

Chapter 13 The Personal Victory

We, the people, currently control everything that needs to be changed in order to build a more sustainable, higher quality of life, for us as individuals as well as for society as a whole. But, more importantly, we have the power to change our own lives. As individuals, we may not be able to see how we can bring about the changes we would like to see in government or in the broader economy or society; but, we know we can change ourselves. For most of us at least, our individual lives could be made far better if we would simply “step off of the treadmill, get out of the rat race,” and start living a life of harmony and balance. Our common sense tells us that more cheap stuff will not make us happy.

We need stronger, more harmonious relationships with other people – within our families, our communities, and our nations. We live in a society where mental depression has become epidemic. The fundamental cause of mental depression is failed relationships. Certainly some are depressed due to physical disabilities, but most are depressed because they lack positive human relationships. Most of us are not starving, we have adequate clothing and shelter, and we have adequate transportation and healthcare -- we do not want for the basic physical needs. We could quite likely improve our quality of life by spending a good bit more time and effort on building positive relationships with other people.

We also have the power to reclaim the ethical and moral dimensions of our lives. The vast majority of people admit that they believe in some higher power or some higher order of things to which we humans must conform; most of us admit to being spiritual. Yet, we have been shamed and coerced into compartmentalizing our lives. We are told that we can't allow our ethical and moral values to interfere unduly with our work or with our civic involvement. But deep down we know that we are whole people – we can't separate our ethical values from our relationships with other people or from what we do for a living. Most of us have felt that we had to compromise at least some of our ethical or moral principles in order to earn a decent living or have an impact in the political area. In fact, if most of us had not compromised our values, we wouldn't have the problems with our economic and political systems that we have today. We have rationalized that the economic and social benefits outweighed the moral costs. But we have suffered, perhaps unknowingly, as a consequence of such rationalization.

We didn't have to compromise our principles; we simply choose to do so. Deep down inside we know that our lives would be better if we quit compromising and began living and working according to our principles

and values. We need to begin living lives of harmony and balance. We have the power to enhance our quality of life, and we can begin using that power today – if we can find the courage to do so.

By John Ikerd, from “Crisis and Opportunity in North American Agriculture,” a paper presented at a farm conference, “Recapturing Wealth on the Canadian Prairies,” Brandon, Manitoba, October 26-27, 2000.

I cannot tell you how to achieve your personal victory. We each must find our own way. We can learn from studying different maps as we attempt to choose our best route. But, each path will be a bit different because no one can be sure of the way. Our path will be a unique path and our victory will be uniquely ours.

Many people today are searching for something better from life. Every popular bookstore has a major section of self-help books. In addition, self-help themes take up significant portions of other sections, such as those devoted to business, psychology, health, relationships, spirituality, and new age. Every author claims to have something a bit better to offer readers seeking more rewarding and fulfilling lives. Admittedly, for any given individual, at a particular time in life, one may be a bit better than are the others. But, most simply offer different arrangement of pretty much the same basic principles, values, thoughts, and actions.

Many such books offer the old tried and true values of industrial era thinking, with victory defined as material success. They focus on telling us how to become wealthy – in the corporate world, in the stock market, through individual entrepreneurship, or through the power of personal relationships. Invariably, they suggest some variation to the old linear sequential industrial process. They exhort us to assess our opportunities, set goals, develop measurable objectives, develop a plan, devise a strategy, make decisions, take actions, monitor progress, and make strategic course corrections until we achieve our objectives. When all of our objectives are achieved, we will have achieved our goal.

It doesn't seem to matter whether the goal is to become a self-made millionaire by the time you're thirty or to marry a rich husband or wife, the road to success is pretty much the same. Know where you are today, know where you want to go, have a rational plan for getting there, and then proceed through a logical, sequential process until you reach your destination. For years, I taught this same basic approach to farming and family economics.

Today, however, a growing number of self-help gurus are choosing from a different set of values, and are creating new arrangements of thoughts, habits, and actions in the pursuit of a more holistic, dynamic concept of success. These new *life arrangers* are providing alternative road maps to personal victory – victory that extends beyond individual self-interest, to include the interpersonal and spiritual layers of self. And while each author may provide something unique, they all draw from a common source of values. Unlike those who peddle individual, material success, who rely on the rationality and logic of the science-based, industrial era, those who promote a higher quality of life draw far more on the insights and intuitions of the knowledge-based, post-industrial era. Luckily, as with rationality and logic, there is a commonality among their insight and intuitions. It is from this common sense that we can find our unique roads to personal victory.

I have never read a self-help book that completely fit me personally. However, I have rarely failed to find something of value. I have come to believe that each new thought or idea contributes to our personal well-being to the extent that it is consistent or in harmony with our current consciousness. Things seem rational and logical because they are consistent with our collection of conventional wisdom – values we have been taught or learned through experimentation. Those that ring true are in harmony with our common sense – principles we know to be true and right, even if we have never learned them or experienced them for ourselves. The writers who seem far more relevant to personal victory in the new post-industrial society are those who appeal to our common sense.

While working on the community self-development project in north Missouri, during my later years at the University of Missouri, our program team came up with the idea for helping the rural people in our project area make a *fresh start*. The whole area in which we were working was depressed, economically and socially. Not only were there few decent jobs in the area, but there was little sense of connectedness or of belonging. Most individuals seemed to lack any real sense of pride in the present and few expressed any hope for a better future. Our hope was that we might spark some enthusiasm for community change by encouraging personal change – by helping people make a *fresh start*. We called it the Fresh Start Program.

We based our program on some commonalities among ideas gleaned from books written by several prominent popular writers. One of my colleague calls these “airport books,” because they are more likely to be found in airport bookstores than in university libraries. The reference

books included Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,¹ Alan Savory’s Holistic Management,² Tom Peters’ The Pursuit of Wow,³ Peter Senge’s The Fifth Discipline,⁴ Susan Jeffers’, End the Struggle and Dance with Life,⁵ and Robert Kriegel’s, If It Ain’t Broke, Break it!⁶ This certainly doesn’t exhaust the list of *new thinkers*, but it is a sufficient sample to begin to see the commonalities among the different approaches, and to begin to define a basic set of common sense principles of personal victory.

The principles that we derived for our Fresh Start program were as follows:

- Be guided by purpose rather than goals: *Life is a journey, not a destination. Develop and maintain a holistic vision of a desired way of living, rather than a desired level of accomplishment. A life lived with purpose and meaning is a successful life, regardless of what is accomplished. Purpose is a far better compass than are objectives and goals.*
- Rely on principles rather than values: *Principles are those things that we know to be true, right, and important, regardless of the situation – principles reflect our common sense. Values are those things we have been taught, or have learned on our own, which help us maintain consistency in our day-to-day decisions and actions. But, our values may not be consistent with our principles. Never allow values to take precedent over principles.*
- Stay Open to Opportunity: *The world around us is constantly changing and renewing itself. Our ability to perceive and understand the world is constantly changing, and thus, constantly renewing our minds. Reality is dynamic, not static; so we must remain awake and open to new opportunities to realize the wonders of reality.*
- Build positive relationships: *Human beings are social, by nature. All living things are interconnected with each other and with the earth. Relationships have value to people, apart from any purely individual or economic reward. We are all a part of the same whole, thus our purpose and meaning is a shared purpose and meaning. The quality of our relationships affects the quality of our lives.*

- *Go to the source for solutions: The quick and easy way out often leads back in. Neutralize problems by eliminating their source. Never consider a problem solved just because you have alleviated its symptoms. Prevent future problems by maintaining healthy relationships – among people and within nature. Prevention is the only lasting solution.*
- *Make good choices: Life is made up of a series of choices and consequences. We cannot reshape the world to fit our particular desires; we can only choose among the alternatives available. All choices have consequences, which in turn present us with additional choices. The quality of our choices is the only control we have over the quality of our lives. So, we must learn to make good choices.*
- *Having done all, let go: The only thing you can actually control is your reaction to whatever life hands you. After you have done all you can do, let go and let life happen. All you can do is all you can do, but all you can do is enough. Once you have confidence in your ability to respond to the challenges of life, you are free to let go and enjoy life.*

Every approach to management and personal decisions I have encountered in my life begins with something relating to setting goals or objectives. However, goals and objectives usually imply something specific to be achieved. Goals are more general in nature, to be achieved over the long run, and objectives are more specific, short-term benchmarks, to be reached on the way to achieving goals. I believe this approach to decision making, as much as any other single factor, accounts for the workaholic ways of life, which dominates all industrialized nations today.

We are taught first by our parents, in classrooms, by the mass media, and by example, in every work place in America, that the purpose of our life is to achieve something. We need to set lofty goals for ourselves and then set about achieving them. Achievement is the key to success, so we are told.

The new thinkers advocate a fundamentally different approach. Alan Savory, for example, suggests that we set a single holistic goal, for ourselves, our families, and for all of our enterprises. In practice, a holistic goal is not defined by achievement but instead is defined by the quality of our day-to-day life. Savory's holistic goal is a three-part goal

that includes our desired means of production or wealth creation, our desired future resource base needed to support our means of production, and our desired quality of life. The wealth and resource parts of the holistic goal are but the means necessary for sustaining the desired quality of life. So a holistic goal does not define a level of achievement, instead it articulates a life-centered purpose for which resources are to be organized and managed.

Steven Covey also talks about goals when he suggests that we “begin with the end in mind.” However, he doesn't define the end as some quantitative achievement, but rather as some positive mental image of the life that we want to live. Covey also suggests that we restrict our goal setting to our “circle of influence,” within which we can decide what we want to do. Susan Jeffers most clearly rejects the traditional concept of goal setting when she suggests that setting goals almost invariably leads to an attempt to control circumstances and people, who in fact, are beyond our control. Goals thus encourage us to resort to manipulation and abuse of relationships which invariably detracts from, rather than adds to, our overall quality of life.

Instead of setting quantitative goals, we need to envision our desired quality of life – physically, mentally, and spiritually. In defining our desired quality of life, we will have defined our sense of the purpose and meaning of our life. Our day-to-day decisions can then be guided by our purpose for living. I have concluded that the purpose of my professional life, at least at this time, is to share as widely as I can the lessons that I have learned, specifically those lessons related to the questions of sustainability. I have concluded that I can maintain the financial and intellectual resources needed to sustain my pursuit of this purpose, at least for the foreseeable future, primarily through returns on past investments for my retirement. My family is supportive of my work and of my personal commitment to this way of life. Many of my friends share a common interest in issues of sustainability. I believe in the inherent rightness of my work, and that my pursuit of this purpose can make a positive contribution to economic, ecological, and social sustainability. And for me, the pursuit of this purpose results in a highly desirable quality of life.

I don't have any specific goal or set of objectives that I want to achieve. I am writing this book solely as a means of sharing my thoughts and insights. It doesn't really matter to me who publishes this book or how many copies are sold. In fact, I may end up making it available on the internet, free of charge, if no one wants to publish it. My first concern is that I translate my thoughts into words so that those thoughts can be

more easily shared with other people. I trust that by one means or another, those thoughts will be shared. I also speak at conferences because I want to share my ideas with others. I don't have any goal or objectives concerning where I speak, how many speeches I make, or how much I get paid for speaking. I accept invitations on the basis of whether I think that the audience might benefit from what I have to say, and whether I can learn anything to pass on to others. I'm trying to live a life of purpose.

Principles are the fundamental laws of the universe. Principles are those things that never change. Everything else continually changes in relation to these unchanging principles. We typically think of principles as they are expressed in physical laws – as in gravity and motion – or in genetic codes of living organisms. However, there is reason to believe that human nature is guided by equally inviolate principles.

Steven Covey is perhaps the best-known advocate of principle-based living. His books are based on the premise that there are “natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging, and unarguably ‘there’ as laws such as gravity in the physical dimension.” As he points out, common principles are shared among almost every major and enduring religion, social philosophy, and system of ethics or morality. It's quite conceivable that these principles are as much a part of the natural laws of the universe as are the laws of physics.

We don't have to be taught these principles; they are a part of our common sense. For personal reasons, I developed a list of principles that seem relevant to my life. I doubt that many will seriously disagree with my list, although I may have mistaken some of my personal values for general principles. Principles and values are sometimes difficult to discern. Others might well choose a different set of principles as being more relevant to their lives. I call them my 20 principles of personal relationships.

I want to be *honest, truthful, trustworthy, kind, and fair*. I want to act toward others by *believing, trusting, sharing, caring, and loving*. I want to react to others with *temperance, patience, sympathy, empathy, and forgiveness*. And I want to remain *open-minded, optimistic, hopeful, helpful, and useful*. Admittedly, my actions at times do not measure up to my principles. When they don't, I invariably suffer the consequences. But, who can possibly doubt that such principles would characterize a very desirable way to live. It's just common sense.

Whether we are dealing with other people or with the natural environment, we must rely on principles rather than values. Our values are based on conventional wisdom – things we have been taught or we

have learned through experimentation. Values are beliefs that we have acquired over time concerning what's important, who's important, what's smart, what to do, what to avoid, etc. Our values can be helpful in guiding us as we make day-to-day decisions. But, values may not be rooted in sound principles.

A gang of thieves may share common values. They believe that stealing is a smart or cunning way to get what they want. But, just because they value a criminal way of life, doesn't mean that they actually think it is *right*. They simply allow their values to take precedent over their principles. Our values often reflect shortcuts – smarter, easier, or faster ways to get things done. Covey says that values are our maps, but principles are the territory. Maps are useful guides only if they are consistent with the territory. We should continually check our values against our principles. Personal victory demands that we give priority to moral and ethics principles over expediency-based values.

The world is always changing. Yesterday's solutions may not solve today's problems. Many old ways of thinking simply don't work anymore – at least very well. People change, including us, and we have to change the way we relate to others. Change creates challenges. But, perhaps more important, change creates opportunities. Old ways of thinking don't allow us to seize new opportunities – or even to see them very well. Reality is defined by the relationships among things. Thus, reality is constantly changing and creating new wonders for our minds to explore. But to explore these wonders, we have to keep our minds open, flexible, and pliable – we have to change in harmony with an ever-changing world.

Tom Peters is one of the most articulate advocates of open-mindedness in a chaotic world. He advocates such things as “listening to everyone but not necessarily believing anyone, asking dumb questions, valuing different opinions, embracing failure, reading odd stuff, making odd friends, visiting odd places, spreading confusion, creating chaos, have fun, and doing ‘something,’ even if it's wrong.” Peters talks about thriving on the chaos of a rapidly changing world by staying open-minded and flexible in our thinking.

Robert Kreigel advocates relying on “unconventional wisdom” to keep us out of the mental rut of conventional thinking. He says, “don't be realistic, the best time to change is when you don't have to, playing it safe is dangerous, don't compete but change the game, it's not a mistake to fail, trust the unexpected, if you try to be well-rounded you will probably end up flat, *play* to win, and if it ain't broke, break it.” Kreigel talks about “doing things with passion, putting wings on your goals, riding the

waves of change, being willing to take risks, and challenging the status quo,” for a vibrant, fulfilling life.

A life of purpose and principle need not be a mundane, dull, or boring life – in fact, it simply cannot be mundane, dull, or boring. To live with purpose, you must continually create new life melodies to stay in harmony with the ever-changing world. A core of never-changing principles will free you to live an ever-changing, dynamic, exciting, adventuresome life around this stable core. You don’t have to retune a guitar to play each new song; you need only strike different notes and chords. A life of purpose leaves you free of the petty policies, procedures, processes, personal rules, styles, etc. that so constrain, restrict, and stagnate the lives of so many people. Anything that might help you fulfill your life’s purpose just might be worth a try – particularly if it seems interesting and exciting. The world presents us with a thousand new opportunities each day. But to achieve victory, we must keep our minds open to these new opportunities.

People need other people as much or more than they need anything else in life. The physical things of life might seem to be most important, at least at first thought. Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, developed a popular theory concerning a hierarchy of human needs, which progresses from physical needs, such as food and sex, to social needs, such as love and companionship, and finally to self-actualization – which he described as the ultimate fulfillment of human potential. This hierarchical relationship obviously is valid in the short run, for example, eating is your highest priority if you are starving, but it is not necessarily valid when viewed from a longer run perspective. People may lose their appetite, refuse to eat, or even kill themselves because they feel unloved, unwanted, and all alone in the world.

It’s true that a baby cannot live without milk. But, neither can a baby survive for very long without love. And, I dare say, a baby with enough love is far more likely to get enough milk than a baby with enough food is to get enough love. “Man does not live by bread alone.” People need other people.

People also need the other elements of their natural environment – living and non-living. On the list of the “Top 20 Great Ideas of Science,” mentioned previously, was the fundamental proposition that “all life is connected.” Chief Sealth, the Native American Suquamish leader for whom the city of Seattle was named, is credited with putting the concept of connectedness more poetically, and with expanding it beyond connections with the living to include all things:

This we know
The earth does not belong to us,
We belong to the earth
This we know
All things are connected
Like the blood that unites one family
All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth
Befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.
We did not weave the web of life,
We are merely a strand in it.
Whatever we do to the web,
We do to ourselves

Concepts from quantum physics tend to support this same basic proposition; we cannot do anything without affecting everything else. All things are connected. Thus, we are related to everything else and everyone else, regardless of whether we realize it or not.

When our relationships with other people are weak or negative, we feel lonely and unloved. When our relationships with others are strong and positive, we feel a sense of belonging and of affection. When our relationships with the earth, with the whole of the web of life, become weak or negative, we feel that our life has lost purpose or meaning. But, when our connections to the web of life are strong and positive, we feel a strong sense what we are doing is important, that we are helping to make a better world. These types of relationships may yield nothing directly in terms of our immediate physical or material well-being, but without strong, positive relationships, the physical and material aspects of our lives just don’t seem to matter very much.

Steven Covey suggests that we start building positive relationships by thinking “win/win.” Character is the foundation for win/win thinking, he says. The necessary traits of character are integrity, maturity, and an “abundance mentality” – a belief that there is always enough for all of us to have what we need. You don’t have to lose for me to win, and I don’t have to lose for you to win, instead we can both win. Instead of arguing over how we are going to divide the pie, together we find a way to make a bigger pie. Win-win relationships are based on the foundational principle of trust. Without mutual trust, we inevitably resort to strategies of win/lose, and too often, lose/lose. To build strong relationships, it should be win/win or no deal.

Covey's second suggestion for creating interdependent relationships is to "seek first to understand, and then to be understood." Listen to what the other person has to say first. Try to understand what they need from the relationship before you tell them what you need. Don't assume you know until you have listened carefully. When you understand others, you can express your needs to them without creating unnecessary conflicts. Once you understand the other person, you have every right to expect them to try to understand you. Listening first is a means of finding a win/win solution – don't accept anything less.

Synergy is the product of constructive interdependence. The word synergy simply means that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Synergy is what makes the pie bigger. Synergy creates new *right answers* to questions and new solutions to problems. Best of all, synergy is regenerative – it is a natural product of the positive relationships that it helps to create and support. Through our positive relationships with others, we grow stronger and more capable of building and maintaining more-positive relationships.

Synergy occurs spontaneously within nature. However, the same strategies of thinking win/win and seeking first to understand can enhance synergistic relationships between humans and nature as well. When we live in harmony with nature, both humans and nature win – neither is exploited to support the other. When we truly understand nature, we can find ways to get what we need from nature without degrading its natural productivity. As we learn to rely on synergy rather than exploitation as the primary source of productivity, we will discover an earth of plenty rather than scarcity.

Our ability to build strong relationships is hampered by our basic need for a degree of autonomy – personal sovereignty, or at least security. We live in a world that always seems threatening. Other people make demands on our time. Other people try to tell us how to think. Other people may encourage us to depend on them and then let us down. Relationships make us vulnerable to people who might take advantage of our weaknesses. One way to protect ourselves is to create a *shell* separating ourselves from others – to control carefully the extent to which we share ourselves with others. This shell protects us from manipulation or hurt, because we don't allow ourselves to become vulnerable. But, it prevents us from developing trusting relationships.

I have always had problems with personal relationships, and I still do. I don't really know where it all began, but I suspect it started as kid – when I labeled myself as a bed wetter. My bladder didn't grow large enough fast enough to get me through the night. A trip to the *bathroom*

back then meant a trip outside into cold, dark night. Whether from a faulty bladder or a subconscious fear of the dark, I often slept through the night – regardless. Without going into details, this *condition* lasted long enough to become a serious embarrassment – at least to me.

Regardless of the cause, I was painfully bashful as a child; I was afraid to even look at anyone or have anyone look at me. I guess I was afraid that they would find out *my secret*. Even after I started grade school, I had to stick my head under my desk to say my ABCs.

Eventually my problem solved itself, but by then, the protective shell was firmly in place. The shell thickened in my mid-twenties, when we thought my brother Don might die of injuries from an automobile accident. Then my older sister, Mary Ellen, died from kidney failure, and my father died from heart failure – all within a period of a couple of years. My only close relationships had been with others in my family, and now my family was dying. I didn't know who was going to die next. At times, I hoped it would be me. I hurt so much that I didn't think I could stand it anymore. But, I was a survivor; I made the shell around myself so tough that no one or no thing could ever penetrate it and hurt me this much again.

I have spent much of the rest of my life protected by that shell. I had a close relationship with my first wife, but I tried to bring her inside the shell with me and to shut the rest of the world out. It didn't work. I didn't develop a close relationship with either of my two daughters while they were growing up, although I loved them and still love them with all of my heart. I made excuses that my work kept me too busy, that I was away from home too much, or that I didn't want to interfere unduly in their lives. But the truth was that I didn't want to get close enough to be hurt too much by anything they might say or do. I was also afraid they might find out who I really was and then might not love me. After my divorce, I began to realize that if I wasn't willing to break out of my shell, I might as well go ahead and die. I didn't know it at the time, but life in the shell was slowly killing me.

Since my near-death experience, I have put a very high priority on building relationships. I started immediately trying to rebuild the relationships with my brothers and sister, which had been neglected over the years. I started trying to build relationships with my daughters, trying to salvage at least something from decades of lost opportunities. And, I eventually decided to risk getting married again – but only after confronting a multitude of mistakes I had made in my first marriage and vowing at least not to make those same mistakes again. And, I began to

develop personal relationships with the people through my work – building friendships out of working relationships.

These efforts have been tremendously rewarding. It's difficult to see how my life could have any real quality now without these relationships. However, I still have a long way to go. My relationships with my brothers and sister have been the easiest to reestablish, because we already had a foundation to build upon. I also have found working with friends to be a real joy of life, and can't believe that I ignored this opportunity for so long. My daughters and I will probably never regain anything close to what we could have had if I had been able to relate to them as they were growing up. Decades of distance, distrust, and resentment don't melt away in the warmth of a few months of good intentions. But, we seem to grow closer each year. The rewards are worth the continuing efforts. My love for my new wife grows stronger each day, but I remain vigilant of my competing tendencies of dependence and invulnerability. I know that I am on the right road, but I still have a long way to go.

Life is filled with obstacles to be overcome or problems that need to be solved before we can get what we want out of life. However, our greatest obstacles and problems may be in the ways we think about things. We are inclined to want life to be logical and reasonable. But, life is not a simple, mechanistic process where every action has an immediate, precise, and clearly identifiable consequence. Instead, life is a complex organismic process where each action may have multiple reactions and ultimate consequences.

In living organisms, there are always feedback loops – every action causes a reaction. Many of today's problems turn out to be the unintended consequences, i.e., the feedback, of yesterday's solutions. When we hit a nail with a hammer, you can be pretty sure that the nail went into the board because you hit it with the hammer. When you plant an acorn in the ground and it eventually grows into a mighty oak, it's hard to say what actually made that tree grow. Trees spring up in the woods without ever being planted. Some trees that are planted never germinate, and some that germinate, never reach maturity. Some trees are stricken by disease, some are struck by lightning, while others grow tall and strong. As the poem says, "only God can make a tree." With living things, there are never simple causes and effects. Living things are wonders of nature; they are not machines.

Peter Senge, MIT professor and business consultant, advocates "systems thinking" as an appropriate mental model or paradigm for an organismic world. He says, the reason today's solutions often result in

tomorrow's problems is because in complex systems, everything is interconnected. When we treat the symptom of one problem, we often cause another problem because, in an interconnected world, we can never do "just one thing." Your solution may result in temporary relief, and you may think you have everything under control, only to find out that you have created another problem more serious than the first. The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back. The cure may turn out to be worse than the disease. Faster may be slower, because fast solutions to symptoms often leave the problem unsolved. The easy way out usually leads back in.

However, Senge goes on to explain how systems thinking makes real solutions to problems not only possible but also relatively easy. Systems thinking challenges us to ask, "how can I keep this problem from happening," rather than asking, "how can I stop what's happening." However, cause and effect in living systems quite often are not closely related, either with respect to time or to space. A current symptom may be the result of some minor occurrence that happened months or years ago, in some distant location, appearing only after several cycles or iterations of acceleration or accumulation, before finally emerging as a clearly identifiable problem.

Once you have traced the problem to its source, the solution may be far easier than indicated by the severity of the symptom. In living systems, the biggest problems often result from the smallest causes. For example, a few thousand cells of salmonella in our food can make us as *sick as a dog*. You will swear you are going to die. But, if you get rid of the salmonella, you will be as good as new in a few hours. Avoid it in the future and you will stay well. However, if you persist in eating contaminated food, and in treating the symptoms, you eventually could sick enough to die. You may stop the vomiting and diarrhea, temporarily, but it will come back. The same reasoning holds true for all problems in our lives. It may be difficult to find the real source of problems, but once we find the cause of it, and once we quite causing it, the solution may be easier than we thought possible.

Senge also talks about synergistic solutions. He says, "You can have your cake and eat it too – but not all at once." By seeking to understand how the parts of a system work together, and by learning to work effectively with others, we can find solutions that were not apparent when we focused only on our part of the system. Wholes have characteristics that are not present in their parts. He cautions against trying to analyze problems by taking them apart or breaking them down into parts.

“Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.” We need to learn to work with the whole.

For most of our problems, there is no one else to blame except us. Maybe we didn’t create the problem, but we are a part of it, because our problems and we are parts of the same system. The only reason we have a problem today is because we caused it or we failed to do something to prevent it. We can’t go back and change what happened in the past, but we don’t have to allow it to keep happening.

Problems invariably are a consequence of conflicts or unhealthy relationships among people or between people and the other elements of our natural environment. When we identify the unhealthy relationship that is causing our problems, we should focus our efforts on restoring the relationship, on restoring the system to health. It may take longer to restore relationships than to treat symptoms, but healthy relationships are the only means of preventing problems. Prevention, not treatment, is the only lasting solution.

In my young-adult years, I was determined to become a *self-made man*. I became a big fan of Norman Vincent Peal’s, Power of Positive Thinking and Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends and Influence People. However, such self-help strategies tend to focus on symptoms rather than causes. Positive thinking is something we are supposed to achieve through mental discipline and determination, by driving negative thoughts from our minds. But, this implies that negative thinking is a natural human condition, which it is not.

Our negative thoughts arise from deeper feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, inferiority, or something that causes us to fear or to expect the worst. We cannot erase those doubts and fears through thinking positively, even if we succeed in alleviating their symptoms. We will continue to drift back into negative thinking until we acknowledge and address the source of our insecurity. Regardless of whether the source is physical or mental, we need to address the source, rather than just treat the symptom.

I’m convinced that my source of insecurity was mental and suspect my case is not uncommon. I realize that my early years of *nocturnal embarrassment* pale when compared with sexual or other physical and mental abuse, with physical disability or disfigurement, or with the absence of parental love and affection. But I have at least some concept of how it feels to suffer from a deep-seated sense of inferiority.

The only way I know we can deal with such a sense of inferiority is by accepting ourselves, with all of our flaws, as worthy human beings. We are here for a purpose and our flaws may well be the means by which

we have been guided toward that purpose, or perhaps, have been prepared to fulfill that purpose. Our flaws are a fundamental part of who we are. We can try to hide our flaws, to pretend they don’t exist, or to cover them over with positive thinking. But, as long as we are ashamed to acknowledge the source of our insecurity, we will always be insecure. We can never feel truly secure and confident until we accept ourselves, as we are, as flawed but worthy human beings.

Once we acknowledge our flaws, we will find that other people are far less concerned about our little flaws than are we. We are all flawed, in one sense or another. Jesus said, “Let him among you who is without sin cast the first stone,” and one-by-one they all went away. Those among us who refuse to acknowledge their flaws are perhaps the most flawed of all.

Maybe, through mental concentration, we can succeed in creating a positive image of the person we want to be and the life we want to live. Maybe, through total commitment and hard work, we may even succeed in achieving our goals for the future. We may be able to think ourselves into wealth and fame, but we will never find satisfaction and peace of mind until we find harmony within – among the personal, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. Satisfaction and peace of mind are not the result of achieving some personal goal or objective; they are the natural consequence of a life of purpose and meaning.

We can brag about being a *self-made man*, but common sense tells us that any success we may be able to achieve must be shared with others. I used to feel pretty proud of myself because I had grown up poor, had worked my way to a Ph.D., and had gone out and *amounted to something*. Only later did I realize how little I had actually done and how much more I owed to others. I could have accomplished nothing without parents who loved me and without the other people who believed in me along the way.

We cannot take credit for the people who gave us life, the people who loved us, the people we learned from, or the people who gave us opportunities to grow. Nor can we claim credit for the privilege of living in a social and political environment that supports, encourages, and rewards our efforts. Certainly, success requires effort, and those who are too lazy to work or too afraid to risk failure rarely succeed at much of anything. But, every person who has grown from *rags to riches* owes much of his or her success to those who cared for them and supported them, without regard for what they might receive in return. We can never find happiness in success until we recognize and honor its true sources.

Our life is defined by the choices we make and the consequences of those choices. Obviously, we can’t control the world, but we can choose how we live in it. We can’t control other people, but we can choose how

we relate to them, and we can choose how we respond to whatever they do. We can't control the natural environment, but we can choose how we respond to it. And, the choices we make will have consequences. In many cases, we will also have to make choices concerning how we are going to deal with the consequences of our previous choices. The only control we have over the quality of our lives is the ability to make choices and to choose how we deal with the consequences. So our quality of life is a direct reflection of the quality of our choices.

Alan Savory argues that all of the problems of modern society are symptoms of the way we make decisions. Like Senge, he indicts modern decision makers for focusing on finding short-run treatments for symptoms of problems rather than focusing on solutions, which eliminate problems by restoring health to the whole. But Savory's primary contribution is that he has developed and tested a formal model for making long-run holistic decisions.

Holistic Management (HM) decisions are guided by purpose. Decisions are based on a three-part, holistic goal, mentioned previously, which include the economic, ecological, and social dimensions of quality of life. The "whole under management" in the HM model includes the land base, people, and money – very practical terms for the ecological, social, and economic resources, which must be managed for quality of life. HM is far stronger in practical ecology than the social or economic dimensions, but it recognizes explicitly that things economic, ecological, and social are inseparable aspects of the same whole.

The HM approach to decision making is principle based. It is built on a set of four "ecosystem foundation blocks" -- water cycles, mineral cycles, energy flows, and succession or community dynamics. These building blocks are a practical, down-to-earth representation of the laws of nature. Savory contends that all "new wealth" is generated by energy flows – the product of the solar chain, which transforms solar energy into human-useful form. The water cycle and mineral cycle are essential elements in this solar chain – a process ultimately dependent upon biological diversity and biological succession, in which water and minerals are utilized in transforming solar energy into food and fiber.

The HM model identifies the basic tools available for affecting the performance of these natural systems of wealth generation and outlines strategies for identifying the areas of greatest potential benefits with the least amount of intervention. All decisions in the HM approach are monitored to determine whether they are contributing to the holistic goal, not whether they are solving short-run problems. The initial assumption in the HM approach is that all decisions are *wrong*, until proven

otherwise. This facilitates quick corrective actions when necessary and encourages continual refinement and revision of the decision making process.

I don't believe a single *best* approach exists for making good choices. Many approaches being taught today embody the purpose-driven, principle-guided, organismic, holistic approach to decision making that I have advocated in this book. No single approach will be right for everyone, but I do believe that everyone should have a single approach to decision making. Savory contends that the HM approach is appropriate for all types of decisions – including farming, business, personal, and political. He contends that all types of decisions should be driven by a holistic goal or purpose, should be based on a set of guiding principles, and should be made with consideration to their contribution to the whole. I agree – regardless of whether the approach is HM or something else.

I certainly have made more than my share of bad decisions in my life. And, I still make a lot of mistakes. But I take some comfort in the wisdom of Winston Churchill who said, "Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm." Over time, I have learned not to take my failures too seriously, because I know that every failure provides an opportunity to learn. I have heard people say that if they had a chance to live their lives over again, they would do everything exactly the same as they did the first time. I think such people must be either perfect – meaning they did everything right the first time – or they are *pretty dense* – meaning they didn't learn anything from what they did wrong. I might not live my life any better a second time than I did the first, but I sure wouldn't live it the same. I might make just as many mistakes, but they wouldn't be the same mistakes.

Now, for the first time in my life, I have a clear sense of purpose and meaning. I have a holistic goal for my life, which includes the personal, professional, and spiritual dimensions. I have a set of guiding principles by which to live. I am open to new opportunities, and I commit time and effort to building positive relationships and enjoy both new opportunities and new relationships. I realize that many of my continuing problems have deep-seated causes, and I need to do more than just treat the symptoms. I have a process for making decisions and for checking to see if the choices I make are leading me toward the life that I want to live. I still make my share of mistakes, but I remain enthusiastic, or at least hopeful, and I am making better decisions now that I have ever made before. For the first time in my life, I feel like I am on the road to victory.

The final leg on the road to personal victory is to learn to let go. We can't control the world and we can't control other people. Thus, the need

to control is a need that can never be fulfilled. Control is another of my addictions – one I share with millions. Most of us don't realize that we are addicted to control, because we don't feel any particular need to control other people. But, we can be just as addicted to the need to control our own lives as to the need to control others. We may feel that we have to be in control because we feel vulnerable, afraid, or lack confidence in ourselves or in others.

The need to control isolates us from the rest of the world. We can't build strong relationships because relationships require interdependence rather than dominance or independence. We can't relate to things of nature, because we feel we have to control nature in order to protect ourselves. The only way we can be in control is to disconnect from those things that threaten our autonomy, but those are the very things that contribute to the quality of our lives. So we must learn to look beyond autonomy and sovereignty for our security. This doesn't mean that we should allow ourselves to be subject to others or to be unduly influenced by others, but we must remain open and vulnerable if we are truly to live. Our security must come from our confidence that our lives have purpose and meaning, arising from a higher order of things over which we do not and need not have control. We must learn to trust the higher order of things.

Susan Jeffers calls that part of us that keeps us from trusting our "Lower Self." She says we need to continually remind ourselves to turn things over to our "Higher Self or a Higher Power" – trusting in the higher order of things. The Lower Self is that part of us that keeps telling us that life is difficult, that people are fickle, and that we can't trust anyone or anything other than ourselves. Scott Peck, in The Road Less Traveled,⁷ suggests that we accept the fact that life is difficult, and once we truly accept it, "then life is no longer difficult." He quotes from the "Four Nobel Truths" of Buddha: "Life is Suffering." He quotes from the Old Testament: "Generations come and go and it makes no difference...Everything is unutterably weary and tiresome. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied; no matter how much we hear, we are not content." But if difficulties are an inevitable aspect of life, then they are not our fault, we can't do anything to prevent them, and they are truly beyond our control. Since the difficulties are going to happen, regardless of what we do, then why should we worry about them? We can simply cope with them as they come along and wait for the good times to follow.

Most of us were told from the time we were kids that we could do anything and be anything that we really wanted to do and be. It's simply

not true! We can't do anything we might want to do. We can't be anything we might want to be. Some things, for specific ones of us, are just not going to happen – no matter how much we might want it or how hard we might try. We just aren't strong enough, smart enough, fast enough, or good enough looking – no matter how much effort we put forth.

I truly believe we each have a purpose in life. If we fulfill that purpose, we will have done as much we can possibly do, and we will have been as much we possibly could have been. I believe we each can choose whether we are going to try hard enough and work long enough to fulfill our purpose in life. No one can force us to succeed in doing what we were put here on earth to do. But, neither can we succeed in doing whatever we might choose to do, without regard to our purpose – no matter how long or hard we try. We cannot be our own God – no matter how much we might wish to be in control. We cannot change the higher order of things. We can only fulfill our purpose within it.

It will take all of the desire and effort that we can possibly muster just to do whatever it is we were put here to do. Some of us will be doctors, a few movie stars or sports heroes, a dozen or so will be president, but the rest of us have something more ordinary to do with our lives – although of no less importance. We should set our sights high, because we don't know how high we are meant to go. But, we shouldn't waste our time and energy pursuing someone else's dreams for our lives when our common sense tells us our purpose lies somewhere else. We must learn to *dance with life*.

Tom Peters says that life is weary and tiresome enough without adding unnecessary desperation. He says that we should take time off from work when we think we have too much to do, we should break our old habits, and avoid moderation in all things. "Life can be fun," he says, "live it." Robert Kreigel says that we should celebrate our successes. If we like how something turned out, we should "log it." Sure there are going to be down times, but "Joy pays off. *Play*, to win."

I wrote a little poem during a time of soul searching as a reminder to myself to let go and enjoy life.

Anger, frustration, anxiety, depression
All symptoms of control addiction
We live controlled by our need to control
Our lives filled with contradictions

The only thing we can really control
Is our reaction to whatever life hands us
Our only control is the choice to let go
And to deal with whatever life hands us

The only thing we can really control is our reactions to the things that happen to and around us. We can't make good things happen, and we can't keep bad things from happening. It's true, life happens! But, we can learn to respond in ways that maintain our personal integrity and inner security, regardless of how much we may feel hurt by what happens to us day-to-day. We can learn to let go, quit trying to control, and instead, by faith, accept life as our spirit reveals it. And by grace, we can learn to live life as our soul leads us. We can let go and enjoy life.

Certainly, we should prepare ourselves so that we will have confidence in our ability to cope with whatever life hands us. That's the point of this whole discussion of personal victory. But, once we are prepared, we must be willing to let go and deal with the unfolding of reality. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he said, "Therefore, take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians, 6-13). So, take on the armor of a common sense approach to living, and having done all, let go.

We each have the ability to choose what kind of life we want to live. We can't control what happens to us, but we can choose how we respond to what happens. Those personal choices invariably shape how we relate to other people and to our natural environment. And, as our lives and our choices begin to impact the world around us, we begin, little by little, to change the world. That's the way change happens, one-by-one, little-by-little, until seemingly all at once, we are in the midst of revolution; our personal victories begin to transform the world.

In this chapter, I have not attempted to tell you how to achieve your personal victory. You must find your own way. Hopefully, you have gained some insights that might be helpful in choosing our best route. I would encourage you to follow up by reading one or more of the books cited in this chapter or others with a similar self-help philosophy. The keys are to be guided by purpose and principles, rather than goals and objectives, to follow your sense of truth and rightness, rather than a strategic plan, to build positive relationships, rather than individual wealth, and to accept a life of quality and happiness, rather than strive for success. Each road to personal victory will be a bit different, because no one can be sure of the way. Your path will be a unique path and our

victory will be uniquely ours. And, your personal victory will help create a new and better world.

¹ Stephen Covey. 1989. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.

² Alan Savory. 1988. Holistic Resource Management, Island Press, Covelo, CA.

³ Tom Peters. 1994. The Pursuit of WOW!, Vintage Books, Random House, Inc. New York, NY.

⁴ Peter Senge. 1990. The Fifth Discipline. Doubleday Publishing Co. New York, NY.

⁵ Susan Jeffers. 1997. End the Struggle and Dance With Life. St Martins Press, New York, NY.

⁶ Robert Kriegel. 1991. If it ain't broke... Break it! Warner Books, New York, NY.

⁷ Scott Peck. 1978, The Road Less Traveled, Simon and Schuster, New York, New York.