

The Final Freedom

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Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl observed that even when he was incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp, he still retained one precious freedom—namely: the freedom to choose how he would understand and respond to his situation. It would have been easy for him to see himself as a victim and to respond with despondency and resignation but Frankl choose another path. Trained as a psychiatrist, Frankl gave his life meaning in the midst of grossly dehumanizing conditions by helping to prevent his companions from slipping into severe despondency and suicide.

Frankl's example reminds me that there is more than one way to respond to any situation—no matter how horrific—that I might find myself in. Philosopher and ethicist John Sullivan puts it this way: “There are at least two ways of responding to any situation, a small minded way and a large minded way.” “Small minded” responses are marked by pettiness, defensiveness, fearfulness, deception, and selfishness. By contrast “large minded” actions are guided by generosity, honesty, courage, compassion, and kindness.

Inspired by both Frankl and Sullivan, I have adopted the practice of catching myself in small mind and then switching to large mind. In my case there is no shortage of opportunities for this practice. For example, just the other morning, I walked out my front door and discovered that the sidewalk had a fine glazing of ice. My immediate response to this phenomenon was: “I hate ice; what a pain!” Then, seeing some people struggling to make their way down the icy sidewalk, I thought, “It's going to take me a long time to walk to work.” Only now do I see how small minded my response was. Rather than feeling victimized by the ice, I might have seen this situation as an opportunity to extend kindnesses. For example, had I been in “big mind” I would have put some sand on my sidewalk and that of my neighbors and offered a helping hand to those who were slipping and sliding. Lamentably, I did neither.

Later that same morning I was busy finishing a report when there was a knock at my office door. When I opened the door there stood Patty, one of my students from last semester. Immediately, I thought to myself, “Argh! This is an interruption. I'm in the middle of something important. What does she want?” Now, mind you, all that happened was a knock and the appearance of Patty. Everything after that constituted what Sullivan refers to as my **W-U-R-T**—a **W**ay of **U**nderstanding and **R**esponding **T**o the situation. In this case, my WURT—understanding Patty's appearance as an interruption, etc.—was exceedingly small minded.

What would a large-minded response to this interruption have looked like? Well, I could have substituted “I am in the middle of something important” with “This moment--this NOW--is the only moment that is important--NOW is when life occurs; it is the only moment there is.” In like fashion, I could have expanded “What does she **want** from me” to “What **gift**--

what life teaching--might Patty be bringing me. In this vein, I recall the lines from poet Robert Bly:

If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you've ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Bly's words inspire me to experiment with a big-minded way of responding to life's knocks and calls. For example, the next time someone knocks at my office door, I could pause for three breaths: The first breath to let go of what I am doing; the second to relax in the present moment and the third breath to prepare to welcome, with curiosity and an open heart, whatever might be awaiting me on the other side. Acting in this way, my life would become kinder and filled with possibility.

In the end, Frankl's example calls me to notice all the ways that I incarcerate myself with my small-minded responses to how life presents itself moment by moment. I don't need to be imprisoned by ice storms or victimized by unexpected interruptions. I can exercise my most fundamental liberty—the freedom to choose another response.