

- Journey 3 -



As a society, Americans have long tended to prize rationality and to prioritize thinking skills in our educational systems. We believe that conscious, logical, unemotional reasoning is the key to problem-solving and to successful lives. But we now know that our reasoning is *never* free of emotion, and that much of it is done subconsciously—it involves more reflex than conscious reflection.

If we are ever to live more consciously, more aware of what we are doing and why, we absolutely must explore and master our emotional life and faculties. The most important life decisions we ever make—whether to stay in school, who to marry, whether and when to have children, what career to pursue, who to choose as friends—are made more on the basis of gut feelings than logic. And those feelings stem from and are inextricably bound to our relationships.

Feelings are our own personal reactions to our experiences and to our interpretations of events and of the behavior of others. Two people can theoretically share the same experience but receive it in very different ways. Feelings are triggered subconsciously by our memories and by the influences of past experiences. It is precisely because our feelings arise from our subconscious minds that we can find them mysterious.

And that baffling quality may be one reason why we often ascribe their cause to others. An important principle about emotions is that *no one can make us feel anything*. No one else can or should make us happy. No one else is to

blame for our anger. Feelings arise from within us. How we do or do not choose to respond to them or to act upon them remains our responsibility. We are in charge of what we do with our feelings. The catch is that many of us do not know much about feelings, so how can we be accountable for them?

If we do not excavate our past, uncovering important relationships and the feelings engendered by them, we can become stuck in a loop. We allow our subconscious feelings to push us to repeat the same patterns, without knowing why. Think of these loops as the sound track or play list of your life, endlessly replaying. You may need to remove old songs, add new ones, or even change the genre of this “background music”—by trying new things, meeting new people, or developing new habits.

Making the invisible visible

Exploring where our feelings came from and what triggers them today can remove much of their power to control our behavior. And never doubt that emotions do influence our behavior! We tend to act first, for reasons unclear to us, and create justifications later. We make decisions based upon feelings but then add a layer of rationalizations to “explain” our behavior. Even if you do not see this in your own behavior, surely you have experienced someone else coming up with after-the-fact reasons for doing something that were not mentioned at the time, the explanations becoming more elaborate with each succeeding argument. Humans are very good at this. Our conscious minds hate mysteries and seem designed to solve them—without ever confronting the truth.

Try this thought experiment. Think of a movie or a novel you really love, one that evoked very strong feelings. Perhaps it had protagonists who

- encounter adversity, lose faith and hope, but then emerge from hopelessness to find purpose again, or
- struggle with addiction, lose everything, then make a triumphant comeback, or
- sacrifice everything to save others, or
- make bad choices of friends or partners, suffer for it, and live on to create a better life, or
- buck tradition or bureaucracy or bad guys to help people in need, or
- strike out on their own and courageously begin a whole new life.

For some reason, you really identified with or were inspired by these characters. This is the power of *story*.

Feelings and Relationships

Because we are inherently social creatures, most of our feelings arise from relationships. When establishing new ones, we search for commonalities: experiences and connections and relationships we may share. When we are living through something terrible, awareness that we are not the first or not alone in that difficulty gives us heart. We know that, if others survived an experience, then so can we. Losing relationships—whether through voluntary or involuntary separation—is painful, because even dysfunctional relationships are important to us.

We are programmed from conception as social beings: babies *in utero* are significantly affected by their mothers' behavior. Babies possess an astonishing ability to read facial expressions—because relationships are so vital to our survival. We *need* others. But, as we grow older, we can exercise more control over who we are in relationship with. Babies cannot choose their parents, but our choices of friends, colleagues, and family expand with age. And every loss of relationship is an opportunity to choose the next one wisely.

Warning: you may actually limit or lose some relationships as you discover and define who you are and how you want to live. There is no point, after all, to having a choice if you never exercise that option.

Defining "relationship"

Relationships run the gamut from intimate to family to neighbors to community to society. We are always interdependent, although the balance shifts over time—from the total dependence of the baby to the interdependence of adults to the renewed dependence of the sick or disabled or elderly. One thing all relationships have in common is that they are two-way or reciprocal; both sides give as well as receive.

Some relationships can be very instrumental, with a what's-in-it-for-me? focus. They will serve a specific purpose and then end. If they are not truly reciprocal, they cannot last. That is why the unremitting takers, who seek and feel entitled to constant hand-outs, are eventually driven from the good graces of families and societies. They are not holding up their end of the tacit bargain we all make to give when we can and to receive when we must.

Consider for a moment how you feel when you are on the receiving end—of a compliment, a favor, a gift, a loan, or even the very personal services

required by the ill or disabled. Does “taking” make you uncomfortable? Would you not prefer to be on the “giving” side? We believe that this common unease about receiving is rooted in how vulnerable we can feel when not in control. In fact, this whole book revolves around striking a balance between taking control of our lives and ceding control in relationships. Defining and maintaining that balance allows us to live purposeful and satisfying lives, but finding the happy medium is a lifelong project.

Our fear of loss of control is both ego-driven and unrealistic. We are never completely independent and completely in control. Nor, if we are honest about it, would we want to be. For those who believe and act as if they owe nothing to anyone are deeply unhappy people. They are denying their essential, social nature.

The concessions we make in enduring relationships pay off for us in security. Committed relationships require us to be vulnerable, by revealing our true selves, but they offer us the freedom to *be* ourselves, warts and all, and know that we will not be rejected or abandoned. Siblings, marriage partners, and close friends, when in healthy relationships, have in common the knowledge that the relationship cannot be torpedoed—that the other will continue to love them “no matter what.”



So why are such enduring relationships not more common? You must experience such a mix of vulnerability and security at home before you can extend it to other arenas—and many of us did not. The reason this book has as many blank journal lines as lines of text is that *you* must excavate your life’s debris. Where did it all go wrong? You were probably so young that you were in no way at fault. Certain life lessons you should have learned very young may never have been taught.

