

## The Last of the Human Freedoms by Viral Mehta

□

□ True freedom lies in choice -- this is one of the core insights in the writings of Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. In the best-selling book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl described his profound experiences: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

□

□ In any challenging circumstance, Frankl's testimonial gives a starting point: in order to have the freedom to choose, we first need to be aware that we even have a choice. In awakening to the freedom of the inner choice in any moment, we immediately go from passivity to participation. Do a one-second experiment: ask yourself, "Do I have choice right now?" Simply posing that question begins to change your experience in that very instant.

□

□ But how often am I present to the fact that I have a choice? A telling study at Harvard recently showed that our minds actually wander about half the time, engaged either with the past or the future -- and not with the reality of what's happening in this moment. So in effect, for much of the time we are simply not present. And without presence, how can there be choice? This is not to say that the past and future are not valuable constructs.

□

□ Past experiences can be great teachers, but if we're not careful, they can disproportionately bias what's actually happening in this instant. Similarly, our conception of the future, while it helps us plan and be prepared, is ultimately a projection that siphons attention away from the unfolding of the current moment. Past or future, being distracted from our present reality weakens any possibility of participation.

□

□ Each moment, life places us on the crest of a powerful wave -- we can either deny our capacity to choose, or we can wholeheartedly embrace it. Blue pill or red pill, decay or evolution, these opposing forces are at endless play. On the one hand, the universe incessantly moves towards greater disorder, marching to the laws of thermodynamics and entropy. On the other hand, the very word *cosmos* comes from the Greek for "order," pointing to a clear arc of increasing self-organization and development. Choice is the pivot.

□

□ But choice -- or the lack thereof -- is layered, and choosing to pay attention is just the beginning. Beyond our deeply ingrained human tendency to lose awareness, another

deep pattern comes to light: to encounter the present with reflexive reactivity. Of course, such conditioning represents a coding of past experience, and like the constructs of past and present, these learned preferences can be helpful in making wise choices -- up to a certain point. If they remain unconscious or subconscious, they impose themselves on all our experiences, and keep us from experiencing reality as it is. Instead, we experience it as our accumulation of unexamined patterns define it to be. And we lose out on deepening a true understanding of ourselves and our world.

□

□If, instead, we commit to observe ourselves, even if, at first, just observing the disorder within, we begin to counteract these tendencies. Given enough neutralizing space, the ripples of reactivity die down, and awareness deepens. Such silent witnessing builds its own momentum, eventually becoming a foundation for continued learning and insight into the depths of our minds. Between things happening and responding to them, there is deep presence, and we can see more clearly into the dynamics of the mind, and the cause and effect, even of subtle, mental actions.

□

□Not that it's easy. As a rambunctious kid of 6 or 7, I distinctly remember my parents telling me to "introspect" after any significant mistakes I made. I remember being thoroughly confused by the word, having no clue what it meant or how to do it. As I reflect now, I realize that the word literally means to look within, to really experience the effects of our choices, the consequences of our actions. This is the essence of practical wisdom: to understand through direct experience, which actions, decisions, and intentions add to well-being, and which ones don't.

□

□It all starts with conscious choice. In any moment that I choose to remain aware of my current reality, I give myself a chance to accept that reality as it is, with complete equanimity. If I do, then even as the momentum of past tendencies asserts itself, I feel their effects, but choose again to stop propagating patterns. As a result, in every such moment, unhelpful habits of unconscious reactivity unravel. In continuously engaging this way with a dynamic reality, it becomes clear that transformation isn't something that happens to me. All I am is a constantly evolving process, all I am is transformation itself, and that might just be what Frankl referred to as the "last of the human freedoms."