

CHAPTER TEN

Conscious Choice

*“Take your life in your own hands, and what happens?
A terrible thing: no one to blame.”*

Erica Jong

Walking Your Own Yellow Brick Road

Transported from her home and her comfortable frame of reference, Dorothy embarked on a path of discovery that took her to the strange Land of Oz on the other side of the rainbow. After she inadvertently killed a wicked witch, she was thanked by a grateful “good witch,” who awarded her the ruby slippers of the dead witch. Thus began her journey of self-revelation. Toward its end, she consciously faced and destroyed Oz’s foremost villain, the wicked Witch of the West. Finally unlocking the secret of personal fulfillment, Dorothy found that she was the only person who could get her what she desired most—a way back home. Her gift, the ruby slippers she had worn since the very beginning of her journey, was the key to get back to Kansas.

As you move down your personal yellow brick road, you are more likely to enjoy the journey as your range of choice increases. While it may not get you to Oz more quickly, the ability to make conscious choices will ensure that you are more mature and less naïve when you get there. A naïve woman continues to make poor choices. The only path toward consciousness is through the heart.

Life is fundamentally a journey of consciousness, a state of growing awareness. William Jennings Bryan said, “Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not something to be waited for, but rather something to be achieved.”

The beauty of developing awareness of human behavior patterns is that you can gain insight into your own way of seeing and responding to life’s ups and downs. If you change your belief system and begin to live positively in uncertainty, you can face each day with faith that you will be provided for in every way. Though coping mechanisms fluctuate from helpful to detrimental, they ultimately prevent us from creating our best selves. Let us hope that your desire for a new way of functioning is stronger than your desire to cling to old defenses. Your inner observer is ready and present when higher consciousness expresses itself.

I Want What I Want

The greatest freedom in life is that of choice. The single most powerful investment you can ever make in life is in yourself. Your goal should be to add choices so you can define a different and positive pattern. This is the essence of growth. Establishing a constructive framework signals a useful course of action.

Any increase in choice is an increase in opportunity. This makes choice a precious gift: the gift of independent thought and action. Carol S. Pearson writes in *The Hero Within*, “Most of us are slaves of the stories we unconsciously tell ourselves about our lives. Freedom begins the moment we become conscious of the plot line we are living and, with this insight, recognize that we can step into another story altogether. Our experiences of life quite literally are defined by our assumptions. We make up stories about the world and to a great degree live out their plots.”

You alone are responsible for the design of your life. The choices you make become your road map. Once you develop a personal voice and move beyond conventional limited roles, you will develop the courage to act upon your personal purpose. By honing the specific behaviors of courage, you can transcend personal and societal barriers to succeed in whatever arenas you choose.

Designing a language of courage offers a whole new perspective of choices available to you. Alexandra Stoddard writes in *Making Choices: Discover the Joy in Living the Life You Want to Lead*, “If we’re willing to make difficult decisions that define our character, decisions that come straight from the heart, and we’re also willing to take responsibility for the consequences of actions, we will discover that choice is what guides our personal destiny.”

Being alive necessitates responding to the stresses and opportunities that come your way. When courage is consciously nurtured and strengthened, you are infused with the feminine energy to exert the power of choice. You can speak up, maintain your boundaries, and adhere to your beliefs. When courage is collectively harnessed, it becomes an instrument for redefinition of self.

Every year I jog the “Race for the Cure” to raise funds to fight breast cancer. When it first came to my hometown, the turn out was mediocre. Now the event is tremendously popular. The feeling generated by the women (and men) who support this cause is overwhelming. I seem to run a little faster now that the hope for a cure is shared publicly by so many. The collective energy defines the moment.

The goal of life is to invent and create, not to simply get by. It takes will and choice to break out of your behavior pattern. Stephen Covey states in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Between stimulus and response, man has the freedom to choose. Within the freedom to choose are those endowments that make us uniquely human—self-awareness; imagination (the ability to create in our minds beyond our present reality); conscience (a deep inner awareness of the principles that govern our behavior, and a sense of the degree to which our thoughts and actions are in harmony with them); and independent will (the ability to act based on our self-awareness, free of all other influences). Once you have decided on your highest priorities, conscious choice takes over. It is the ability to act rather than to be acted upon.”

Dorothy and the Cowardly Lion fell asleep in the poppy field because the wicked witch had cast a poisonous spell on them. Most of us want to sleepwalk through life. We have fallen asleep to our essential self. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the good witch wakes up Dorothy and the Lion by making it snow so they can continue their

journey to Oz. Change takes hard work. We must wake up and use conscious choice to follow our own yellow brick road.

Your Feminine Energy: A Force to Be Reckoned With

The Latin word for energy is *virs*, meaning energy. Our feminine energy is the power of our hearts and spirits to choose courage as a way of living. Choosing courage means not needing to be defined by the opinions of others or to gain the approval of others. Each journey begins by choosing new thoughts and attitudes and describing them through language.

Conscious choice requires taking responsibility for the experiences you create. You do many things out of habit. Sometimes the choices are little ones, such as deciding to honk your horn in irritation at another driver. Or they may be big ones, such as spreading malicious gossip about another person. These decisions affect the outcome of your life. Managing your choices is a full-time job.

Joseph Jaworski said in *Synchronicity*, “I discovered that people are not really afraid of dying; they’re afraid of not ever having lived, not ever having deeply considered their life’s higher purpose, and not ever having stepped into that purpose and at least tried to make a difference in this world.”

Discovering life’s higher purpose requires courage. To see your purpose clearly is the gift of insight. Fulfilling that purpose requires even more courage.

You may deceive yourself into believing that choice can be enjoyed without responsibility. William H. Nix writes in *Character Works*, “The freedom to choose brings with it the mantle of responsibility. True freedom of choice does not exist without responsibility. Responsibility does not exist without a standard, or set of standards. It is the standard that creates the need for responsibility. The standard is a person’s purpose.”

Hopefully, all of us have some awareness of our specific purpose. To live on purpose means not by accident. One way to start the process of discovery is to simply ask yourself: “What is my purpose here on this earth?” and “What am I to do with my life?” The answer to these questions provides insight and help you to discover your heart’s desire.

You may experience a certain amount of fear when you discover your pattern of behavior as unraveled in Chapter Seven, Self-Discovery. When you realize your pattern of thinking and behavior, observe a breakdown, and design a new language, you should be motivated to change your choices. Learning is the catalyst for maintaining focus on your purpose.

All of which reminds me of a joke: How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to be willing to be changed. To change your choices, consider calling upon virtue of courage. It takes courage to experience life in a new and different way.

Courage is not a tangible commodity. Americans are addicted to material things: cars, houses, clothing, etc. Courage, however, is an inner-essence like love, creativity, and energy. Although you cannot buy it in a store, it is one of the most valuable possessions on earth. Without courage, we could never learn from our

mistakes. Rita Mae Brown in *Rubyfruit Jungle* says the definition of insanity is doing the same thing, but expecting a different result.

Sue Patton Thoele, therapist and author of several books, shared with me In an interview, “No matter how much we learn the language of courage or how much we change our behavior, I am not sure we’ll automatically be courageous one-hundred percent of the time. Fear is woven into the very fiber of our DNA—perhaps from the burning times (fifteenth-to seventeenth century Europe).” Women were tortured during the burning times, and their courage was ripped away. Women were made to mistrust each other. She says, “But I do think one of the most courageous things we can do is to realize that we may have to re-choose and re-choose and re-choose to consciously act in new ways. Every once in a while we’ll say, ‘Hey, I just did that spontaneously.’ Then we should congratulate ourselves, underscoring the behavior so that we’ll be more likely to choose it again when presented with similar circumstances or feelings.” With this approach women can erase the mistrust that was imprinted into in our souls through torment, and trust each other again. To love each other is all there is time for.

At the moment you realize courage, you become fully identified with it. This connection reinforces your courage. Eventually, you will consciously feel the kinship, recognize the language, and realize you are living courageously.

I Want My Dream Back!

As a young girl, you had a dream about your future. But, perhaps the winds of fate blew you off course. The truth is, your life’s journey depends on how closely your inner map matches the language of your outer reality. Surrendering some of your personality defenses such as pride, blame, humiliation, or greed, can facilitate change. The ultimate purpose of such surrender is to heal your judgments about yourself and see yourself anew. The fundamental goal: seek endless compassion, diminish old assessments, and use courage as a personal compass to direct your choices. Each day contributes in a meaningful way to the vision of your whole life. Manifesting your personal vision conveys courage.

By owning and applying courage, women can make choices that lead to more satisfying lives as well as empowering themselves to make a significant impact on the lives of their daughters, nieces, students, or other woman in their lives. Recapturing the original meaning of courage—to act from one’s heart—can stimulate your resolve in daily life. Thoele says, “The most courageous thing for us women to do is unearth our own authenticity with love, compassion, and gentleness. We need to learn to live gently with others and ourselves (although not wimpily). Doing so makes us stronger.

Making choices that expand our lives offers a richness of living—a different way of moving through life. It is the difference between living narrowly or broadly. Issues that arise in our lives do not announce they are coming. We must make choices. Embracing supportive virtues such as courage guides us down a path that allows us to live our own truth.

The Face of Courage

Courage exhibits four distinct faces:

- (1) **Courage is an invisible shield** of the heart offering us choices on how to create our lives. It can be called upon when facing any situation.
- (2) **Courage is a self-generated perspective** available to each of us and providing the strength to take whatever action we desire.
- (3) **Courage is a support** that strengthens our posture as we walk through life. Embracing its language provides a broad array of choices that allows us to create our lives in a different way.
- (4) **Courage is a tool** wielded by the heart and drawn upon to approach the difficulties that arise in life.

Life's Challenges

The faces of courage change with the circumstances in our life. In Chapter Three, you read about Myrna's military experience in Desert Storm. In the military she used courage as a shield to protect herself from the human suffering she witnessed. Once retired from the Army she faced a new challenge—motherhood. Again, she drew upon her courage to support her in this new challenge. While both responsibilities were different, fear and anxiety accompanied each. With motherhood, she constantly questioned herself: “Am I feeding my daughter right?” “Am I holding her correctly?” “Am I responding quickly enough when she cries?” and “Am I interpreting her cry right?” Myrna wanted to fulfill to her daughter's needs, but her anxiety was extreme, particularly when the reason for the baby's crying could not be determined.

Myrna discovered that her courage was readily available to meet the challenge of motherhood. She said, “I could continue experiencing feelings of self-doubt, or I could be courageous and do the best I could.” She coached herself to review the internal voice of self-doubt. She said, “That's where the choice aspect comes in. Was I courageous or not? I would make the choice to be courageous—except for the days when I chose not to. On those days I would sit myself down and cry with the baby. But I did it consciously!” To be courageous or not is a choice. When you are at choice with courage, there is more of you.

Myrna has learned to recognize her emotions and their effect on her choices. She is able to identify the steps she needs to take to improve her situation, such as asking her husband for help. She knows her strengths and limitations. She has the determination and commitment to get a job done. These competencies are the building blocks to courage. Myrna says, “When I am courageous, I know what I want to do; I know there are obstacles, but my courage gets me through. That's where I pull from my intelligence, my motivation, and everything else.” The two components of courage for her are self-awareness and choice.

While working full time, Myrna attends graduate school to complete a master's program in counseling, and does not make excuses for not being a perfect new mom. After all, it's a hard job. But she recognizes and calls upon her courage when the going gets tough. And she intends to structure a language that conveys and

distinguishes courage for her daughter, because she believes that utilizing courage builds character.

Like Dorothy in Oz, we travel down the uncertain road of life, we are attentive to the lessons learned in each new experience, we can activate our innate feminine energy that enables us to face challenges and to respond appropriately in accepting new opportunities. We do not want to fall asleep in the poppy field and later wonder if we missed our higher purpose. George Konrad said, "Courage is only an accumulation of small steps." At the end of the journey, our words, our choices, and our actions reveal whether we followed our hearts.

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