

Essence of Proactive Life Series

Charting the Life of Your Choice

Herbert A. Shepard

**Management of Change
and Life and Career Planning
Practical Essays Edited by**

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Charting the Life of Your Choice

This first essay helps readers build a life worth living and addresses such profound questions as "Who am I?" and "Who should I be?"

It invites us to a candid self-examination which results in discovering those moments when we rejoice in life and find sources of fulfillment. The essay covers the three prerequisites for a deep gratification in life. When these prerequisites are in harmony we rejoice.

“Charting the Life of Your Choice” establishes a basis for living a meaningful life. It develops the awareness that we are responsible for the quality of our lives and that living fully means investing thoroughly in the creation of our experience. This investment involves risk and joy, two

subjects thoroughly discussed in the last section of the essay.

The second essay titled “**Moving Forward in Your Organization and Community**” is an invaluable guide for leaders, professionals and all change makers. Available at www.herbertshepard.org, it offers eight principles based on the author's experience in working with decision-makers and coaching change agents. These principles range from avoiding self-sacrifice to building experiments for success. Other topics explored include retaining optimism, capturing the moment and recommending the ingredients for successful innovation.

Herbert Shepard: Charting the Life of Your Choice

About the Author

Herbert Allen Shepard

HERB SHEPARD was a pioneering thinker in the Organization Development movement, an engaging teacher and mentor of exceptional depth, scope and humility with a gift for recognizing and nurturing the potential of others. His unselfishness, utter sincerity, compassion and unwavering commitment touched lives, forged lasting friendships and helped shape the careers of a generation of leaders and social scientists. He held faculty posts at several universities including M.I.T., where he received his doctorate in Industrial Economics. He founded and directed the first doctoral program in Organization Development at Case Western; developed a residency in administrative psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine, and was also President of The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.

Herb conducted the first large-scale experiments in Organization Development, while at Esso in the late fifties, and served as principal consultant to TRW Systems in its pioneering work in the application of behavioral science to organizations and teams. He has published widely in this field and was chairman of the Douglas Memorial Award Committee of the Journal of

Applied Behavioral Science. His research and pragmatic work made a significant contribution to our understanding of human behavior and social systems from dyads (doctor-patient or consultant-client) to organizations (synergy, alternative dispute resolution, structure, building consensus and caring about the powerless). It opened the way for further developments in the psychology of teams, leadership and interpersonal compatibility; cognitive behavior therapy, social cognitive theory (educational psychology); choice theory; principled negotiation, positive psychology and organization development.

In management consulting, Herb's clients included Bell-Northern Research, Syncrude, Esso, TRW, Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, Union Carbide, USAID and most of the departments of the federal governments of the U.S.A. and Canada.

Herb advised clients of The Professional Development Institute and led executive seminars and workshops including “Managing in Turbulent Environment”, since 1975. He accepted the honorary title of President Emeritus for the Professional Development Institute which he held from 1977 till his death August 2, 1985. With his death, we have lost not only a mentor, but a warm person whose friendship, authenticity and values have been precious to us and are felt all the more deeply now.

Alain Paul Martin

First Essay

Charting the Life of Your Choice

Life planning is planning life-worth-living. The choices you make today create your future, as well as your here-and-now. And you have some freedom of choice, today and tomorrow as well. We are only slowly emerging from an era of deterministic science when it was assumed that today's choices are completely the product of yesterday's choices, and the very notion of choice a quaint illusion. The psychologists assured us that life after the age of five was merely an unfolding of a personality set in early childhood. And our culture demands of each of us so many promises and contracts that most of us seem to have signed away our future choices. We seal our fates.

Many people see their futures as fated in another way. They think of the future as something that happens to them. When they are asked to draw a line representing the way they think about their total lives - from the beginning in the past to the end in the future - they can portray certain aspects of their past but are unable to map the future. The past can be reinterpreted, but it cannot be managed. Only the future is manageable, but

these people have great difficulty in thinking about it that way. Some people plan their careers, and invest their energies in bringing about certain career achievements. Unfortunately, when people plan only their careers, the other aspects of their lives are unanticipated and sometimes unhappy consequences of their career choices. When these people draw their life lines, they draw only career lines.

Life planning is a self-confrontation. It is the induction of an identity crisis and a destination crisis for yourself. It requires the re-examination of basic values and assumptions. Many of us are enslaved to beliefs and fears that turn us into instruments used for some purpose outside ourselves. One therapist greets new patients with the question: "Why haven't you committed suicide?" The answers often lie outside the person and his joy in life, or lack of it: responsibilities to family, God and country,

or even to the insurance company. And if a married couple is asked: "Why haven't you divorced?", the answers are often outside their joy in each other, or lack of it: family responsibilities or social embarrassment.

Yet the gestalt prayer counsels:

*"I am not in this world
to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world
to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I
And if by chance we find each other*

It's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped."

Fritz Perls

Who am I and who are you?

The first answers that come to mind are usually "marketing" answers. They describe what makes you or me a respectable commodity: title, profession, member-ships, loyalties, skills, hobbies, roles as parent, spouse or manager. The answers that come later take us beyond the boundaries of such socially prescribed selves, and precipitate an identity crisis.

Who **should** you be? Our culture provides us with many reasons for being that lie outside ourselves, with many images of what we should be. The self-confrontation of life planning involves the unraveling of deeply, often automatically held assumptions about shoulds and oughts, goods and bads. A dictator concerned only with maintenance of his own power would value such qualities in the citizenry as loyalty, respect for authority, law and order, unselfishness, humility and competitive-ness. When you perform well, whom are you trying to please? When you are winning, is it ever at the cost of

something more important? Is having a fine reputation at all like being trapped? Is being independent ever lonely? Is the greatest risk not risking?

On the subject of what one ought to be, Khalil Gibran had this story to tell:

*"It was in the garden of a madhouse that I met a youth
with a face pale and lovely and full of wonder.
And I sat beside him upon the bench,
and I said, 'Why are you here?'
And he looked at me in astonishment, and he said,
'It is an unseemly question, yet I will answer you.
My father would make of me a reproduction of himself;
so also would my uncle. My mother would have me the
image of her illustrious father. My sister would hold up
her seafaring husband as the perfect example
for me to follow.
My brother thinks I should be like him, a fine athlete.
'And my teachers also, the doctor of philosophy,
and the music master, and the logician, they too were
determined, and each would have me but a reflection
of his own face in a mirror.
'Therefore I came to this place. I find it more sane here.
At least I can be myself.'
Then of a sudden he turned to me and he said,
'But tell me, were you also driven to this place
by education and good counsel?'
And I answered, 'No, I am a visitor.'
And he said, 'Oh, you are one of those who live
in the madhouse on the other side of the wall.'"¹*

The location of the madhouse is less important than whether either the inmate or the visitor has learned to make his own life worth celebrating. What were those moments when you rejoiced in life, when you were fully alive, and living fully, and experiencing fulfillment? You're likely to find that many of them were quite "simple", and had little to do with the way

you spend most of your time. If you can identify the conditions under which your life is fulfilling, you can set about creating those conditions.

Easier said than done. A basic fact of life - that it is to be lived fully - is difficult to grasp. Lyndon Johnson's widow, reflecting on their last years together, commented:

*"To be close to death gives you a new awareness of the preciousness of life, and the extreme tenuousness of it. You must live every day to the fullest, as though you had a short supply - because you do. I said that glibly for years, but I didn't know how intensely one should live."*²

Some people can apprehend the preciousness of life by writing their own obituaries, focusing on activities and feelings, and writing the obituary twice: once as an extrapolation of present life style, and again as one would wish it to be. But many others find this rather direct way of facing the question, "What shall I do with the time I have left?" too threatening to be taken seriously.

What are the conditions under which it is possible to rejoice in life? Perhaps one can learn from infants. An infant rejoices when it can affect its environment in ways that please it. It rejoices in loving and playful interaction with other beings. And it rejoices in the functioning of its own body. These three sources of fulfillment, translated into adult words, can be called autonomy, resonance and tone.

As used here, autonomy refers to your ability to create a world worth living in for yourself. Typically, the autonomous person has many skills useful to himself and society, continually develops his physical, emotional and intellectual capacities, can relate in many ways to others, is proactive and foresighted, imaginative and realistic, takes responsibility for his choices and their consequences, is open to new experience and learns from it. But the essence of autonomy is not what one's resources are, but how they are used, the purpose they serve: namely, the creation and maintenance of a world worth living in. Thus autonomy differs from related terms like power, skill, achievement, independence or wealth, which may become ends in themselves, or may be used to create a world for oneself that is not worth living in. The characteristics of such a world and of autonomy are not the same for every person. Robert Frost described the meaning of autonomy in the poet's world:

*“The reason artists show so little interest
In public freedom is because the freedom
They've come to feel the need of is a kind
No one can give them - they can scarce attain –
The freedom of their own material;
So, never at a loss in simile,
They can command the exact affinity
Of anything they are confronted with.
This perfect moment of un-bafflement,
When no man's name and no noun's adjective.*

*But summons out of nowhere like a jinni.
We know not what we owe this moment to.
It may be wine, but much more likely love
Possibly just well-being in the body,
Or respite from the thought of rivalry.
It's what my father must mean by departure,
Freedom to flash off into wild connections.
Once having known it nothing else will do.
Our days all pass awaiting its return.”³*

The second source of fulfillment is resonance, a relationship with other beings which is empathic, responsive, mutually stimulating and expansive for all those involved. The term can describe a person's relationship with other environments as well. Resonance differs from the common meaning of love, which is usually understood to be an exchange relationship rather than a resonance relationship. Freya Stark describes the essence of resonance in following passage:

*“For it must be remembered that silence
can be dead or living,
and the two kinds must be distinguished.
And perhaps the Poles of Being are in the distinction
the one an end and a downfall and a destruction,
and the other a part of that which has neither beginning
nor end; and even in the humblest instance
there is a difference in the silence of these two.
There is, for instance, regrettably often
a noticeable blank in the wedded silence,
when a couple have been married a long time.*

One sees them in restaurants or on cruises - middle-aged, averted faced that turn toward each other with no light in their eyes and drop words of such astonishing triviality that one wonders how the air consents to carry them: surely the sort of conversation Sartre was thinking of when he described Hell as one prolonged domestic scene.

Yet if a young creature were to ask for advice whether to say yes or no to the man or woman she or he thought of marrying, one might do worse than ask:

'Are you happy to be silent together?'

That companionship is the living silence - a relaxation that finds speech superfluous, an atmosphere of well-being

where nothing needs to be explained,

a part of that current which can make not only men but most living things happy to be together.

It is, I like to imagine, the stream that flows beneath all differences of language

and carries each one of us from those cindery beginnings toward our undiscovered end."⁴

The third source of fulfillment, tone, is an alertness of all the senses and organs. The meaning we attach to the term "muscle tone" captures the quality referred to as the tone of the whole organism - sensory, mental, emotional, muscular, etc. The concept of tone differs from the concept of health. Health is usually regarded as something different from physical health. Tone is a psycho-physiological concept: anxiety is as much its enemy as drugs. Lowen expresses this idea as follows:

*“A person experiences the reality of the world only through his body.
...If the body is relatively un-alive, a person's impressions and responses are diminished. The more alive the body is, the more vividly does he perceive reality and the more actively does he respond to it. We have all experienced the fact that when we feel particularly good and alive, we perceive the world more sharply... The aliveness of the body denotes its capacity for feeling. In the absence of feeling the body goes 'dead' insofar as its ability to be impressed by or respond to situations is concerned. The emotionally dead person is turned inward: thoughts and fantasies replace feeling and action; images compensate for the loss of reality. ...It is the body that melts with love, freezes with fear, trembles in anger, and reaches for warmth and contact. Apart from the body, these words are poetic images. Experienced in the body, they have a reality that gives meaning to existence.”⁵*

When autonomy, resonance and tone are all high, we rejoice in life. This is a peak experience, and as Frost says, "Once having known it, nothing else will do." The three are closely intertwined: if autonomy is used in ways that reduce resonance, it will not produce a world worth living in; low tone will adversely affect resonance and autonomy. Treating them as separate

aspects of life-worth-living may have some value in the life planning process for persons who have been spending all their energies on work and neglecting their relationships with others or their own bodies; or for persons who only feel strong when they are going against others and don't know that it is possible to be strong when going with others; or for persons who overeat at the expense of tone and resonance; or for persons with many resources, persons who possess the elements making for autonomy, but have experienced little fulfillment.

How does the infant's delighting in its experience of autonomy become transformed into the adult's striving for status and winning over others? How does the infant's joy in resonance become transformed into the adult's view of love as a commodity and commodities as substitutes for love? How does the infant's joy in its own body become transformed into emotional deadness? Perhaps it is because our socializing institutions demand that the child give up his search for autonomy in exchange for packages of pseudo-resonance. Whatever the telling events in the process of socialization are, many people "grow up" having learned "truths" that blind them to life...

Life planning is essentially an invitation to explore new perspectives from which to view past experience, one's current life, and future alternatives... The value system we inherited is not necessarily designed to make life-worth-living.

The discovery and creation of perspectives that deepen our appreciation of ourselves in the universe is the fourth aspect of life-worth-living. It is akin to resonance, as suggested by the terminology William O. Douglass used to describe what is meant here by perspective:

*“Man is whole when he is in tune with the winds,
the stars and the hills as well as with his neighbors.
Being in tune with the apartment or the community
is part of the secret.
Being in tune with the universe is the whole secret.”*

In everyday experience, being in tune with the universe, or having an adequate perspective, means seeing problems from above rather than from underneath, means not getting locked in to one end or the other of a presumed polarization, means being free in your situation rather than dependent on it, means owning your behavior rather than claiming someone else's behavior "caused" yours.

Life planning is a quest, and it is also a continuous part of life-worth-living. And while the life planning process and outlook described here may help you to live more fully, it will not protect you from pain. Developing towards higher levels of autonomy, resonance, tone and perspective faces you with all the awkwardness, mistakes and painful choices involved in any learning. Living more fully means investing

yourself more fully in the creation of your experience:
and anything you invest yourself in to the point that it
can bring you great joy can also bring you great grief
by its loss.

Herbert Shepard's PDI Publications

Management of Change and Life & Career Planning

Practical Essays in the "Essence of a Proactive Life" Series

- Herbert A. Shepard: Charting the Future of Your Choice
- Herbert A. Shepard: Moving Forward in Your Organization and Community

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