within our physical environment is another major source of health or illness. The people with whom we spend our time have great influence on what we think and what we do. They can encourage healthy or harmful life styles. They can support life-enhancing behavior or drain us.

Our internal reality affects the probability that we will seek or create healthy external realities. The types of thoughts we have, the kinds of plans we make, the reactions we have to particular people or events, all result in changes in the probability that we will even consider the effect of people and places on our health.

The combined effects of our internal and external reality increase or decrease the probability that we will experience healthy mood states. Mood straddles internal and external reality. Mood is amenable to physical observation, to a certain extent. A smile, a frown, or a tear can give witness to identifiable emotions and their accompanying moods. However, the subjective meaning of a tear is only known to the person experiencing the emotion. Moods and emotions are the constant evaluators of our ongoing experience. They color our conscious existence. And thus they are a particularly important part of our personal reality. Thus, emotional health is in some ways even more important than physical health. It is possible to imagine someone who is terminally ill being emotionally at peace. Somehow, this individual elicits less pity than a physically healthy person racked with emotional desperation.

Learning which thoughts and actions increase the probability of physical, cognitive, and emotional health is a task well worth tackling. It is a task that can be part of every moment of our lives. But it is also a task that is best successfully tackled as a long-term project.

### Planning and the power of time

When we think about the things that are most valued, it is important to note that they all took time to create. Whether it be a famous building, a classic book, a well known piece of music, or a venerable institution, all took a long time to come to fruition. From the time the first bit of inspiration came to the architect, writer, composer, or leader, to the time when the creation was completed, several steps took place. First, the concept had to become identifiable as something the person wanted to create. Then, its nature had to be specified. Much trial and error went into the development of each part or section of the whole. Moments of discouragement had to be overcome. And much time had to be spent actually working on the pieces that, together, make up the final product. The probability that a wonderful building, a great book, an inspiring song, or a helpful organization will be created is dependent on each of these steps.

Learning the healthy management of reality also takes a long time. First, one must embrace the idea of molding one's life as something one wants to accomplish. Then, one needs to decide what one values, and what one wants in one's life. Practicing the ways one wants to think, act, and feel will lead to moments of great fulfillment, and moments of disappointment or demoralization. The probability that one will learn to manage one's reality depends on the process of noticing and repeating the things that worked and discarding those that were useless or harmful.

Each day that is molded into a shape approximating one's ideal is a tremendous payoff, of course. And these payoffs can occur immediately: being in a frenzy of anxiety and doubt, and being able to not only reduce the level of anxiety, but actually achieve a feeling of peacefulness and calm is extremely rewarding.

A colleague of mine shared the following insight with me: as she begins specially busy days, she reminds herself that whether she feels frantic, or whether she feels calm, she still has to hurry from one meeting to another, and handle the same demands on her. However, her day goes much better, and she can actually enjoy it more, if she goes through it with a calm inner feeling. So, why not choose to do so?

Can one actually just "choose to do so"? In my experience, the answer is often "Yes!" In many situations, noticing how you are feeling, and deciding to create another feeling, can actually make a difference. If nothing else, it can decrease the feeling of being overwhelmed, which is not a trivial result. Creating another feeling usually involves taking a different mental perspective, that is, molding your internal reality. Doing so often can produce a real difference in your external reality, as well as in your emotional state.

Here is an example: imagine finding yourself in the middle of a particularly nasty interaction with a service person. You are about to blow a gasket from frustration. Now try the following: switch your attention from the anger at the person to the interaction itself. Analyze what is happening. Consider the possibility that the other person may be having a particularly bad day, or is worried about a family problem, or is insufficiently trained to handle what you need. No matter how angry and demanding you become, the person is not going to be able to

do what you wish. If you are able, notice that the situation could actually be seen as humorous. You have seen comedy skits of a grouch getting more and more worked up, red in the face, veins sticking up from his forehead. Is that the way you are acting? And, if you are, will it help you achieve what you want? Often, the answer is no. Noticing this, becoming mindful of this process, can often derail the otherwise predictable chain of events: blowing up at the person, feeling immense anger and resentment, and ruminating about the situation for some time to come. Instead, you can smile inwardly, figure out another way to get what you want, and proceed with your day without carrying unnecessary baggage. Sometimes, just deciding not to keep on butting your head against the other person will allow him or her to stop fighting you as well. This is the epitome of managing your reality in a healthy manner.

I believe that all of us are capable of making these types of changes in our day-to-day lives. But the probability that we will use this ability skillfully becomes better and better the more we practice. And here is where the power of time comes in. By planning to create a better life for oneself, and beginning to act on the plan, one increases the chances that one's life will be better in the future. And, if we ever face severe circumstances, or outright tragedies, the reality management lifestyle can reduce the chances that we will add unnecessary suffering to an already painful event.

Financial planning can be seen as a type of reality management practice. The reality one wants to mold is building up enough funds to be able to achieve a relatively comfortable retirement. To do this by saving only moderate amounts of money, it is useful to begin relatively early. Doing so allows the money saved or invested to earn returns that will gradually add up to a comfortable nest egg. At some point, the interest or dividends earned by the amount saved can actually match or exceed the amount one is saving regularly. Each year that one delays the start of saving for retirement, one faces having to save larger and larger amounts of money to achieve the same retirement goal. The alternatives are having to keep working much longer than one desires (or is able), or facing an economically tight retirement.

Learning to manage one's reality can have a similar progression. As one invests time and energy creating a healthy moment, hour, or day, benefits start accruing. One increases the probability that one's emotional and physical health will remain good, that one's relationship with others remain cordial, and that one's living and work situations will be shaped in a manner that leads to stability and satisfaction. Having a reputation for being honest, dependable, caring, and enjoyable to be with gives one many options. The more options one has, the more freedom one has. One has increased the chances of creating a personal reality that supports health and happiness.

### Tips on increasing the probability of molding one's reality

- Know where you want to go. Have a goal.
- Be specific. Draw up your blueprints. Remember the old joke about the person who always wanted “to be somebody.” It wasn’t until he was in his 40’s that he realized that it might have been helpful to be more specific.
- Don’t neglect the building blocks: Your thoughts and actions. Goals and blueprints lead to nothing unless you begin putting one brick on top of another.
- Remember that gradual change requires less effort and has a higher likelihood of succeeding than quick change: If you want to save \$1000 in a year, saving \$83 per month is a lot easier than waiting until the end of the year and trying to scrape together the entire \$1000. Similarly, if you want to eventually have a healthier personal reality, molding your thoughts and actions throughout your day is easier than making a major life change all of a sudden.

## Chapter 7

### Managing Internal Reality

In teaching these methods over the last twenty-five years, I have identified four levels of change in the process of managing internal reality. Not all four levels are necessary to achieve a fulfilling personal reality, nor is any level inherently more important than the others. In a sense, all four levels are embedded or implied in the others. But it is helpful to tease them apart in order to learn to recognize them.

#### Learning to Use Specific Thoughts

Thoughts can be fleeting and hard to work with. We have thousands each day, and they blend into each other very quickly. To make it easier to work with thoughts, we can define them as “sentences we tell ourselves.”

The basic goals at this level are:

1. To increase the number of thoughts that help us do what we value and that improve our mood and
2. To decrease the number of thoughts that are obstacles to our plans and that disturb our mood.

To learn to use them, we first need to identify the specific thoughts we have each day that influence our activities and mood. One way of doing this is to notice the thoughts we have when our mood is uncomfortable, or when we are having trouble doing something we have decided to do. One way of keeping track of these thoughts is to write them on a sheet of paper, with the ones that have a positive

influence on us on one side and those that have a negative influence on us on the other side. A 3 x 5 card works well, with a “+” on one side for the “positive” thoughts, and a “-” on the other side for the “negative” thoughts.

Notice that there aren't a set of “positive thoughts” and a set of “negative thoughts” that apply to everybody. What we call positive thoughts in this book are thoughts that have a positive influence on us, or that are helpful to us. Negative thoughts, as used in this book, are thoughts that have a negative influence on us, or that are harmful to us.

If you find that you are having a lot of negative or harmful thoughts and very few positive or helpful thoughts, it might pay to “prime the pump.” To do this, write down several positive thoughts about yourself, about your plans, and about your personal reality. Then draw upon them throughout the day.

If you notice that you are having the same types of negative thought often throughout your day, and that these thoughts are getting in the way of doing what you want and feeling good, then you can systematically replace them with the more energizing thoughts.

Here is a helpful thought: your mind is your internal reality, your internal world. It is a world that is always having an influence on how you feel and what you do. Therefore, it is important to keep the world healthy. Get rid of the thoughts you have accumulated over the years that are polluting your internal environment. If you can't get rid of them totally, at least put them in a dump where they can't taint the rest of your internal world. Notice when polluting thoughts are foisted upon you, whether by friends, family, coworkers, or the media. You do not have to expose yourself to energy-draining ways of thinking from any source, including television, radio, newspapers, or the World Wide Web. Your mind is your kingdom. No one else has control over it, unless you give them that control.

## Being Your Own Coach

The second level at which one can mold one's internal reality is the level of self-instructions, that is how one talks to, or gives advice to oneself. We sometimes refer to this as "being your own coach."

One of the reasons coaches are helpful is that they can give us guidance as we are trying to learn a skill. A coach can give us an objective perspective. A coach can keep us on task. A coach can give us emotional support when we are feeling discouraged. A coach can help us achieve our highest level of performance.

The basic idea of this level is to provide yourself with the help a coach can give you. This consists of consciously activating a skill that we all have but that we are often not aware of using. This is the skill of giving ourselves directions to increase the chances we will reach our goal. Small children can often be heard giving themselves directions, often by repeating what their parents say to them. For example, a toddler might approach a delicate vase, reach out his hand, and then say, "No, don't touch." Or she might come near the stove and say "No! Hot!" After a while, these self-directions are no longer said aloud. They become internalized. They are used only in the child's internal, or mental, world. But even adults use them again when they are doing something new. For example, when getting to a new place, you might notice yourself saying: "Three blocks past the signal light, then a right, the third door on the left, four stories up, and the third suite on the left." Talking to yourself can actually be helpful at times.

Being your own coach involves deciding what you want to do, and then giving yourself directions so you are more likely to do it. For example, if you are working on achieving a better mood, you might make it a point to check your mood at regular intervals throughout the day. Ask yourself “How have I been feeling?” Then, “What have I been thinking?” If you have been feeling well, make a note (actually write down) the thoughts that have been going through your mind, and keep them ready for a time when you are not feeling good. If you have been feeling down, notice the thoughts that have been related to that feeling, and see if you can replace them with other thoughts, change them, or dispute them. (More on disputing thoughts in the next section.)

Imagine having a particularly difficult morning, in which your mood is dragging you down, and in which you are having trouble doing the things you had planned to get done. At around 10 a.m., during a break, you ask yourself: “How am I feeling?” And your answer is “Lousy! I am procrastinating, feeling resentful, and I don’t think I can’t get over this mood!” Usually, the morning might go on the same way, so that by noon, you are still feeling lousy, haven’t accomplished much, and are feeling even worse, because now you wasted the whole morning.

Now imagine trying to be your own coach. Your answer at 10 a.m. is the same, but now you begin to talk to yourself through a difficult morning:

“OK, I am feeling lousy. And because I am feeling lousy I don’t think I can get started with what I have to do today.”

“What exactly do I need to do? Get the materials from my shelf and put them on my desk. OK, I can do that.” (You do it.)

“I am feeling resentful about having to do this at the last minute. I should have done this a month ago. I am so angry at myself for having procrastinated. I am stewing in my own juices by thinking about how I always do this to myself.”

“Thinking and thinking about this right now is not going to help me now, however. The best thing to do is getting started now. I need to come up with a way to avoid procrastinating so much in the future. But focusing on that right now will just be a way to procrastinate some more. What I need to do now is begin working with these materials.” (You begin.)

Notice that the process does not involve seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, or denying the difficulty you are facing. You have something you need to do. You have procrastinated yourself into a corner. Coaching yourself means starting from where you are, acknowledging the reality of the situation, and trying to talk yourself through it, as you might do for someone you really care about.

When this approach is used skillfully, it can lead to both short-term and long-term benefits. In the case above, you have finally begun something you had to do. In two hours, you will be that much ahead in your project (as opposed to having frittered away another two hours). After the project is done, you could use the same technique to plan a way of changing this pattern or procrastination in the future. For example, you could use the self-coaching method earlier in the process next time. Practicing how to use this skill could gradually lead to lessening the procrastination pattern you have developed. Since it probably took many years to develop, it is probably unreasonable to think you can get rid of it immediately. Here is where a probabilistic, gradual approach comes in. The more you practice this method of coaching yourself, the better you will get at it, and the more patterns you will be able to relearn.

### Beliefs and Consequences

The third level of work in modifying your internal (mental) reality is identifying and questioning your own beliefs. Beliefs can be helpful to you. Beliefs can also be harmful. Beliefs that are helpful and do not hurt you or others are probably worth keeping. Beliefs that are harmful to you or others are probably worth questioning.

Given that many people have beliefs that contradict each other, I have over the years given less importance to whether a belief is true or not, and more importance to the consequence of the belief. This is especially true in regard to beliefs that are evaluative in nature, such as “I am a good \_\_\_\_\_ (parent, friend, worker, athlete, cook, and so on).” In most cases, it would be very hard to come to a unanimous decision about how good someone “really” is. There is a lot of judgment and personal preference involved in such statements. Yet, many people suffer from believing that they are (and will always be) inadequate at something they find important. In most cases, we are relatively good in some areas, and not as good in other areas. One does not have to be perfect to be good.

Albert Ellis, the psychologist who developed a type of therapy called Rational-Emotive Therapy, listed many beliefs that cause people misery in a book called A Guide to Rational Living. He included beliefs such as:

- To be happy one needs to be loved and approved of by virtually everyone
- To consider oneself worthwhile, one should be thoroughly competent and achieving
- It is awful and catastrophic when things are not the way one wants them to be
- One's past history determines one's present behavior; if something strongly affected your life, it will always affect it
- There is invariably a right, precise, and perfect solution to human problems and it is catastrophic if this solution is not found.

Ellis maintained that most of our negative feelings stem from a belief that is triggered by something that happens to us. For example, if someone criticizes something we have done, this might trigger the belief that to be happy we need to be approved of by everyone. It is not the criticism itself that triggers negative feelings in us, but rather the belief that everyone should approve of everything we do, and therefore, that disapproval should make us upset. He suggests that a way to counteract this process is to identify this belief and dispute it. For example, one might remember that some of the most admired people in history had people who disagreed with them. Galileo was disciplined by his own church, Socrates was even sentenced to drink hemlock, Gandhi was shot. The disapproval does not take away from these people's importance in world history. If such personages could be criticized, why should we be immune from disapproval?

Aaron Beck, a psychiatrist who developed Cognitive Therapy, identified several logical errors in the thinking of people who are prone to depression. One of his colleagues, David Burns, lists some of these errors in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*:

- All-or-nothing thinking: Things are either all good or all bad. You are either a success or a failure. You are either a good parent or a bad parent.
- Overgeneralizing: If one bad thing happens, then bad things will always happen.
- Ignoring the positive: If a good thing happens, you ignore it, because, of course, only bad things happen to you.
- Mind reading: You believe that people are always thinking about you, and that what they are thinking about you is always bad.
- Fortune telling: You believe you know yourself well enough to predict the future, and the future will turn out badly.
- Emotional reasoning: You believe that your feelings are an accurate reflection of reality. If you feel something is awful, then it is awful.
- Labeling yourself: You take labels people may have given you when you were little, or just to tease and insult you, as true descriptions of yourself. In fact, you continue labeling yourself negatively, and believing these negative labels are true.

The antidote for these logical errors is to question the evidence for them. Few people, if any, are totally good or totally bad parents. Most of us are really good at some aspects of being a parent, OK at others, and not so good at some. It is perfectly reasonable to try to improve in those areas that are important. To castigate ourselves for not being perfect is at best unnecessary, and clearly unhealthy for ourselves and those around us.

Becoming aware of how our beliefs affect our mood and our ability to do what we want is the first step toward defusing their negative impact. Learning how to logically dispute these beliefs can be very helpful, especially for those beliefs that are deeply ingrained in us, and that are hard to ignore.

Nevertheless, though logic can be a wonderful weapon against harmful beliefs, it has its limits. It has been said that if logic convinces you that life has no meaning, don't give up on life, give up on logic. And this takes us to the fourth level of internal reality management.

## We Are Meaning-Makers

The fourth level of internal reality management involves our personal philosophy of life. Our philosophy of life is the way we see the world, the way we make sense of life, the stance we take toward life. It is the product of all the influences we have had over the years. For some people, these influences are woven into a coherent, conscious philosophy of life. For others, they are less organized, more a matter of habit than of choice.

As long as our lifestyle leads to healthy outcomes for ourselves and those around us, there is little need to question our philosophy of life. But it is important to realize that our philosophy of life is something that is under our control. We have the right to reconsider it, modify it, or make it even stronger.

Our philosophy of life does not have to be “logical.” It does not have to be based on incontrovertible evidence. It can be a matter of personal preference. But it is not irrelevant or inconsequential. Our philosophy of life creates meaning for us, it places our experiences in a personal context, it gives importance to some things and allows us to dismiss others as trivial.

Knowing that we can change our philosophy of life can be very freeing. In many ways, the fact that we can do this is the ultimate freedom. Viktor E. Frankl, author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, talks about how what he calls “attitudinal values” can provide meaning even in the most extreme circumstances. They can provide motivation for taking on difficult and even painful tasks. They can bring us peace in the midst of tragedy.

Being aware of our “attitudinal values” makes it possible to strengthen them or change them. These values include such basic things as the value of human life, of liberty, equality, love for others, compassion, and the value of work and effort. When applied to our own life, they provide us with direction, with reasons for what

we do. They can encourage us to take care of ourselves as we would take care of loved ones. They can encourage us to seek to take care of our emotional health as well as our physical health. They give us permission to look after spiritual as well as financial resources.

These choices are the area in which human beings have the most freedom. We choose how to prioritize these values. Even when we follow the precepts of our culture, religion, or political institutions, we are making the choice to do so. We are choosing to assign meaning to the things we do. We actively engage in making meaning out of our lives. In this sense, the fourth level of internal reality management is the most comprehensive, in that making meaning of our reality can transform it. If we assign our lives and the lives of those around us with great importance, we become motivated to shape them into the best possible form. This internal change can then influence external (physical) reality in massive ways. For example, deciding to love life can help us make our lives more fulfilling. Life doesn't have to be perfect to be loved, but it must be loved to be perfect.

### Closing the Loop: The four levels as a cycle

Once one reaches the fourth level of change, one automatically moves to the first level. Choosing a particular philosophy of life demands that one become aware of the specific thoughts and behavior one engages in. If one's philosophy of life involves considering human life important, then the thoughts and behaviors one will foster become clear: thoughts that demean others need to be replaced with thoughts that respect their unique value; behaviors which harm others must be curtailed, and those which help them must be nurtured. One can more clearly coach oneself to live according to one's values. And logic can be used in the service of one's values.

One's philosophy of life is like the architect's design of our internal reality. The specific thoughts and behaviors are like the bricks and mortar, the beams and windowpanes. The self-coaching is like the blueprints, the subcontracts, the orders one gives to the workers. And the logical analysis of beliefs is like the analysis of weight and balance, of symmetry or planned asymmetry, of light and darkness, of the order of the rooms that will ultimately result in a finished building.

Our internal reality is, in many ways, our ongoing masterpiece. The efforts necessary to keep it healthy and energy-giving are well spent. We create it, shape it, and mold it, with each passing thought. We channel our streams of consciousness toward peacefulness or desperation. We develop a view of life that is coherent or chaotic. And we live in this creation each moment of our lives.

## Chapter 8

### Managing External Reality

As you read this chapter, you will often experience the feeling that you know all this already. And you will be right. The ideas in this book are very commonsensical. All of us know them at some level. Yet it is surprising to me how often the people who come for therapy or to one of our educational groups find them useful. I believe the power of these ideas lies in placing them in a context in which the individual is able to apply them systematically.

The context for this chapter is the idea of shaping or molding your external reality, that is, the world outside of your mind, the physical world, the world that can be observed by others. We will first address the place in which your mind resides, that is, your body. We will then focus on the time and space in which you live. We will proceed to your social world. Finally, I will share with you the concept of a “minimum daily requirement” of rewarding activities.

#### Our Bodies: Our Most Immediate Reality

The part of physical reality that has the most impact on our life is our body. It stands to reason that the state of our body will have a major impact on the state of our mind and of our life in general. Our body can certainly be shaped and molded in a variety of ways. Most of these ways are under our control. Being mindful the state of our bodies is the first step toward managing our physical reality.

To manage our reality optimally, we often face the need for moderation. This will be a common theme in this chapter. The key to maintaining a healthy external reality is to maintain an adequate level of whatever factor you are focusing on: not too much, and not too little.

Sleep. Few of us are aware of the impact that sleep has on our mood and our ability to function. As modern society has developed ways to impinge more and more into the darkness of night, human beings have lost the natural rhythms that used to regulate our sleep. It is now possible to spend all night working, socializing, or entertaining oneself with television, reading, computer games, or the Internet. To regulate one's own sleep cycle, one must do so consciously.

Seven to nine hours of sleep seems to be optimal for most people. To increase the chances that you will achieve this, it is helpful to establish a healthy routine: go to sleep at the same time and get up (not just wake up) at the same time every day. Your body will learn this routine. Some people find that, after a while, they no longer need an alarm. They begin waking up at their regular time without effort.

Eating. Nutrition and weight are the major areas in which to focus. To address this part of our external reality it is important to learn about balanced diets, how to limit intake of fats and sugars, and how to establishing a healthy routine in terms of eating regularly.

Weight control is also important. Making quick major changes in our weight is not desirable. It may not be good for our health, and it usually doesn't result in long-lasting change. Decide on a desirable range for yourself, and monitor your weight periodically to make sure you haven't left that range. If you have, do the two things that are necessary to gain or lose weight: eat and exercise enough to increase or decrease weight.

Exercise. Exercise is helpful in weight control, but it also has many other benefits: It increases cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, agility, flexibility, and even has positive effects on mood. It is one of the best habits to get into. Three half hours is the usually recommended lower level of scheduled exercise per week. Walking is a good alternative. Keeping your body strong enough to do the things you want to do is one of the best ways to manage your reality.

### Time

In teaching how to manage external reality, it is helpful on focusing on each day, each 24-hour period. In a sense, our life is made up of some unknown number of days, and thus, molding the shape of each of these days will result in molding the shape of our lives.

If you are feeling overwhelmed with commitments, the task is to build in some “white space” into your days. “White space” is an image that our family developed during a period in which all of our days seemed to be scheduled, and we had little time to just be together. The image is that of writing on a piece of paper, and using up all the space available, including the margins. We felt we needed to leave some white space somewhere on the page, in order to feel a sense of control over our own lives. The phrase stuck, and we have used it successfully to recognize it when we achieve it, and to ask each other for some when our school and work lives seem to get out of hand.

If you are feeling down or depressed, then the task is to build in some islands of peace and tranquility, or of rewarding activities into your days. People who are depressed often talk about their days as being full of oppressive darkness. An image that is sometimes helpful is that of creating islands of light in the middle of the darkness. These areas of light gradually increase in number, until each day has some periods of time to look forward to. As progress continues, the periods of light become the dominant part of the day, and fewer and fewer hours during the day contain the darkness of depression. To accomplish this, we help the patient develop a list of activities that he or she finds pleasant (or found pleasant in the past). Then we encourage the patient to schedule these activities throughout the day. Obviously, to be practical, most of the activities have to be brief enough to be able to do quickly and unobtrusively. If you do not have money, the activities have to be free or inexpensive. If you are sick or disabled, the activities have to be things that are possible given any physical limitations imposed by the illness or disability.

The conscious shaping of one's day is one of the most practical ways of shaping one's reality, and one's life. Time is one of those resources that, once used, cannot be replaced. Therefore, it is important that it be used mindfully.

### Space

Where we spend our time determines the part of reality that we will allow to have impact on us. Our reality changes radically depending on whether we enter an environment that will be supportive or draining, an environment that will expose us to energizing stimuli or oppressive stimuli. Becoming mindful of where we choose to be will help determine the shape of our external reality.

Places have the power to extract from us certain types of behavior, thought, and feelings. Bars pull for drinking behavior. Libraries encourage reading. Movie theaters elicit different emotions, depending on the movie being shown. By choosing where and how often we expose ourselves to these stimuli, we choose how we will be affected. Advances in technology now permit us to bring environments into our homes: we can sit in front of the television set and see anything from philosophical discussions to graphic violence. We can surf the web and bring into our home almost any type of written information, sound, or image.

In the middle of the twentieth century, it was still difficult for most individuals to obtain information, sounds, or visual images. Television was beginning to be developed. Newspapers, magazines, books, and movies were the most popular of mass media. Finding them was still a task for most people, even in the developed world. As the twenty-first century begins, we are barraged by information. The task for most of us is to manage this overwhelming amount of material. We want to obtain the benefits of having so much information at our fingertips, without allowing the information to dull our senses, or to lead our minds in directions that we have not chosen.

This task will become greater as time goes on. It will become more and more important to guide our children to choose their environments well, including the mass media environments to which they are exposed so easily. They need to learn how to keep their internal environment healthy by consciously choosing the aspects of the external environment that they will expose themselves to. The management of their external reality will greatly influence their internal reality.

## People

The social environment is at least as important as the physical environment. The people with whom we associate help define our selves. They encourage certain behaviors and thoughts, and discourage others. They provide us with support or drain us of resolve. They help to label us by the way they interact with us: they give us a role in our communities. And in doing so, they influence the way we think of others and ourselves.

People shape both our internal and external reality. If we want to have influence on how these realities are shaped, we can do so by managing our social reality. This involves being conscious of how people affect us. It involves mindfully choosing to spend more time with those people who elicit the type of thoughts, actions, and feelings that we want to experience, and reduce the time we spend with those people who reinforce those patterns we want to put aside. For example, when trying to stop smoking, it is helpful to spend time with non-smoking friends, or with smoking friends who have agreed to help you quit.

People and places often interact in predictable ways. Spending time with a friend at the beach may result in a much different experience than spending time with the same friend at a bar. So choosing the right combination of people and places can be the best bet in terms of managing your social reality.

### Is There a “Minimum Daily Requirement” of Rewarding Activities?

Peter M. Lewinsohn, the psychologist who was my dissertation chair at the University of Oregon, developed an interesting method of treating depression. He had patients fill out a questionnaire with hundreds of pleasant activities, and then used the results to prescribe an increase in pleasant activities that were related to the person’s mood. This approach was helpful to many patients suffering from depression, and has been adapted into psychological treatments for depression across the country.

In using this method, it occurred to me that perhaps human beings have a minimum daily requirement of rewarding activities. These activities include pleasant activities, activities in which we get to enjoy a feeling of mastery, and activities that we find particularly meaningful, even if they are not inherently pleasant. When we get less than our minimum daily requirement for a long enough time, our body and our mind begin to malfunction. We develop negative mood states, we have trouble eating and sleeping, we become less sociable, and we actually begin to lose our ability to enjoy things. It is as if the organism begins to slow down its life functions. In severe cases, thoughts of death and suicide actually appear. Rewarding activities may be reinforcing to our life functions, to our very desire to live. In this manner, they shape our overall state of well-being. They shape us and our reality.

If this is the case, then it is important that we shape the nature and frequency of these activities. It is important that we take the time to engage in those activities that we find pleasant and meaningful. It is important that we shape our days so that there is time to spend in those places and with those people who bring a sense of interest and joy into our lives. Our bodies may need this kind of emotional

stimulation just as they need their minimum daily requirement of vitamins and nutrients.

## Epilog

### On the Practice of the Presence of Good

We have now come to the end of the book. Just as when I reach the end of any teaching relationship, a part of me wishes to remember the most important information or advice I know, so that I can share it with my students or patients as they leave my office or classroom for the last time. At an intellectual level, I understand that there are no magic pieces of knowledge that will make the difference in people's lives. Nevertheless, I wish to share with you one more thought, one more metaphor.

The healthy management of reality is itself a metaphor, of course. I have used the image of sculpting reality, which involves molding yourself and your world in a manner that produces health: physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Now I want to add the image of learning to become conscious of this practice, the practice of healthy reality management, in a way that not only serves to prevent unnecessary suffering and reduce the effects of stressful events, but also brings into one's daily life a feeling of wonder, purpose, and inner peace.

Becoming aware of one's internal and external world, and how our thoughts and actions can shape them, is a key aspect of the ideas described in this book. These ideas can be used to achieve many objectives, from very limited ones to very global ones. One can consider these ideas gimmicks, parlor tricks with little substance, to be used as a pastime and discarded easily. Or one can construe them as a general tool for achieving fundamental lifelong goals. This section is intended to illustrate the latter.

In Chapter 2, I talked about choosing a direction, and about the concept of "the good." To put into practice any new skill, there must be a reason, a motivation for putting in the energy and time that integrating something into one's daily life entails. I believe that successful use of the reality management ideas is most likely to occur if these ideas are explicitly used to seek the good.

Human beings have a built-in tendency to look for what is good. At first, they begin by seeking what is good for them, and them alone, in part because they are only aware of their own existence. As they grow and mature, their search for what is good encompasses the welfare of more and more people: their parents, their brother and sisters, their friends, their school, their teams, their social groups (be they cliques, or gangs, or clubs), their churches, businesses, communities, and finally their countries. More and more are going beyond that to encompass humanity as a whole, and some attempt to encompass life, whether plant or animal, the earth, and even the universe.

As the search for the good expands beyond solely what is in one's own interests, the concept of good begins to approximate the search that is the basis for many spiritual quests. The concept of the good then becomes compatible with the many religious traditions that have been and will continue to be important in human life.

The development of religions themselves have had similar stages, beginning with beliefs and practices aimed at securing from deities what was necessary for survival, such as food, water, warmth, or victory over one's enemies. Religious thinking gradually expanded to more interactive relationships with one's god. These interactions have included promises of faithfulness and explicit and often publicly stated intentions to follow particular lifestyle practices, believed to be

good not for self-gain, but good in a more universal sense.

Cynics point out that, even in cases where material benefits are not the motivation for spiritual practices, the belief that these practices will lead to eternal bliss is the real reason for adopting them. Thus, self-gain is still involved even in apparently selfless lifestyles. I admit that this may very well be the case for certain people. But my sense is that, for most individuals for whom spiritually influenced lifestyles are more than just socially sanctioned rituals, the seeking after the good goes beyond self-gain. "The good" begins to develop a reality in these people's lives, and the ways they think and behave begin to be judged in their own minds in terms of whether they are in harmony with their concept of the good.

The good is independent of what specific human beings think is good. It cannot be defined by polls, popular beliefs, or the power of the state. It has an existence beyond time and space: the beliefs of societies throughout the centuries and throughout the vast geographic locations in which they have flourished has shifted in terms of what has been considered good. In some ways, the search for the good parallels the efforts of scientists to discover how nature works, taking precautions not to be biased by one's assumptions or one's society's current beliefs. The efforts of people for whom spiritual and moral values are important are aimed at gradually discovering more aspects of "the good" and their practical implications.

As we enter the twenty-first century, human societies are moving toward agreement on many issues that have not been generally accepted even in the relatively short period of time in which we have maintained records of human history. Most nations now consider evil practices which were until recently widespread and even sanctioned: slavery, genocide, torture, acting on the belief in the inherent inferiority of people because of their ethnicity, gender, or social class, or the practice of barring groups of people from learning how to read and obtain knowledge. Vestiges of these beliefs and practices are still within us, and at times they erupt with catastrophic results. And there are still many practices which are hotly debated by advocates of one or another perspective, and which we are far from agreement on. One wonders whether any of the currently agreed-upon evils will ever be totally eradicated. One wonders whether humanity will eventually come to a general agreement about the many moral dilemmas that face us today. But as we carry on with our day-to-day lives, we continually make choices. Do these choices contribute to the actualization of the good?

In order for the good to be considered worth living for, it must have an effect on one's daily life. Otherwise, it will remain a mere abstraction. For the good to be perceived as real, it must be felt. It must have an abiding presence in one's life. It must become a recognizable companion, whose absence is noticed.

One of the best descriptions of this type of relationship with the good is a little book called The Practice of the Presence of God by a monk from the middle ages named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence's attempts to develop a close personal relationship with his God led him to devise a habit of becoming conscious of what his faith already had taught him, namely, that God was everywhere, and thus, always with him. If God is everywhere, he reasoned, then everything that I

do is done with Him at my side. With Him at my side, everything I do becomes holy. Peeling potatoes is as holy an act as praying in church. There is nothing I do or think which is separate from God. And, because I am never away from God, I am always in His care, never alone, never forgotten. As he practiced this consciousness of the presence of his God, Brother Lawrence learned that, at first, it took effort to retain this mind state. But, as he reminded himself to do so, the consciousness of being with his God, became second nature to him. And he found that this practice resulted in a deep sense of peace and happiness. The book is a compilation of his letters to others who sought to become close to the Christian God. They make fascinating reading.

Other traditions provide similar spiritual practices, such as the practice of mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition, the use of communal prayers at certain times throughout the day, practiced by Islam and many other religions, and the tradition of having conversations with one's God, as in some of the Jewish writings and the practices of Christian mystics. Practices such as these are intended to bring the attention of the faithful back to what they understand to be the ultimate reality, be that understood as a person-like entity, a Supreme Being, such as the Christian God, or a more ethereal, ineffable reality, inherently incomprehensible by the human mind, such as the Tao.

My life experiences have led me to have a deep respect for the large variety of religious experiences that I have encountered. I was brought up in Perú, a country in which Catholicism was, for practical purposes, the only religion. As a child, I was a deeply devout Catholic. I believed that only those who had been baptized Catholic and who had lived according to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church would be saved. At age 10, my parents immigrated to San Francisco. I met many people from a wide variety of traditions in the next 10

years. As I trace back my thinking on religion, I believe that it kept on expanding to encompass more and more possibilities. Interestingly, I believe the core values that attracted me to a religious life in the first place were at work in this metamorphosis. As I came in contact with more and more people who were not Catholic, it became harder and harder to maintain the belief that they would be consigned to hell for all eternity. That thought clashed with my understanding of God as a being of infinite goodness. So, I began to believe that, as long as one was Christian, and tried to lead a good life, one could be saved, by the grace of God. But then I became aware of the multitudes of people who are devout believers, but non-Christian. So, I began to consider the possibility that it was having a religion that was important, and that as long as one was faithful to one's religious beliefs, one could lead a truly good life. Then, as I entered college, I became familiar with people who were openly agnostic or atheists, but whose values appeared to me to be exemplary. And the need to belong to a specific religion or even to an explicitly spiritual lifestyle to lead a good life became questionable.

As it turned out, this gradual stretching of the concept of a good life or of being a good person has been immensely helpful in my role as a professor and a psychologist. My students and my patients come from a wide variety of backgrounds. I am now able to ally myself with those parts of their conception of good that I can perceive, and support and strengthen them. I have come to believe that all human beings have a built in tendency to seek that which is good. Not all of us use this tendency well: none of us abide by it perfectly, some of us ignore it most of the time, and a few actually seem to work against it. But it is never out of our reach. Thus, the potential to ally with it is always present. The question is how to actualize that potential.

I find Brother Lawrence's metaphor particular helpful. For him, it was

important to practice the presence of his God. I feel I cannot teach others to practice the presence of a particular God or other religious concept. I do not know how to pick one among all the ones I have become acquainted with, much less those I have not yet learned about. But I can call forth each person's tendency to seek the good. I can activate my own tendency to do so. And I can purposefully attempt to join the two (or the many) and use the joint energy generated by this conscious effort to increase movement in a healthy direction.

I can point out that the good is not only a concept. It has a reality that can be felt. We know when we have been in the presence of someone who was acting out of good motives, and when we have been devalued or manipulated with malicious intent. Is there any doubt that the former is preferable? We know that we would much rather live in a reality in which others acted out of noble motives, rather than out of meanness or pettiness. We know that our actions can contribute to either of these realities. And one way to increase the probabilities that we will help build a good reality is to practice the presence of good.

Practicing the presence of good begins with setting up cues within both one's internal reality and external reality that help focus our attention on the reality of goodness itself. For example, before or during an interaction with someone, we can ask ourselves how to make this interaction produce goodness for both of us. The internal reminder to focus on how our conversation can lead to a good end will usually translate into external actions (facial expressions, hand gestures, tone of voice) which will actually make the interaction more constructive on our part. Most of the time, the other person will respond to the tone we set: if we are belligerent, we will stimulate belligerence, fear, or disdain; if we are friendly and nonthreatening, most of the time we will be treated similarly. The result will be a greater feeling of working together and a greater likelihood of obtaining more of

what we both want.

If we have a strong religious or spiritual belief, we can certainly use it to make the concept of good more concrete. For a Christian, like Brother Lawrence, the practice of the presence of God can be used just as he described it. Yet even in this case, it is important to add the concept of good to our consciousness. What I am referring to here is the danger of using (usually mistakenly) religious beliefs in harmful ways. There are many examples of religion being used in ways which brought much suffering to communities or individuals: the Salem witch trials, the Inquisition, the many religious wars which have plagued humanity, and the victimization of many communities of the faithful through religious persecution and oppression. At the more individual level, there is the danger of "holier than thou" attitudes that can be used to devalue individuals who do not believe as we do or who do not live as we do. This possible source of pain from what should be a source of goodness reminds me of the following saying: "Don't let your principles get in the way of being a good person." What that statement means to me is that the ethical principles stemming from the good teachings of our religions or our cultures can sometimes be used in evil ways.

It is important, therefore, to appraise the consequences of acting on what appear at first glance to be unassailable principles. If the consequences of our beliefs are likely to produce more harm than good, we need to reconsider our beliefs. We cannot abdicate our responsibility to judge our actions by relying entirely on formulas of behavior (or, more accurately, our particular interpretation of these formulas).

The difficulty with having to use our judgment on a continuous basis is that we know we are not perfect, and thus, our judgement could potentially lead us astray. Having an infallible source of moral certainty is certainly tempting. It can do away with the danger of everyone doing whatever they please, merely by declaring it the good, as they see it.

As far as I can determine, there is more consensus about what is good than we usually realize. Those areas in which there is great controversy are often more salient to us precisely because they are controversial. The vast areas that most people and cultures agree on are taken for granted. If in our practice of the presence of good, we focused only on the areas in which there is consensus, we would be able to deal with the vast majority of the situations we face each day. But it is true that there would be a few areas that would be difficult to address. What about them?

Here we return to the notion that reality is infinite, and we are finite. We as individuals and we as a species have much to learn yet. It is not healthy to expect that we will ever have all the answers. Just as in the areas of physical and social science, technology, and economics, we are constantly learning more and correcting errors from the past, so also in the areas of moral and ethical values we can look forward to progress. I certainly hope that one thousand years from now

we will have progressed in terms of how we treat ourselves and each other and how we treat life in this planet and beyond. As we think back one and two thousand years ago, we can see that, for all of our current imperfections, we have progressed in substantial ways. Similarly, I hope that as our individual lives unfold, ten years from now we will have progressed in terms of how we treat ourselves, our loved ones, and people in general. I believe that progress could benefit from an explicit dedication to the pursuit of goodness in our day-to-day lives. And that pursuit could itself be aided by attending to the reality of goodness, that is by the practice of the presence of good.

In the finite time we each have on earth, it is unlikely that we will reach infinite perfection. However, it is quite possible for us to set our direction so that we steer ever more unerringly toward our guiding star. As we practice the presence of good, the presence of this guiding star will become more real to us. It will become second nature to ask ourselves how to make this day, this task, this encounter with another lead to greater good. As the healthy management of reality becomes integrated with this voyage toward the good, it becomes more useful and more powerful. The search for the good begins to encompass both our internal reality and our external reality. We observe our own thoughts, our internal dialogue, our beliefs, and our philosophy of life, and ask ourselves whether each leads toward greater goodness. We observe our lifestyle, the way we treat others, the way we spend our time, the way we spend our resources, and ask ourselves whether we are helping to add goodness to external reality.

As with any endeavor that is important, this active planning process, this attention to detail eventually pays off. Just as a building owes its beauty and strength to the architect's initial concept and its carefully implemented plans, just as a scientific research program leads to new knowledge by relentlessly pursuing the logical next experiment, just as a financial plan comes to fruition only after years of self-discipline, so also the search for goodness and its implementation via the healthy management of reality can lead to an ever greater sense of influence over one's life.

There must be a sense of purpose in order for one to devote oneself to learning the healthy management of reality. I believe that the desire to add a greater amount of goodness to our world can serve as that sense of purpose. For those of you who choose to follow this path, I wish you wisdom and strength.