



ALTERNATE REALITY

EXCERPTS

Also by Erik Tyler

The Best Advice So Far

TRIED & (Still) TRUE

and coming soon

You Always Have A Choice

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1st Edition
USA

*For The Marshfield Gang (BDHR):
you are a limitless supply of
new 'good old days.'*

**A ship in harbor is safe,
but that is not what ships are built for.**

John A. Shedd

introduction

IT SEEMS TO ME that the potential for happiness or misery exists in about equal proportion in the world. No one is immune from either.

Likewise, I see people experiencing what seem on the surface to be parallel circumstances and yet exhibiting very different reactions to them. One man is whistling merrily as he strolls along a busy sidewalk while another is scowling with hands stuffed into his pockets. The couple to my left is sharing baby photos and laughing warmly with a stranger at a restaurant, while the one to my right is grumbling about the wait. The third-grade teacher in Room A is excited for her students to try out the new math game she created last night, while the teacher in Room B

across the hall is sighing and counting down the minutes until the end of the school day. This family's bonds tighten when their mother passes away, while that family frays and falls apart in the face of their own such loss.

There's an endless body of evidence around us, pointing to the conclusion that life is not merely about *what is*, but about how we choose to tune our attentions.

I know some great photographers. And I know some not-so-great ones. As with most art, I've found that the difference between the great and the not-so-great does not lie in the sophistication of the available equipment. Pictures taken by one photographer with a disposable camera can be breathtaking, while those taken by another with a top-of-the-line setup can fall flat. Rather, the difference lies in the use of fundamental skills. In a creative eye. And in a certain amount of patience.

In life, we are all photographers. We are not handed the images that must fill our pages. We can walk around a situation, setting up the composition of the shot we'd like to capture. We can wait for clouds to shift so that a particular light will fall on a subject. We can choose to take up the frame with more of this and less of that. To zoom in on one thing and not another. And, as with a camera lens, the choices we make will cause some things to become clearer, while others blur into the background.

It's a matter of focus.

As far as I've ever seen (and I know an awful lot of people), there is no reward for choosing to focus on the negative in life. Granted, there are *perceived* gains—pity, attention, martyrdom. But they are a sad bouquet, if you ask me, in comparison with the perennial garden

of wonder, joy, contentment and hope that we plant when we choose to focus on the positive.

As with photography, getting good at it takes work. New techniques must be learned. Skills honed.

The subject or scenery may not change, so you learn to change *your perspective*. It may take hundreds of shots of the same thing at times, spurred on by the unwavering belief that there is something beautiful hiding there.

This book is a collection of real-life stories, essays, observations and challenges designed to pique curiosity and promote just such a change in perspective. You've turned your camera on by opening these pages and making the choice to read. So you're ready. Now stay alert. Study the landscapes you find here. Try out new lenses as you move through your own terrain. Take lots of snapshots. Some may turn out blurry, garish or underwhelming. That's OK. Keep

switching up the angle. Catch the changing light. Be patient. Slowly but surely, it will come—the ability to see what others do not, what you yourself had once missed.

The *artistry*.

chapter 1: gods

HOW DO YOU REACT to being in the middle of a thunder and lightning storm? I mean a *real humdinger*. The temperature drops thirty-some-odd degrees from days prior. The wind and rain lash with fury, downing branches and setting flagpoles to clanging an urgent warning.

But the pinnacle of any storm worth its salt is when it crashes down right over your head.

There are no “Mississippis” left to count between the blinding light and the heart-stopping *BOOOM!*

Prepare yourself as you might for the next clap, the adrenaline spikes again, seizing your lungs for a moment. Tell yourself all you want that you are safe inside your house, but the storm

feels alive. You feel small and vulnerable and irrational. *That lightning just might come through the outlets and get me!*

Often when such a storm strikes, it occurs to me how truly and utterly terrifying they must have seemed to earth's inhabitants centuries or millennia ago, during dark ages when humankind believed that such events were the wrathful vengeance of powerful and capricious gods.

Take a moment to go beyond merely reading that thought. Try your best to consider that perspective—one that for much of the world during much of history was considered as obvious and true as the flesh on their bones.

The fire sizzling around you is a personal punishment on your town.

Your neighbors.

On you.

The wind is tearing at your house, seeking you out. It knows where you are.

The deafening crash is the incomprehensible voice of deity, naming your sins for the world to know. How many people will suffer today because of the displeasure you have caused? But do you even know what it is you have done to incite this curse?

Silly folks, right? I mean, c'mon. How could they have been so utterly ridiculous?

Ah well, what did they know...

But I'm inclined to think that those terrified souls weren't all that different from us.

It seems to me that each generation of humans fancies itself to be terribly enlightened, while judging those who came before to have been simpletons all. But consider even recent history.

Slavery? Segregation? Of course!

Man on the moon? Ridiculous!

Sending and receiving information of any sort one desires across the world in one second, carried on invisible streams of 1s and 0s?

Science fiction!

Forget history. Look at your own life span. How many things did you once believe firmly—things at which you now can only laugh or shake your head in chagrin? Never mind Santa and the Tooth Fairy. I'm talking about real-life stuff that matters, and at ages where one might have known better, only to declare a decade or so later, "What on earth was I thinking?"

Philosophy. Religion. Politics. Relationships. Priorities.

Consider. If we, as a race on the whole and as individuals, have been wrong so many countless times before—however *right* we may have believed ourselves to be at the time—isn't it only reasonable to assume that at least *some* of

what we firmly believe today is also less than 100% accurate?

And if this is true, could we not embrace humility and extend a little more patience and open-mindedness to others, even when their ideas may seem dead wrong to us at the moment?

From electricity to education reform, medical care to moon landings, any real progress that's been made throughout history has been made by those willing to shift their perspective as new information becomes available. So I've never quite understood why so many of us count it as some sort of a personal failure to change our mind, rather than seeing it as the strength and natural marker of personal progress that it really is.

I came across this quote recently, and it seems to me to hold a good dose of wisdom:

**“Real knowledge is to know the extent of
one’s own ignorance.”**

—Confucius

I am not a relativist. Logic, so far as I understand it, would seem to say that all things cannot be equally and simultaneously true. I only implore each of us to question whether we ought to be so bold as to declare ourselves the final authority.

QUESTIONS

for Discussion & Self-Reflection:

1. Does the idea of changing your mind about “big things” seem more like a personal failure or a welcome, natural part of personal progress?
2. When someone else shares a perspective that does not match your own, which of the following best describes your response:
 - I welcome different perspectives and consider them carefully.
 - I silently tolerate different perspectives, but they rarely change what I already think.

- I feel an urge to debate with others who have different perspectives or to otherwise convince them that my own perspective is correct.

3. How do you respond to this quote from the chapter? *“If we, as a race on the whole and as individuals, have been wrong so many countless times before—however right we may have believed ourselves to be at the time— isn’t it only reasonable to assume that at least some of what we firmly believe today is also less than 100% accurate?”*

4. So when *was* the last time you changed your mind about something important? What was it? What contributed to changing your mind on that issue?

chapter 2: towel

MANY YEARS AGO, I made a whirlwind trip to pick up my friend Chad from Penn State after his last final of the semester. By “whirlwind,” I mean eight hours up on a Thursday, arriving at midnight, and hitting the road again Friday by 3:00 PM to head back. I’m no college kid anymore, but I still love a good road trip. Travel of any kind reminds me how much is going on in the world beyond my own backyard. Every time I strike out somewhere, I really do think to myself, “I could just pick up and travel—or even move—*any time I want!*” That’s not at all to say that I’m looking to move or that I’m unhappy or that I’ve got the wanderlust. New England is very much home to me, and I love my life. Travel

simply *reminds* me of the many choices and options I have open to me at all times. And that somehow helps me stay open to the possibilities right where I am.

Back to that erstwhile road trip to Pennsylvania. I had eight hours to myself on the way there.

My iPod was loaded up with all kinds of retro music I hadn't listened to in years. But I've also always been a big proponent of the value of cultivating silence in our lives; and I wound up spending more time with the music off than on, enjoying the open road and the space to let thoughts roam. Or settle.

However, I don't want to talk about the trip *there* just now. I want to talk about the trip *back*.

Often when people travel together, they listen to the radio or podcasts or music much of the time. Or they take turns driving while the others try to catch as much of a nap as possible between

being jostled by lane shifts and using a wadded-up shirt as a pillow. This was not the case with Chad and me. We talked for nearly the entire eight hours. I'm not kidding. And by "talked," I don't mean playing punch-buggy or the license plate game. Sure, we joked around some and shared new music we'd discovered since last we'd seen one another; but a good seven hours of the eight were spent in real conversation about life. Stuff that matters.

At one point, we found ourselves talking about the meaning of *normal*. It seemed to us that we all label others as "not normal" in many ways every day:

He's an odd duck.

She's too thin.

He's not very motivated.

She's overly emotional.

Sometimes we say it aloud. Much of the time, it remains an ongoing internal monologue.

Chad and I came to the conclusion that, most often, what we *really mean* when we say or think these things is “This person is not like *me*.” That is, we are setting *ourselves* as the standard for what is to be considered normal.

By way of example, let’s talk about a towel.

Earlier that morning, before leaving Penn State, I was getting ready to take a shower at Chad’s apartment. In the interest of packing light, I hadn’t brought a towel of my own, so I asked if I could borrow one. Chad pointed to two towels, one yellow and one green, hanging over one another on the top corner of a door. “I’ve been using those, and with finals and everything, I can’t remember the last time I actually washed them. But you’re welcome to use one.” He smirked.

Some of you just made scrunchy face. But why?

Chad's roommate, also a friend of mine, stepped in and offered one of his own towels. "Here," he said, "use mine. I've only used it a couple of times."

You just made scrunchy face again.

The truth is, the towel I wound up using was dry. Fine. It did the job. It wasn't even stinky. So why the scrunchy face? "Because," you protest, "that's... just... *gross!*" But don't you *really* mean that *you yourself* would not do it, and therefore it "isn't normal"? (And if you *didn't* make scrunchy face, is it not because you yourself see nothing wrong with reusing a towel several times?)

Years ago, I visited San Luis, Mexico. A group of us had gone to bring shoes to a village where dwellings were constructed from junkyard scraps: tires, wire, cardboard. Our

team was instructed not to drink the water, because of the high bacteria content. There were no trees anywhere to be seen, no place that might offer any shade from the relentless sun.

For the moment, imagine that *you* live there. You own no shoes. You live in one of these single-room, makeshift hovels with its many views to the stark outside, where seams between the garbage that constructs the walls do not quite meet. Six other members of your extended family also live in this dwelling, all of you sleeping on the dirt floor at night.

From within that scene, reconsider the towels offered to me at Chad's college apartment.

In San Luis, do these towels seem *normal*? Absolutely not. But is it for the same reason that elicited your scrunchy face (and mine) earlier? Absolutely not.

In San Luis, one might wonder, "What do you *do* with it?" And if you were to explain that

you use it to quickly dry water off your body after taking a hot shower in clean, drinkable water, the people of San Luis would be no more enlightened. *Shower? Hot water? And you do this ritual every day—sometimes more than once?*

How odd. How “not normal” it all would seem.

By the standards of most of the world, a towel is a luxury. More like magic. And if you do happen to own one, you certainly aren’t washing it after every use. Or even after every *week* of use.

Of course, this pertains to more than towels. It’s about making value judgments on anyone for any of a host of reasons.

You see, for the most part, the best we can say without being egocentric is, “That person is *different* from me. They are doing this differently from how I would do it, thinking

about it differently from how I think about it.”
No worse. No better. Just different.

I remember now what led us to this discussion as Chad and I drove together that day. He had asked whether I thought that, deep down, everyone really *wanted* to do the right thing. He was thinking specifically about a young man he had counseled in a prison. I suggested that *the right thing* can only mean *the right thing as I define “right.”* For instance, how can someone really want, deep down, to work a nine-to-five job and earn “an honest living” when they’ve only ever known selling pills on the street? When that is what his father sent him out to do as far back as junior high school, the very activity that made his father *proud* of him when he’d sell them all and bring home the money he’d collected? “A real job” would seem much like a towel showing up in San Luis. “Don’t you want this towel? How could you *not* want this

towel? I know that deep down, you must *really* want this towel!”

But all they can think is... *what the heck is a towel?*

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we should have no standards in life, or that we should be moral relativists, or that we should not try to help people move to places of greater health, safety and wellbeing. I'm simply saying that I think we would all benefit from continually reminding ourselves that there are countless *real* and *valid* perspectives in the world other than our own.

QUESTIONS

for Discussion & Self-Reflection:

1. When you read about the towels offered by my friends, were you a scrunchy-face-maker? If so, would you have used the towel in the end, or would you have found some other way to dry yourself off? What would your internal dialogue have sounded like?
2. How do you feel about the suggestion that each of us defines “normal” as whatever aligns with our own way of thinking or doing things?
3. Have you ever been in a situation where your own way of thinking or acting was

not the norm for the majority of those around you? What were the circumstances? How did you respond to being in that setting? Did you gain any new perspectives from it?

chapter 3: happy

SOME YEARS BACK, when one of the kids I used to mentor was in college, he texted me:

I need to write a paper about the happiest person I know. Do you mind if I interview you?

I was glad to help him and, of course, honored that I'd been his choice for the interview.

I found some of the questions particularly interesting. I almost felt bad for the young man, Tristan, who would need to write a case study following the interview. Why did I feel bad? Well, a lot of my answers were anomalous, and

that can make writing a paper somewhat more of a challenge.

One of the first questions was this:

“Were you surprised when this student asked to interview you as ‘the happiest person he knows’?”

My short reply: “Honored, but not surprised, no.” As I look around at the people I interact with each day, I feel confident in saying that I am happier than most, and that I maintain that happiness more consistently than most.

Here are a few of the other questions from Tristan’s interview:

“Do you feel that some factor or factors from your upbringing contributed to your level of happiness today?”

Honestly, my answer was no. I had happy times, vacations and such; but I didn't have a happy upbringing on the whole. Not by a long shot.

“Were there any people in your early life whom you consider to have been role models of what happiness looks like?”

Again here, my answer was no. In fact, I recall the day this realization hit me. It was my freshman year in college. I was 18 years old, and I couldn't think of even a single person in my life who was truly happy or peaceful, or who had what I'd call “joy.”

“Would you say that you are consistently happy?”

My reply: “No one is happy all the time. *No one*. I would say that I maintain happiness 90% of the time or better, though.” And even during the other 10%, it’s not a roller coaster that dips into “the depths of despair” (as Anne Shirley might have put it).

“Are there any times that you feel more or less happy than others (e.g., seasons, times of the week, etc.)?”

Me: “No. My happiness is not dependent on time of day, day of the week, or season. Fatigue and weather might have some small effect. But in general, it comes down to how well I’m focusing on the basics of happiness at any given time.”

And that got me thinking.

If I am serving as the case in point, then happiness does not hinge on having had an easy

childhood. Nor does it seem to be contingent upon circumstance or time.

So... *what* then? What are the “basics of happiness”?



Some years back, Chad (whom I mentioned in the previous chapter) was all jazzed up about a book he'd started reading. He wanted me to read it as well, so that we could talk about it together. Now I didn't really have any personal interest in the book, to be honest; but I *did* have an interest in Chad as my friend. So I went ahead and bought the book, in order to read along and to be able to discuss it with him.

The book was about happiness. Here's one snippet from the book, to give you an idea of the content:

“The philosopher and mathematician René Descartes concluded that our experience is the only thing about which we may be completely sure and that everything else we think we know is merely an inference from that. And yet, we have seen that when we say with moderate precision what we mean by words such as happiness, we still can’t be sure that two people who claim to be happy are having the same experience, or that we are having an experience of happiness at all.”

Did you get all that?

Elsewhere, the book explored other such fascinating ground as the differences between emotional happiness, moral happiness and judgmental happiness. And it included graphs

analyzing things like “experience-stretching hypotheses.”

Don’t you feel happier? Or at least like you’re on the road to understanding happiness more clearly?

No? Well, rest assured, I’m right there with you.

Now, I *did* find the book interesting from a certain perspective. I agreed with some of it (even the part I quoted above, once I could sort out what the author was getting at). But I also found myself laughing quite a bit as I considered the absurdity of how complex something like “happiness” could be made to seem. Most of all, I found myself wondering what the real-world application might be for people who...

...well, people who *just want to be happy*.

Should it be this difficult to absorb and apply? I mean, maybe this explains why more people aren't happier: it's just too darned *complicated*.

Before we continue, let me interject a brief side note here for your amusement. I finished the book, head swimming, and called Chad to let him know, certain that he'd want to enthusiastically jump in and start discussing the heck out of it. His response: "*Pssht*. That book is dead to me. I hated it. Stopped reading by chapter three."

Um... thanks for telling me, buddy.



I recall visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and standing in front of an enormous canvas. It had been painted entirely white and appeared to have some sort of hay or grass mixed in with the paint here and there. Many

well-dressed and erudite-looking people were gathered around it, gazing contemplatively. Some even jotted notes in fancy leather-bound journals. All of this was accompanied by much slow and sagacious nodding of heads and rubbing of chins. No one other than me seemed to think the price in excess of \$50,000 seemed out of place.

Now you may think me uncultured, uncouth or even outright barbarous for what I'm about to say here; but all I could think of was Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Emperor's New Clothes." In fact, it is only due to elemental good breeding that I kept from snort-laughing right there in the echoing silence of the museum. Don't get me wrong: I'm all for art and self-expression and subjective value and whatnot. But don't cover a giant canvas in grass-paint and expect me to just accept that it has a value of \$50,000—no matter *how* many

other people have swallowed the Kool-Aid. *It's just not that complicated.*



A few years before the museum visit, a musician-friend of mine invited me to see two jazz greats play at Carnegie Hall. And when I say “greats,” I mean *greats*: a pianist and a trumpet player of renown. But despite the dazzling experience of being in the iconic venue and the undeniable talent of these two musicians, there just was no rhyme or reason to what they were playing that night (nor rhythm, for that matter). Despite this, after each “number,” the crowd applauded, almost robotically—like Pavlov’s dogs drooling at the bell.

Somewhere during the second half, the duo ventured from the mind-numbing abstraction

into a few broken bars of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” The crowd went *wild*. I mean, you’d have thought the performers had shot large bills out of cannons into the audience, so uproarious was their response... to the *only* thing close to a recognizable melody in the set.

Afterward, my friend and his companions were discussing the brilliance of it all over some high-priced microbrew or other. I listened for a while, hoping to avoid being put on the spot. But inevitably, my friend turned to me: “And what did *you* think?”

I told him the truth. “It was crap. There was no musicality to it whatsoever, and they both knew it.”

Well, let me tell you—the conversation quickly shifted to about an hour of exclaiming how ignorant I was, what a country bumpkin,

how I just didn't get the complexity of the rhythmical layers and such.

The next day, *The New York Times* critics reviewed the concert. They stated outright that the two artists had “pulled one over on the audience” and calling it “some sort of practical joke from two greats who were clearly bored in their careers after having done it all, and who merely wanted to see just how much they could get away with on account of their good names.”

Like that “fine art” painting and that Carnegie concert, I think modern motivational culture has tried to sell us the Emperor's new clothes with regard to happiness, adding more and more explanations and jargon and seminars and presentations about how to achieve it. But all the while, happiness hasn't changed. It hasn't gotten more complex or complicated. *We* may have allowed ourselves or our lives to become

more complicated, but I think happiness is still as simple as it ever was.



Toward the end of our interview, Tristan asked, “To what do you attribute your level of happiness?” And that got to the heart of it. It wasn’t determined by my past. It wasn’t dependent on role models or other people. It wasn’t circumstantial. It wasn’t seasonal. No, what I told Tristan was just about as basic as it gets.

“It all comes down to choice. And you *always* have a choice.”

In each circumstance, I remind myself of this simple fact.

I *always* have a choice.

I am not a victim.

Life isn't happening to me. I get to be an active participant in my own life.

I may not choose everything that happens in life, but I always get the choice of what I will do *next*.

And I believe that.

I practice it. (And practice and practice...)

In fact, this became the entire theme of my first book, [*The Best Advice So Far*](#). I'm careful to say at the very beginning of that book that I didn't invent any of the advice to be found within its pages. Not really. If something is true, then it's *always* been true: "Truth *just is*. The best any of us can do is to discover it, to better understand it, and to explain it in such a way that others can make some sense of it with us."

I don't try to invent any slick new jargon or catchphrases to use in my books, in order to up the marketability. I don't include any charts or graphs or scientific studies. My intention is that

whatever I write and share with others be simple, that it be about the *basics* of happiness, things like:

“You *always* have a choice.”

“Misery is a choice.”

“You have to start where you are, not where you wish you were.”

“Treat people as people, not as problems.”

“Kindness still works.”



A writer-friend, Sean, and I got into a short exchange in the comments section of a blog post I'd written some years back:

Sean: “Some lessons just need to be learned again and again, practiced day after day; they never become rote.”

Me: “Yes, happiness or success in any area isn’t a state at which one arrives. It’s about consistent practice of the little things.”

Nothing fancy. Nothing complicated.

See, I don’t think we need continually more information in order to find happiness. We just need to be intentional and consistent in practicing the basics.

In fact, we don’t need to *find it at all*.

Happiness isn’t hiding from us.

We just need to choose it.

And then choose it again.

And again...

QUESTIONS

for Discussion & Self-Reflection:

1. Do you think those who know you best would identify you as one of the happiest people they know?
2. How consistent is your happiness level?
No matter your answer, why do you think that is the case?
3. Do you believe that happiness is mostly determined by external factors or by internal factors? What has led you to this current belief?
4. What is your response to the following statement from the chapter? *“I may not*

*choose everything that happens in life,
but I always get the choice of what I
will do next.”*

chapter 4: creativity

YOU ARE CREATING ALL THE TIME.

That's a strong statement. And I know that some of my more philosophical friends will argue from the outset, based on the laws of thermodynamics and such, that nothing is ever really "created."

On one level, I agree.

For instance, I'm aware that there are a limited number of sounds and letters in any given language with which every poet or writer or speaker creates words, just as there are only so many notes from which all songwriters and composers may choose.

Likewise, if we were to talk about the ability to “create” new life (i.e., procreation), I realize that babies are made out of “us”...

who are in turn made out of meats and grains...

which were in turn made out of dirt...

which was made up of rock and trace chemicals...

which are composed of base elements.

But let's not ruin the moment (or potentially miss a life-changing perspective) with Spock-like ponderings. Instead, for the time being, let's consider that to *create* is essentially make *something* out of *nothing*.

Before my birth, this book did not exist. It *could not* have existed. It was nothing at all. *Today*, however, it *does* exist as a unique collection of experiences that no one else in the history of the world has ever experienced. It is thoughts and reflections and connections put into a formation of words that has never before occurred, and which not another person—alive or dead or who will ever walk the earth after me—could have written. That is, this book is a creation that is unique to *me alone*.

When a song finds its way out of me, it too is born out of nothing. Unlike my physical body, however, a song is *not* made of dirt and trace chemicals and elements. It's something—*other*. And it couldn't have existed without *my* existence and experiences, without my act of will to bring it into being. It was nothing, which became a vapor of an idea, which took form in words and sounds. More sounds were

added, and in the end, there is this *thing*—a song—that is introduced to the world of reality.

What's more, these new creations of mine have power—the power to move people or to tell a story or to cause someone to want to dance. Or perhaps to even change the course of someone's life.

For you, maybe one of your unique creations is a garden. Before *you*, it was just an unremarkable plot of land. Dirt. Perhaps some grass or weeds and stones. And now it is a labor of love, a true work of art that no one has ever seen before and which, by its nature, will never be able to be recreated. Before you, there was no garden. There could not have been. *And then there was.*

You made it so.

Perhaps you've dubbed yourself “uncreative,” and so you're just not really connecting on a personal level with all of this. Let me present

you with a challenge that may change your perspective.

Tomorrow, wherever you go throughout your day—work, home, the gym, the grocery store, anywhere—try greeting each person you encounter exactly as follows:

1. Make wide eyes and smirk as if you know something they don't.
2. Say “Seems like Humpty Dumpty’s back up on that wall, eh?”
3. Then laugh a little laugh as if they should get what you mean.

Alas, I realize that most of you—particularly if you’ve already deemed yourself lacking in creativity—will not actually take me up on this

challenge. It's a pity, really, because you'd get a humdinger of an object lesson out of it. But for the sake of continuing with my point, I invite you to at least *imagine* that you've taken my challenge.

What do you suppose would happen if you greeted people this way? How would your boss react? Your coworkers? Your spouse? Your friends? The drive-through server at the coffee place?

"I'd get fired!" you might protest.

"They'd call the men in the white coats and have me committed."

"They'd stare and wonder when I was going to finish the joke."

The fact is that it really doesn't *matter* exactly what people would do or say. What's important is that you would most certainly elicit a *different* reaction from the one you get now and every other day, when sticking to your

routine of standard pleasantries and predictable responses.

OK, but what does that prove about creativity? Well, the words are nothing special. Everyone has heard of Humpty Dumpty and his wall, and you didn't write the poem. But the combination of *your* words and actions has the power to produce absolutely unique results using these elements. Before the Humpty-Dumpty version of you decided to make that face and say those words and laugh that laugh, there was nothing to indicate that anyone should be calling a psychiatrist, for instance, while afterward—there *was*.

You made it so.

What I'm getting at with this silly little example is that *your* words, *your* actions, *your* tone of voice, *your* facial expressions (or *your* indifference, *your* anger, *your* sarcasm)—

they are all fully within the scope of your choice. And with them you create moments, both in your own life and in the lives of others.

How about a realistic example?

Let's say that you bump into a teen you know and his mom says, "Jared got his license yesterday." In that moment, you have a canvas on which you will create an experience like none other in the history of humanity—one made up of you, that particular parent, that particular boy, that particular milestone and a special ingredient called *right now*. What will you create with it?

You could shrug, snort derisively and say, "Yeah, give it ten years and see how excited you are about it *then*." In so doing, your words and actions will have created a moment. There was excitement and hope and the joy of youth before you began creating. And then there wasn't.

You made it so.

Or you could smile broadly, remember the day you got your own license, and exclaim with enthusiasm, “Oh, wow! That’s awesome! Can I see it? You are absolutely gonna *love* the freedom that comes with driving. I still do! OK, so, tell me all about your first solo drive...” And with your *choice* of words and actions, you will have created a moment. You will have affirmed a young man and added excitement to his own, helping to make the most of his accomplishment. A minute before you started creating, that affirmation and expectation that we never need to outgrow the things we love as we grow older—*wasn’t anything at all*. And then it was.

You made it so.

Are you in a rut? I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but it’s of your own making. With a series of choices, you have created it and are deciding to keep walking in it. But within that truth lies

the power to break *out of* the very same rut. For in making *new choices*, you can create *new outcomes*.

Every time you choose to avoid eye contact with those around you, or to disregard them, or to be a complainer, or to do exactly what you did yesterday, it is changing you and those around you. It is creating a dismal mood, a feeling of disconnection, an environment of tension or cloying numbness or merely the idea that the status quo is all there is to life.

Every smile you choose to don, every kind word you choose to utter, every helping hand you choose to extend is also changing you and those around you. It is creating joy, expectation, fun, an environment of invitation and positivity and possibility.

I trust I've made a compelling argument: that creating goes far beyond writing a book, composing a symphony or cultivating a garden.

You are an agent of choice. And that means that *you* are a creative force by very nature.

So what will your next creation be?

QUESTIONS

for Discussion & Self-Reflection:

1. In general, general and before reading this chapter, had you considered yourself to be a creative person? What specific things—whether tangible or intangible—do you enjoy creating? How else do you tend to express your creativity?
2. How much of a role, if any, do you feel that skill or expertise has in the enjoyment of what is created, both by the creator and by others?
3. Considering the idea that your everyday words, actions and attitudes hold the power of creating alternate

realities in your life and in the lives of others (for good or ill), does this initially strike you as more inspiring or intimidating?

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