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Avoiding Failure and Harm while Becoming a Top Player in the Game

Knowledge of what has liberating value will free you “From the deterministic influences of outside forces – be they biological or social in nature – and hence you will become independent from the social controls that exploit both”
(Csíkszentmihályi 2008, 20-21).

The basic premise of this article is that individuals who are on top of their game will not choose a course of action that will result in failure, a self-defeating course of action, a course of action that prevents them from achieving their desired outcome, a course of action that causes dissatisfaction or disappointment, nor a course of action that causes suffering, harm, or even worst. The article explains why being able to achieve the outcome you are hoping for requires knowledge of what has liberating value. That is to say, the article focuses on the freedom to experience your desired outcome and the power to overcome obstacles that stand between you and your goal. Experiencing what you are hoping for is defined as achieving an outcome that is in your best interest, an outcome that helps you to experience your highest good, and that helps you to achieve your goal in life. In that sense the article explains how individuals can acquire the freedom and power to achieve what they are hoping for in life while avoiding failure, disappointment, and harm.

Section one of the article describes the impressions of the social and economic reality that individuals feel they are confronted with and the options that they believe will enable them to live the type of life they desire (e.g., options such as getting suitably established within the structure of the social system, resisting conformity to a social system they consider oppressive, or some form of “street life”). The article clearly does not promote nor condemn either option. However, because it is written from the perspective of an artist – who, in addition to being a university instructor, has experience with odd jobs, and ventures in street life – it provides a comprehensive perspective on how to make choices that will help you deal effectively with the challenges, risks, and opposition to your stance in life, but in a way that allows you to ultimately experience happiness and success (section 2).

1. The Nature of Social Reality

The fundamental principles of social psychology assert that to be able to effectively deal with the reality you are confronted with, two things must be explicitly clear. First, the approach you take to dealing with your social and economic reality must be based on a clear understanding of the real nature of that reality. Second, is a clear understanding of knowledge that will help you achieve the outcome you desire most, despite your social economic reality. Those familiar with the nature of social relationships know that society is structured so that two of the most important factors are freedom and power. Freedom is the ability to live the life you prefer without being hindered for social or economic reasons. Power is the ability to effectively overcome the obstacles to achieving your goal. If there are social or economic circumstances inhibiting your ability to realize your full potential for achievement, then you are facing a challenge to your freedom. If you cannot find any way to overcome the challenges so that you can live in accordance with your preferences and convictions, then the problem lies with power. Thus, success in achieving your goal is very much dependent on the nature of the power structure of your society, how you fit into the power structure, and how power is distributed (i.e., if it is distributed in ways that enable individuals to experience the full extent of their rights).

Given the nature of social reality as described above, a response to reality can generally be described as taking one of two paths. First, the path of those who are indeed sensitive to the issues of freedom and power. However, they feel that social and economic necessity compels them to find a way to experience a meaningful and satisfying life within the structure of society, even though they realize that their choice can be affected by social boundaries. Second, are those who view the nature of the system as restrictive, discriminatory, or constraining. They believe that, given the nature of reality, it is best for them to simultaneously engage in creative self-expression while, at the same time, pushing the boundaries of society in order to establish their own unique space. This second option is especially evident with those who choose an alternative path in life and hold the conviction that great achievements require both risks and pushing the established boundaries that would otherwise constrain them. For those who choose the alternative

path, power is not something that can be possessed exclusively (like objects), so it cannot be centralized. Power is, above all and most importantly, relational thus your power depends on the role you play in relationships or, to put it another way, power depends on how you play your role in relationships. Power relations are strategic interactions that involve both attraction and resistance. Thus, for artists, power comes with the ability to shape impressions, influence the public, and to influence artistic style.

Of course, regardless of which path you choose, success is not certain. And the more rigid society is (regarding boundaries), the greater the difficulty of finding satisfaction, fulfillment, and dignity. Consequently, your freedom and power have to do with gaining a certain type of knowledge that will enable you to maximize the chances of enjoying the outcome you desire and avoid self-defeating behavior, disappointment, failure, and harm. I call this “knowledge of what has liberating value”.

2. Knowledge of what has Liberating Value

On the one hand, freedom is the ability to act in ways that you find meaningful (e.g., like studying at a university in preparation for becoming a professional, trying out for sports, starting a business, or practicing an art, etc.). However, in many of these cases, the determining factor of success is not strictly based on your personal abilities and effort, given the structural constraints of society. In fact, the pressure of the structural constraints of society can challenge your identity, capabilities, and chances of experiencing fulfillment and life satisfaction. Even though individuals have chosen a socially endorsed path, they can still face disappointment, emotional setbacks, constraints, and even failure – which can be painful. Thus, the pursuit of finding one’s place in society can necessarily be mixed with the realization of having to face oppositional and adversarial challenges. It is for the purpose of avoiding these feelings resulting in an emotional setback (or even failure) that this part of the article focuses on what is involved in ensuring you experience the full personal and social benefits that freedom and power afford.

Mahatma Gandhi advised that one approach to exercising power in a way that contributes to your freedom is to use your unique creative talents and ingenuity to make positive change. However, he added that this is best achieved when you obtain self-knowledge, which enables you to creatively express your freedom in ways that reflect your unique creative talents. A creative response to social reality is also referred to as self-making, the aesthetics of the self, and the art of living, thus is distinctively different to a reactionary struggle for freedom and power. Reactionaries fail to realize that their behavior ensnares them in their social traps thus is a form of negative reinforcing the social traps they are trying to escape (e.g., social deviance, incarceration, addiction, violence, or even worse). Thus, reactionaries are doing the right thing by striving for freedom but doing it in the wrong way by playing into a mindset that limits their freedom, future success, and happiness.

Creative expression based on self-knowledge requires what renown liberationist Paulo Freire referred to as conscientization or what Indian philosophy refers to as *Optimal Consciousness*. *Optimal Consciousness* is described as freeing consciousness from the way it has been shaped by forces of biological and social determinism – which not only leads to self-knowledge but motivates creative acts as well as the ability to express yourself freely and authentically. Optimal consciousness is awareness of how to use your creative ingenuity to maximize positive outcomes for yourself and your community, increase your level of holistic well-being, and increase your level of social and economic well-being.

With the raised level of consciousness, you are empowered to make an entrepreneurial-type impact on society. I know many of you will think of an entrepreneur as connected with business and economics (and in some respects, that is true). But there are many who chose the alternative or creative path in life who think of themselves as entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs, according to Joseph Schumpeter, the person who popularized the concept, are individuals who, out of the desire to be their own person and their own boss, express themselves freely and independently and use their creative ingenuity to make an impact on society. Such an impact destroys the old social paradigm and establishes an entirely new social economic paradigm that social theorists refer to as “a dynamic creative breakthrough” (exactly what Mahatma Gandhi had in mind by a creative yet peaceful approach to freedom by exercising power).

Consequently, youth are increasingly attracted to some form of an alternative, creative, or artistic way of both finding success and pushing against social constraints. Young people are drawn to creativity as a means of achieving success for several reasons. First, youth coming from backgrounds of extreme poverty would find it difficult to finance a university education or to obtain financing to start a business. Plus, they are enticed into entertainment as a path to wealth and success by the allurements of pop media. Pop media portray young people (barely out of their teens) with the finest cars, expensive jewelry, some have even already purchased property, and seem to have an active romantic life. Despite the obstacles and the fact that only a small percentage of artists actually achieve the lifestyle portrayed by the media, many from the poorest section of society feel that it is worth the risk.

That is to say, despite the fact that creative arts are providing youth an opportunity for self-expression and to boost their self-esteem, it is also connected with clear examples of enormous challenges and obstacles. The challenges and obstacles are evident in behaviors that can result in disappointment, failure, harm, self-defeating behavior, or even worse. However, many young people deciding whether (or not) to take on the risk believe in the well-established aphorism “No Pain No Gain”. They also believe the risks are merely a test of their “skills”, talent, abilities, creativity, and ingenuity. In other words, they are willing to take-on the challenge and whatever initial forms of success and prosperity they experience provide a tremendous boost to their ego. However, the problem occurs when the risks result in behavioral patterns that are self-defeating in that they ultimately result in making it impossible to achieve one’s goals.

To make the risk worth it, you must consider how to maximize the chances of getting the payoff you desire while minimizing self-defeating behaviors, failure, and harm. This is what is referred to as knowledge of what has liberating value (i.e., also referred to as *a truth that will set you free*). Liberating knowledge empowers you with the ability to achieve what you desire to do and realize what you desire to be. The key is your ability to face and accept two very paradoxical aspects of social reality and the struggle for freedom and power. The first is that society is both constraining, resistant, and restrictive while, at the same time, it is attracted to and celebrates unique talent, originality,

and novelty (i.e., this is what is often referred to as artistic freedom). A second aspect of the paradox is that the present the pop media employs creative and innovative ways to deal with social reality while, at the same time, it portrays the wealth and prosperity that accompany unique and courageous talent, originality, and novelty (i.e., the alluring values of the society). Thus, the unavoidability of promoting forms of expression that perpetuate the dominant values of society is as much a factor in the established commercial media as the intent of the artists to push the boundaries of the system.

Knowledge of what has liberating value is derived from discerning the connection between your authentic self and the forces that play a role in shaping intention into actuality. We realize that some people are actually attracted to, pursue, and actively engage in activities that ultimately bring about undesirable outcomes. Why would individuals make a choice that is not in their best interest when considering alternative courses of action? Or, in terms of the basic or fundamental concerns of psychology, why do people act in a way that is self-defeating? Self-defeating behavior is defined as a course of action that has short-term gain or helps individuals cope with an immediate situation that they are confronted with but has long-term consequences (foreseen or unforeseen) that will hinder them from achieving their goal, the act has consequences that are harmful, or the course of action has long-term consequences that the person does not desire.

Knowledge of what has liberating value (i.e., *a truth that sets you free*) is tantamount to being able to discern what is in your best interests, thus the ability to discern how to achieve what you desire most. Discernment is defined as the power of “Making the aim right. This enables us to do the actions that tend towards the aim we have set before ourselves, and to achieve it” (Classical Vedanta Philosophy). Classical philosophy refers to the forces that are the source of the psychic power of discernment as your authentic inner self. The concept authentic self was described by the renowned psychologist Carl Jung as the mediating force between your normal mind (ego) and the aspect of your mental activities that are the source of natural drives, needs, and desires (these natural urges, such as hunger, thirst, and the need for affection must be satisfied). The point is that the normal mind is largely shaped by social convention. This means that most of us are trying to find a way to satisfy our basic survival needs in ways that will enable us to

be successful in our social or cultural settings. However, Jung stressed that the mediating force (what classical philosophy refers to as the inner most self) acts as an inner guiding force that provides the ability to satisfy your drives in ways that not only help you to be successful in social terms but, as well, to express yourself in your own unique, creative, and entrepreneurial way.

Those who connect with the force that provides the power of creative *genius* (i.e., those who connect with their authentic selves and use their creative genius to become self-directed) are referred to as fortunate, inclined to experience good fortune, blessed, ingenious, or often they are referred to as lucky. Gaining your desired outcome requires having the good fortune of the natural order of things unfolding in a way that is in harmony with your intentions. It is the role that good fortune plays as a factor that determines if your actions are actually able to produce your desired outcome. The wisdom literature of both the East and the West describes good fortune as the outcome of simply trusting in and being guided by your authentic self and believing in your creative talents. Thus, good fortune results from two factors: first, is connecting with that part of your inner nature that provides you with the power of creative genius and second, is having the inclination to act in harmony with your inner-most nature.