

The 3 Vital Steps of the Apprenticeship Phase in Mastering Anything

By Robert Greene on May 10, 2013

This post is an excerpt from *Mastery* by Robert Greene (Viking). *Mastery* is the latest book from the bestselling author of *The 48 Laws of Power*, *The Art of Seduction*, *The 33 Strategies of War*, and *The 50th Law*.

In the stories of the greatest Masters, past and present, we can inevitably detect a phase in their lives in which all of their future powers were in development, like the chrysalis of a butterfly. This part of their lives—a largely self-directed apprenticeship that lasts some five to ten years—receives little attention because it does not contain stories of great achievement or discovery. Often in their Apprenticeship Phase, these types are not yet much different from anyone else. Under the surface, however, their minds are transforming in ways we cannot see but contain all of the seeds of their future success.

Much of how such Masters navigate this phase comes from an intuitive grasp of what is most important and essential for their development, but in studying what they did right we can learn some invaluable lessons for ourselves. In fact, a close examination of their lives reveals a pattern that transcends their various fields, indicating a kind of Ideal Apprenticeship for mastery. And to grasp this pattern, to follow it in our own ways, we must understand something about the very idea and necessity for passing through an apprenticeship.

In childhood we are inculcated in culture through a long period of dependency—far longer than any other animal. During this period we learn language, writing, math, and reasoning skills, along with a few others. Much of this happens under the watchful and loving guidance of parents and teachers. As we get older, greater emphasis is placed on book learning—absorbing as much information as possible about various subjects. Such knowledge of history, science, or literature is abstract, and the process of learning largely involves passive absorption. At the end of this process (usually somewhere between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five) we are then thrust into the cold, harsh work world to fend for ourselves.

When we emerge from the youthful state of dependency, we are not really ready to handle the transition to an entirely independent phase. We carry with us the habit of learning from books or teachers, which is largely unsuited for the practical, self-directed phase of life that comes next. We tend to be somewhat socially naïve and unprepared for the political games people play. Still uncertain as to our identity, we think that what matters in the work world is gaining attention and making friends. And these misconceptions and naïveté are brutally exposed in the light of the real world.

If we adjust over time, we might eventually find our way; but if we make too many mistakes, we create endless problems for ourselves. We spend too much time entangled in emotional issues, and we never quite have enough detachment to reflect and learn from our experiences. The apprenticeship, by its very nature, must be conducted by each individual in his or her own way. To follow precisely the lead of others or advice from a book is self-defeating. This is the phase in life in which we finally declare our independence and establish who we are. But for this second education in our lives, so critical to our future success, there are some powerful and essential lessons that we all can benefit from, that can guide us away from common mistakes and save us valuable time.

These lessons transcend all fields and historical periods because they are connected to something essential about human psychology and how the brain itself functions. They can be distilled into one overarching principle for the Apprenticeship Phase, and a process that loosely follows three steps.

The principle is simple and must be engraved deeply in your mind: the goal of an apprenticeship is not money, a good position, a title, or a diploma, but rather the transformation of your mind and character—the first transformation on the way to mastery. You enter a career as an outsider. You are naïve and full of misconceptions about this new world. Your head is full of dreams and fantasies about the future. Your knowledge of the world is subjective, based on emotions, insecurities, and limited experience. Slowly, you will ground yourself in reality, in the objective world represented by the knowledge and skills that make people successful in it. You will learn how to work with others and handle criticism. In the process you will transform yourself from someone who is impatient and scattered into someone who is disciplined and focused, with a mind that can handle complexity. In the end, you will master yourself and all of your weaknesses.

This has a simple consequence: you must choose places of work and positions that offer the greatest possibilities for learning. Practical knowledge is the ultimate commodity, and is what will pay you dividends for decades to come—far more than the paltry increase in pay you might receive at some seemingly lucrative position that offers fewer learning opportunities. This means that you move toward challenges that will toughen and improve you, where you will get the most objective feedback on your performance and progress. You do not choose apprenticeships that seem easy and comfortable.

In this sense you must see yourself as following in the footsteps of Charles Darwin. You are finally on your own, on a voyage in which you will craft your own future. It is the time of youth and adventure—of exploring the world with an open mind and spirit. In fact, whenever you must learn a new skill or alter your career path later in life, you reconnect with that youthful, adventurous part of yourself. Darwin could have played it safe, collecting what was necessary, and spending more time on board studying instead of actively exploring. In that case, he would not have become an illustrious scientist, but just another collector. He constantly looked for challenges, pushing himself past his comfort zone. He used danger and difficulties as a way to measure his progress. You must adopt such a spirit and see your apprenticeship as a kind of journey in which you will transform yourself, rather than as a drab indoctrination into the work world.

The Apprenticeship Phase – The Three Steps or Modes

With the principle outlined above guiding you in your choices, you must think of three essential steps in your apprenticeship, each one overlapping the other. These steps are: **Deep Observation** (*The Passive Mode*), **Skills Acquisition** (*The Practice Mode*), and **Experimentation** (*The Active Mode*). Keep in mind that an apprenticeship can come in many different forms. It can happen at one place over several years, or it can consist of several different positions in different places, a kind of compound apprenticeship involving many different skills. It can include a mix of graduate school and practical experience. In all of these cases, it will help you to think in terms of these steps, although you may need to give added weight to a particular one depending on the nature of your field.

Step One: Deep Observation – The Passive Mode

When you enter a career or new environment, you move into a world with its own rules, procedures, and social dynamic. For decades or even centuries, people have compiled knowledge of how to get things done in a particular field, each generation improving on the past. In addition, every workplace has its own conventions, rules of behavior, and work standards. There are also all kinds of power relationships that exist between individuals. All of this represents a reality that transcends your individual needs and desires. And so your task upon entering this world is to observe and absorb its reality as deeply as possible.

The greatest mistake you can make in the initial months of your apprenticeship is to imagine that you have to get attention, impress people, and prove yourself. These thoughts will dominate your mind and close it off from the reality around you. Any positive attention you receive is deceptive; it is not based on your skills or anything real, and it will turn against you. Instead, you will want to acknowledge the reality and submit to it, muting your colors and keeping in the background as much as possible, remaining passive and giving yourself the space to observe. You will also want to drop any preconceptions you might have about this world you are entering. If you impress people in these first months, it should be because of the seriousness of your desire to learn, not because you are trying to rise to the top before you are ready.

You will be observing two essential realities in this new world. First, you will observe the rules and procedures that govern success in this environment—in other words, “this is how we do things here.” Some of these rules will be communicated to you directly—generally the ones that are superficial and largely a matter of common sense. You must pay attention to these and observe them, but what is of more interest are the rules that are unstated and are part of the underlying work culture. These concern style and values that are considered important. They are often a reflection of the character of the man or woman on top.

You can observe such rules by looking at those who are on their way up in the hierarchy, who have a golden touch. More tellingly, you can observe those who are more awkward, who have been chastised for particular mistakes or even been fired. Such examples serve as negative trip wires: do things this way and you will suffer.

The second reality you will observe is the power relationships that exist within the group: who has real control; through whom do all communications flow; who is on the rise and who is on the decline. These procedural and political rules may be dysfunctional or counterproductive, but your job is not to moralize about this or complain,

but merely to understand them, to get a complete lay of the land. You are like an anthropologist studying an alien culture, attuned to all of its nuances and conventions. You are not there to change that culture; you will only end up being killed, or in the case of work, fired. Later, when you have attained power and mastery, you will be the one to rewrite or destroy these same rules.

Every task you are given, no matter how menial, offers opportunities to observe this world at work. No detail about the people within it is too trivial. Everything you see or hear is a sign for you to decode. Over time, you will begin to see and understand more of the reality that eluded you at first. For instance, a person whom you initially thought had great power ended up being someone with more bark than bite. Slowly, you begin to see behind the appearances. As you amass more information about the rules and power dynamics of your new environment, you can begin to analyze why they exist, and how they relate to larger trends in the field. You move from observation to analysis, honing your reasoning skills, but only after months of careful attention.

We can see how Charles Darwin followed this step quite clearly. By spending the first few months studying life on board the ship and perceiving the unwritten rules, he made his time for science much more productive. By enabling himself to fit in, he was able to avoid needless battles that would have later disrupted his scientific work, not to mention the emotional turmoil these would have presented to him. He later practiced the same technique with gauchos and other local communities he came in contact with. This allowed him to extend the regions he could explore and the specimens he could collect. On another level, he slowly transformed himself into perhaps the most astute observer of nature the world has ever known. Emptying himself of any preconceptions about life and its origins, Darwin trained himself to see things as they are. He did not theorize or generalize about what he was seeing until he had amassed enough information. Submitting to and absorbing the reality of all aspects of this voyage, he ended up piercing one of the most fundamental realities of all—the evolution of all living forms.

Understand: there are several critical reasons why you must follow this step. First, knowing your environment inside and out will help you in navigating it and avoiding costly mistakes. You are like a hunter: your knowledge of every detail of the forest and of the ecosystem as a whole will give you many more options for survival and success. Second, the ability to observe any unfamiliar environment will become a critical lifelong skill. You will develop the habit of stilling your ego and looking outward instead of inward. You will see in any encounter what most people miss because they are thinking of themselves. You will cultivate a keen eye for human psychology, and strengthen your ability to focus. Finally, you will become accustomed to observing first, basing your ideas and theories on what you have seen with your eyes, and then analyzing what you find. This will be a very important skill for the next, creative phase in life.

Step Two: Skills Acquisition – The Practice Mode

At some point, as you progress through the initial months of observation required in an apprenticeship, you will enter a critical stage: practice toward the acquisition of skills. Every human activity, endeavor, or career path involves the mastering of skills. In some fields, it is direct and obvious, like operating a tool or machine or creating something physical. In others, it is more of a mix of the physical and mental, such as the observing and collecting of specimens for Charles Darwin. In still others, the skills are more nebulous, such as handling people or researching and organizing information. As much as possible, you want to reduce these skills to something simple and essential—the core of what you need to get good at, skills that can be practiced.

In acquiring any kind of skill, there exists a natural learning process that coincides with the functioning of our brains. This learning process leads to what we shall call tacit knowledge—a feeling for what you are doing that is hard to put into words but easy to demonstrate in action. And to understand how this learning process operates, it is useful to look at the greatest system ever invented for the training of skills and the achievement of tacit knowledge—the apprenticeship system of the Middle Ages. This system arose as a solution to a problem: As business expanded in the Middle Ages, Masters of various crafts could no longer depend on family members to work in the shop. They needed more hands. But it was not worth it for them to bring in people who would come and go—they needed stability and time to build up skills in their workers. And so they developed the apprenticeship system, in which young people from approximately the ages of twelve to seventeen would enter work in a shop, signing a contract that would commit them for the term of seven years. At the end of this term, apprentices would have to pass a master test, or produce a master work, to prove their level of skill. Once passed, they were now elevated to the rank of journeymen and could travel wherever there was work, practicing the craft.

Because few books or drawings existed at the time, apprentices would learn the trade by watching Masters and imitating them as closely as possible. They learned through endless repetition and hands-on work, with very little verbal instruction (the word “apprentice” itself comes from the Latin *prehendere*, meaning to grasp with the hand). Because resources such as textiles, wood, and metals were expensive and could not be wasted on practice runs, apprentices would spend most of their time working directly on materials that would be used for the final product. They had to learn how to focus deeply on their work and not make mistakes.

If one added up the time that apprentices ended up working directly on materials in those years, it would amount to more than 10,000 hours, enough to establish exceptional skill level at a craft. The power of this form of tacit knowledge is embodied in the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe —masterpieces of beauty, craftsmanship, and stability, all erected without blueprints or books. These cathedrals represented the accumulated skills of numerous craftsmen and engineers.

What this means is simple: language, oral and written, is a relatively recent invention. Well before that time, our ancestors had to learn various skills—toolmaking, hunting, and so forth. The natural model for learning, largely based on the power of mirror neurons, came from watching and imitating others, then repeating the action over and over. Our brains are suited for this form of learning. In an activity such as riding a bicycle, we all know that it is easier to watch someone and follow their lead than to listen to or read instructions. The more we do it, the easier it becomes. Even with skills that are primarily mental, such as computer programming or speaking a foreign language, it remains the case that we learn best through practice and repetition—the natural learning process. We learn a foreign language by actually speaking it as much as possible, not by reading books and absorbing theories. The more we speak and practice, the more fluent we become.

Once you take this far enough, you enter a cycle of accelerated returns in which the practice becomes easier and more interesting, leading to the ability to practice for longer hours, which increases your skill level, which in turn makes practice even more interesting. Reaching this cycle is the goal you must set for yourself, and to get there you must understand some basic principles about skills themselves.

First, it is essential that you begin with one skill that you can master, and that serves as a foundation for acquiring others. You must avoid at all cost the idea that you can manage learning several skills at a time. You need to develop your powers of concentration, and understand that trying to multi task will be the death of the process.

Second, the initial stages of learning a skill invariably involve tedium. Yet rather than avoiding this inevitable tedium, you must accept and embrace it. The pain and boredom we experience in the initial stage of learning a skill toughens our minds, much like physical exercise. Too many people believe that everything must be pleasurable in life, which makes them constantly search for distractions and short-circuits the learning process. The pain is a kind of challenge your mind presents—will you learn how to focus and move past the boredom, or like a child will you succumb to the need for immediate pleasure and distraction? Much as with physical exercise, you can even get a kind of perverse pleasure out of this pain, knowing the benefits it will bring you. In any event, you must meet any boredom head-on and not try to avoid or repress it. Throughout your life you will encounter tedious situations, and you must cultivate the ability to handle them with discipline.

In practicing a skill in the initial stages, something happens neurologically to the brain that is important for you to understand. When you start something new, a large number of neurons in the frontal cortex (the higher, more conscious command area of the brain) are recruited and become active, helping you in the learning process. The brain has to deal with a large amount of new information, and this would be stressful and overwhelming if only a limited part of the brain were used to handle it. The frontal cortex even expands in size in this initial phase, as we focus hard on the task. But once something is repeated often enough, it becomes hardwired and automatic, and the neural pathways for this skill are delegated to other parts of the brain, farther down the cortex. Those neurons in the frontal cortex that we needed in the initial stages are now freed up to help in learning something else, and the area goes back to its normal size.

In the end, an entire network of neurons is developed to remember this single task, which accounts for the fact that we can still ride a bicycle years after we first learned how to do so. If we were to take a look at the frontal cortex of those who have mastered something through repetition, it would be remarkably still and inactive as they performed the skill. All of their brain activity is occurring in areas that are lower down and require much less conscious control.

This process of hardwiring cannot occur if you are constantly distracted, moving from one task to another. In such a case, the neural pathways dedicated to this skill never get established; what you learn is too tenuous to remain rooted in the brain. It is better to dedicate two or three hours of intense focus to a skill than to spend eight hours of diffused concentration on it. You want to be as immediately present to what you are doing as possible.

Once an action becomes automatic, you now have the mental space to observe yourself as you practice. You must use this distance to take note of your weaknesses or flaws that need correction—to analyze yourself. It helps also to gain as much feedback as possible from others, to have standards against which you can measure your progress so that you are aware of how far you have to go. People who do not practice and learn new skills never gain a proper sense of proportion or self-criticism. They think they can achieve anything without effort and have little contact with reality. Trying something over and over again grounds you in reality, making you deeply aware of your inadequacies and of what you can accomplish with more work and effort.

If you take this far enough, you will naturally enter the cycle of accelerated returns: As you learn and gain skills you can begin to vary what you do, finding nuances that you can develop in the work, so that it becomes more interesting. As elements become more automatic your mind is not exhausted by the effort and you can practice harder, which in turn brings greater skill and more pleasure. You can look for challenges, new areas to conquer, keeping your interest at a high level. As the cycle accelerates, you can reach a point where your mind is totally absorbed in the practice, entering a kind of flow in which everything else is blocked out. You become one with the tool or instrument or thing you are studying. Your skill is not something that can be put into words; it is embedded in your body and nervous system—it becomes tacit knowledge. Learning any kind of skill deeply prepares you for mastery. The sensation of flow and of being a part of the instrument is a precursor to the great pleasures that mastery can bring.

In essence, when you practice and develop any skill you transform yourself in the process. You reveal to yourself new capabilities that were previously latent, that are exposed as you progress. You develop emotionally. Your sense of pleasure becomes redefined. What offers immediate pleasure comes to seem like a distraction, an empty entertainment to help pass the time. Real pleasure comes from overcoming challenges, feeling confidence in your abilities, gaining fluency in skills, and experiencing the power this brings. You develop patience. Boredom no longer signals the need for distraction, but rather the need for new challenges to conquer.

Although it might seem that the time necessary to master the requisite skills and attain a level of expertise would depend on the field and your own talent level, those who have researched the subject repeatedly come up with the number of 10,000 hours. This seems to be the amount of quality practice time that is needed for someone to reach a high level of skill and it applies to composers, chess players, writers, and athletes, among others. This number has an almost magical or mystical resonance to it. It means that so much practice time—no matter the person or the field—leads to a qualitative change in the human brain. The mind has learned to organize and structure large amounts of information. With all of this tacit knowledge, it can now become creative and playful with it. Although the number of hours might seem high, it generally adds up to seven to ten years of sustained, solid practice—roughly the period of a traditional apprenticeship. In other words, concentrated practice over time cannot fail but produce results.

Step Three: Experimentation – The Active Mode

This is the shortest part of the process, but a critical component nonetheless. As you gain in skill and confidence, you must make the move to a more active mode of experimentation. This could mean taking on more responsibility, initiating a project of some sort, doing work that exposes you to the criticisms of peers or even the public. The point of this is to gauge your progress and whether there are still gaps in your knowledge. You are observing yourself in action and seeing how you respond to the judgments of others. Can you take criticism and use it constructively?

With Charles Darwin, as the voyage progressed and he began to entertain the notions that would lead to his theory of evolution, he decided to expose his ideas to others. First, on the Beagle, he discussed them with the captain and patiently absorbed his vehement criticisms of the idea. This, Darwin told himself, would be more or less the reaction of the public, and he would have to prepare himself for that. He also began to write letters to various scientists and scientific societies back in England. The responses he received indicated he was on to something, but that he would need some more research. For Leonardo da Vinci, as he progressed in his studio

work for Verrocchio, he began to experiment and to assert his own style. He found to his surprise that the Master was impressed with his inventiveness. For Leonardo, this indicated that he was near the end of his apprenticeship.

Most people wait too long to take this step, generally out of [fear](#). It is always easier to learn the rules and stay within your comfort zone. Often you must force yourself to initiate such actions or experiments before you think you are ready. You are testing your character, [moving past your fears](#), and developing a sense of detachment to your work—looking at it through the eyes of others. You are getting a taste for the next phase in which what you produce will be under constant scrutiny.

You will know when your apprenticeship is over by the feeling that you have nothing left to learn in this environment. It is time to declare your independence or move to another place to continue your apprenticeship and expand your skill base. Later in life, when you are confronted with a career change or the need to learn new skills, having gone through this process before, it will become second nature. You have learned how to learn.

Index Estimator

Pages of text =	50-100	100-150	150-200	200-250	250-300	300-350	350-400	400-450	450-500
General non-fiction index = (2-4 index entries/page) -----	2-3 pages	3-5 pages	5-6 pages	6-8 pages	8-9 pages	9-11 pages	11-12 pages	12-14 pages	14-15 pages
Indexing time = -----	1-2 days	2 days	2-3 days	3 days	3-4 days	4 days	4-5 days	5-6 days	6-7 days
Editing time =	~ 1 day	~ 1 day	~ 1 day	1 day	1 day	1-2 days	2 days	2 days	2 days
Tech. trade book index = (3-6 index entries/page) -----	3-5 pages	4-7 pages	6-9 pages	8-11 pages	10-13 pages	12-15 pages	14-17 pages	16-19 pages	18-21 pages
Indexing time = -----	1-2 days	2-3 days	3-4 days	4-5 days	5-6 days	6-7 days	7-8 days	8-9 days	9-10 days
Editing time =	~ 1 day	~ 1 day	~ 1 day	1 day	1 day	1-2 days	2 days	2 days	2 days
Corp. technical docs index = (4-8 index entries/page) -----	3-8 pages	5-9 pages	7-11 pages	9-15 pages	11-18 pages	13-21 pages	15-24 pages	17-28 pages	20-35 pages
Indexing time = -----	1-2 days	2-3 days	3-4 days	4-5 days	5-6 days	6-7 days	7-8 days	8-9 days	9-10 days
Editing time =	~ 1 day	~ 1 day	1 day	1 day	1 day	1-2 days	2 days	2 days	2 days
Very scientific text index = (10-30 index entries/page) -----	8-20 pages	13-22 pages	17-27 pages	22-42 pages	27-45 pages	32-54 pages	44-60 pages	41-68 pages	50-80 pages
Indexing time = -----	2-3 days	3-5 days	4-6 days	5-7 days	6-8 days	7-10 days	8-11 days	10-13 days	12-15 days
Editing time =	1-2 days	1-2 days	1-2 days	2 days	2-3 days	2-3 days	2-3 days	3 days	3 days

NOTE: Page counts refer to published indexes. Estimates of indexing and editing times are based upon previous projects. If my workload allows, "RUSH" projects will be completed in less time.



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AREAS OF EXPERTISE: Computer science, technical communication, management, business technology, health and nutrition, medical sciences, engineering, quality programs, environmental science, information technology, telecommunications, agricultural science, language and literature, reference materials.

Editorial Rates

Updated: June 2012

Common editorial rates —regardless of whether a project is flat rate or hourly— tend to fall within the ranges indicated below. These should be used only as a rough guideline; rates vary considerably depending on the nature of the work, the time frame of the assignment, the degree of special expertise required, and other factors. The industry standard for a manuscript page, however, is a firm 250 words.

Type of Work	Estimated Pace	Range of Fees
EDITING		
Editing, basic copyediting	5-10 ms pgs/hr	\$30-40/hr
Editing, heavy copyediting	2-5 ms pgs/hr	\$40-50/hr
Editing, website copyediting		\$40-50/hr
Editing, developmental	1-5 pgs/hr	\$45-55/hr
Editing, substantive or line	1-6 ms pgs/hr	\$40-60/hr
FACT CHECKING		\$30-40/hr
INDEXING	8-20 pr pg/hr	\$35-65/hr \$5.50-12/pr ind pg
LAYOUT		
Layout, books	6-10 pgs/hr	\$45-85/hr
Layout, newsletters	1-4 pgs/hr	\$40-100/hr
Layout, websites		\$16-20/pg
MANUSCRIPT EVALUATION		\$45-55/hr
PERMISSIONS		\$40-50/hr
PROJECT MANAGEMENT		\$9-30/pr pg \$40-90/hr
PROOFREADING	9-13 ms pgs/hr	\$30-35/hr
RESEARCHING		\$40-75/hr
TRANSCRIBING	variable	\$3-5/pg
TRANSLATING	300-500 wds/hr	\$40-50/hr
WEB DESIGN		\$50-75/hr
WRITING	1-3 ms pgs/hr	
Writing, fiction		\$40-50/hr 20¢-25¢/wd
Writing, ghostwriting		\$50-60/hr 26¢-50¢/wd
Writing, grants/proposals/sales/PR		\$50-60/hr 30¢-95¢/wd
Writing, journalism		\$40-50/hr 26¢-50¢/wd
Writing, medical		\$60-70/hr 80¢-95¢/wd
Writing, nonspecified		\$40-100/hr 20¢-\$2/wd
Writing, technical/trade		\$50-60/hr 45¢-55¢/wd

NOTE ind = indexable page, ms = manuscript, pr = printed, pg = page, hr = hour, wd = word

Life is a Journey not a Rollercoaster Ride

Author: Jackie Joens

In the movie, Parenthood, there is a scene where Steve Martin's and Mary Steenburgen's characters are discussing the difficulties and challenges of parenthood and life. Martin is frustrated and expressing his desire for some control and guarantees in life. Steenburgen states, "Life is messy." Martin replies, "I hate messy!" It is just about at this moment that Steenburgen's grandmother (who is apparently suffering from some form of dementia) enters the room and shares a story.

Grandma explains, "You know, when I was young, Grandpa took me on a roller coaster. Up and down, up, down. Oh, what a ride. I always wanted to go again. It was just interesting to me that a ride could make me so frightened...so scared, so sick, so excited...and so thrilled all together. Some didn't like it. They went on the merry-go-round. That just goes around. Nothing. I like the roller coaster. You get more out of it."

I have always thought that to be a poignant moment in the movie. A lesson in reality which clearly illustrates that there are some things in our lives that occur no matter what we do. It is a scene that reminds us that sometimes, in spite of our best efforts or intentions, life keeps rolling along...up and down.

If we carefully process, we can see that grandma's lesson was more about how we perceive the ride of life rather than the ride itself. Are we focused on the "thrills" that present themselves or are we more focused on the need for predictability and the control that the merry-go-round provides? Grandma's story illustrates how sometimes things in life happen that we have no control over, but there will always be another corner, another hill to climb or descend...life goes on. As Scarlet O'Hara proclaimed in Gone With the Wind, "Tomorrow is another day!"

When I first saw these movies (back in my younger, more innocent and less skeptical days) I found a sense of comfort in these scenes. I embraced the idea that I wasn't alone on this rollercoaster ride of life. There were others experiencing similar frustrations, uncertainties, struggles and the uphill climb of life. There was always tomorrow's promise of the possibility of wonderful life events that were thrilling, exciting, exuberating and I just needed to hold on as I rode time on the downhill, easy side of the slope. The metaphor seemed to fit. It made sense to a young woman living in a new world of adulthood; with the corresponding responsibilities, challenges, and life encounters.

Then something changed...life happened. As I got older and experienced more of the complexities of living, I came to an astonishing conclusion. I wasn't a just a passenger on what I thought was this rollercoaster ride. Decisions I pondered, choices I made, directions I moved all were within my control. I had a lot more power in how my ride of life flowed than what the rollercoaster analogy allowed. I wasn't just buckled in to a safety seat, waiting for the next incident to occur. I wasn't a "passenger" on a ride of each day, waiting to see if tomorrow would bring up hill battles or an exciting ride down hill. I was making decisions each and everyday on what direction to proceed on my journey.

Now don't get me wrong. I know there are many things that happen through the years over which I (or we) don't have any control. I can't control the one hour wait in the security check point line at the airport. There was absolutely nothing I could do to keep my grandmother from having a stroke or my son from tearing his ACL. I couldn't stop the horrific events of 9/11. I can't change the laws and allow for a man suffering from paranoid schizophrenia to be held longer than the mandatory 72 hours for psychiatric evaluation and medication. I cannot change the weather patterns, climate cycles, economic conditions, the horrors of war, the devastation of natural disasters, or the murder of innocent people. There is far too much that occurs in life that makes no sense and for which I hold no answers. These events happen and there is sometimes a lot of pain associated with them. There is evil in the world that remains unexplained and is sometimes very frightening.

As difficult as these struggles can be (and they are) I choose to do more than just ride the ride of life. I choose not to become just a passenger – “a victim.” I do not believe that these events just happen as part of the ride and I that I have no power in these situations other than to watch them occur as I am carried on the uphill climb. No, I rather take a proactive roll in my voyage.

Instead of a rollercoaster ride, I think that a better metaphor for life is a “journey.” “Journey” is defined as something suggesting travel or passage from one place to another. As we move forward from one day to the next (by definition) we are met with challenges of one sort or another. Some are quite pleasant and exciting and others are difficult and more of a struggle. All of these challenges are part of the journey – my journey - your journey - we must go through them. It is how we handle them, or (in other words) choose to traverse the path of our journey that helps us map out our individual directions and experiences.

We can make choices as to how to deal with our unruly coworker, cranky neighbor, negative in-laws, news of illness, pain of injury, realization of spousal infidelity, announcement of deadlines, or news of national tragedies. These things happen and people enter and exit our lives on a regular basis, directly or indirectly. Instead of sitting back believing to be powerless, we can accept the challenge of learning from the experience. What will we do with the new information? What lesson(s) are we taking away from the exchange? Do we choose to grow from the situation or become a passenger – a victim, helplessly riding along?

The point is that making choices is what life is all about. Even the choice to not choose is taking a position. Here, your pronouncement is that you don’t want to do anything or decide anything. Make no mistake about it though, it is still a choice. We are constantly challenged to choose how we are going to meet each challenge and what lessons we will take away from the experience. If we choose to be a victim to life’s circumstances - riding the ride - then we will live each day with a victim-way of thinking. We will wait for life to happen to us, rather than embracing the lessons that could enrich our future selves, relationships, encounters, or experiences.

Take a moment and reflect on where you are today and what direction you are choosing for your life. Are you riding a merry-go-round, repeating old mistakes or unhealthy behaviors? Is your ride more like the ups and downs of a rollercoaster, sitting back and holding on for dear life? Or, are you embracing the challenges (ups and downs) of each and every day by choosing to evaluate and learn from life’s lessons? These lessons (if you are open) can help you navigate your journey in a much more enriched and satisfying way. Embrace your lessons and grow with your experiences. Fill your journey with the promise of a new day – a new more fulfilling direction to your life.

The Story of the Taoist Farmer

There is a Chinese story of an old farmer who had an old horse for tilling his fields.

One day the horse escaped into the hills and, when all the farmer's neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Then, when the farmer's son tried to tame one of the wild horses, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

Some weeks later the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg they let him off.

Now was that good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?

The King and His Friend

An African king had a close friend who had the habit of remarking "this is good" about every occurrence in life no matter what it was.

One day the king and his friend were out hunting. The king's friend loaded a gun and handed it to the king, but alas he loaded it wrong and when the king fired it, his thumb was blown off.

"This is good!" exclaimed his friend.

The horrified and bleeding king was furious. "How can you say this is good? This is obviously horrible!" he shouted.

The king put his friend in jail.

About a year later the king went hunting by himself. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake and bound him to it. As they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed that the king was missing a thumb.

Being superstitious, they never ate anyone who was less than whole. They untied the king and sent him on his way.

Full of remorse the king rushed to the prison to release his friend.

"You were right, it WAS good!" the king said.

The king told his friend how the missing thumb saved his life and added, "I feel so sad that I locked you in jail. That was such a bad thing to do."

"NO! this is good!" responded his delighted friend.

"Oh, how could that be good my friend? I did a terrible thing to you while I owe you my life."

"It is good," said his friend, "because if I wasn't in jail I would have been hunting with you and they would have killed ME."

A Story of Priorities and a Jar

The following story is one that's been circulating for awhile. I believe it holds a very important message regarding appropriately setting priorities in our lives.

A professor of philosophy stood before his class with some items in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly he picked up a large empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with rocks about two inches in diameter. He then asked the students if the jar was full.

They agreed that it was full.

So the professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly and watched as the pebbles rolled into the open areas between the rocks. The professor then asked the students again if the jar was full.

They chuckled and agreed that it was indeed full this time.

The professor picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. The sand filled the remaining open areas of the jar.

"Now," said the professor, "I want you to recognize that this jar signifies your life. The rocks are the truly important things, such as family, health and relationships. If all else was lost and only the rocks remained, your life would still be meaningful.

The pebbles are the other things that matter in your life, such as work or school.

The sand signifies the remaining "small stuff" and material possessions.

If you put sand into the jar first, there is no room for the rocks or the pebbles. The same can be applied to your lives. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are truly important.

Pay attention to the things in life that are critical to your happiness and well-being. Take time to get medical check-ups, play with your children, go for a run, write your grandmother a letter. There will always be time to go to work, clean the house, or fix the disposal. Take care of the rocks first – things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just pebbles and sand.