

Choose Happiness

By Donald Schnell

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By Donald Schnell

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It's a beautiful spring day in Beverly Hills, California. I'm looking out my window at elm trees in full leaf and roses in full bloom, and thinking about the people who helped me get where I am today.

Mark Johnson was the kind of guy some people love to hate. He was always in a great mood and always had something positive to say. When he saw you, he enthusiastically boomed, "Hello, my friend!" When you asked him how he was, he nearly shouted, "I'm on top of the world!" I was sometimes a little embarrassed by his noisy exuberance, but I was glad he was my friend.

Mark was a unique worker at the Phelps Dodge Copper Mine in my home town of Ajo, Arizona. The miners followed him around. Because of his attitude, he was a natural motivator. If one of the guys was having a bad day, Mark was there to help him see the bright side of any situation. Once I remember him taking one of the men to the bank with him after work. I later learned that Mark had personally given over half his check to help that man cover his family's medical bills. It wasn't the first time Mark had done this. Many could testify to his generosity.

And those were tough times for copper miners in the 1970's-with only a decade left before the mine would close, and Ajo would turn into a ghost town

Mark Johnson and I worked in the Smelter-the OVEN. Hot enough to melt gold. Hot enough to melt your shoes...it was Hell.

Mark's positive approach to life made me curious, so one day I asked him, "I don't get it! Everyone grumbles and complains about the hard work, the heat, and the low wages. Everyone but you. No one can be a positive person all the time. How do you do it?"

Mark had a quick answer, and a quicker smile, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'Mark, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood.' Don, I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. Don, I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. Don, I choose the positive side of life."

"Yeah, right, it's not that easy," I protested.

"Yes, it is," Mark said. "Life is all about choices. Every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to each situation. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: it's your choice how you live life."

My job in the mines that summer was challenging. I was only 19 years old after all. I was home for the summer to try to make enough money for my sophomore year at Arizona State.

Challenging? That is a major understatement. My assignment: to shovel from the top of the OVEN the metallic soot that would build up on the roof. It took a shovel and an industrial strength vacuum cleaner to do the job. Life threatening? Yep!

That OVEN had to be clean or it might collapse. We worked in crews of two-man teams. For safety, we strapped wooden platforms beneath our shoes. As we worked we kept an eye on our platforms, and if they started to smoke, we jumped off the OVEN before our shoes caught fire. The top of the OVEN was the hottest, because heat rises. I resented when Mark was transferred to the ICE HOUSE. He was going to work in the coolest place in Arizona during that infernal summer. Why not me? He now had one of the nicest jobs you

could get in that fiery Hell called a copper mine. Why not me?

Things change. The miners went on strike. Mark came to me in great distress. It was the first time I'd ever seen him upset. "Don," he said, "I've got to work. I'm going to have to be a scab. I have a family to feed. My wife Becky is 8 months pregnant." Tough decision. The toughest.

In Ajo, an innocent child of a scab was once shot to death. Countless are the brutal stories I can recall of how scabs were severely beaten, crippled or killed for their decision to cross the picket line. Mark had nowhere to turn. Copper mining was the only industry in that town 100 miles from civilization. He had no money to move, no money to travel. Sadly, I supported him in his decision. What else could I do?

The next day was ugly. Hundreds of angry miners lined up to taunt, jeer and protest the few scabs who showed up to work. Mark hung his head in shame as he drove through the picket line in a company truck with armed escorts. The decision to work was fatal. But not because of the miners' hatred of scabs. Mark was assigned my job to clean the top of the OVEN. The same I'd worked on only days before. That day, witnesses saw the OVEN collapse, and my friend Mark was instantly incinerated.

Mark's death had a major impact on me. It could have been my life that was taken by that OVEN. I was a kid, and I hurt. Worst of all, I felt guilty for resenting his time in the Ice House. I felt guilty for not always welcoming his positive outlook. But, now he was gone. His family was fatherless. Because his last work was that of a scab, he was counted as a temporary worker, and the family lost all his benefits. It was a tragedy I couldn't handle. The fire of that oven burned inside my gut. I had to turn my anger, my guilt, and my sadness and pain into something positive.

I reflected on Mark's upbeat philosophy and decided that I could best honor him by being like him, and focusing on the good in my life.

Mark's untimely death taught me a valuable lesson. Life is short. There is no telling when we will be called to take the Great Adventure. Each day of our lives is precious. Mark was 100% right. Each day is a choice. You and you alone decide what kind of day you will have. You can choose to be happy or sad, loving or hateful. Enlightenment is all about choice. What choice are you going to make today? Remember my friend Mark this week and make the choice to be happy.

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