

CHAPTER ONE

The Road to Somewhere

Unless you know what you want from life, you are not likely to stumble across it—but how do you know what you want? Especially if you are in some “the future-is-misty” stage and are not quite certain where you are heading. How do you decide what will be important in your future?

From interviews with hundreds of people about their hopes and plans, and from surveys of thousands of people about their careers, I have learned that what most people want out of life, more than anything else, is *the opportunity to make choices*.

What We All Want Is Choices

The worst possible life is a life without choices, a life barren of the hope of new things, a life of blind alleys, often leading to hopelessness. In contrast, the most pleasant life is the life filled with future opportunities.

For example, here are several possible outcomes of life; which of them appeal to you?

- Having an interesting job.
- Having a good marriage.
- Running your own company (or your own laboratory, or your own ranch, or your own newspaper).
- Living overseas in the beautiful village by the sea.
- Spending time with interesting friends.
- Having a comfortable home in the country.
- Living in a modern apartment in the heart of an exciting city.

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- Having enough free time and money to travel to interesting places.
- Being part of a close-knit, loving family
- Staying in good physical condition.
- Having people come to you because you are an expert.
- Making enough money to educate your children, purchase beautiful art, and contribute funds to others who are in need.
- Working in an important government post, influencing what is happening in your country.
- Producing a great work of art, or making an important scientific discovery, or devising a better master plan for a city, or making a run-down farm profitable.

If you are like most people, many of these might appeal to you. You might even answer, “I would like to have almost all of those things happen to me at one time or another.” What you are saying is that you want to have many potential opportunities so that you can pick and choose.

That is what this book is all about—creating opportunities for yourself. Sooner or later, you will realize that *the greatest tragedy in life is to have no options, to have no choices*. Consequently, when you are planning your future, you should plan it in a way that will give you a range of choices. This approach is particularly important if you are not certain right now what you want to do. Some people, when they are uncertain, have a tendency to do nothing, and this substantially restricts their future choices. Even if you do not know what you want to do in the long run, there are actions that you can take in the short run that will give you more choices when the long run gets here.

To Create Choices, You Must Have Goals

How can you be certain that you will have future choices? By setting goals so that you do not drift aimlessly. But they have to be the right kind of goals. The average person, when asked what they want from life, replies with fairly specific goals, such as “a good education, a good job, a good marriage, a loving family, a pleasant home, travel, money, success.”

For two reasons, such aims are not very useful in helping you plan a satisfying life. First, these goals are fixed, unchanging, while life is just the opposite. To say, for example, that you want a good job implies that there is a job somewhere that will keep you happy indefinitely. Or to yearn for a good marriage implies that once you have found the right person to marry, you will live happily ever after.

Well, it doesn't work that way. *Practically all goals tarnish with time if they are not renewed in some way.* A job that is exhilarating during the first year becomes less so after five years; without renewal, it becomes an automatic, perhaps humdrum activity after ten years, and a prison after twenty. The same for a marriage. The divorce rate, perhaps the best indication of marriage failures, is almost fifty percent, demonstrating that even relationships of love (“till death do us part”) can weaken and change with time if there is no renewal.

The second reason that such specific goals are not the best focus for our strivings is that, once attained, they no longer seem so important. To earn a degree, to be promoted, to make \$100,000, to marry the most important person in the world, to win a gold medal, to reach a quota—these

are the carrots that we strive for, and they are pleasant at first, extraordinarily so, but without continual growth, they pale. The poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed;" Adam Smith said essentially the same thing in *The Money Game*, a fascinating book on what motivates people to play the stock market: "No specific goal can sustain one for very long after it is achieved."

Goals are useful, to be sure—much of this book is devoted to them—but they should not be viewed as end products. Goals are useful only as they help move from here to somewhere else.

Like Alice, most of us think we want to go "somewhere," and it takes some experience to learn that, in life, there is no "somewhere." *There is only the road to somewhere and we are always on the way.*

Where do we learn to think of life as having "somewheres," as having places that once we reach, we will always be happy? Through the media. *Much of what we know of life, we learn from television, plays, books, and movies.* Much of that is educational, sometimes in peculiarly useful ways. John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard professor who was President John F. Kennedy's Ambassador to India, reported in his book, *Ambassador's Diary*, that when he arrived in India, he was expected to review a large contingent of Indian troops. He had no warning and no prior experience in reviewing troops. How did he know what to do? As he put it, "For my protocol, I drew heavily on old television shows. . . ."

Although the media have educated us in many useful ways, they have also misled us into thinking that the world is full of endings, some happy, some sad, but always endings.



There is **only**
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The movie ends, the television show ends, the novel ends, the play ends. That is not the way the world is. In life there are no endings. No matter how pleasant or painful the weekend was, the cast always gets up on Monday morning and goes about its business. In a movie, the sun may set, the moon may rise, the honeymooners may walk hand in hand down the lane to a climactic fade-out, but, in real life, they will awaken to an average day that may start with the scratchy realization that here they are in this expensive resort with no toothpaste and they cannot get the taste of last night's spicy dinner out of their mouths.

To give up the concept of “endings” is one of the most important steps in learning to plan realistically. Many people have trouble accepting this, and maybe an example will help.

One painful realization suffered by a young woman who has aimed her life toward happy endings (“a good marriage, a great job, a loving family, and a nice home”) comes when the children have left home and she is left alone, when she realizes that she hates her job, the house that needs to be cleaned weekly is only a millstone around her neck, and her husband is totally absorbed in his work and his golf game, an absorption that may leave his wife excluded. For a woman in that position, happy endings are pretty flat.

The same thing happens to men; the scenario may be slightly different, but the outcome is the same. *Life is complicated—that’s why it is fun*, but we need a way of thinking about it that captures this complexity and one that allows us to plan our goals accordingly.

Think of life in this way. Instead of happy endings and “somewheres,” think of life as a long, never-ending pathway stretching out ahead of you, with many other pathways branching off to either side. The pathway you are on now represents the lifestyle you are now living; the branching

Drink and dance
and laugh and lie.
Love the reeling midnight through.
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But, alas, we never do.)

—Dorothy Parker
“The Flaw in Paganism”

pathways represent new directions you might take—new jobs, new hobbies, and new places to live. One new pathway might be labeled, “be a cartoonist,” and if you have the proper talents and energy, you might choose to start down that pathway. Soon you would reach a fork where one branch would be labeled “freelance cartoonist,” and the other, “regularly employed.” You will have to choose, and your choice will have considerable influence on your further options because the future pathways leading from the two different branches will not always be the same.

Each branching pathway has a gate, and the gate will be open for you only if you have the right credentials. Consequently, when you come to new pathways, two factors will determine whether you will leave the pathway you are on now and start down a path leading in a new direction. The first factor is whether the pathway is open to you, which will be determined by your credentials; the second factor is whether or not you want to go through the gate, even if it is open. The first factor—your credentials—is the more important because if the gate is not open for you, you have no choice, no matter how badly you wish to follow the new pathway. Consequently, your main strategy in planning a life with maximum opportunities is to accumulate the best credentials possible—or, as I call them, assets—so that the maximum number of pathways will be open to you. *You want the choice to be in your hands, not the gatekeepers’ hands.*

TO REACH YOUR GOALS AND TO EXPAND YOUR CHOICES, YOU MUST HAVE ASSETS, THE MORE THE BETTER

These pathways and gates are only imaginable, of course. They represent the choices you will have in life. They might be labeled with occupations: doctor, lawyer, farmer, chef; or with places to live: big city, small town, the country, overseas; or with general lifestyles: married with a large family, famous with lots of money, a powerful politician, a quiet, comfortable life in a small village.

Whether any of the pathways will be open for you depends on your assets—on such factors as your education, your work experiences, your skills, perhaps your family connections, even your appearance and, above all, your health. If, for example, you want to enter the pathway marked “medical school,” you will need to take the right courses in college, you will need to earn good grades, and you will need to have impressed someone who is reasonably important so that they will write a good letter of recommendation for you. If you want to go down the path marked “farming,” because of the high cost of entry, you will probably have to inherit a farm (or marry someone who will). If you want to live overseas, you will need to have an occupation that is exportable, such as entertainer, international manager, language translator, or scientist, you will probably need to speak a foreign language fluently, you will need to grow up in a family that has foreign connections, or you will need a substantial amount of imagination, persistence, and luck. The point is, *most pathways are open only to people with the right combination of assets, along with the necessary motivation.*

For most people the pathway ahead is usually misty. You cannot be exactly certain where your current pathway is leading, and you certainly cannot see all possible branching pathways that might appear in the future. However, once you realize that whether or not a specific gate will be open for you depends on the assets you have, then—even if the future is misty—you can begin creating future choices now by increasing your assets, even if you are not certain which future pathways you may wish to follow. You will at least have choices, and the more assets you have, the more future pathways that will be open for you, and therefore the more choices you will have.

What opens the gates to new pathways? The next chapter is devoted totally to that question, and you should study it closely. Generally, what it says is that *education* opens new pathways, *experience* opens new pathways, *talents* open new pathways, *well-connected friends and family* open new pathways, *good health* opens new pathways (or at least keeps some from closing), and *personal characteristics* such as *physical or mental abilities, creativity, persistence, leadership* and *good work habits* open new pathways.

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Your age may also have some impact on whether gateways will be open to you. Early in life, we start passing gateways leading off from our route and, unless we see them, have the right assets, and the desire to enter them, some of them will be forever closed to us. For example, the pathway “Be a concert pianist” comes along early in life, even as early as six years of age, and most of us shoot right by it without realizing (or caring) that that pathway (i.e., that occupation) is probably forever closed to us. Thus, some decisions have to be made quite early in life although, remember, no decision is fixed. Even an early decision to

devote yourself to the piano is only a decision to start down that pathway. Other pathways will continue to appear, some with open gates, some with locked gates, again depending on your credentials.

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At the other extreme, some pathways do not come along until you have lived a while. Sometimes the restrictions are formal—for example, you must be at least thirty-five years old to be President of the United States—but generally the restrictions on age eliminate people without appropriate experience. For example, most influential politicians are in their fifties and sixties, not because of any formal restrictions, but because it requires many years of living to build a political base that can help in winning elections.

There is no use in fretting much about your age; you cannot change it and you cannot slow aging down. What you can do is make certain that when you are old enough to consider entering a new pathway, you will have the necessary credentials for opening that gate—and that takes planning.

Planning

I once asked a successful man, while interviewing him about his career, “What led to your success? How did you make it to the top?”

“A lot of luck,” he answered, “but a lot of planning too. I have always been a planner.”

“Tell me about that . . . when did you start planning?”

“I can tell you exactly when because I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was in college, living in a dormitory room with a boy from Iowa. He came in one night while a bunch of us were sitting around, talking about life. I could tell he was excited, but he did not say anything until everyone else left. Then he blurted out, ‘my folks just got rich!! My mother called tonight—she walked out to the mailbox this morning and found a check for a half-million dollars!’”

If you want
something to
happen,
make a space
for it.

—A savvy college student

“My reaction, after the initial astonishment, was only barely concealed envy. I asked him how it happened.

“He said, ‘I don’t exactly understand, but I guess my dad bought some stock in a small company years ago, and then just kind of forgot about it. The company has just been bought out by a larger company, and this is our share.’”

The man I was interviewing continued, “That night I lay in bed awake a long time, thinking, ‘Why was it his family and not mine? Why him and not me?’ Finally, I tried to analyze it in a systematic way.

“I thought to myself, ‘what could possibly happen in my life to bring me such a windfall?’ and bleakly I realized that there was nothing. I had no old stock that would shoot

Do not wait until you
are thirsty
to dig a well.

—Chinese proverb

臨渴掘井

臨
渴
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upwards in value nor, as far as I knew, did my family. I had no land where someone might suddenly find oil; I had no paintings that might turn out to be by Old Masters; I had no talents that someone, somehow was going to miraculously discover overnight to make me famous—I had nothing special going for me. And right there in that dormitory bed I said to myself, ‘Charlie, if you want something to happen in your life, you have to plant some seeds, and you had better plant a lot of them because you never can tell which ones will sprout.’ Since then, I have always been a planter of seeds. A few of them have sprouted, and here I am.”

Later on, a university student put it to me more succinctly. This young woman, a likeable, alert, and enthusiastic striver, said to me, “If you want something to happen in your life, Professor, you have to make a space for it.” She put her hands straight out in front of her, palms together, and started forcing them slowly apart, as though she had stuck them into a bale of cotton, and was slowly forcing them apart, making a bigger and bigger space in the cotton. “You see, you have to make a space for it . . . for whatever it is you want.”

If you want milk,
there is no sense
sitting on a milk stool
in the middle
of a field,
waiting for a COW
to back up to you.

—A Midwestern farmer

Both of these people were planners; they made things happen in their lives, either by planting seeds or pushing aside the cotton. They did not sit idly by, waiting for life to happen to them. They went out looking, they made plans, and then they took actions.

Here are some comments that should help you make better plans.

1. Planning is a matter of probabilities, which means that sometimes your plans will work out, and sometimes they will not—you can save yourself a lot of grief by realizing that sooner rather than later. *Nothing in life is a sure thing, and any plans that you make for the future will have to deal with uncertainly.* Once you realize that, several other conclusions are apparent. First, there are steps you can take to raise your probability for success. Second, you had better have some alternatives in case your first plan is unavailable. Third, any given plan can fail, and you had best prepare for that possibility also.

2. Your planning should cover different time spans, such as one hour, one week, one year, or ten years. Obviously, planning has to be much different if you are thinking about next year as opposed to ten years from now. You can, and should, plan ten years ahead but you cannot do it with much precision because there are too many uncertain factors. As Winston Churchill once said when speaking of planning the affairs of the British Empire, "*One must always look ahead, but it is difficult to look farther than you can see.*" You can, and should, plan for one hour ahead also; you can do that with substantial precision, but of course any one single hour will not have much impact on your life. (Although several single hours stacked together, well planned and well executed, can be an excellent contribution to your future opportunities.)

Although there will be much uncertainty in your life over the next ten years, one thing that you can count on with absolute certainty is that ten years from now, you will be ten years older. If you are reading this book at age seventeen, in the next ten years of your life, you will probably complete your formal education, leave home, marry, start your first job, and switch jobs at least once (according to the averages). The odds of all of those things happening are high; what planning are you doing for them now?

If you are reading this book at age thirty-seven, in the next ten years, you may reach the peak of your occupational life, your income may reach a maximum and level off, you may purchase a home, your children will probably be teenagers (and they will likely be planning their college educations and leaving home), and the aging of your body will become more evident, especially if you have poor health habits. You will probably have less energy and endurance



The winds of grace
may be blowing,
but it is up to US
to set
the sails.

—A Norwegian
ship's captain

than you have now. Distressing, perhaps, but a fact and one that you should plan for.

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Goal Planning

You can categorize your goals roughly as follows:

- Long-range goals, over the horizon;
- Medium-range goals, the next chapter in your life;
- Short-range goals, the coming year;
- Mini-goals, thirty days ahead; and
- Micro-goals, the next fifteen minutes.

Long-range goals are those concerned with the overall style of life that you wish to live—the type of job that you want, whether you wish to be married, the kind of family

that you want, where you will be living, basically the general situation that you wish to live in. Although you should develop some overall idea of what you are after, do not try to plan long-range goals in detail because too many changes will come along. Have an overall plan, but keep it flexible.

Medium-range goals are goals covering the next five years or so; they cover the particular kind of training or education you are seeking, or the next step in your career. You will have more control over these, and you can tell along the way whether or not you are achieving them and modify your efforts accordingly.

Short-range goals are goals covering the period from about one month to one year from now. You can set these goals quite realistically

and can tell fairly soon whether you are reaching them. Do not set impossible goals for yourself. While you always want to stretch yourself, you do not want to become discouraged. *Aim realistically and optimistically*, but then try hard to achieve your aims. If you fail, try again. If you fail again, try to fail smarter. Persistence is necessary for success in achieving most worthwhile goals.

Mini-goals are goals covering from about one day to one month. You will have much more control over these goals than you do over the longer-term goals. You can plan out a program for the next week, or the next month, and your chances of carrying it out—assuming your goals are reasonable and your motivation is strong—are good. If you

It was a day like today
when MARCO POLO left
for China. What are your
plans for today?

—Loesje International poster