

effective environments newsletter



CONSULTANTS TO NONPROFITS, SMALL BUSINESSES & ENTREPRENEURS

Only YOU Can Author Your Life

The idea of each of us authoring life is not new; however, it is easy to forget that we ARE the authors of life. This article reminds us all that, day by day, we are either inventing life or reacting to the circumstances around us.

I. What is Authoring Life?

"Authoring life" is shorthand for taking charge of how life goes and for living a life that satisfies and fulfills us. To author life is to be responsible for what occurs to us and around us and to make choices from being responsible. We don't mean that we'll always get our way or that we'll be wealthy and famous because we said that is what we want. Authoring life refers to something far more subtle and powerful.

At one level, "authoring life" means we invent our future, identifying what is important and acting consistent with that. On this large scale, we invent our future when we create a

life-long vision and make plans for its fulfillment. On a day-to-day basis, we take actions to make that vision a reality — actions that lead us in the direction we want to go and are consistent with the ultimate fulfillment of our dreams. This is the more recognized meaning of "authoring life." Taking a stand for something and "living one's dream" are widely acknowledged and there are many inspiring stories about people who have done just that. These stories remind us of the fundamental strength and magnificence of human beings. They also remind us that what these inspiring people have done, we might do too. More importantly, an opening is created to live our own version of an extraordinary life. These are important reminders and lessons for "authoring life."

Inventing life is a multi-layered phenomenon. It applies to the big picture and large dreams. It also applies to the less grand

scheme of things, affecting our choice of short-term accomplishments and even our decisions about how to spend our day.

For example, suppose I intend to make a career change and become a social worker. Obtaining a graduate degree is part of that process. In the long term, I see myself making a difference in my new career. In the shorter term, I see myself as a student, pursuing the knowledge that will empower me to succeed. Today, my plan of action is to identify the institutions that offer degrees in my chosen field and to request applications from the five that are located closest to my home town.

At each of these levels — long term vision, short term goals and today — we always have an opportunity to name what is important to us and focus on making that a reality, OR we can allow ourselves to be buffeted by the winds of circumstance and just see how



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it all turns out. There exists the possibility of life as an invention for any period of time we contemplate.

There is yet one more level at which we have the chance to author life — the level of the immediate, the moment, the now. When all is said and done, this is the place where life gets lived. When it comes to making choices and taking actions consistent with those choices, all we ever have is “today” and “right now.”

The choices we make at this level — indeed, the very act of choosing at all — matter greatly to our quality of life and to the ultimate fulfillment of our dreams. The tire goes flat in the moment. How will I react? Probably badly? Or will I invent another way to respond? My boss criticizes me or rudely shoots down my brilliant idea in front of God and everybody — and it happens in this moment. Will I respond in a manner that is consistent with my commitments?

From the moment I wake up, the question is there: Am I authoring life? Or am I simply stumbling around, allowing my mood, my communications and what I do to be shaped by everything and everyone around me?

The answer to this question can change from moment to moment! It is at this level, where life is actually

happening, that the true work of “authoring life” occurs. Will you have the courage and the discipline to choose what will most empower you moment by moment? That is the crux of the matter.

The possibility of living life fully and with satisfaction exists when we are authoring life on all three levels. What I dream for 50 years from now, I also act to realize in this moment. I am living into a future that is important to me — a future of my own invention and choosing.

II. How do we author life?

Make space to invent

The first step is to prepare yourself by ensuring that you have the mental room in which to create. Such preparation involves inventing for yourself a “clean slate,” so that the future is not crowded with “shoulds” or “problems to be fixed.” Before we can truly create, we must put the past behind us and be at peace with where we are now. This process may require writing in a journal, communicating with someone with whom you are incomplete, or simply declaring to yourself that you are now free to invent. Whatever is required, do this first.

Create a context that empowers you

A key part of authoring life is establishing your own structure of interpretation — identifying how you will choose to interpret the world around you and the circumstances that occur day by day. For example, will you assume that the people you meet are driven by good intentions or by selfish motives? When the going gets tough, will you welcome the challenge as an opportunity to learn and grow? Or will you assume that it’s hopeless and you might as well quit?

How you choose to interpret the world will shape your ability to maintain the “space to invent” to which we alluded above. It will also determine your capacity to stay empowered to author life. (See, e.g., “Quite Possibly, There’s Nothing Wrong,” effective environments newsletter, November 2000, at www.effenv.com/publications/articles.)

Focus on what is important

In making your long-term, short-term and daily choices, focus on what is important to you and on what it will take to make it a reality. Measure for what has been accomplished and what is needed next, rather than bemoaning the gap between where you are and where you want to be. In

general, there are four steps to achieve the end results you are after:

1. Identify what is important.
2. Make it do-able or manageable, by breaking it into bite-sized pieces and creating a plan.
3. Make choices that are consistent with the fulfillment of your plan.
4. Adopt practices that will keep you on track.

Focus on empowerment

Develop and adopt ways of being that empower you and the people around you. Be a student of what empowers you and others. You'll discover that certain ways of speaking are empowering, and other ways are not. For example, "I promise" empowers; "I'll try" does not.

Conduct is empowering, too. Doing what you said you would do is empowering. Communicating clearly and promptly when you are not able to do what you said you would do can also empower, especially if you also make a new promise for achieving the desired outcome.

Looking to the future — rather than complaining or assigning blame — is also empowering. Where we choose to look —

and what we choose to create — determines in great measure our level of success, our level of happiness, and our overall quality of life.

Conclusion

Authoring life occurs on several levels — from the "big picture" to the "stuff of the moment." It is, perhaps, most potent at the level at which it is most immediate.

It can be hard work, particularly at first, as the natural tendency of human beings is often to look outside ourselves for information about how life is going and what is possible now.

This work is worthwhile, however. Authoring life can be a source of satisfaction, accomplishment, fulfillment of commitments and expanded joy. We invite you to take it on. After all, only you can author your life. And it's your only job.

Happy Holidays!