

Free Will: A User's Guide

How to transform your life into
the life you always dreamed of

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Introduction

“You don't need a savior. You don't need to follow anyone, or listen to anyone's teachings. You don't need to give anything, and you don't need to ask for anything. What you need to do is think for yourself and then put those thoughts into action.”

If you ask anyone on the street, they will probably say they make their own choices. We all believe in Free Will. And yet, while few things are so obviously a part of our day-to-day experience, most people overlook the *power* that Free Will gives us. Most of us go through life like passengers in a fast-moving car. We struggle to keep our bearings as the world flies by in a blur around us, and we never realize that we're doing the driving. We're so busy reacting to situations that appear seemingly out of nowhere that we never take the opportunity to guide the process. But Free Will gives us the power to do so. More importantly, it gives us the *responsibility* to do so.

Most of us struggle along day to day, our self-esteem undermined by years of regimentation, rejection, and coercion. We accept situations that really don't meet our needs, and we get less than we deserve out of life. And yet, we all want more; *we know there should be more*. But when we go looking for something to make us feel whole, we are taken in by sleazy manipulators, greedy marketers and hypocritical demagogues who offer us distractions that never quite fulfill our needs. When they inevitably move on, we're left with regret and an even greater sense of dissatisfaction. Our lives seem to offer few choices and few opportunities, so we deaden the sense of disappointment with vapid entertainment and the latest consumer rubbish.

It is time to put aside our dissatisfaction and take up the lives we were meant to live. It's time to stop searching and start

finding, to stop hoping and start achieving. We already have everything we need to do this, because the experience we get out of life is the direct result of the choices we make and the actions we take. Free Will means we choose those things for ourselves. So if we want to feel whole, empowered, content, we need to take it upon ourselves *to bring those things about*. We're the ones who make it happen.

If you've been searching for meaning, looking for some kind of purpose to guide your life, this is it: the purpose of your life is to learn how to use your Free Will effectively. The value of your life is in how close you come to doing so. If you want a more satisfying life and deeper, more fulfilling experiences – if you want a life that is *worth something* – then it's up to you to make it happen. You can do so with the power of Free Will; you just need to learn how.

Let's make it perfectly clear right up front: the life you experience is not about a judge in the sky sending you blessings if you follow his rules and punishing you if you don't. It's not about a cosmic law that brings you what you focus on, or repays you for the bad things you've done in the past. It's not determined by outside factors like economics, physical limitations, family dynamics, or social roles. Even your past mistakes and traumas don't have to affect the life you are living today or the life you will lead in the future. Sure, these things may impact the *content* of your experience, but the quality of your life is based on only two things: your perceptions and your actions.

To live a happy, fulfilled and meaningful life, you don't have to believe in foolish superstitions. You don't have to accept illogical beliefs, or engage in bizarre rituals. You don't need to pray, or worship, or sacrifice. You don't need forgiveness; you don't need a break; you don't need a hand. You don't need a savior. You don't need to follow anyone, or listen to anyone's teachings. You don't need to give anything, and you don't need to ask for anything.

What you need to do is, think for yourself and then put those thoughts into action.

That's it. Once you are doing this, you can choose to believe or disbelieve whatever you want. And right now, you can get started by just considering the following propositions and what they imply. That alone will change your life. The best part is that it's easy – because it all makes sense. There is nothing supernatural here. There is no inflexible dogma that you have to accept on faith. You just have to realize that Free Will means you always make your own decisions. Life is about the choices you make, how you interpret the results, and how you choose to respond from there. Those three things are all you need to focus on; and *Free Will means they are all under your control*. Your first step forward is to realize that fact; the next step is to act accordingly. When you do so, you begin a process of true self-discovery and self-empowerment that changes everything.

Are you ready to take up the challenge? Are you ready to take responsibility for your happiness, and actually start bringing it about? Do you have the strength and determination to make your own choices? If you're tired of playing the same old game, and are ready to start making your own rules, then learn how to use your Free Will. Consider this your user's guide.

PART I
The Spirit:
The Reality of Free Will

Chapter 1: Free Will – The Choice is Always Yours

“Some people collapse in the face of the slightest adversity, while others carry on in spite of the worst possible circumstances. The response is not dictated by the situation but by the individual who encounters it.”

If Free Will is real then the only conclusion that makes sense is that – whether you realize it or not – *everything you do is your own decision*. Every action arises from your volition. If you do what other people tell you, it is your decision to obey. If fear overwhelms and paralyzes you, it is your decision to focus on that fear. If you're in an unsatisfying situation, it is your decision to accept rather than resist. Similarly, if you stand up for yourself, if you fight for what you believe in, despite the odds, if you struggle to make the world a better place, those are your choices as well. Every action you take is a manifestation of your Free Will. Those actions affect what outcomes you experience, and your life is the sum of those experiences. Therefore, your life is really the expression of your Free Will. What you choose to express defines your life and determines its meaning.

You have the power to manifest whatever you want to see in the world, to pursue anything you desire. And not only do you possess this power, you have the responsibility as a living, conscious entity to use it. Life is about acting, it's about choosing, it's about experiencing what you want. The power to do these things belongs to you; it has always belonged to you, and though you may never have realized what it was or how it worked, you have always been using it. Now is the time to learn how to control your power; our world needs you. We must all begin to use Free Will consciously and for ourselves.

We define Free Will as the ability to choose our own actions, or to decide what causes are sufficient motivations for action. Free Will is the ultimate inalienable right, the foundation upon which all other freedoms are based. Every single action you take is a manifestation of Free Will. If you stand up right now and move to a different room, it will be because you have consciously ordered your body to do so. You may have a good reason for moving or you may do it on a whim – *you decide* what motivations are sufficient – but it is absolutely certain that you will remain where you are unless you will yourself to get up and move. All your actions are decisions.

Each passing moment is therefore an opportunity to decide – to act or not act, to change the channel on the TV or to turn it off, to keep sitting quietly in your chair or to run screaming into the street. This is where sacrifice, heroism, and redemption get their meaning – they are *decisions* that individuals make and carry out. It would be more comfortable if we didn't make sacrifices, it would be safer not to be a hero, it would be easier not to seek redemption; but people choose to do those things anyway. Those choices, and the strength of character to see them through, are what make such acts so powerful. But your everyday decisions are just as significant. Each is a test of your personal resolve; each is an expression of your Free Will. Each is an opportunity for you to decide what your real values are and then to bring them into being.

In mundane situations, it is easy to lose sight of that fact. Most of us pay so little attention to Free Will in our day-to-day lives that we forget we have it at all. We go to work every morning, even if we don't really want to. We do what we're told, even when we resent having to do so. To keep our loved-ones safe and happy, we take on hardships we would otherwise avoid. We may struggle through the loss of a job, or the destruction of a home, or something equally difficult that we would never personally choose for ourselves. These things seem to force us into acting in ways

that we have no control over. But outside circumstances such as these are really just *motivations*; the actions we choose in response to them are still under our control. A situation may compel us to act, but we still choose to accept that compulsion. We choose how to respond to it. Some people collapse in the face of the slightest adversity, while others carry on in spite of the worst possible circumstances. The response is not dictated by the situation but by the individual who encounters it. Our actions manifest our Will.

It is important to understand this concept, because it changes the way you think about Free Will in your daily life. Let's say you work at a job you don't like. It may appear that you have to go to work every day even though you would rather stay home –and therefore, you are forced to work against your will. But think about *why* you keep showing up at that job. Most likely, it is because you need money to put food on the table, and you must do some kind of work to get it. Your employer offers a certain rate of pay for someone to do a particular job, and you decide to accept that offer because you want the money they're paying. That is really why you go to work each day – because you choose to trade your time and labor for money that's being offered. Your employer expects you to show up for work; and each day, you decide whether it is worthwhile to meet that expectation. That doesn't mean you can't change your mind. If you decide you really don't like your job anymore, or that you don't want to do what your boss asks, no one can stop you from walking away. You have the freedom to make that decision. The question is why don't you?

You probably choose not to quit because you anticipate the potential consequences. You would need to find some other way to put food on the table, and your family might suffer if you couldn't do so. You might not find another job that pays as well; and even if you did, it might prove even less enjoyable than the job you left. These potential consequences create a level of uncertainty. And so you weigh the possibility of an unpleasant outcome and decide you

would rather not take the risk; you would rather keep working at the unpleasant job you have, instead of searching for something better.

But what if the risks were less significant? If you won the lottery and never had to worry about bills again, you wouldn't say, "I'll keep going to work, because I can't quit;" You would leave without a second thought. If you had a high-paying, enjoyable new career lined up, you would walk away from your dismal job and never look back. But the power to quit is the power to quit. If you have it under positive circumstances, then *you have it under any circumstances*. And so whether or not you choose to leave your job is therefore not a matter of whether you can do so, but of whether you really want to. And that is a simple question of cost/benefit analysis. You weigh the advantages and disadvantages as you see them, and you make your decision accordingly.

This same process applies in every situation. Even laws that compel certain behaviors can be broken. If they couldn't, we wouldn't need police. There would be no accidents caused by people running red lights, there would be no tax evasion or embezzlement, there would be no crime of any kind, because the law forbids it. Crime exists because Free Will exists. People *can* disobey the law; they choose their own actions, no matter what the law says. The criminal code is simply a motivator. It provides negative consequences for breaking the law, just as economics provides negative consequences for quitting your job. There is no guarantee that you would experience those consequences if you chose to break the law. There is no guarantee that your family would starve if you quit your job. These are only *potential* consequences, and Free Will means you decide whether they are sufficient to motivate your decisions. If you absolutely refuse to take an action no matter the consequences, then no one can make you do it. If you are so committed to an action that you will carry it through whatever the cost, then nothing can stop you. The final

decision is always yours. If you feel that a situation gives you no options, it simply means you don't see a preferable alternative to the action being dictated to you. But determining what is preferable is always personal judgment.

Of course we have to account for the potential consequences of our actions. After all, Free Will means we are responsible for everything we do. But we must remember that we evaluate those consequences for ourselves, and we determine what effect they might have on our decision-making. *We always get to decide.* So using Free Will effectively is really about evaluating our options – based on our understanding of the situation and our best predictions about the probable costs and benefits. Why then do we so often fail to think things through? Why do we let other people tell us what is worthwhile, instead of listening to our own inner voice? Why do we give our Free Will away, and let other people tell us what to do?

The answer can only be that there is something affecting our evaluation process – skewing the cost/benefit analysis in favor of following the rules, doing what we're told, and fitting in with what we think is the consensus view. Most of us find it difficult to think outside the box, or to act in a way that is contrary to expectations. We have trouble accurately judging the potential consequences of our actions because our views of ourselves and the world give us a distorted sense of what's possible or probable. Before we can truly start employing our Free Will effectively, we need to take a look at how we think and determine why it is we think the way we do. That process starts when we begin to understand *perception*.

Chapter 2: Elements of Perception – What You Think, And Why?

“Though it may seem hard to believe, there is no single correct way to understand the world. Different people will interpret the same set of signals in different ways, and there is no reason to believe only one will be right. As long as your perception fits the facts of your experience, you can base it on whatever assumptions you care to make. Interpretation is completely yours to control...”

Free Will and Perception are two sides of the same coin. Together, they make up our personal feedback mechanism to the universe. We create situations through our freely chosen actions, and we perceive the results of those actions so we can decide what to do next. It would be impossible to understand the world if we couldn't relate to it through our actions, and it would be impossible to choose meaningful actions if we couldn't perceive the world in which those actions take place. The problem is that most of us have distorted perceptions of the world and of ourselves. We worry about inconsequential matters and ignore potentially serious issues. We limit the range of our thinking. We doubt our abilities and close ourselves off to the opportunities that the world offers. We lose touch with our desires – our inner sense of purpose – and embrace value systems that don't address our real needs.

All of these issues stem from the way we perceive things; and before we can begin to fix these problems, we need to understand exactly how perception works. Perception is the key to our experience, to our outlook on the world, and thus to the actions we choose. Three elements of perception work together to create the world we encounter:

- **Receptiveness:** the process of taking in sensory data.

- **Censorship:** the process of filtering out extraneous data so we can focus on what we believe is relevant, and
- **Interpretation:** the process by which we make sense of data by analyzing and categorizing it.

Receptiveness

Receptiveness is the physical process of getting signals from the outside world through our senses and our nervous systems. For example, human eyes are sensitive to a certain range of frequencies that we call visible light. When light of different frequencies hits our eyes, we interpret the signals as shapes and colors. Similarly, our ears are sensitive to the vibration of air molecules. Fast, high-frequency vibrations create high-pitched sounds, while lower frequency vibrations create low-pitched sounds. We can receive only a certain range of sights and sounds because our senses are attuned to a limited range of frequencies. We know that there are higher and lower frequencies beyond what we can normally detect, but these signals don't enter our awareness because we are unable to receive them without the aid of mechanical devices.

Such signals are not without meaning, however. Indeed, there is a whole universe of information being conveyed in signals that are beyond our capacity to detect. Receptiveness is fundamentally limited by our physical senses, which define the boundaries of what we can perceive; but this doesn't mean we cannot expand our perception. In fact, we already receive thousands more signals than we even realize. We fail to notice not because we cannot detect them, but because we tune them out, through the process of censorship.

Censorship

Censorship is a psychological process that tells us which signals we can ignore and which ones we should focus on. For example, when you walk down the street, your nervous system picks up thousands of different signals from the environment— the

sound of approaching cars, the appearance of other people, the smell of wood burning in a neighbor's fireplace, the feel of a cool breeze, and many more. You *receive* all of those sensory inputs, but your mind needs to prioritize them before you can begin to create a meaningful picture of what is happening. Censorship is the process that handles the prioritizing; it tells you what parts of the picture to focus on and what parts to filter out. So as you walk along, you will probably pay attention to the sound of a car approaching behind you, so that you can move out of the way if necessary. You may notice other people on the street and say hello as they walk by. You do these things because your censor evaluates the signal you receive, and passes the important data on so that you can respond accordingly.

But consider the twittering of birds in the trees. Our ears can detect these sounds, so you will certainly receive those signals as you walk along. You will probably recognize them for what they are, and if birds are a subject of particular interest, you may recognize which species is making the noise. However, unless bird watching is the specific purpose of your walk, you will probably not pay attention to the sounds. Your internal censor won't understand them to be significant. So if a bird takes wing with a cry of alarm, you may not even notice. On the other hand, if a stranger points your direction and yells out a warning, you will almost surely pay attention. Both are physical movements and vibrations of air that your senses detect, but censorship tells you that one signal is important while the other is not.

Censorship plays a key role in our perception of the world because it tells us what to look at. We cannot understand things if we don't consciously think about them, so if you filter out a signal, it will have no influence on your understanding of the world. It will not become part of your perception. It follows, therefore, that if we filter out fewer of the signals that come to us, we can increase our awareness and change the way we perceive things.

Richard Wiseman's study of the "Luck Factor" demonstrates the power of this idea. In one experiment, he gave identical newspapers to a group of people. Each member of the group had identified him or herself as either lucky or unlucky – a measure of their own self-perception. Wiseman asked each individual to count how many photographs appeared in the newspaper. While the unlucky people took about two minutes to complete the task, the lucky people needed only a few seconds. Why? Because on page two of the newspaper, Wiseman had inserted two-inch letters that read "Stop counting. There are 43 photographs in this newspaper." Half way through the paper, he also printed "Stop counting. Tell the experimenter you have seen this ad and win \$250." The people who perceived themselves as unlucky tended to overlook both of these messages because they were strictly focused on counting pictures. Wiseman concluded that one way people generate good fortune is by their ability to notice chance opportunities. The fact that people who miss such opportunities are also those who perceive themselves as unlucky, demonstrates the affect censorship can have on your perceptions.

By simply accepting more of the sensory data we receive instead of censoring it out, we can experience ordinary events in new ways. We can gather more information with which to fill in the details, and that allows us to develop a richer understanding of the situations we encounter. We can therefore make better assessments of those situations, and thus employ our Free Will more effectively. So by adjusting our level of censorship, we fundamentally change our perception of ourselves and our experiences. And to adjust our censors, we just need to change the importance we assign to incoming signals, so that we ignore less and consider more. And that is a matter of changing our interpretations.

Interpretation

Interpretation is the ongoing process of establishing meaning from the signals we consider important. While our nervous systems constantly receive sensory data, we cannot respond to those impressions until we make sense of them. Our interpretive faculties assign meaning to what we encounter, so that we can understand what is happening. Interpretation is therefore the most important element of our perceptions; it is the key to the way we think and the way we act.

It's important to realize that our interpretations are based more on our inner worlds than on the world around us. For example, when you are angry about something, it often seems like the people you encounter are incompetent, rude, or annoying. When you're happy, people seem friendly and easier to get along with. When you are watching a scary movie, you may be easily startled by ordinary noises in your house. What changes in these examples are not the circumstances around you but the circumstances *within* you. The world doesn't change from depressing and lifeless to happy and joyful on its own. It *appears* to do so because you change the way you are interpreting it. If your happy mood makes you interpret your experience joyfully, then you encounter a joyful world. If your angry mood causes you to interpret other people's behavior angrily, then you experience a world of annoyances. If you interpret signals from a frightened perspective, you encounter a world of frightening possibilities.

Free Will gives us the power to choose our own interpretations. This means we can decide not only how we perceive the signals that come to us, but also which signals we censor out and which ones we notice. So if you chose to interpret your experience as though everything happens for a reason and synchronicity plays an important function in your life, then you will pay closer attention to the seemingly random events you once filtered out. You will perceive significance in things you once put

down to coincidence. If you choose an interpretation in which totem animals and nature spirits guide and support you, you will pay attention to the calls of the birds, the barking of dogs, and the appearance of wild animals. You will perceive these things as important and meaningful. If you interpret every experience as a unique opportunity to manifest your Free Will, you will take the time to evaluate your circumstances as thoroughly as you can, consider every alternative, and make the best possible choice.

Though it may seem hard to believe, there is no single correct way to understand the world. Different people will interpret the same set of signals in different ways, and there is no reason to believe only one will be right. As long as your perception fits the facts of your experience, you can base it on whatever assumptions you care to make. Interpretation is completely yours to control, which means your perception of the world is open to modification. It is determined by which framework of beliefs and assumptions you choose to apply. These affect how you understand your situation and how you perceive the options available to you. The decisions you make – and therefore, how you manifest your Free Will – depend on what you *choose to believe* about yourself and the world. Thus, the next step on our path to self-empowerment is to examine our beliefs and see if they're worth keeping. To do that, we need to consider how we acquired them in the first place.

PART II
The Mind:
Misperceptions and the
Roots of the Problem

Chapter 3: Socialization and Conditioning – How We Came to Believe What We Believe

“Most people surrender their Free Will to outside authorities because their conditioning makes them afraid of making the wrong decisions. Rather than face the possibility of failure, they avoid situations that push them beyond their comfort levels; and most are quite uncomfortable standing out from the crowd.”

The beliefs and assumptions we use to interpret our experience will determine how we perceive it. But only a small percentage of what we believe about the world comes from our own direct experience. The vast majority comes from what we've been told and what the people around us seem to hold true. If we hear a message frequently enough – and if our friends and role models appear to accept that message – our natural tendency will be to assume it is true. If the people we grew up with follow a certain code of behavior, chances are good that we will adhere to the same code. We will, in fact, tend to accept any rationale that is provided to explain such behavior, because we feel an instinctive longing to be part of the group. We depend on community for our survival, and have evolved a psychological need to anticipate and care about how other people might respond to our actions. This helps us ensure that the members of our community react positively toward us. And so we are fundamentally motivated to learn the behaviors and beliefs of the groups with which we identify. The process by which we do this is called *socialization*.

The socialization process begins when we are very young. We all must learn to moderate our behavior to maintain social cohesion; but as children, we generally lack the necessary experience to foresee the consequences of our actions. Our Free Will therefore needs to be tempered and guided, so that we begin to

consider the needs of other people as well as ourselves. In learning to do so, we develop the empathy and social skills needed to integrate successfully into society. For the socialization process to work correctly, however, children need to understand the reasons behind the rules they're being asked to accept. We rely on the other members of our community to impart these lessons, and unfortunately, society often falls short in this role. As a result, we misunderstand ourselves, our Free Will, and our roles in the world.

Family dynamics provide the most powerful source of socialization pressure, but its application in this context is probably the least uniform, because the larger community does not take an active role in this area. Little interference in family matters occurs unless serious neglect or abuse becomes evident. And yet, while parents generally have a strong incentive to raise their children successfully, they often lack the skills or knowledge necessary for the task. Moreover, their approach to child rearing may not correspond with broader social norms.

Each family raises its children within its own specific worldview, dictated and manifested by the parents. Religious dogmas, racial biases, attitudes and interpersonal dynamics are all ingrained into a child's identity through his or her family experience. Unless children are exposed to alternative belief systems, these perspectives are accepted without question. Little thought may ever be given to other ways of thinking, and so the same skewed worldviews and outmoded behaviors may be passed on from generation to generation.

Problems can also occur when parents or authority figures fail to explain the reasons behind the rule they want to impart, and instead resort to threats of punishment to simply make children do what they're told. While this is an expedient tactic to elicit desired behavior in the short-term, in the long-term it causes children to misperceive their relationship to the world. The confrontational power dynamic that it creates may cause a child to assume such

conflict is a normal part of all interpersonal relationships. Perhaps more importantly, instead of learning to choose actions by evaluating the potential outcomes and their impact on other people, the child may learn that certain behaviors must be manifested, or avoided, simply because a person with authority says so. This undermines the self-determination that is the heart of Free Will.

The educational system tends to exacerbate the problem, by forcing a regimented system of obedience and submission onto students. The teaching paradigm encourages students to believe that there is a single correct answer for every question and a single correct procedure for finding it. Creative problem solving and interpretation of data is discouraged in favor of rote memorization and repetition of facts. Innovation and synthesis are stifled as children are forced to choose among compartmentalized fields of study, and interests outside the curriculum are considered distractions. Students who fail to comply with these expectations are punished with low grades, undermining their self-esteem and subjecting them to criticism from teachers and peers. Because they are told that poor educational performance will have an adverse impact on their career opportunities and earning potential, children feel a very real pressure to conform and to achieve within the system. They learn to keep their ideas to themselves, hide their ignorance, and look to authorities for the correct answers. The overall effect is to restrict a child's unique individuality, and force him into a standardized role.

These social pressures are applied constantly as we grow up, and as a result, we internalize the messages and behaviors through a process called *conditioning*. We see our social norms demonstrated by the people around us and we see the ramifications of displaying other values. Our own behaviors are praised or punished according to our conformance with expectations, and we adapt to these realities so readily that we eventually stop thinking about them. When we experience a situation, we think and behave in a certain

way, without consciously choosing to do so. Our response becomes conditioned according to what we experienced during similar situations in the past.

Because of misapplied social pressures, we have been conditioned to fear using our power to create the lives we truly desire. We surrender our Free Will to outside authorities because our conditioning makes us afraid of making the wrong decisions. Rather than face the possibility of failure, we avoid situations that push us beyond our comfort levels; and most of us are quite uncomfortable standing out from the crowd. Most of us doubt our ability to comprehend issues, and instead seek easy, black-and-white explanations. In the face of contrary evidence, we fight to hold such perspectives, or we avoid consideration of the issue altogether. We are uncomfortable in the presence of ambiguity and look for someone else's interpretation to create the consensus reality. We lose touch with our Free Will and the power of our perception. And we are thus rendered easily manipulable to those who wish to maintain positions of social dominance.

Chapter 4: Sinister Socialization – How Authorities Manipulate Social Influences to Condition Our Behavior

“...because these efforts use fear to motivate us, they often force us to adopt perspectives that do not reflect our own values. This... makes us restrain our inner will to explore and express our own views, out of a fear that doing so is dangerous.”

Socialization and conditioning can also be deliberately manipulated. When this happens, negative self-perception, fear of failure, and reliance on outside authorities become explicit messages, developed and promulgated by those with an interest in maintaining power. Because social conditioning causes people to limit their choices and behave in certain ways, it is used to control how a group behaves and to whom it gives authority. Free Will means people choose their own actions, so if they choose to obey an authority figure it can only be because they are motivated in some way to do so. Social conditioning is a powerful way to create that motivation, and authority figures use it to ensure that their followers come to believe the version of reality that is presented to them.

As we saw in chapter 1, a very common motivator for doing things we might not otherwise choose to do is the belief that it's better to obey than to risk the potential consequences of disobedience. This calculation makes sense when obedience delivers obvious benefits. For example, you might obey the rules at work so you can continue to receive a paycheck. But when the demands are more cumbersome or the benefits less obvious, then we have less motivation to comply. To prevent people from getting out of line, authorities manipulate the other side of the cost-benefit

equation. They use the power of socialization to instill belief systems that increase the perceived consequences of disobedience.

One example of this process can be found in organized religion. Without considering the benefits religions may provide, we can certainly see that each is a structure of authority. Believers choose to obey strictures and accept dogmas that are handed down and interpreted by church leaders. This allows religious authorities to control the behavior of their followers by telling them what is acceptable to God and what is not. To ensure observance of these potentially odious rules, the church needs to make believers see a benefit from obeying that exceeds the potential cost of disobeying. But there is no obvious worldly advantage to be found in following one religion over another. All religions seem to offer some degree of comfort to those who believe in them, and if God has a preference, he does not make it explicitly evident. So the church uses its socializing influence to increase the perceived cost of ignoring its strictures, by manipulating the power to define reality. It describes a "next world" of eternal blessings for the faithful and eternal punishments for everyone else. The message is explicit: if you believe the church's doctrine and follow its rules, you will be rewarded in the afterlife; if you do not, you will be punished.

Considerable social pressure is applied to ensure that followers are conditioned to accept and understand this point. Group worship is usually practiced, so that potentially skeptical individuals are surrounded by a large community of presumed believers. The ceremonies often include repetition of standardized prayers, gestures, and behaviors, all of which distract the conscious mind so the subconscious is more open to suggestion. Services are typically led by clearly identifiable authority figures who pronounce the official dogma, with no opportunity given for group interpretation or the voicing of doubts.

Believers are strongly motivated to indoctrinate their children as well, with special rituals intended to be performed at

different stages throughout the child's life. This pushes the church's influence even deeper. Parents force their children to participate in church rituals, prevent them from acting against religious doctrines, discourage exploration of competing belief systems, and instill faith in their particular dogma. Children exposed to such indoctrination learn to respect the church's authority and adhere to its tenets. They keep any doubts to themselves because their role models appear to believe so firmly. And thus the entire process can be continued from generation to generation. In this way, church authorities dictate the worldviews of millions of people. And by giving believers a framework of beliefs and assumptions with which to interpret their experiences, they control how their followers behave.

Other authorities use social pressure and conditioning to achieve the same aims. Advertisers use them to manipulate people into buying their products. Since the social instinct motivates us to be well received or popular among our peers, we are naturally drawn to associate ourselves with people we perceive to be popular. Socialization tells us who those people are, and teaches us to emulate their behavior. Advertisers therefore pay famous – and thus presumably popular – people to endorse or be seen using their products. Our conditioning motivates us to buy those products and thereby associate ourselves with the celebrity. Because we want to seem popular, we emulate the presumed behavior of a popular person.

Even when celebrities are not depicted, the images used in advertising are still designed to appeal to our social motivations. Models are always athletic and handsome or voluptuous and beautiful. The scenes are always either highly intimate or highly social. The images always depict people in positions of power, or enjoying spontaneous fun, or being transformed from ordinary nobodies into desirable winners. The social narrative is obvious:

The advertised commodity will help you achieve the same kinds of relationships and social standing.

Conditioning techniques are also employed in most advertisements. Each ad is designed to stimulate an emotion or mental state: a sense of comfort, sexual arousal, insecurity, or any other feeling that will help sell the product. By displaying brand logos at the same time the feeling is elicited, advertisers condition individuals to associate the logo with the feeling. Over time, the connection becomes so strong that simply seeing the logo generates the associated mental state. Purchasing that brand thus becomes a way to re-create a positive feeling or assuage a negative one.

Politicians also manipulate social pressure, for the purpose of getting votes and maintaining their power. They present images of themselves as authority figures with all the necessary answers. They constantly repeat simple sound bites that become associated with their names and ideas. Conditioning from constant exposure to these messages make us jump to certain conclusions when the name or idea is mentioned, and these conclusions are deliberately crafted to focus our thinking along a single line of reasoning.

Political speeches employ rhetorical techniques and carefully chosen “doublespeak” to create feelings of excitement, hope, and resolve in listeners. Each word is specifically chosen by writers and public relations experts to create an image that appeals to the necessary demographics. The speeches are typically given in front of large crowds of cheering supporters, creating the impression that most people accept the message being delivered, and socialization makes us more likely to accept these messages as well. Our social conditioning motivates us to obey these people because they project a demeanor of power and leadership.

Mass media is the delivery system by which all these messages proliferate. As a primary means of conveying information about the wider world, media networks reinforce and legitimize our views of reality and are therefore a significant force of socialization

and conditioning in their own right. A news program's decisions about which stories to report and how they will be covered, for example, affect what events we know about and whether we perceive them as important. Media networks essentially take the role of censor, determining what data is made available for us to interpret by choosing what information to broadcast. Moreover, because of socialization, the interpretation provided in the broadcast largely creates the consensus opinion. Media networks define the message, and the power of socialization motivates us to believe what we are told.

Mass media can also quickly promote an individual to celebrity status, simply by providing exposure. The media focuses a great deal of attention on the comings and goings of famous people, making such stories seem relevant by using terms like "superstar" and "celebrity icon" to refer to the individuals involved. This creates the impression that these people are important, thus generating interest in otherwise irrelevant people and topics. This increased interest builds the celebrity's influence and further connects his or her name with a certain set of ideas, which advertisers take advantage of to sell more products. And since the same media companies that build a celebrity's image may also own the record labels, publishing houses, and movie studios that sell the celebrity's products, this drumming up of interest increases their own revenues as well. Following the movements of celebrities also takes advantage of our social motivation to associate with popular individuals to increase the network's viewership. We tune in because we want to find out what the popular people are doing.

All of this sinister manipulation creates significant problems for society. Efforts to manipulate the perceived cost of disobedience factionalize communities into competing groups, unable to even consider alternative perspectives. Belief in any set of dogmas leaves no room for mental flexibility because the potential cost of exploring another approach – let alone embracing it – is

perceived to be too great. Moreover, because these efforts use fear to motivate us, they often force us to adopt perspectives that do not reflect our own values. This creates psychological turmoil because it makes us restrain our inner will to explore and express our own views out of fear that doing so is dangerous.

The ubiquity of socialization and conditioning in marketing generates another significant negative social impact. We become so overloaded with messages that we cannot keep up. Our natural instinct to emulate those we perceive as popular is overwhelmed by the sheer number of popular people, and by the competing messages they offer. As a result, we lose our ability to determine what messages really are important. As we lose touch with our inner values, we develop a sort of cynicism. We feel compelled to buy the products, even though we know they will not live up to their promise. We purchase the "must have" new item, knowing it will be obsolete before we even learn how to use it. We vote for the candidates who tap into our aspirations or fears, even though we know they will prove as corrupt and inept as the rest. As our social instincts fail to generate the results they were evolved to bring about, we become alienated and disempowered. We lose our ability to comprehend our true relationship to the world and we lose our passion for life.

The only solution is to reclaim control of how we interpret our experiences and how we choose to respond; we need to liberate our Free Will. After all, if we really didn't have the power to choose, there would be no need to manipulate our social instincts. Advertisers, authorities, and power structures try to manipulate us because *they cannot force us to do anything*. We choose to do what they tell us, or we choose otherwise. No matter what the external pressures, no matter how we might fear being judged, no matter how much it might appear that everyone sees the issue a certain way – we can still perceive things however we choose, judge them for ourselves, and respond accordingly.

And now that we understand where our beliefs and perceptions come from and how they have been manipulated, we can re-examine the assumptions that have driven our decisions up to this point. Have they really helped us manifest the lives we want, or are they holding us back? We may find that so far, much our lives have been lived on autopilot.

Chapter 5: Autopilot – Socialization in Action

“While we remain unaware of our autopilot programs, we continue to offer knee-jerk reactions to the situations we encounter; and if we keep acting the same way over and over, is it any surprise that we find ourselves in the same situations over and over again?”

Now that you understand the role socialization has played in constructing your beliefs, you are ready to face the next significant obstacle – taking back conscious control of your thoughts and actions. Our socializing influences have a powerful effect on our behavior. Even if we realize that the rules and assumptions we’ve internalized don’t correspond with how we want things to be, we still tend to act on those old assumptions anyway. We do things the way we have always done them, and we don’t stop to really consider our situations. We make snap decisions without thinking through the benefits and ramifications of our actions. As a result, we wind up manifesting behaviors without consciously choosing them. More often than not, we simply operate on autopilot.

Think about the example in Chapter 1, about our choice to go to work each day. While we saw what basis is used to reach that decision, the fact is, most people don’t consciously consider the question. Most don’t presume to have an option. They accept the assumption that times are hard, and that they should be thankful for whatever work they can find. They believe that without a job, they will be unable to survive. They assume the consequences of quitting would be far too great. In short, they embrace the perspective that society gives us. They allow that interpretation to define their view. And so they go on doing what’s “required” of

them without thinking about it -- without realizing they are making that interpretation manifest in their lives.

This kind of autopilot programming is the result of cognitive dissonance, brought about by our conditioned unwillingness to accept our Free Will. Experience tells us that we make our own decisions, but socialization pressures us to behave as if we do not. And because social pressures are so often misinterpreted – either because of poor implementation or deliberate manipulation – we find it impossible to effectively integrate these conflicting perspectives. Authorities seem to have such great power to punish us that most of us conclude we must surrender our Free Will and accept their interpretations. But even though we may be afraid to admit it, we know that Free Will is our reality and cannot be surrendered; it is fundamental to our existence and our experience. Since we cannot hold both of these opposing views simultaneously, the only way to deal with the conflict is to block it from our conscious awareness. We ignore reality, stick to our assumptions, and look for ways to suppress the dissatisfaction that results.

While we remain unaware of our autopilot programs, we continue to offer knee-jerk reactions to the situations we encounter. And if we keep acting the same way over and over, is it any surprise that we find ourselves in the same situations over and over again? Now that we realize we can choose our own actions and understand things our own way, we need a method for evaluating our autopilot programs to find out whether they truly conform to our Free Willed choices. The process begins when we understand that, even when we are on autopilot, our decisions and reactions are still based on programs that *we* provide. We may be doing what we have always done, and our actions may be based on what we have always been told; but we are still controlling those actions. Therefore, we have the power to do things differently if we want to.

If you are not happy with the experiences life brings you, the solution is not to complain about the results, but to choose different procedures. This process of evaluating your thinking, your decisions, and their outcomes is called *self-reflection*, and it can be applied at every moment of your life. The evaluation is simple: If you are truly happy with the results you're generating, then autopilot is fine. If not, you need to take control and change things. Self-reflection allows us to learn from our experience. And by applying those lessons to our future decision-making, we can rewrite our autopilot programs and start acting differently.

The easiest way to begin using self-reflection is by remembering a time when your response to a situation brought about an unsatisfactory result. Think about how you acted, and consider *why* you chose to act the way you did. What did you intend to achieve? Would a different course of action have brought about a better result? Why didn't you choose that course of action at the time? Did it not cross your mind? Or were you simply trying to avoid the potential negative consequences of that action? If you didn't think you had any alternative but to act the way you did, what assumptions led to that perspective? Was holding on to those assumptions worth accepting an outcome you didn't want? Or would you be better off trying something different next time?

A series of questions like this will help you assess your decision-making and evaluate your autopilot programs. You will probably realize in hindsight that there were other options available, but that you chose not to consider or pursue them. Perhaps they never crossed your mind, or perhaps you perceived them to be too risky. The point is to develop a better understanding of whatever choice you made, and to identify what set of assumptions formed the basis of your action. These are the rules by which your autopilot program operates. As you apply this technique to decisions you have made, you begin to recognize the situations in which your autopilot programs tend to take over. By assessing the

outcomes they achieve, you determine whether those autopilot programs are effective or not. More importantly, you start to think about other possible responses that you might try instead. In short, you learn how to switch off the autopilot and start making more conscious decisions.

Your autopilot programs may continue to override your decision-making for a long time. Perhaps you will find yourself in an old pattern before you even realize that you intended to respond differently. That's okay. The important thing is to become aware of your automatic responses and accept that you have the power to change them. As long as you keep noticing when you fall into autopilot, and keep thinking about ways you can act differently, your insight continues to grow. Eventually, you recognize your autopilot programs before they take over and reclaim control of the situation. Over time, you find that the new behaviors you have chosen become your automatic responses, and that your autopilot programs have been rewritten. And as long as your new behaviors continue to generate the results you want, you have nothing to worry about.

Through this process of reprogramming our autopilots, we come to realize that our actions are not dictated by the situations around us but by our own desires and Free Will. We start to make more rational decisions, because we understand that we don't have to replay our same old reactions. We are free to choose our responses, based on our own perception of events as they are unfolding – not on previous encounters and learned behaviors. This fundamentally changes the way we interact with the world. But to make the most of this process, we must learn to apply it to the one universal element in all our experiences: ourselves.

Chapter 6: Self Talk – How You Have Learned to Perceive Yourself

"Why should someone else's opinion, formed years in the past, define who you are today? If your image is not one of power and competence, why should you accept it? You are powerful! Free Will gives you total control over your life and experience. Don't waste it trying to convince yourself that you are unworthy."

Because *you* are the common factor in all your experiences, your self-perception naturally has the greatest impact on how you interpret everything else. It determines how you perceive your relationship with the world. Developing a strong self-image is therefore an essential step in learning to use your Free Will effectively. If you doubt your abilities and judgment, you will look to someone else for guidance and thereby give your Free Will away. If you see yourself as a powerful, competent individual who can make good decisions, then you will embrace your Free Will and use it to manifest your values. You have seen how socialization pressures teach people to doubt themselves. Now it's time to see what effect they have had on your own self-esteem.

The most direct way to measure and modify your self-perception is by watching your *self-talk* – the things you say to yourself, about yourself. If you want to improve your self-image, you have to pay attention to what you tell yourself and make sure you deliver positive messages. The first step is to observe your internal dialogue. We all have an inner voice that provides a sort of ongoing commentary on our experience. It runs almost constantly. Any time you find that inner voice talking about you, pay attention to what it is saying and think about its message objectively. You will probably be surprised at how much criticism and how little

praise you give yourself. You may also be surprised at how harsh your self-criticism can be.

For example, if you make an embarrassing mistake, your inner voice may say, "I'm always screwing up, I'm such an idiot." If you try on an outfit, you may look in the mirror and think, "I look horrible in this; I'm too fat." You may go to a party and think, "I can't dance; I'll look stupid." If you think about directing the same comments at a friend, you will surely realize that the words are hurtful. You would never say such things. If you were even going to voice such criticisms, you would surely do so more gently. You wouldn't call your friend an idiot, you wouldn't tell a friend he looked stupid, or that she looked horrible in a new outfit. Yet, we seem to think it is ok to say those things to ourselves. Indeed, we do it all the time. But think about it – shouldn't we give ourselves at least as much respect as we would give anyone else? If we want to develop a positive self-image that will allow us to make full use of our Free Will, we must learn to be friendly toward ourselves.

Most people can point to the original source of their negative self-talk. You will probably find that the criticisms you apply to yourself actually echo the things you heard from parents, peers, and other social authority figures as you were growing up. Because these people had influence in your life, you paid attention to the messages they gave you. You saw them as leaders and you accepted their judgments, integrating them into your perception of yourself.

Your self-talk reinforces that perception through constant repetition. But just because we heard those messages from authorities in the past doesn't mean they are – or ever were – accurate. More likely, they were simply a means of holding you down so that you could be more easily controlled. Why should someone else's opinion, formed years in the past, define who you are today? If your image is not one of power and competence, why should you accept it? You *are* powerful! Free Will gives you total

control over your life and experience. Don't waste it trying to convince yourself that you are unworthy.

We tend to think our negative self-talk doesn't matter; that our self-applied negative labels are simply turns of phrase that we don't take literally. But it weakens our self-esteem to be constantly bombarded with negative and hurtful statements, and it is no different when the abuse is self-directed. Harsh self-criticism undermines our view of ourselves because it is based on generalizations. Instead of focusing on a specific situation or shortcoming, it creates the conceptual illusion that the fault is a defining element of our nature. For example, if you are wrong about something, it simply means your beliefs about that particular issue are not factually accurate. By definition, such a criticism is limited to a specific instance and a specific subject. But if you label yourself "an idiot" because you are wrong, you turn that specific instance into a general rule, defining yourself as someone *incapable* of knowing anything meaningful about any issue. Objectively speaking, this is certainly not true.

We should therefore try to replace our negative generalizations with more specific, more accurate, and more positive statements. It is more specific to say, "I was wrong about that," than to say, "I'm stupid." It is more accurate to say, "I need more practice," than to say, "I'll never get this right." And it's far more positive to say, "I might like my looks better if I lost a few pounds," than to say, "I'm fat and ugly." The process is not about trying to deny that you make mistakes or that you may have room for improvement. It is about recognizing that these things are a temporary condition. Perhaps you made a mistake *this time*, but that doesn't mean you make mistakes *every time*. At this moment, you may wish things were better, but that doesn't mean you can't change them. There is no reason to assume you can't overcome any limitation, given sufficient time and sufficient Will. When you focus on specific issues, you can think about how to correct them.

It is also important to treat yourself kindly. We find it all too easy to criticize ourselves, but it seems far more difficult to recognize our positive traits and achievements. We need to give ourselves more credit. You may think you are being conceited if you talk to yourself in a positive way, but it is not conceited to treat yourself with the same respect you show others. It's not arrogant to recognize your accomplishments or praise yourself for a job well done. Having a positive self-image is not the same as being egotistical.

Besides, if self-talk has any effect at all on your self-perception, it stands to reason that *being kind to yourself can only be beneficial*. At the very least, consciously monitoring and modifying your self-talk will make you more aware of your thought process and give you better insight into the way you understand your experiences.

The past judgments of others only define you as long as you choose to let them. We all have the power to develop our own standards and employ our own judgments. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Strong self-esteem is the root of a powerful Will; and to build it, we need to stop wallowing in self-contempt and letting past mistakes overwhelm our present capacities.

Constantly repeating negative statements about ourselves will not resolve the psychological turmoil we create by suppressing our Free Will. The only solution is to acknowledge our power; and that means changing the way we think about ourselves, about our world, and about the possibilities that are available to us. It's time to reframe our perceptions.

Chapter 7: Reframing – How to Create New Perspectives

“It is important to remember that these are perspectives that you consciously decide to accept, rather than ‘truths’ that are handed down to you. They are not intended to control how you perceive things, but rather to help you choose an interpretation of whatever signals you receive.”

If we are going to build satisfying lives, we have to make ourselves the central figures in our own life stories and make the application of Free Will our primary storyline. That requires us to overcome our autopilot programs, get control of our self-talk, and ultimately to remake ourselves and the world. The way we accomplish this last challenge is through a process called *reframing*. Reframing gives us the power to consciously modify our perceptions, by evaluating our understanding of an experience, and comparing it to other possible interpretations. This allows us to choose which version of reality we prefer, and decide whether we have understood our experience in the most accurate or worthwhile manner. As we saw in chapter 2, there is no single correct way to understand the world. There is, therefore, no reason to settle on an interpretation of events that is unacceptable to you. This doesn’t mean you will always be completely happy with your experiences. Life presents us with challenges, and there may be times when the events unfolding around us simply cannot be perceived in a good light. But as long as your interpretation accurately fits the objective facts of the situation, you can approach it any way you want; you can respond however you choose. Perception is under your control.

Reframing is simply a process of looking at a situation and evaluating it through a different interpretive framework. It begins

with noticing a situation that causes dissatisfaction, and realizing that we might not be interpreting it correctly. It requires strong self-awareness to recognize that our dissatisfaction does not arise from the details of a situation, but from our interpretation of those details. Chapter 2 gives us the necessary tools for understanding how perception works, but often the beliefs we internalized through socialization cause us to fall into negative assumptions, and assess our situation too quickly. Our autopilot programming then takes over, causing us to act as if there is only one appropriate way to respond. This is why reframing is such an important key to controlling our autopilot programs. If we routinely try to reframe our perceptions and look for positive interpretations, we block our autopilots from taking over.

Once we realize that our dissatisfaction derives from how we understand a situation, the next step is to evaluate our interpretation using the elements of perception and our knowledge of how socialization may cause us to internalize beliefs that we no longer want to accept. A purely objective and rational approach is required here. We need to assess how much of what we perceive is based on our actual experience, and how much is based on mere inference. We can then look at our inferences, determine what assumptions led us to them, and decide whether those assumptions are really valid. The point is to realize how much of the situation is in fact unknown to us. This opens up room for doubt.

The final step is to apply different perspectives, looking for a more positive set of assumptions that still fit the facts of the situation as we actually know them. If another perspective can be found, we should ask ourselves why we should hold onto our old assumptions instead of embracing these new ones. Can we be sure that one version is right and the other wrong? Once we realize that there may be more than one way to understand the situation, it becomes immediately clear that we must choose the response that

best addresses all possible interpretations. Otherwise, we risk creating the circumstances that we assumed were already out there.

For example, if you've had a history of arguing with a particular sibling, you may have learned to listen to that person with a critical ear, to guard against insults and be ready with a counter-attack. You bring that expectation of conflict to all your interactions with that person, and it determines how you perceive any encounter because it forms the basis for interpreting whatever information you receive. Thus, you may pay closer attention to potential insults, and you may ignore signals that could indicate warmth.

But if you can accept the possibility that your sibling really does love you, and that perhaps you just don't share the same values, or understand how to communicate with each other effectively, you can apply that alternative perspective to your encounter. You may then see that your sibling's actions are not intended to generate conflict, and you will respond more positively.

The more you apply the reframing process, the more you realize that things really can be whatever you want them to be. The real trick is to think of those different perspectives *before you decide on your response*. It can be helpful therefore to choose a baseline set of idealized assumptions that you can apply to your understanding of the world. If you can perceive things in this way, you will extract the greatest satisfaction from your experience. It may not always be possible to make your situation fit these assumptions, but seeing if there is a reasonable way to interpret things in a more positive light will prevent you from jumping to conclusions that may not be correct or appropriate.

It is important to remember that these are perspectives that you consciously decide to accept, rather than "truths" that are handed down to you. They are not intended to control how you perceive things, but rather to help you choose an interpretation of whatever signals you receive in a way that corresponds with *what you*

want to see. They do not override your Free Will – like the sinister messages of socialization – but rather reinforce it, because you know they are personal interpretations that you can use or ignore as you wish.

Our baseline should start with the universal truth of Free Will. No matter what the situation, we can always assume that we have power over our actions. If our circumstances seem to leave us no decision-making authority, then we are definitely misunderstanding the circumstances. We always have Free Will; therefore, we are never powerless. Situations may get beyond our control, but how we respond is always ours to control.

Logic dictates that we should also assume other people have the same power and personal authority that we have. What can be the positive effect of socialization, if not to make us realize that there are other Wills than our own? And if Free Will and perception are at the core of our own existence, it stands to reason that the same principles apply to everyone else. Therefore, everyone has the same right to make decisions as we do, based on their own understanding of events and their own personal values. If we keep this in mind, we will naturally treat other people with greater respect – not by acknowledging their power over us, but by not trying to claim power over them. And because we give people the power to assert their own Will, they will tend to respond to us more favorably. This reinforces our positive perspective on the world.

The next assumption we should try to make is that everyone is doing what they believe is right. This is really just an extension of our last assumption. Our goal in using Free Will is to choose the best possible actions to manifest who we are and what we believe in. It follows that if everyone else has Free Will, then they are probably trying to use it the same way. Despite the black-and-white, good and evil, interpretations that authorities so often give

us, most individuals don't deliberately choose to do evil for its own sake.

This doesn't mean you will only encounter good in the world. People may act in ways that you perceive as mean-spirited, ignorant, or reprehensible. But most likely, in their own minds, those people feel justified. We have seen that socialization can cause us to internalize beliefs and assumptions that may affect the way we act. If we assume that people are responding to events in the best way they can think of, we gain insight into their thinking and assumptions. As a result, we may choose a more sympathetic response to the situation.

This leads to another useful basic assumption: that we can understand the world correctly. We've already said *there is no incorrect interpretation* of reality, which means there can be no incorrect understanding. The only measure of correctness we need is how well our experiences fit the assumptions we make, and how much satisfaction and delight those experiences bring us. But at times, we may still encounter people who just don't seem to conform to our positive perspective. It may be impossible to see how such people are doing what they think is right, or to justify respecting their Free Will; but the point of these assumptions is not that they are universally correct, but rather that they are universally advantageous to consider. Our behavior does not have to conform with these beliefs all the time. Nothing has gone wrong if our positive assumptions prove false now and then. We can always choose to respond in whatever way seems most appropriate. But rather than see these negative encounters as evidence that the world really is evil, or that we really don't understand things correctly, we should simply see them as the anomalies they are. Individuals have Free Will, and that means people can do whatever they choose. Some people make terrible choices, but we shouldn't let their actions cause us to doubt our positive view of the world.

One final assumption to consider is that there may be a reason behind the experiences that come our way. This is not a religious, supernatural, or karmic perspective. It is simply a way of looking at life in terms of cause and effect. We have already seen that our understanding of the world derives from our past experiences. This means the things you have experienced so far have brought you to precisely this point, and to precisely the worldview that you have right now. And now that you are reading the ideas presented here, they are also being added to your experience and worked into your understanding. It makes sense that if you were not ready to consider these ideas, then you would have stopped reading by now. So to some extent your previous experiences have prepared you for encountering these ideas. And if you choose to apply these ideas in your life, you will be embarking on a new path of self-empowerment. It only makes sense to assume that your future experiences will be part of your growth in that process. They may test your inner strength, lead you to explore new issues, or reward your ability to manifest who you are.

The point is that you can think of your life as an ongoing story of growth and development toward some ultimate outcome. Every moment, every decision, every action is a step along that path, and while you live the path is always before you. You simply need to decide where it leads. Experience is the evolution of consciousness — your own, individual consciousness. Time will surely tell what you are evolving toward, but the only way to find out in the present is to act, to manifest your Free Will and see where it takes you. And with that, we can begin to look at how we decide what actions we should take.

Part III
The Body:
Breaking Loose and Manifesting Your
Own Life

Chapter 8: How to Make Decisions – The Principle of Integrity

"It is not about following the rules, or avoiding blame when you do wrong. Integrity is entirely a matter of understanding your own values and acting accordingly... You don't have to look anywhere beyond yourself to figure out how to behave, because integrity means acting the way you think you should, according to your own desires and beliefs. Free Will doesn't come from the outside."

So far our focus has been on perception. We've looked at how perception works and the outside factors that restrict it. We've also seen how these factors influence our decision-making, and we have looked at techniques for recognizing and mitigating these influences. We have learned how to evaluate the lessons of socialization, modify our self-talk, reprogram our autopilot, and reframe our perspective. All of this leads us to the fundamental purpose behind Free Will, and that is choosing free and independent actions. This is how we manifest the reality in which we live.

It should go without saying that you are the only person who can decide what you should manifest. A behavior works if you are satisfied with the outcome that it achieves; and if it works, you don't need to change it. It's not a matter of whether you think other people would be satisfied, or of how you think someone else would want you to feel about your action. Free Will means you decide what motivations are sufficient and acceptable. Your actions manifest who you are at your core. If you find that you are not happy with what your actions have brought about, then you must exercise your Free Will to do something about it.

This may seem a little daunting at first, because it means you can't just count on other people to tell you what's right and wrong. You have to decide for yourself, accept the consequences, and deal with the outcomes. There is no one to blame if you go wrong. On the other hand, there is no one standing in your way if you are right. You are free to manifest anything you set your mind to. You do it by choosing the actions that best bring about your desires. This is the only way to live a satisfying life.

Many of us have never given much thought to what we want to bring about. We were conditioned to look for guidance and obey authorities, and until now, we may have based our choices on simply meeting someone else's expectations. Society gives us so many sets of expectations to pursue that we can easily get lost in one outside distraction after another. But we need to find our own purpose. And if we're going to stay focused, we need to know what we really want. The principle of integrity is our best guidepost.

Integrity is defined as consistency between what you *want to* bring about and what you *actually do* bring about. So acting with integrity means following your own Free Will and bringing about what you want. If you act with integrity, you can be sure that your actions are truly your own, because by definition, an integrated action is a manifestation of your personal values. Therefore, integrity should be your guide in deciding how to respond to any situation. Acting with integrity is a four-stage process that consists of:

1. Comprehending your personal values,
2. Accurately judging how to manifest those values,
3. Acting in a way that reflects this judgment, and
4. Bringing about results that are in accordance with your desires

Before we go any further, please notice that the word, “morality” has not appeared anywhere in this text so far. Your guidepost for choosing actions with integrity is not in any external

code of conduct. Integrity is not based on religious laws or community standards. It is not about following the rules, or avoiding blame when you do wrong. Integrity is entirely a matter of understanding your own values and acting accordingly. This means you have the power. You don't have to look anywhere beyond yourself to figure out how to behave, because integrity means acting the way you think you should, according to your own desires and beliefs. Free Will doesn't come from the outside.

If you manifest your values in as many actions as possible, you will have a fulfilling life. It's that simple. You build self-esteem by bringing about the results you want to bring about. By acting with integrity, you make yourself into the person you want to be, you become the hero of your own story; you take charge of your life. When integrity works, you do things you can be proud of, because your actions reflect your personal values. So you can let go of guilt, remorse, insecurity, and any other negative feeling that prevents you from becoming what you are meant to be.

You can test the integrity of any decision by simply asking yourself one question: *am I willing to take ownership of this action and its effects?* If you choose to act with integrity, then your actions should reflect your best judgment about how to manifest your values. This is really the whole point of Free Will. After all, what's the use in having the power to choose if your choice cannot correspond with what you desire? If an action manifests your personal values, then you should be proud to acknowledge it as your own. If you are ashamed of your action, then you have compromised your integrity in some way, and you have not brought about results in accordance with your desires. The fourth step in the integrity process has failed. By looking back through the other stages of the process, you can find out where you went wrong and take steps to correct the situation in the future.

Step 3: Acting in a way that reflects your judgment

What ultimately counts in life are the actions we take. This is the point of the third phase in the integrity process. We must act. But there are significant challenges in trying to act in a way that reflects our values. The first challenge, as we have discussed earlier, is our tendency to slip into autopilot. If we respond automatically to a situation, we are probably not considering our personal values. Our actions therefore, will not reflect our best judgment and this will lead to loss of integrity. We cannot choose the best actions if we don't think about our options.

The second and perhaps greater challenge, is that we often hesitate to act, even if we know what to do. Most of our greatest regrets originate not in doing something wrong, but in failing to do what we know was right. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into circumstances that conflict with our inner values, and we don't act to correct that issue, we let ourselves down. We can never achieve integrity without building the resolve to act appropriately, in accordance with our own Will, when an opportunity comes. And if our action still turns out for the worst, we can always try to make amends. But such an outcome usually points to a problem in step two of the integrity process.

Step 2: Accurately judging how to manifest your values

Sometimes you may do what you think is appropriate, but still wind up ashamed of the action you chose. This reflects an error in part two of the process. Accurately judging how to manifest your values involves looking at two things: motivations, and intentions. In simple terms, motivations are the internal factors that generate the desire to act. They arise from your personal values, which your innermost self desires to see manifested. Intentions are the effects you want your actions to bring about, in response to your motivations. When you act with integrity, your

intentions reflect your personal values and therefore create the result that you truly desire.

For example, let's say you hurt someone's feelings. Your core values tell you that you should try to avoid hurting others unnecessarily, and since you know you have acted contrary to those values, you feel a sense of guilt. That guilt is your motivation; it drives you to do something about the situation. From that motivation arises the intention to make amends. The action you choose – such as apologizing – manifests your intention and thereby resolves your motivation by putting affairs back in line with your values. Fundamentally, this is how all decisions are made.

But the intention we develop in response to a motivation is based on our judgment, and sometimes we get it wrong. We may try to satisfy our motivations by asserting intentions that do not truly manifest our values. For example, if someone insults you, it triggers a motivation of anger, because your core values say that people should be treated with equal dignity and respect. You will be motivated to alleviate that feeling by re-establishing the sense of equality. But there are a number of ways to do so, and you must judge which will best resolve the situation.

You may decide to punch the person in the nose, causing reciprocal pain and undermining your enemy's dignity. Your intention in this case is still to re-establish equality, but you decide to do so by pulling the other person down from their superior position. If you think about this decision as a reflection of your intentions, you should realize that it is not the best means of satisfying your motivation, because it generates the same kind of action that motivated your response in the first place – namely, devaluing a person's dignity and respect. Choosing this response, therefore, does not manifest your core values, and represents a loss of integrity. The outcome will probably not be one you are proud of.

You may try to justify your actions, telling yourself that that your enemy deserved what he got. You may make angry generalizations about that person in order to convince yourself that he or she had no dignity and didn't deserve respect. You will do whatever you can to avoid empathizing with your enemy, so that you can maintain the illusion that you haven't really sacrificed your inner values.

Alternatively, you may tell yourself that you didn't really *intend* to cause harm, but that your enemy simply overreacted or misunderstood you. Going back to our earlier example of hurting someone's feelings, you might try to suppress your guilt by denying that you ever intended to cause harm. You will do whatever you can to recast your behavior in a positive light, so that you can maintain the illusion that you really didn't violate your core values.

Whether you try to convince yourself that you did nothing wrong, or that your wrong actions were really justified, you are ultimately denying the truth of your decision. It was a failure of judgment; and no matter how much you may rationalize it, you will feel inwardly unhappy about your experience. You cannot hide from yourself.

Integrity demands that you be honest about who you are and what you do. It is not necessarily wrong if you choose to act with hurtful intentions, so long as you are certain they really reflect your values. Integrity is not about doing what other people think is right, it's about being true to yourself. But to *know* you are being true to yourself, you must comprehend what your values really are.

Step 1: Comprehending your personal values

Your personal values are the principles you live by; they reflect your underlying beliefs about how things should be – how you should interact with the world and how it should interact with you. Only you can know what your values are, and so only you can know if your actions display integrity. Therefore, the most

important step in the integrity process is to comprehend your personal values. Without this knowledge, integrity collapses. You may accept Free Will and the power to change your behavior; but if you don't know your true values, how can you tell what behavior to adopt? How can you tell where to set your sites if you don't know where you are, or which direction you want to go? Unless you identify and embrace your personal values, you can never be more than a robot. You may be better tuned than most, but you will still be following someone else's script. Integrity only works if you figure out what you really believe in.

The process can be difficult. Socialization exerts tremendous influence over our behavior by forcing values on us and trying to make us accept them as our own. Questioning those values and the belief systems on which they are based can cause great deal of strife in our lives. This is especially so when our core beliefs differ from those endorsed by our families and communities. And yet, now that we recognize the responsibility that Free Will entails, we understand that the only acceptable choice we can make is the one that best reflects our values. That's what our lives are about. That's the game we're all playing, and it's the only game in town.

You can find out what your values are by recognizing where you have placed your focus. Author and motivational speaker, James Oviedo, suggests four questions for determining your focus:

1. How do you spend your discretionary time?
2. How do you spend your discretionary money?
3. Who are your heroes?
4. When you are alone, what do you think about the most?

If you answer each of these questions honestly, you will see what you have focused on in your life so far. The things you think about, the things you devote your time and resources to, are the things you value. The characteristics you seek to emulate in your heroes are the traits you value. Therefore, pursuing those things and

manifesting those traits should reflect your core values and lead to integrity in your actions.

If your evaluation of the integrity process leads you back to this point without revealing any errors or flaws in any of the steps, then it stands to reason that you have acted with integrity and brought about results in accordance with your desires. By definition then, you should be satisfied with your actions and your experience. But if you began your evaluation because you were *not* satisfied, then it can only mean that the values you are manifesting are not your true core values. On some level, you are still acting under the influence of socialization and conditioning.

You will need to go deeper in laying the foundations for your new self. You will have to get past the mental abstractions, and assess your true self. What do you really need in your life? What will bring you lasting contentment and not just another distraction? What are your highest aspirations? In essence, you need to start listening to your soul.

Chapter 9: Listening to the Soul – How to Find Personal Values You Really Care About

“Defining your personal values means figuring out what you truly believe, what you will stand up for no matter the consequences. It takes a brave and dedicated person to consciously pursue this task, but it is the fundamental heart of self-empowerment and the essence of Free Will.”

Perhaps your values have been based on a life of conflict. Until now, you may have been focused on maintaining the appearance of strength, hiding any weaknesses, and undermining your adversaries before they got the chance to harm you. You may find that the actions you've taken to manifest those values have brought about less than satisfactory results. They have forced you to stay always on your guard, wary of slipping up or allowing anyone to get too close. Perhaps you regret some of the things you have done as a result. And you may now see that the ultimate manifestation of your goal can never be achieved, because as you acquire more power over others, more people come to resent or envy you. And since there will always be other people to challenge you, it is impossible to rest or to truly enjoy what you have brought about in your life.

Alternatively, you may have taken your values from the materialistic messages of our celebrity culture. Perhaps you've tried to keep up with the latest trends, own the newest gadgets, or display all the right "bling." Now you may find that those values don't bring you lasting satisfaction because they require you to keep buying new things, looking ahead for the new hot items, and worrying about how you will afford them. Even if you gather enough of the right things to fit in or become the envy of your

peers, you may now see that you can never hold that position because the trends keep changing. Bigger and better versions keep coming out, and you always have to judge yourself against the other people around you.

These and other misplaced values can never be the source of true contentment, because instead of giving you lasting satisfaction, they draw you into a constant struggle to satisfy their requirements. There is no final piece of hot merchandise that will put you permanently on the cutting edge. There is no ultimate luxury experience that will let you know you have reached the pinnacle of success. There is no level of power and authority that will finally set you free from doubt and paranoia. We might be able to distract ourselves for years by pursuing these values, but they will always generate stress and dissatisfaction because they do not satisfy our innermost needs. The problem is that they are directed outward rather than inward. They focus on external circumstances that we are largely unable to control. Our core values should be self-directed. They should emphasize our circumstances; only then can we actually hope to achieve them in our experience.

The only way to truly live is to figure out what you desire in your life, and then strive to manifest that in the world. It's not as simple as just playing the role you think is expected of you. Defining your personal values means figuring out what you truly believe, what you will stand up for no matter the consequences. It takes a brave and dedicated person to consciously pursue this task, but it is the fundamental heart of self-empowerment and the essence of Free Will. Exploring your personal values is the most important and transformative effort you can undertake, because it is the source from which everything in your life ultimately arises.

We saw in Chapter 8 that motivations are an indicator of our core values. When our values are challenged, we feel motivated to take action and restore balance. Similarly, when our core values are acknowledged and manifested – for example when we respond

to our motivations with integrity – we experience a positive feeling of satisfaction and contentment. It makes sense then, that we can gain insight into what truly matters to us by paying attention to the motivations we feel. If we feel truly happy about a situation, it most likely reflects our values. And where we feel alienated, discontent, or trapped is where our values are being compromised. So think about what there is in your life that truly makes you feel content. When you identify a source, ask yourself why it appeals to you. What do you get from it? The answers will point you in the direction to uncover your inner values, but you will probably need to dig deeper to uncover the roots of your contentment. The process by which we evaluate our motivations and determine what lies at their root is called listening to the soul.

Keep in mind that we are not using "soul" in a metaphysical context here. It is simply a metaphor for an aspect of consciousness that could as well be described as the heart, or the gut. It refers to the source of our emotions, compassion, and conscience – the things that create our motivations. This inner source is called the soul because it fundamentally defines who we are, and yet it exists at a level that is beyond the power of our rational minds to fully comprehend. It is a mysterious, but nonetheless integral, part of the Self.

So when you identify something that makes you feel content with your life, you should evaluate that cause and see if it can be universalized. Can the same value, applied in other areas, generate the same positive feeling? Or are there some exceptions to the rule that might point to some more fundamental underlying element? When you have found a principle that gives you satisfaction in every case, you have discovered a core value.

For example, you may notice that you get contentment from your family life. You enjoy being in the presence of your family and being part of a family unit. You may therefore conclude that emphasizing the importance of family is one of your core

values. While that conclusion may be true, the real test is to try to universalize the principle. If family relationships are a core value, then you should feel positive emotions whenever you encounter a family member. But if there are members of your family you do not like to be around – those whose values are different from your own, or who make you feel uncomfortable – then the simple fact of being related by blood cannot really be the defining cause of your satisfaction. Similarly, you may feel a closer bond with certain friends than you do with certain family members. Does it give you greater satisfaction to spend time with family you dislike, than to spend it with friends you enjoy? If the answer is no, then there must be something besides mere family connections that causes your sense of contentment.

Thus, you may discover a more fundamental, underlying cause. Perhaps you enjoy your relationship with certain family members not merely because they are relatives, but because they acknowledge and value your contribution to the family dynamic. You sense that they appreciate you as a precious member of the group. That same mutual appreciation might also exist in close friendships, which therefore also generate a sense of contentment in your life. Because this element of being appreciated for what you contribute can be applied more universally – you feel contentment when you are appreciated and valued, regardless of your relationship to the person with whom you are interacting – it is a more accurate description of your core value.

And yet, there is probably an even deeper refinement to uncover; and again trying to universalize the value will help to reveal it. You may have friends and family who make you feel valued and appreciated, but only when you act within certain limits. Perhaps they expect you to share their worldview, or allow them to behave in ways that you find unappealing. Or perhaps there are issues you think are important, that they are unwilling to accept or discuss. In those cases, you probably do not get the same sense of

contentment, even though you may know you are appreciated. The root cause of your satisfaction, therefore, must be not so much that you are appreciated, but what you are appreciated for; your valued contributions must be the things you really want to contribute. Feeling that you are appreciated for your sacrifices is one thing, but knowing that you are appreciated for being who you want to be and doing what you want to do – is something else entirely.

That value can be universalized. Any relationship that allows you to truly pursue your own desires, and to know that what you do is acknowledged and cherished, will generate a sense of contentment. That relationship may be with a family member, a friend, or even a stranger who truly seems to care about your interests and ambitions. It applies in every case. And so you discover that your sense of satisfaction and contentment emerges when you know you are free to express your innermost self. Your core value, therefore, is really personal autonomy. It is knowing you are empowered to bring about anything you want.

Note that the same conclusion can be reached if you evaluate your negative emotions. You can trace them back to your personal values by asking, why the situation upsets you. If you universalize the source of your negative feelings, you will find that they come down to lack of power. They emerge when you are unable to bring about your Will, when you are restricted from expressing who you truly are, or when you are forced to behave according to someone else's desires instead of your own. When you reach this conclusion, you have essentially come upon personal autonomy from the other side. Just as having your Free Will acknowledged and accepted generates positive feelings, so having it denied or constrained generates negative feelings.

We now have the last piece of the puzzle in place; and the big picture it reveals is the same fundamental reality we began with: Free Will. Free Will is real; it is the defining essence and purpose of our lives as conscious human beings. We cannot help but express it

in our every action, and our greatest satisfaction comes from doing so as fully and as truly as we can. That's all we really need to think about. That's all we really need to do. And if we can stay focused on that one thing, we can change the world for ourselves, and for everyone who encounters us in their lives.

Chapter 10: Bumps in the Road – How to Deal With Other People

"You decide if the message is worthwhile, and if it is, then you don't need anyone else to confirm or approve your belief. Your purpose is to create the life you want to live, not to convince others that you are right."

Without a doubt, we will all meet resistance in our efforts to manifest Free Will. It is a constant challenge. When we choose to create our own lives and reject the demands that external forces place on us, we may find that the people around us resent our change of heart. They may still hold to social, religious, or cultural norms that we no longer consider meaningful; and the effects of socialization and conditioning may make it difficult for them to acknowledge our new perspectives. Moreover, our own socialization will provide powerful incentive to set aside our desires in order to maintain relationships or avoid conflict. But integrity demands that – unless accepting those external pressures is a free-willed decision that truly corresponds with our own core values – we must hold fast to who we truly are.

Trying to ignore our Free Will and surrender our values is doomed to failure, because each of us is our own reality. The only things we can truly know are who we are and what we feel – everything else is a perception, an assumption. And we cannot deal with reality by pretending it is other than what it is. Like the addict who denies he has a problem, we experience more and more evidence of the truth, until we finally choose to accept it. Free Will is our reality, our inner selves desire to be manifested and drive us to make it so. We may spend years trying to make our lives conform to some external set of values, but we will never escape

the knowledge that something is missing until we accept who we really are and start making our actions our own.

We don't need to convince other people of our right to choose for ourselves. We don't need their approval. We need to be ourselves as individuals, and let others decide how they want to respond. We cannot control their choices, we cannot make them understand us, or accept us, or believe as we do. We can only acknowledge their freedom to do as they will, and respond to their actions in accordance with our own values.

This leads to another significant obstacle to overcome. Once we have begun to reclaim our Free Will, we recognize that most of people around us are still on autopilot – still pursuing what they're told is valuable, still focused on what they're told is important, still obeying those they believe have authority over them. We can only feel sympathy for such people, because we realize that their dissatisfaction, their useless struggles, their self-imposed limitations would be relieved if they could just perceive things differently. This compassion is well founded, because the suffering that plagues most people is indeed self-generated; it emerges from misunderstanding the true nature of our existence, from rejecting our Free Will.

But it is a mistake to try and force people around to our point of view. We all live our own lives, and it is up to each of us to discover what is important and decide how to pursue it. No one should be forced onto a path that they are not ready and willing to tread. Indeed, that is the underlying problem with using socialization to instill belief systems. If we try to convince people to embrace their Free Will, we find ourselves having to argue with those who are simply not ready to accept the idea. This can only undermine our own confidence in the process and lead to loss of integrity if we carry our efforts too far.

The power of a message isn't derived from how many people believe it, but from how we personally experience it. Free

Will is not a religion that depends on millions of followers performing the same rituals every day; it's a philosophy whose measure of value is its effectiveness in your life. You decide if the message is worthwhile, and if it is, then you don't need anyone else to confirm or approve your belief. Your purpose is to create the life you want to live, not to convince others that you are right. The former is enough of a challenge; but it is one you have the power to achieve, because it focuses on the one thing you control – yourself. It is a personal quest for self-empowerment and fulfillment. In pursuing it, you will serve as an example to others, and perhaps you will attract people who want to know how you have done it. But because the message is that people can think and act in any way that makes sense to them, it simply cannot be forced on anyone. We must all realize it for ourselves.

In dealing with other people, we should therefore try to be compassionate and open. We should let others act according to their Free Will. But above all, we should respond to each person and each situation with integrity, expressing our selves and our values as fully as we can. That's really all we can do, and it is enough.

Once we realize that we create the world around us through our conscious perceptions and our deliberate actions, we are finally able to take up the real business of living – that is pursuing our ultimate aspirations, creating the lives we want and the world we want, finding and fulfilling our destinies. And now it is time to embrace the complete freedom that is not only our birthright, but which is already the true state of our existence. What we choose to do with it is for each of us to decide. We are all the heroes of our own stories.

Part IV
The Spirit:
A View of the Path Ahead

Epilogue: Sticking to the Path – Simple Guidelines to Keep Us on Track

And so the whole thing comes full circle. We see that Free Will is the underlying reality of our existence; and once we acknowledge that fact, it comes to define our values. When we begin to manifest those values through the integrity process, we make ourselves the heroes of our life stories. No matter what course we then choose, we will derive greater satisfaction from our lives because we will be making them what we want them to be.

We become the evaluators, the deciders, the creators. We take responsibility for finding and manifesting our true selves. It all comes down to the words inscribed at the ancient Oracle of Delphi – *Know Thyself*. The process lasts a lifetime, and the challenges are always before us... but so are the solutions. As we step forward to take up this great quest for self-fulfillment, there are a few essentials we should always try to remember. Everything we have seen in this text can be boiled down to these few guidelines. Keep them in mind and you cannot fail.

1. Free Will is our fundamental reality. It is the root of empowerment, and the foundation of self-esteem. It can never be taken away.
2. Every action is a decision, even when that decision is to obey someone else.
3. Socialization is a positive effort, too often applied ineptly. Try not to judge authorities too harshly, but hold firm to your Free Will.
4. Power is the ability to get others to carry out your wishes. It can only be given, by Free-Willed individuals who choose to do as you ask.

5. Certainty is an illusion that misleads the foolish. All understanding is open to interpretation.
6. Negative self-talk is our greatest enemy. It makes us feel guilty, weak, and insecure; and it leads to our manipulation.
7. Assume the best about yourself and others. Most people are good and mean well, though they may misunderstand what that means.
8. Integrity is Free Will's ultimate expression. Manifest your values in every choice, and do not fail to act. That is life's challenge.
9. Personal autonomy is our core value. Ensure that it is acknowledged, and you will find contentment. Acknowledge it in others, and you will find peace.
10. A person standing in front of you is more than the sum of any labels you put on him, and more important. Let him be what he is.

And now, you are in the driver's seat – as you have always been. Take control, decide where you want to go, and most of all, enjoy the trip.

