

Independence Day - Free Your Mind

By Kathy Paauw

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"Happiness, like unhappiness, is a proactive choice."
-Stephen Covey

I saw the movie Pearl Harbor over Memorial Day weekend. It served as a good reminder of the tremendous cost of freedom. There is also a tremendous cost to not having freedom.

In a physical sense, most of us enjoy freedom. In an emotional or psychological sense, however, an estimated 80% of the population puts themselves into a self-imposed prison cell on a regular basis. We forfeit our freedom of choice through our own thought processes. I frequently hear my clients say, "I have to" or "I gotta" or "I should" And when I hear those phrases I often ask, "Do you have to or do you choose to?" There are very few things in life that we have to do. Yet some of us forfeit our choice to the point of seeing our options in life as limited. This generally leads to a feeling of hopelessness.

There are indeed times when you are not at choice. When you are not at choice, you may be a victim. And sometimes you might slip into the victim role when, in fact, you do have choices. The first step toward getting out of a self-imposed victim role is to recognize the choices you have.

Exercise Your Free Will

"Independent will is our capacity to act. It gives us the power to transcend our paradigms, to swim upstream, to rewrite our scripts, to act based on principle rather than reacting based on emotion or circumstance."
-Stephen Covey

We have been given the ability to examine our conscious thoughts and choose how we react in any given situation. We learn at a very early age that if we act a certain way, we

will achieve a certain result.

Often the result we opt for is safety. And safety is necessary to preserve our physical well-being. However, our desire to be "safe" sometimes paralyzes our ability to exercise our free will. From childhood on, most of us have been programmed to "play it safe," and this often affects the choices we make as adults. We tell ourselves, "That was so disappointing before, so I better not take that chance again."

Do you allow your fear of hurt, rejection, or failure to determine how much risk you are willing to take? What is the cost of doing this? Perhaps you're stuck in a job or career path you hate, or you are in a relationship that does not serve you, or you've chosen not to pursue a relationship you want. Do you struggle with low self-esteem and self-confidence? If so, you are probably severely hampering your ability to manifest what you want in your life by convincing yourself that you should not try, or that you do not deserve what you really want. Our choices are strongly influenced by our disempowering emotions. By learning to recognize and step out of experiencing these emotions, a whole new world of possibility will be available to you.

I know this from personal experience. For 13 years I chose to stay in a stressful career that I did not find fulfilling. The more time I invested in that career path, the less at choice I felt. At one point I took an exam to receive a special certification in my field. When I passed the exam and was certified, I felt like there was no turning back! I told myself, "I can't leave this field now look how much I've invested in it!" And besides, I had no idea what else I could possibly do. Fear held me back, until one day the pain of not making a change outweighed the fear of the unknown.

Susan Jeffers, author of *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, teaches us how to stop negative thinking patterns and reeducate our minds to think more positively. In her book, she shows us how to risk a little every day, how to turn every decision into a "No-Lose" situation, and much more.

When my clients focus on their values -- what is most important to them at the core -- they are more at choice and less at effect. They recognize that they have the freedom to choose based on their own values, versus being influenced by limiting beliefs, circumstances, or the opinions of others. One of the great joys of being a coach is that I get to journey with my clients as they create the work and play they are most passionate about. When passion and talents/skills intersect, there is no limit to the possibilities!

Inside-Out Thinking

"If your success is not on your own terms, if it looks good to the world but does not feel good in your heart, it is not success at all." -Anna Quindlen

Most of us grew up with an "outside-in" model of thinking. In other words, we have been influenced by the advice and opinions of others rather than trusting the answers from within. When we follow the outside-in model, the results do not usually bring about a deep level of satisfaction or fulfillment. Outside-in thinking means that we try to change, improve, or transform ourselves and our circumstances based on what others think. Outside-in thinking represents a reactive model, based on external circumstances. Not only is this less effective, but it usually takes more effort and energy.

The "inside-out" model of thinking represents a proactive model, which is based on accessing one's own internal wisdom and core values. The word "proactive" means more than merely taking initiative. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen. When we align our actions with the essence of who we are and what we value most, we are using the inside-out model. As each of us more fully honors our essential selves and our values, outer conditions begin to change, improve, and even transform.

One of the best illustrations of the power of "inside-out" came to me when I was a child. I went to see the movie *Papillon*. For those not familiar with this story, Henri Charriere was a Frenchman who was convicted in 1931 of a murder he did not commit. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he spent 12 years in the penal colony of French Guiana. After eight unsuccessful attempts to escape, he finally got away to Venezuela. More than 20 years later, when he was 60, Charriere wrote his story, which became an international best seller and was made into a movie. One scene from the movie has stuck with me all these years. Charriere was locked in a dark, small cell in solitary confinement almost 24 hours a day. The only living things sharing the tiny prison cell with him were the roaches. He chose to make these roaches his "friends" and actually looked forward to seeing them on the occasions when a beam of light would come into his cell so he could see.

Now, if you're like me, I was taught that roaches were not my friends. This scene in the movie taught me a very important lesson in life: It is not our circumstances that make or break us, but rather our response to those

circumstances. Jack Canfield illustrates this beautifully in his book, *How to Build High Self-Esteem*, by sharing this simple equation: E (experience) + R (response) = O (outcome).

In Charriere's case, the experience was that he was imprisoned in solitary confinement in a very small roach-infested cell with little or no light. The response was that he chose to think of the roaches as welcomed guests in his home -- his way of honoring his own value of having companionship in his life. The outcome was that he was able to maintain his sanity by inviting the roaches to provide him with the companionship he so desperately craved while in solitary confinement. Had Charriere's response been different, I'm certain he would have experienced a completely different outcome. As I recall, the movie paralleled Charriere's life with that of another prisoner in the same penal colony. Although the two prisoners shared similar experiences, their responses were quite different. The other man ended up losing his sanity and dying during an attempt to escape.

Although we may never find ourselves in Charriere's circumstances, I believe most of us are mentally imprisoned by our own response to experiences in our lives. When we experience emotions like fear, anger, and jealousy, we have chosen thoughts that put us in the smallest of jail cells. These emotions completely paralyze our freedom of choice.

We have the ability to be completely at choice about how we see things, how we feel, and what we do as a result. In Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, he explains how these things are all connected: Our paradigms -- the lens through which we view things -- inform our thoughts. Our thoughts inform our feelings. Our feelings inform our response. Our response affects the outcome. This explains how two people working from different paradigms can experience the same event and yet experience completely different outcomes. To illustrate, Stephen Covey tells of an experience he once had:

Mr. Covey was sitting on a New York subway one quiet Sunday morning when a man and his children got on his subway car. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, while his children immediately began yelling back and forth, throwing things, and even grabbing people's papers. Although the children were being very disruptive, the father made no attempt to control his kids. It appeared that he was oblivious to the situation. Covey grew more irritated by the minute. Clearly everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So Covey finally turned to the man and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?" The father lifted

his gaze as he became conscious to the situation, and he said, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either."

At this point, Covey shifted from feeling irritated and judgmental to feeling compassion, concern, and empathy. In other words, as Covey got more information, it shifted his paradigm, which shifted the way he thought about the situation, which shifted his feelings about the man and his children. And all of these shifts helped Covey to choose a different response, which changed the outcome for both Covey and the other man.

During the month of July, as the U.S. celebrates its 225th year of independence, let's give pause to consider how each of us can be liberated by our own choices and live our lives more intentionally.

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