

THE PURPOSE CHOICE: KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

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THERE ARE AT LEAST THREE TIMES in life when we ought to be required to go off on a retreat where we sit by a fire and reflect on the question, “What’s next?” One is when we choose our vocation; another, when we choose a life partner. The third is when we contemplate what used to be called retirement.

Something happens to us when we sit before fires. New choices come up within us, and we glimpse new visions that were not there before. A fire shifts the mood to one of purpose and possibility. No matter where a fire happens to be, it always weaves its spell.

Earlier in our history, fires were our homes. We slept circled around them at night. We gathered beside them for councils. Around fires, lives of hope are created and unwritten commitments are made. Around the fire we feel a sense of our place in the world.

Once we feel the warmth and connections around a fire, we make contact with our core and with the universal fires of our ancestors. So fundamental is this feeling that the very building of a fire has symbolic significance. Each step evokes our histories. Although we may not need the fire today for warmth or cooking, it is still a human necessity — an essential ritual.

Since the dawn of civilization, elders have sat around fires discussing and debating the essential choices. There is an evolving elder within each of us, and there is a danger of losing contact with that core in ourselves. As Carl Jung put it, “Every human being has a two-million-year-old man within himself, and if he loses contact with that two-million-year-old self, he loses his real roots.” The “elder within” is an essential part of our genetic hardwiring, and it is called forth around the fire.

Four Essential Flames

POSITIVE AGING, ALSO REFERRED to as “conscious aging,” has proven to be a difficult and elusive concept to define. Among the many definitions that abound, none is fully adequate. Yet, since it is essential to have a working model, let me offer my own model which I call the “four flames” formulation.¹ I find the “fire” metaphor is especially useful because it is so universal and timeless in its appeal.

The “four flames” of positive aging describe four *tasks of development* that are essential for our happiness, health, healing, and longevity in the second half of life. Those who have successfully completed each task demonstrate distinctive characteristics, or “flames”:

- from Identity comes deep freedom to choose a course of action in life situations;
- from Community, deep compassion for others and all life;
- from Passion, deep energy, expressed in creative, experiential, or attitudinal actions; and
- from Purpose, deep desire to make a difference in the world.

Consistent with other wholistic approaches, the model suggests that each task builds on and informs the next.

The centerpiece of this model is the last of the four — the purpose choice — which is tied to *life-enhancing beliefs about human freedom, human dignity, human rights, service to life, and reverence for life.*

The Purpose Choice

THEORY IS ALWAYS IN DEBT TO LIFE experience, and the “four flames” concept has been shaped by my life, my studies, my clients, and my teachers. Among this latter group, I am in profound debt to Viktor Frankl whose life story may be familiar to many.

During his three years of internment in two Nazi concentration camps, Frankl witnessed and experienced starvation and acts of torture and cruelty beyond imagination. Yet despite the overwhelming suffering and the near certain threat of death, he also discovered an inspiring human capacity to find meaning and purpose in life.

In the preface of Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Gordon Allport wrote, “How could he — every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold and brutality, hourly expecting extermination — how could he find life worth preserving? A psychiatrist who personally has faced such extremity is a psychiatrist worth listening to.”

I couldn't agree more. So, I listened to him. Frankl returned from the death camps with the knowledge that we have freedom to choose an attitude or way of reacting to our fate. It did not matter what that fate was. “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*” (Nietzsche).

Frankl created a form of therapy for people whose lives lack meaning. “Logotherapy” (as he called it) is based on three principles: (1) the freedom of will, (2) the will to meaning, and (3) the meaning of life. The first of these, the *freedom of will*, involves freedom to choose our reactions to our life conditions, which then results in the freedom to rise above those circumstances. Thus, we are not determined by biological instincts, childhood conflicts, or other external forces. The *will to meaning* and the *meaning of life* refer to the need to search not for ourselves, but for a meaning which will offer a purpose to our existence. A purpose that is larger than ourselves.

The search for meaning in the second half of life necessitates personal choice. Frankl called the lack of meaning “noogenic neurosis” — a state characterized by purposelessness, aimlessness, and emptiness. This results in people living in an “existential vacuum” in which life has no meaning and they feel bored and passionless. Frankl observed a growing existential vacuum throughout the world, and he felt the solution was to find or regain a sense of meaning in life.

Logotherapy offers three ways to give meaning to life: (1) by what we give to the world in terms of some “creation,” (2) by what we take from the world in “experience,” and (3) by the attitude we take toward “suffering.”

His experience in the concentration camp led Frankl to conclude that life's main motivation is to find meaning in life so there is reason to get up in the morning — reason to continue living. There is no *universal will to meaning*; meaning is unique to each person, and it will change as situations change. This search for meaning, however, increases “inner tension.” And as a vital person grapples with the gap between what one is and what one could be, Frankl believed that tension increased. He believed that tension was a prerequisite for psychological health and the alternative — a life without tension — led to noogenic neurosis.

Finding meaning in life allows us to reach the state of “self-transcendence” — the ultimate state of a fully-realized human being. What Frankl called “self-transcendence,” I call “the purpose choice.”

The Big Distinction

THOUGH SOME REGARD FINDING A PURPOSE and *living on purpose* as interchangeable phrases, I believe they are not. There are critically important differences.

Finding a purpose most often occurs in reaction to the external circumstances that the world presents us. Like Frankl in the concentration camps, the sudden shift in circumstances that is perceived as threat

mobilizes a basic, unexamined instinct for survival. We do not stop and think about it; we simply act — our action prompted by the threat. The action that arises tends to be temporary, lasting as long as the circumstances that provoked it persist. At the same time, the act of finding a purpose begins to reveal what people really care about. The circumstance becomes a triggering event in the choice to live on purpose.

Living on purpose means making a clear choice about what it is that we care about in our lives, what it is we have passion about, and what it is we choose to have our lives be about. Then, we use this conscious choice as the ground upon which we build our lives. Rather than having life push us into a purpose, we choose our purpose and dedicate our lives to living on purpose. We use our purpose as our “center” — our solid core — that we go to when we make the decisions that shape our days and our future.

Back to the Future

WHEN WE GO TO THE VILLAGES of the original peoples, like the hunter-gatherer Hadza in East Africa, and we participate in that most elemental of human experiences — sitting around a fire at night, talking, trading stories, sharing wisdom — we come to notice a certain arrangement of the group. Certain people find places closer to the fire; these members of the group tend to be the primary participants in the discussions and storytelling. Behind them tends to be a larger group — not excluded, but at a respectful distance — listening. The spontaneous arrangement is determined in part by age, but more so, by wisdom. Those who are perceived to have a wise voice to offer claim the place closest to the fire.

I view the people living on purpose today as much like this. Becoming a wise elder means finding one’s voice and claiming one’s place at the fire. And like the arrangement of individuals around the Hadza tribal fire, it does not depend solely on a physical age: how white hair your hair is or how wrinkled your skin. Rather, there are states of mind and heart that are common to those upon whom we rely for wisdom and guidance.

There is no universal path for becoming a wise elder. But going back to the future — sitting around the fire with the Hadza — helps to light the path.

Becoming a purposeful person is a choice. It’s a way of relating to the world and the people in it that, though it generally bears a relationship to getting older, is neither guaranteed nor prevented by one’s chronological age. It is characterized by a choice to continue deepening the experience of growing, knowing that life is about ongoing development from cradle to grave. People who are choosing to live on purpose are curious. They recognize and accept their own mortality while still continuing to discover, learn, and grow.

Becoming a conscious elder means choosing to live on purpose. It involves a kind of paradoxical choice — one that comes from relinquishing external power but which requires us to take ownership of our internal power. It means claiming our voice, speaking softly, yet with purpose and hope. Defining what it means to be a conscious elder requires us to look both forward and backward simultaneously, to draw from the past while advancing confidently in the direction of the future.
