

Y5 – Your Decisions & Goals

Dear: As I've already written, my goal for these Y-chapters is to "tie up some loose ends". I've been trying to do it within the context of my mantra (from the P-chapters):

The priorities are: first premisses, then purposes – and then principles, priorities, and policies – and finally: plans, procedures, and practices (with perseverance).

In this chapter, I'll comment a little on your "plans, procedures, and practices", but first, I want to comment on your decisions and goals – and before even that (and even more fundamentally), I want to comment on "the decision process", itself.

You may remember my claim, made way back in the D-chapter (entitled "Digging for Decisions"), that *most of your important decisions will be simple, whereas most of your difficult decisions will be relatively unimportant*. Thus, as examples of important decisions, if a projectile is headed for your head, don't think about it, DUCK! – and if you're thinking about "doing drugs", then DON'T! In contrast, when you find yourself "sweating over a difficult decision", the usual reason is because the consequences of your decision are "too close to call", which then means that the decision really isn't very important: whatever you decide, "things" will work out "pretty much the same".

In particular, I continue to maintain that one of your most important decisions – if not the most important! – is the relatively simple decision about how to gain knowledge about the reality external to your mind. I consider it to be a "simple" decision, because I don't see how anyone in his or her "right mind" can decide other than: the way to learn about reality is obviously by experimenting with it, i.e., by the scientific method. For example, Dear, if you want to know if some tree "exists", try kicking it!

Unfortunately, however, ever since you were a baby you've been indoctrinated (by your parents, your friends, your clerics, and your society) into "believing" that the way to gain such knowledge is not *via* the scientific method (the method that you started to use, on your own, when you were still in your crib!) but by having "faith", by "listening to your heart", by

“trusting in the Lord”, and other such “theistic” (i.e., unscientific, anti-human) balderdash. Faced with the threat of losing your parents love if you didn’t adopt their method of “gaining” such “knowledge” (and if that weren’t enough, if you didn’t conform to their craziness, your clerics threatened you with “eternal damnation in Hell”), you decided to “play along” in their game of make believe. Given the circumstance, yours was a wise decision for the time: after all, you relied on your parents for food, clothing, shelter, etc. But now that you’re about to set out on your own, Dear, I strongly encourage you to re-examine your decision.

To try to help you with your fundamental decision (re. how to gain knowledge about reality) – and in fact, to try to help you with all your decisions – let me start by repeating from **D** the summary that I remind myself with “D” when I’m walking.

To decide, dig – especially into data. “Show me the data!” For difficult decisions, dig into goals and values, feelings and instincts, and premisses, options, priorities, and probabilities. But remember: important decisions are usually simple; many decisions are difficult, because they’re unimportant; if it’s “too close to call”, don’t; instead, flip a coin! Do as the gods decree, in the best two out of three, or three out of five... – until they get it right!

Yet, even though most of your difficult decisions will probably be relatively unimportant, you’ll likely behave similar to the rest of us and sweat over them anyway! Therefore, to try to tie up still another “loose end” (that I left dangling in **D**), let me provide you with some suggestions about a few procedures and practices that you might want to adopt to make such decisions about your plans, such as what graduate school to attend, what job offer to accept, if you should marry, what house to buy, how many kids to have (if any), and similar. And again, Dear, most of them will probably be “unimportant decisions”, because your important decisions will be easy to make, whereas if they’re “cliff hangers”, it means that it really doesn’t matter too much what you decide.

As for how I might help, I’ll start by mentioning that, just as there are many books and internet sites available to show you “How to Succeed”, there are many showing you “How to Decide”. But just as the “How to Succeed” suggestions are useful only after you’ve made fundamental choices concerning your prime goals (in particular, the choices of the extent of your

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“family” and the objectives against which your values will be measured), there are similarly two major limitations on all the “How to Decide” books (at least, those books of which I’m aware): 1) they provide guidance only for making your “relatively minor decisions” (what college to attend, what job to accept, whom to marry, what house to buy, and similar), not for the major decisions of your life (i.e., what fundamental premisses to adopt and the most important decision: how will you gain knowledge), and 2) such books assume that you already know what you want!

And if you think my including that second restriction is “kinda stupid – ‘cause it’s obvious” – then, Dear, I’d respond: “Ha!” If you’re sweating over what car or house (or whatever) to buy, for example, how about first digging to try to understand why you want a car or a house (or whatever). Why buy a car? For local trips, why not use your bike, taxis, buses, subways, etc., and for longer trips, why not use rented cars, buses, trains, and planes? Would it be better to rent than buy a house? And rather than trying to decide if you should marry so-and-so, are you sure you want to be married? Are you sure you want to have children? And so on. But when you have reached a decision about what you want, then for making “difficult” decisions about how to get it, I’d recommend that you avail yourself of the good advice offered in books such as *Smart Choices*.¹

In addition, maybe it would be useful if I showed you some ideas that I’ve found valuable for making decisions. For what follows, I’ll try to illustrate with three classes of decisions: 1) complex decisions – but all factors relatively certain (e.g., purchasing a car or house or similar), 2) value-laden decisions (e.g., whether or not to engage in premarital sex, get married, have children, and similar), and 3) decisions with large uncertainties (e.g., what graduate research assistantship to accept, what career to pursue, and similar). For each of these three classes of decisions, I’ll assume some details – to illustrate how I recommend that you “dig” (*into data... into goals and values, feelings and instincts, and premisses, options, priorities, and probabilities*) before reaching your decision.

1. Complex decisions in which all factors are relatively certain.

In such cases, Dear, first be clear about what you need (which may be different from what you want!), then dig into all relevant data, and organize

¹ *Smart Choices* by John S. Hammond, Ralph L. Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1999.

the data into a form that's most meaningful for you. Since probably the first major purchase that you'll make is a car, I'll use that case as an illustration.

The first step is to decide what you need (which, again, may be different from what you want). So, to permit me to continue with the analysis, assume that you came up with the following "list of needs":

- not to spend all your money (or not to be saddled with oppressive debt)
- safe and reliable transportation, especially within the city
- a car that won't cost a fortune to maintain, big enough so that you can move most of your "stuff", and clean, decent looking, and not a polluter or a gas guzzler,
- easy to drive, one that "feels good", and for which insurance and licensing won't cost "an arm and a leg".

Of course I don't know what else you might add (or subtract), but for present purposes, I'll assume that the above "list of needs" is complete.

Now, to get a clearer idea of what you need, arrange your needs in priority – and if the list of needs is long or complicated, then you might want to use a spreadsheet, not only to list your needs in priority but also to assign "relative weights" to each. If so, then long before you start looking at cars, you'll need to decide on these relative weights (or "relative scores"), e.g., on a scale of 1 to 10, you might decide that "cost" scores a 9, while "decent looking" scores only a 1, and so on. Later, when you get to examining specific cars and when you judge each car for how it satisfies each need (say on a scale of 1 to 10), then you'll multiply each car's score (in each category of need) with that need's weight. For example, one car might score a 6 for "cost" and a 10 for "decent looking", so that in the overall score for this car, then these two factors (alone) would add to $(6 \times 9) + (10 \times 1) = 64$, whereas another car, scoring a 8 for "cost" and only a 2 for "decent looking", would outscore the better looking car by $(8 \times 9) + (2 \times 1) = 74$ to 64.

There are, of course, both advantage and disadvantages to using a spreadsheet (or similar numerical scheme) to keep track of your needs. One advantage is that a numerical scheme will probably tend to minimize your letting your emotions become inappropriately involved in your decision;

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otherwise, some “flashy feature” of a possible purchase might undesirably influence your decision. For example, a particular car with a great “sound system” might “grab” your attention – and your emotions – but is that what you really “need” in a car? Another advantage is that, if you have developed such a scheme, then when you finally make your purchase (and find its inevitable shortcomings!), you’ll be able to look back and remind yourself why you made your decision. And still another advantage, especially important if your spouse is involved in making the decision (which, by the way, ALWAYS makes the decision more difficult!), is that you can later minimize undesirable emotional interactions with your spouse: if you both had agreed on an “objective” weighting scheme before you started looking at cars, then if you both continue to abide by that agreement, arguments might be averted – or at least minimized. ☹

As for disadvantages of any numerical scheme, a major one is that no such scheme is objective (are you sure that “cost” should score a 9 and “looks” only a 1?). An even bigger disadvantage is that some of what you label as “needs” are actually “show stoppers”, i.e., “absolute needs” (e.g., you might not only “need” the price to be reasonable, you might require that it be less \$10,000). Consequently, Dear, “stay loose” – use what seems to work best for you – always using your head as best you can.

In any event, after you decide what your needs (and maybe even wants!) are and how to “prioritize” them (i.e., after you finished “digging” inside yourself), then the tedious work begins, digging into (external) data (or information). For any purchase, such digging can be difficult, but the case of purchasing a car can be more difficult than for any other purchase that you’ll ever make! That may seem unreasonable, since a house can easily be 10 times more expensive than a car, but a house purchase can be simpler, because 1) normally the number of choices is much smaller (maybe you’ll have 10 houses to choose that meet your criteria, but you could find 10,000 cars that do!), and 2) normally you’ll use a real-estate broker to assist your house purchase (although it isn’t necessary, if you’re careful), but few people use “car brokers” to help them with their car purchases, although some people do – and probably more would, if they felt that available auto brokers were trustworthy! If you want to investigate the possibility of using a car broker, then search for information on the web.²

² For example, see <http://www.smartmoney.com/autos/buying/index.cfm?story=carbroker2005&pgnum=1>.

Otherwise, if you decide to proceed with a car purchase “on your own” (if you can’t con a parent or a grandparent into helping you!), then prepare yourself for a lot of work, hassle, and frustration. As a first step, you should definitely go to a good library to get Consumer Reports’ *Annual Buyer’s Guide*. In it, you’ll find both their and their readers’ ratings for both new and used cars. If you decided that you can’t afford a new car (and I should note that buying a new car is typically much less work than buying a good, used car), then check out Consumer Reports’ list of “best used cars” for the price range that you’ve decided you can afford; from that list, decide on what type of car best meets your other “needs” and “wants”; later, when you begin shopping, focus your search on such cars. Also, and very importantly, check out their list of “worst used cars” (or “least dependable” or whatever its title) – and then later, when you’re shopping, avoid any such cars.³

Next, start studying! Before you buy a car (new or used) from a car dealer, you might want to read some books, such as Robin Segal’s *The Car Buyer’s Bible*, complete with its “Commandments”! If you plan to buy a used car, then before you do any shopping, search for (and study) advice on the internet, such as “10 steps in buying a used car” and “10 worst mistakes”.⁴ Among such mistakes, one of the worst is not to have arranged how you’ll pay for the car before you look at any (not borrowing is best, but if you plan on borrowing, then it’s advisable to arrange the loan from other than the seller). Two major mistakes in buying used cars is not to use the internet to check out any car’s history using its Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) and not arranging to have a mechanic check out any “uncertified” car that you’re thinking of buying, before you do.

To find such a mechanic, first decide on where you plan to have work done on your car when it has trouble – and I guarantee you, it will! If you expect to use an independent mechanic near your residence to fix your car, then before you do any shopping for a car, visit his (or her) shop, and ask him if he’ll check out a car that you’re thinking about buying, how much he’ll charge, how much lead time he’ll need before he can check it out, etc. “My”

³ Incidentally, Dear, I failed to do that and purchased a real lemon: a used ’85 Cadillac Deville. You bet I was mad at myself for not having first checked Consumer Reports’ *Buyers Guide*. In it, I would have found (as I subsequently did) that it was listed among the “least dependable”. And thus, Dear, don’t make the mistake of not listening to the advice of people who have made mistakes! Better, by far, is to learn from their mistakes rather than your own.

⁴ Respectively at <http://www.edmunds.com/advice/buying/articles/78387/article.html> and at <http://autoadvice.about.com/od/buying/a/WorstMistakUsed.htm>.

mechanic will do it on a day's notice for \$50. If you plan on having work done on your car by mechanics at the dealer who sells new cars of your (used) car's make, then make similar inquiries and arrangements at the service departments of, say, your top three, candidate cars.

For example, if in your chosen price range and car style, *Consumer Reports* identifies the best used cars to be, say, an xxx Chevrolet, a yyy Hyundai, and a zzz Toyota, then make arrangements at the service departments of those three car dealers. You'll need to have such cars checked, Dear (even if they're identified in *Consumer Reports* as "most dependable" or similar), because although in general such cars may be "best", that doesn't mean that you can't find "lemons"! Besides, each used car has had a different history, and the only thing that's certain is that somebody wanted to get rid of the car that you're thinking of buying. Later, if you find a candidate car at the used-car lot of one of the dealers who also sells those cars new, then don't even look at the car unless its been "certified", and don't buy the car without a 90-day "warranty" giving you free repairs for at least three months.

And so, my Dear, after doing such "homework", after assembling your tools so that you can begin digging, then start digging to find yourself a car! It's a daunting task, especially if you decide to buy a used car. It'll probably take you at least 20 hours of busy shopping, over half of which you should probably do on the internet (if you live in or near a big city). When you do finally start "hitting the pavement", it would be good if you had a friend (even a parent or grandparent!) along with you, who's capable of keeping you "grounded", not "carried away" by someone's "sales pitch".

With respect to any "sales pitch", maybe I should add a few comments about the price to pay for a specific used car, a decision that needn't be very difficult. After you've decided (based on your research) on the years, makes, and models of the cars that you want to look at, first go to the website for Kelley's Blue Book (<http://www.kbb.com/>) and/or Edmunds (<http://www.edmunds.com/>) to determine the prices that you should expect to pay for each car; then, create for yourself (e.g., on an index card, for your easy reference) a "cheat-sheet" of such prices. Also, look at some newspaper ads of the car dealers you expect to visit, to see typical discounts that they're currently offering on their used cars (typically, they're 10%; if used-car sales are slow, then they can easily be 20%). If they're 10%, then plan on getting at least a 10% discount for the car that interests you, even if it's not listed as one of the dealer's "specials".

When you finally decide to make an offer on a particular car, proceed roughly as follows. Regardless of the price asked for the car, decide on a fair price for it, based on the Blue-Book price and on any special features of the car. For example, if it has a dent, then deduct how much it would cost you to get it fixed (even if you don't plan to); if you think it needs new tires, deduct ~\$400; etc. When you've decided on a more reasonable price than the one advertised, offer the sales person the same amount below that fair value as the dealer is asking above it; e.g., if you've decided that the fair value is \$6500 and the dealer is asking \$7999 (i.e., ~\$1500 too much), then offer ~\$1500 still lower, i.e., \$5000. [And if you're trading in a used car whose Blue-Book price is \$1500, then offer $(\$5000 - \$1500) = \$3500$ plus your car.]

Whatever you offer will of course be rejected (and the sales person and the dealer's finance person will complain, stall, haggle, etc.), but just ignore the games they'll play. When they're finished fooling around, they'll come back with a counter offer (probably complaining that it would be a "steal", that they'd soon go out of business if all their customers were similar to you, etc.). In their counter offer, suppose that they lower their price by \$500 to \$7500. To their counter offer, offer your own: raise the amount that you'd be willing to pay by the same amount that they've lowered theirs, i.e., raise your offer from \$5000 to \$5500 (or to \$4000 plus your car). Continue playing the game until the asking price is down to what you decided, at the outset, was "fair".

Maybe I should add some other points. 1) If you get near the end of the haggling over the price and the sales person says something similar to, "It's only \$500 more", then, Dear, think about it: if you got a job at a restaurant and washed dishes for 8 hours per day for two week, then would you say to your employer: "Ah, forget about it; it's only \$500." 2) If the dealer won't reduce the price of the car to what you consider reasonable, then move on to another dealer. 3) Before you begin shopping, you might want to reconsider your decision to buy a car: you can get a lot of taxi rides and rent a lot of cars for \$6500 plus the annual costs of license, insurance, and maintenance. 4) You might also want to reconsider your decision to buy a used car: if you'll wait until you can afford a new car (at a price at least 10% lower than the "suggested retail price"!), then given the new-car warranties now available, the chances of buying a lemon will be essentially zero and the annual maintenance costs will be relatively small.

Anyway, that's enough (too much?) about such "simple" decisions that are (or should be) predominantly made by your left-brain's analysis capabilities and for which the data are (or should be) relatively easy to acquire and relatively reliable. In an earlier paragraph I listed this class of decisions as: 1) complex decisions – but all factors relatively certain (e.g., purchasing a car or house or similar). Now, I want to comment (less!) on the second class of problems listed earlier, i.e., 2) value-laden decisions (e.g., whether or not to engage in premarital sex, get married, have children, and similar). In such decisions, you'll need to dig not so much into data but deep into the origin and reasons for your values.

2. *Value-laden Decisions.*

If you've decided not to try to gain knowledge *via* the scientific method (unwisely deciding, instead, to "listen to your heart", "seek guidance from god", "study the scriptures", or similar), then I'd agree that your "value-laden decisions" would be relatively simple: just go to your religion's local cleric and do whatever he says. While you're there, you might want him to certify that you're a good little automaton (get sprinkled with "holy water", get your "temple recommends", or whatever). And maybe to complete the process, you might want to surrender your license that certifies you as a human, able to think for yourself. Maybe you should determine if he wants to fit you for a bomb belt, in case he later wants you to murder some "infidels". Sorry, Dear, maybe that writing is a bit biased.

On the other hand, if you've decided to gain knowledge *via* the scientific method (thereby determining that gods exist only as infectious ideas in the minds of fools or schizophrenics and that clerics are either stupid or running a con game), then you'll need to reach value-laden decisions by digging deep into your own thoughts and emotions. In early chapters (e.g., **E**, entitled "Evaluating Endeavors" and **F**, entitled "Figuring out Feelings"), I tried to show you how I do my own such "digging"; elsewhere (especially in **V**, dealing with "Values and Objectives"), I tried to show you that most of our values rest on the sound bases of our dual survival goals (of ourselves and our families, whatever the extent we recognize as "family"); I don't want to go through all that again. Instead, here I'll mention just a few ideas that you might want to consider applying in particular cases.

- If you're considering premarital sex, then it's no one's business but your own, your partner's, and those who might be directly influenced (e.g.,

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your partner's spouse or children – and possibly your future spouse, if in the future you foolishly decide to talk about that part of your “previous” life). Consequently, if your proposed sex partner isn't encumbered, then as far as I'm concerned, having premarital sex is not a “value-laden decision” – except in so far as you absolutely must protect your physical health (for your own survival!) and the emotional health of your partner (out of “common decency”).

- If you're considering extra-marital sex, then immediately slam on the brakes, get out of the vehicle, and start digging. Are you trying to “get even” with your spouse? Is this the “best” way? Have you tried “talking it out”? Do you plan on “punishing” your spouse with the information? Did you promise not to have sex with anyone else? Is your promise worth nothing? What about other consequences (such as being “found out”, pregnancy, disease, infecting your spouse with a disease, etc.)? What about alternatives? What about first discussing with your spouse the possibilities of extra-marital sex – or getting a divorce?
- If you are pregnant (or for male readers, if your girlfriend is) and considering an abortion, then again you'll probably need to dig into your values – but maybe not. I wouldn't need to. I'm sorry if I seem insensitive, Dear, but to me this is another case that's not a “value-laden decision”. In my opinion, a child isn't conceived in a woman's womb but in her mind. If she doesn't want the baby, then the child was never “conceived”; therefore, she should certainly proceed to have the growth removed from her body. If clerical idiots “feel” otherwise, then why do they persist in similarly “horrible” activities, such as cutting their toenails and hair? Don't they know that new life could be “conceived” from the cells they so callously discard?
- If you're thinking about having children, Dear, then I strongly recommend that you “dig deep” before reaching your decision. What is it, exactly, that you want – and why? Which are your own thoughts, emotions, and instincts and which are someone else's? Do you really think that this poor old world needs more babies? What about committing comparable resources to helping children already here?

But enough of such decisions; now, I'll move on to “the tough one”, i.e.,

3) Decisions with large Uncertainties.

The trouble with the future, Dear, is that it's so uncertain – claims of all prophets notwithstanding (i.e., notwithstanding even the most trivial evaluations). Meanwhile, though, you're faced with literally millions of decisions, each of which depends on your ability to predict the future. For example, were you really satisfied with your decision to get out of bed this morning? Did you evaluate the probability that you'd trip over something (e.g., all the junk you left lying on the floor!), crash your head into the wall, and end up in a comma for the rest of your vegetative life?

To make decisions that entail large uncertainties, the only reasonable approach is to try to reduce the uncertainties, then estimate probabilities, and then calculate expected values. To reduce uncertainties, try to dig up more data. For example, if you're trying to decide which of three offers for graduate research assistantships to accept and if the graduate program at each university seems comparable, then (getting funding from wherever you can, e.g., your parents, your grandparents, your aunts and uncles, even a bank) don't "take the time" but "make the time" to visit each university that made an offer, meet with your potential thesis advisor, meet with his or her graduate students, have a look at the university, its location, living accommodations, etc.

Then, with uncertainties diminished, move on to the next two steps in making your decision (estimating probabilities and expected values), and to do that, proceed as best you can. What are the chances that you'll be able to get your desired degree from universities A, B, and C? Can you find some data about dropout rates and pass/fail ratios? Suppose you came to the conclusion that the chances of completing your degree were, roughly: 80% at A, 50% at B, and 30% at C. Then, toward estimating expected values, what's the "value" of a degree from each of those schools? To compare such "values" you'll need to put them on a common basis, e.g., with scores on a range of 1 to 10, or with your estimates for monetary values on all consequences. If you choose monetary values, then (after a lot of work, e.g., getting information on the jobs and maybe even the salaries of alumni), you might decide that the lifetime values of degrees from the three universities (including the value to you of becoming, say, a "world-class scientist" or a "top rank administrator" or a successful politician, etc.) are, say, \$200,000 from university A, \$500,000 from B, and \$1,000,000 from C. If so, then by multiplying the probabilities for getting the degrees ("guesstimated" a few sentences ago) by their monetary values, you get the expected values for

each choice: $0.8 \times \$200\text{K} = \160K for A, $0.5 \times \$500\text{K} = \250K for B, and $0.3 \times \$1,000\text{K} = \300K from C. Thereby, if all other factors are roughly similar (competent and considerate advisors, funding fairly secure, adequate facilities both within and near the universities, etc.), then accept the offer from university C – after you’ve rechecked and double-checked your estimates for probabilities and values!

And after you’ve finished making all your simple decisions (about whether to get up in the morning, which graduate school to attend, whether to get married, and similar), then you can “get serious” and address a more challenging question: “Whaddya wanna be when you grow up?”!

I can’t help you with that question, Dear, but below, I’ll at least mention (in some cases, again) some ideas that seemed to have helped me.

- I never did figure out what I wanted to be when I grow up; I still haven’t decided – although I sure would like to finish this damn book! And if there’s any lesson to be learned from my experiences, Dear, then it might be: just keep doing what interests you, trying not to hurt others – and even trying to help them. Remember: “The only way to repay our debt to the past is to put the future in debt to ourselves.”
- Don’t worry about the future excessively (if only you can figure out what’s “excessive”!): things have a way of working out; time heals most wounds (and, we hope, wounds most heels). Don’t forget, though: “The best revenge is to live well.”
- I never was able to adequately (let alone “accurately”) plan my life more than five years into the future. Eventually I got wiser, stopped trying, and leaned how to “go with the flow”.

Some ideas that might be of more use to you when you’re “starting out” are those that I tried to show you in earlier chapters (especially **G** & **H**, dealing with “Goals”, “Happiness”, and “Hope”). You might recall my recommendations to try to set yourself a nested hierarchy of goals (like those “outrageous” wooden Russian dolls you used to play with) and to try to develop a “fail-safe strategy”, i.e., one with “fall-back positions”.

As an illustration of a “fail-safe strategy”, given that you’re now talking about becoming a teacher (what happened to your ideas about becoming a

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vet?), then think about the following. If you get your degree in education, then you can become a teacher; if you get your degree in engineering, then you can become an engineer or a teacher; and if you get your degree in Engineering Physics (as did a certain set of your grandparents ☺), then you can become a manager, a scientist, an engineer, a... or a teacher! That is, Dear, I recommend that, for your first degree, you seek a broad and challenging course of study.

Three other ideas, addressed below and which I hope you'll find useful, deal with: 1) Worrying about making mistakes, 2) Not trying to reduce the risk of making mistakes by communicating your ideas with others, and 3) Worrying about "making a fool of yourself".

My main message dealing with mistakes is don't worry about them, in practice – but do try to avoid them, in principle! As for making mistakes (in practice), consider some other people's "words of wisdom", such as the following (from Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, from a web page of quotations about mistakes by Bob Jacobs, and from a book edited by Edmund Fuller⁵, in which, in a few cases, I've used more modern terminology, while trying to preserve the original meanings).

A man who has committed a mistake and doesn't correct it, is committing another mistake. [Confucius]

Persistent people begin their success where others end in failures. [Edward Eggleston]

Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new. [Albert Einstein]

Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results. I know several thousand things that won't work. [Thomas Edison]

Some of the best lessons we ever learn we learn from our mistakes and failures. The error of the past is the wisdom and success of the future. [Tyron Edwards]

Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes. [Mahatma Gandhi]

We err as long as we strive. [Goethe]

⁵ This book has what I would describe as "the inappropriate title": *4800 Wisecracks, Witty Remarks, and Epigrams for all Occasions* (Avenel Books, Crown Publishers, New York, 1980); it was originally published under a "more appropriate title": *Thesaurus of Epigrams*.

Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again. [F. P. Jones]

A genius makes no mistakes – the errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery. [James Joyce]

Don't be afraid to fail. Don't waste energy trying to cover up failure. Learn from your failures and go on to the next challenge. It's OK to fail. If you aren't failing, you're not growing. [H. Stanley Judd]

Every great improvement has come after repeated failures. Virtually nothing comes out right the first time. Failures, repeated failures, are fingerposts on the road to achievement. [Charles R. Kettering]

The study of the errors into which great minds have fallen in the pursuit of truth can never be uninstructional... No man is so wise but that he may learn some wisdom from his past errors, either of thought or action, and no society has made such advances as to be capable of no improvement from the retrospect of its past folly and credulity. [Charles Mackay]

It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation. [Herman Melville]

A man should never be ashamed to own he has been wrong, which is but saying in other words that he is wiser today than he was yesterday. [Alexander Pope]

An error made on your own is safer than ten truths accepted on faith, because the first leaves you the means to correct it, but the second destroys your capacity to distinguish truth from error. [Ayn Rand]

The only one who never makes a mistake is the one who never does anything. [Theodore Roosevelt]

If people did not sometimes do silly things, nothing intelligent would ever get done. [Wittgenstein]

Yet, in spite of all such “approval” for making mistakes, it's preferable to avoid them – if possible!

It's especially preferable to avoid mistakes if their consequences will influence other people – and it's almost impossible for your mistakes not to influence other people, such as members of your family. For example, Dear, if you make a mistake while climbing a mountain and hurt yourself, there will be repercussions to your family, especially to your parents. Similarly, think of the repercussions to his parents (and to you) of your father's mistake

not to subject his god hypothesis to additional tests. Think of the repercussions to your father (and to you) from your uncle-with-the beard's mistake, and think of the repercussions to both of them (and to you) from my mistakes in not doing a better job helping them through their teenage years – the years when kids gain more freedom to make mistakes.

Similarly, Dear, although for years you've been making more and more decisions, yet now that you're leaving home for college, you'll experience a tremendous increase in freedom – to make more mistakes! You can drink too much alcohol, try some illegal drugs, discard sexual restraint, and I'm sure there are thousands of other mistakes that you can make – and would wish that you hadn't.

Can I help you make wiser decisions? Well, certainly I'd like to, but based on my own track record, it's doubtful that I have the necessary competence. Second, don't forget what Sartre said about the "existential dilemma": you're condemned to be free. That is, there's no way to escape making your own decisions: even if you decide to do exactly what some cleric (or parent or even grandparent) tells you to do, you must bear the responsibility, even for that decision. Thereby, Dear, what I and other members of your family get to do is sit back and enjoy the consequences of your wise choices – and suffer the consequences of your mistakes!

One of the mistakes that I hope you won't make is to "go on a mission" for your church, to attempt to convert others to your religion – both because of its damage to others and its potential damage to you. Dear: the mission of all religious missionaries is to turn thinking humans into braying and obeying sheep. That's treason against humanity! I'll put it this way: courtesy your parents, you have become addicted to a delusion (a topic I'll address in a later Y-chapter); your proselytizing would then be the same as a drug addict encouraging a non-user to try his drugs – so the drug dealers (the clerics of your religion) can get more money. And the potential damage to you is that, in time, I expect you'll see it – and then, you'll have enormous regrets for how you damaged other people's lives.

If you want to go on a mission, Dear, then teach people how to think, not how to avoid thinking! For example, you could join the Peace Corps or similar (although I'd recommend that you finish your education first). In any event, the goal should be to teach people how to observe, how to formulate hypotheses from their observations, how to perform experiments

to test their hypotheses, how to analyze their data, how to then formulate new hypotheses, and so on, without end. With this (scientific) method, humans have made enormous progress, understanding nature and eliminating some of the brutal consequences of her vagaries. In addition, we've learned what should be thrown on the trash heap of human history (for example, all the mindless jabberwocky of all religions, promoting such primitive science that it would be laughable were it not so damnably harmful to humanity).

But you know all that even better than I. To an "outsider", it's "mind boggling" to see the degree to which members of your church adopt the goals and priorities dictated by your church's leaders. Of course, for some people who find it difficult to identify their goals and arrange them in priority, maybe there's "comfort" in having all of that done for them, but to be an adult, Dear, means making your own decisions. It's your life, Dear, and it's for you to decide if, for example, you want to "go on a mission". But if you want to experience "going on a mission", how about a mission to the moon, or into science, or into politics, or...?

Obviously, then, there are different types of mistakes. Thus, Dear, notice that in all the quotations listed above, the authors were writing about "mistakes in practices" – not about "mistakes in principles". To confuse you about my meaning ["Thanks a lot grampa!"], I'll say that it would be a mistake in principle to worry about making mistakes in practice! And now, to try to clear up the potential confusion, I'll list some other "mistakes in principle", most of which I've addressed in earlier chapters. They include:

- Not to use the scientific method to try to gain understanding,
- To base decisions on "communications" with god,
- To seek guidance from some "holy book",
- To make decisions by only "listening to your heart",
- To make decisions relying only on your reasoning (without subjecting your reasoned results to experimental tests),
- To decide that you can avoid making decisions,
- To worry about making mistakes in practice, and
- Not to try to avoid making mistakes!

Two other "mistakes in principle", which I mentioned above and will address below, are 2) Not trying to reduce the risk of making mistakes by

communicating your ideas with others, and 3) Worrying about “making a fool of yourself”.

Probably I should invert the “negative wording” of the “mistake” numbered as 2), above, so that it appears more “positive”. Thus, Dear, before you make what you consider to be an important decision, I strongly recommend that you communicate your ideas with others (relatives, friends, counselors, teachers, even strangers). If you do, I expect you’ll be amazed how insightful different perspectives can be. As a case in point, think again about your dad’s decision to believe in god: he “promised” (himself) that he would “believe” (in God), if God would “just” save your uncle’s life. Think of all the ramifications of that dumb decision, which as far as I know, he never discussed with anyone. In contrast, Dear, please have the courage to share your thoughts with others, inviting criticism.

I purposefully used the word ‘courage’, because the common reason for not discussing one’s ideas with someone else is the “principle” that I listed above, i.e., the mistake of worrying about “making a fool of yourself”. As I’ve written before (e.g., in **F**), it’s important, Dear, to develop the courage to face your fears. As Lloyd Douglas said: “If you harbor any sort of fear, it percolates through all your thinking, damages your personality, and makes you landlord to a ghost.” Bertrand Russell summarized it well: “To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.” Meanwhile, most of us are afraid of being seen as fools – which is perhaps the best evidence that we are!

All of which reminds me of a great scene in an otherwise silly movie that your grandmother and I recently watched. The title was *See no Evil, Hear No Evil*; one of the main characters was blind and was played by Richard Pryor; the other main character was deaf (but could read lips) and was played by Gene Wilder. Sitting on two park benches facing each other (so that the deaf one could read the blind one’s lips), the two fellows were eating ice cream cones. The deaf fellow said that what he dreaded most was being seen as a fool. The blind fellow said that it was a pity that they hadn’t met years earlier, because he could easily have alleviated the deaf fellow’s fear. “How?” asked the deaf fellow (as nearly as I can remember). “Easy,” responded the blind fellow, who then moved over to sit adjacent to the deaf guy, used his hand to locate the deaf guy’s head, and placed his half-eaten ice cream cone upside down on top of the deaf guy’s head. The conversation then proceeded roughly as follows. “How’s that feel?” “Not

so good.” “I bet you look really silly right now.” “Probably.” “Well then, it’s not so bad after all, is it?”

Now, Dear, of course I don’t necessarily recommend that you go around wearing an ice-cream cone as a dunce cap, but I do strongly recommend that, before you take action based on some “serious reasoning”, you “screw your courage to the sticking point” and share your thoughts with others – in case they can see that your “serious reasoning” has some serious errors. As for whom to talk to, it doesn’t really matter: a friend (who would be useless as a future friend if he or she “makes fun of you”), a parent (and I know that this choice can have disadvantages), a grandparent, a teacher, a counselor, a psychologist or psychiatrist, or even a stranger. If nothing else, Dear, write down your reasoning in a diary or similar, and then return to your writing in a week or so, to see if your idea still makes sense.

If you think that I’m belaboring the point, Dear, I would argue that I’m not! I would argue that having the courage to being exposed as a fool (which is not foolish, but perhaps the pinnacle of wisdom!) is one of the keys to all knowledge. Thus, Dear, the more you study science, the more you’ll see that the enormous advances in knowledge (especially the advances made during the past few hundreds of years) have been not solely because of the intelligence of a few people to conceive brilliant hypotheses but also because of their courage to submit their hypotheses and predictions to potential ridicule. The essence of all, important scientific publications is that someone has the courage to say: “It may be dumb, but consider the following idea.” Stated differently, an enormous amount of data is available to support the hypothesis that a part of brilliance (and, as far as helping humanity is concerned, perhaps the greatest part of brilliance) is the courage to face being labeled a fool.

If anyone ever derides you for erroneous reasoning, Dear, then maybe you want to say (or at least think):

Well my error isn’t so dumb as that of the foolish Hindu cleric who concocted the caste system (who argued, in analogy to the human body, that a caste system was dictated by “the most resplendent one”, i.e., God), or of Aristotle (who deduced that slavery was “the natural order” based on his foolish reasoning by analogy), or of Augustine (who deduced that slavery was justified based on the absurd premiss that the Bible was “true”). In fact, my error isn’t even so dumb as the errors of my one of my grandfathers (who almost committed suicide because he thought he was a slave to

his DNA molecule), or my father (who forgot to test his hypothesis), or my mother (who doesn't question her indoctrination).

And if someone attempts to deride you by saying that you've made a mistake and that you're being foolish, then say: "Thank you – but could you try to show me what you consider to be my error."

To try to minimize your potential errors, maybe the following summary of "procedures and practices" will be of some use to you – at least for your decisions that require thought.

Some Principles for Thoughtful Decisions

1. Define your hierarchy of goals!
2. Convene your Board of Governors!
3. Require your instincts to conform to your values!
4. Re-assess your values!
5. Evaluate your emotions!
6. Dig into all data!
7. Check your logic!
8. Test your decision, and then
9. Do it again!

Decision Questionnaire

A. Preliminaries:

1. What goal or goals are you pursuing?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is this decision?
3. You want this decision by when?
4. Who else will your decision impact?
5. Have you assembled all appropriate data, including the opinions of those whom your decision will impact?
6. What is the cause of the greatest uncertainty?
7. Can you reduce this uncertainty?
8. What might happen if you delay your decision?
9. Why delay it?
10. Delay it until when?

B. Goals & Values:

1. What are your goals, including the promotion of your values?
2. What are the sources of your values?
3. What are the priorities of your goals and values?

C. Options & Uncertainties:

1. What are your options?

2. For each option, what's the probability of it being realized to what degree?
3. What can you do to modify these probabilities?
4. For each option, and for varying degrees of achievement of each option, what would be the probable consequences to your goals and to your values?
5. If you assign a numerical value (or, if appropriate, a monetary value) to each option, and then weight each value with the probability of it being realized, then what is the numerical (or monetary) "expected value" of each option?
6. What are your top few, most preferred options (i.e., the ones with greatest expected value)?

D. Evaluations & Assessments

1. What are the "opinions" of each member of your Board of Governors about each of your "top few, most preferred options"?
2. If you can test your preferred options without compromising your (other) goals and values, then what are the consequences of your tests?

E. Implementation & Monitoring

1. What actions are necessary to implement your decision and when will you take them?
2. How will you monitor progress toward your goals?

Of course, Dear, if all that seems "a bit much", then you can always "listen to your heart", "seek God's guidance", or "study the scriptures". ☺

And, Dear, if it all does seem to be "too much", then I hope you'll consider the following, described by the philosopher Richard Richardson in his 1964 book *An Atheist's Values*,⁶ since it outlines why such judgments are usually so complicated – and why it sometimes seems best to "follow your heart", although that's risky!

The process of making a wise choice, in view of principles and consequences, is judgment rather than deduction or induction or inference or intuition. Deduction plays a part in it, for example in seeing what a given principle implies in a given situation. But deduction never forms the whole of deliberation and judgment. There is in addition at least the choice to apply this principle to this situation. Induction also plays a part; for in predicting the consequences of a proposal we must use our inferences as to what the laws of nature are. But induction, too, never forms the whole of deliberation and judgment, because prediction is not choice. Both deduction and induction are radically distinct from judgment in that they are abstractive, separative, analytical, whereas judgment is concreative and synthetical. We judge what is best to do in this whole concrete situation. The wise man tries to see all the

⁶ Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/11393708/An-Atheists-Values-1964-by-Richard-Robinson-19021996>.

relevant principles and all the important consequences, and then to make a judgment on the whole.

Thus an important choice has far more grounds than an inference has. In an inference you can say quite shortly what the whole of your reason is for your conclusion. But in a wise judgment it is a very long business to give your reason, because your reason ought to be nothing less than the whole of the principles relevant to your choice and the whole of the consequences of your choice, and the whole situation in which it occurs. Hence in practice people sometimes renounce the effort to give a reason for their choice. They feel that they could only say part of it, and that to represent a part of it as the reason would be to misrepresent the choice. Hence choice often looks like intuition, that is, like something totally unreasoned. It often looks like intuition even to the wise chooser himself, who has really reviewed a great deal of matter in making it. Good choice is all-considering; and the all-considering sometimes looks like the nothing-considering...

The final judgment, after we have made our review of all the relevant considerations, is always a risk and often feels like a risk. Judgment is riskier than either deduction or induction. Deduction is safe and sure, a pleasant occupation for the timorous, because the premisses entail the conclusion. Induction is unsure, because the premisses do not entail the conclusion; but still it is theoretical; we are risking only a theory. Judgment is neither sure nor theoretical. It is risking our lives. Though I have here discussed judgment in reference to choice, and contrasted it with induction, judgment is often required not merely for deciding what to do but also for deciding what the particular facts of the world are. It is a matter of judgment whether you can safely overtake another car or not, a question of deciding what emerges from the whole concrete situation which you perceive. Induction is more our process of adopting abstract and general statements about the world, than our process of deciding the nature and course of any concrete event. Whether there is a god, for example, a particular concrete question about the world, is a matter for judgment rather than for induction or deduction.

But enough generalities. Now, I want to try to tie up still more loose ends, in particular, those dealing with your plans, procedures, and practices (as well as your potentials, which you can probably realize if you'll "just" persevere). As I already mentioned, I suspect that the stimulation that I use, namely, "*One more year left to live*", won't be of much value to you "until you're older", because with a little bit of luck and taking appropriate care, you should have a long life ahead of you. You might think: "Well, 50-or-so years from now, I wanna goof off like a certain set of useless grandparents; 30-or-so years from now, I'm gonna have accomplished more than my parents ever did; 10-or-so years from now, I'm gonna finish my college education..."

“No way!”, responded a petulant grandchild, “I ain’t gonna spend another decade in school!”

Careful with that one, kid. No matter your career choice, you’ll find that it’s an extremely competitive world. Think about how hard your dad works; I had to do similar; almost certainly, so will you. Further, the competition that you’ll face isn’t just against other Americans, but against workers from throughout the world and against changing circumstances.

For example, if you’re thinking about getting a job in a local service company (or starting your own), then realize that any service company will have significant competition and will be in jeopardy of becoming obsolete: think of all the people who delivered milk or ice, who worked maintaining the horse and buggy industry, and so on, including building nuclear bombs and spacecraft to fly people to the moon. Or, if you’re thinking about getting a job in a local industry (or starting your own), realize that many of this country’s manufacturing jobs are moving to other countries, where “unskilled labor” is much cheaper. And if you’re thinking that you’ll just marry someone who’ll provide you with everything you and your children will want, then first I’d ask if you really think that this poor old world needs more children, then I’d ask if you really want to put all your eggs in a single basket, and then I’d ask: what if such a spouse never materializes, or if one does, that such a spouse will want a dependent such as you?

Thereby, Dear, I hope you see that probably your wisest course of action (and the best available way for you to gain an “edge” over all competition) is to take advantage of the astounding educational opportunities available to you – opportunities available to only a small fraction of your competitors. Consequently, Dear, unless you have some extraordinary artistic or athletic talent (singing, dancing, painting, writing, composing music, playing basketball...), then I strongly encourage you to get all the education you can. And don’t forget the key to getting to the top of some intellectual field: it doesn’t require inordinate brain power, just a lot of will power, i.e., perseverance, i.e., work! But first, you’d better address the age-old question: Whaddya wanna be when you grow up?! What are your goals? What are your plans? Which then leads me to a problem I encountered in earlier chapters and to my desire to tie up some more loose ends.

In earlier chapters (especially **G** and **H**), I wrote quite bit about goals. I urged you to set yourself reasonable goals (and their associated priorities,

* Go to other chapters *via*

which are felt as “hopes”), because making progress toward your goals is the cause of the feeling that we call “happiness”. Also, I urged you to develop a “nested hierarchy of goals” (nested like those Russian dolls you played with when you were a toddler); that is, that you develop “fail safe” plans. But in those earlier chapters, I didn’t do what you might have expected me to do, namely, to suggest ways to set and pursue your goals. I wouldn’t be surprised if, upon reading those chapters, you moaned something similar to: “For cryin’ out loud, Grampa, gimme somethin’ I can use!”

For example, you might have wondered why (way back in **G** and **H**, dealing with goals and with hopes) I didn’t go into some of the “How to Succeed” techniques, described in innumerable books, audiotapes, and in these days, who-knows-what form. There was a reason why I skipped such stuff in earlier chapters – and the reason wasn’t because I don’t want you to succeed! Instead, as I suggested in those chapters, the critical issue is not to learn how to succeed (which is actually relatively easy!), but first to decide what you want to achieve, a topic rarely covered in such “How to Succeed” techniques.⁷

That is, Dear, the critical question is not “How to succeed” but “What are your goals?” And in those early chapters, there was a “loose end” that I felt I needed to tie up before I moved on to “plans, procedures, and practices” (such as “How to succeed”). This loose end was to address “goals” more completely. It’s “true enough”, as I suggested already in **B**, that all of us pursue our trio of survival goals (of ourselves, our extended families, and our values), but I felt that I needed to prod you, first, to decide what was the extent of your “extended family”, and then, to decide what was the source of your “values”. In my view, only after you address and answer such questions should you proceed to “plans, procedures, and practices”.

In case my meaning and writing are so obscure that you don’t understand what I’m trying to convey, then consider some examples. Suppose you decided that your “family” included only you, that your prime value was only your own survival, and that, therefore, you’d become a bank robber. Or suppose you decided that the extent of your family included just fellow members of the Mafia and you adopted values prescribed by “the family”.

⁷ Exceptions include those cases in which the promoter is really promoting religion, such as in that stupid and damnable book *The Purpose Driven Life*, which has sold ~20 million copies. I reviewed some aspects of that book in **P3**, which dealt with “Some Purposes Pursued.”

Or similarly, suppose you decided that the extent of your family included just fellow Mormons and you adopted values promoted by Mormon clerics. Then in each case (and quite likely in any case you could think of, including being a “good” Jew, Christian, Muslim... or even a good humanist), then there are some very good ideas about “How to succeed” (at being a bank robber, a member of the Mafia, a “good” Mormon, and so on).

As a first illustration, let me quote some good advice for setting goals that you can find at www.mindtools.com/pgroalef.html. In what follows, I’ve changed just a few words and a little punctuation (and some formatting), hoping to slightly improve how the author’s ideas are conveyed. The web page doesn’t give the author’s identity; whoever the author is, I think that he or she provides some great ideas.

Setting Goals Effectively

The way in which you set goals strongly affects their outcome. The following broad guidelines apply to setting effective goals.

- *Positive Statement.* Express your goals positively: “execute this technique well” is a much better goal than “don’t make this stupid mistake”.
- *Be Precise.* If you set a precise goal, putting in dates, times, and amounts so that achievement can be measured, then you know the exact goal to be achieved and can take complete satisfaction from having achieved it.
- *Set Priorities.* Where you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- *Write goals down.* This helps to avoid confusion and can give your goals more force.
- *Keep Operational Goals Small.* Keep the goals you are working towards immediately (i.e., in this session) small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you aren’t making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Today’s goals should be derived from larger goals.

You should note a number of general principles about goal setting:

Set Performance Goals not Outcome Goals

This is very important. You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible – there is nothing as dispiriting as failing to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control, such as bad business environments, poor judging, bad weather, injury, or just plain bad luck. Goals based on outcomes are extremely vulnerable to failure because of things beyond your control.

If you base your goals on personal performance or skills or knowledge to be acquired, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals and draw satisfaction from them. For example, you might achieve a personal best time in a race, but still be disqualified as a result of a poor judging decision. If you had set an outcome goal of being in the top three, then this will be a defeat, but if you set a performance goal of achieving a particular time, then you will have achieved the goal and can draw satisfaction and self-confidence from its achievement.

Another flaw is where outcome goals are based on the rewards of achieving something, whether these are financial or are based on the recognition of colleagues. In early stages these will be highly motivating factors; as they are achieved, however, the benefits of further achievement at the same level reduce. You will become progressively less motivated.

Set Specific Goals

Set specific measurable goals. If you achieve all conditions of a measurable goal, then you can be confident and comfortable in its achievement. If you consistently fail to meet a measurable goal, then you can adjust it or analyze the reason for failure and take appropriate action to improve skills.

Set Realistic Goals

Goals may be set unrealistically high for many reasons:

- *Other people.* Other people (parents, media, society) can set unrealistic goals for you, based on what they want. Often this will be done in ignorance of your goals, desires, and ambitions.
- *Insufficient information.* If you do not have a clear, realistic understanding of what you are trying to achieve and of the skills and knowledge to be mastered, it's difficult to set effective and realistic goals.
- *Expecting your best performance.* Many people base their goals on their best performance, however long ago that was. This ignores the inevitable backsliding, which can occur for good reasons, and ignores the factors that led to that best performance. It is better to set goals that raise your average performance and make it more consistent.
- *Lack of respect for self.* If you do not respect your right to rest, relaxation, and pleasure in life then you risk burnout.

Alternatively, goals can be set too low because of:

- *Fear of failure.* If you are frightened of failure you will not take the risks needed for optimum performance. As you apply goal setting and see the achievement of goals, your self-confidence should increase, helping you to take bigger risks. Know that failure is a positive thing: it shows you areas where you can improve your skills and performance.
- *Taking it too easy.* It is easy to take the reasons for not setting goals unrealistically high as an excuse to set them too low. If you're not prepared to stretch yourself and work hard, then you are extremely unlikely to achieve anything of any real worth.

Setting goals at the correct level is a skill that is acquired by practice.

You should set goals so that they are slightly out of your immediate grasp, but not so far that there is no hope of achieving them: people don't put serious effort into achieving goals that they believe are unrealistic. However, remember that the belief that a goal is unrealistic may be incorrect. Such a belief can be changed by effective use of imagery. Personal factors such as tiredness, other commitments, and the need for rest, etc. should be taken into account when goals are set.

Now review the goals you have set, and then measure them against the points above. Adjust them to meet the recommendations and then review them. You should now be able to see the importance of setting goals effectively.

Thinking a goal through

When you are thinking about how to achieve goals, addressing the following questions can help you to focus on the sub-goals that lead to their achievement:

- What skills do I need to achieve this?
- What information and knowledge do I need?
- What help, assistance, or collaboration do I need?
- What resources do I need?
- What can block progress?
- Am I making any questionable assumptions?
- Is there a better way of doing things?

All the above, Dear, was quoted from www.mindtools.com/pgroalef.html; I agree with essentially all of it; I'm quite confident that, by following such techniques, you could become a "good" bank robber, Mafia member, Mormon, Jew, Christian, Muslim... even a good humanist!

And if you're beginning to see what I mean, then let me try to remove any remaining doubt. What follows is another set of recommendation about "How to Succeed", this set from Ned Grossman; I copied it from his website, which now I can't find, but in turn, the recommendations are from his book *How to Succeed in Life – Ideas and Principles They Don't Teach In School*, which is now published; it's available at, e.g., amazon.com. On the web page were included the following quotations about how to succeed, along with Grossman's own ideas (which I'll get to):

There is only one success: to be able to spend your life in your own way.
[Christopher Morley]

The talent of success is nothing more than doing what you can do well; and doing well whatever you do, without a thought of fame. [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow]

Success is many things to many people. But, if you have the courage to be true to yourself, to live up to your potential, to be fair with others, and always look for the good in any situation... then you will have been the best you can be, and there is no greater success than that. [Linda Lee Elrod]

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success... [Henry Thoreau]

Success is a journey – not a destination. [H. Tom Collard]

Success consists of a series of little daily victories. [Laddie F. Hutar]

Experience shows that success is due less to ability than to zeal. The winner is he who gives himself to his work, body and soul. [Charles Buxton]

A purpose is the eternal condition of success. [Theodore Munger]

The best place to succeed is where you are with what you have.
[Charles M. Schwab]

The way you enjoy life best is to wrap up one goal and start right on the next one.
[Jim Rohn]

I know the price of success – dedication, hard work, and an unremitting devotion to the things you want to see happen. [Frank Lloyd Wright]

In achieving success, backbone is more important than wishbone. [Frank Tyger]

The rungs in the ladder of success are composed of difficulties. [B.C. Forbes]

Success is the reward for accomplishment. [Harry F. Bankes]

Success rests with having the courage and endurance and, above all, the will to become the person you are, however peculiar that may be. [George Sheehan]

Success does not lie in achievement; it lies in striving, reaching, attempting, and growing. [Ned Grossman]

Grossman amplifies what he means as follows [to which I've added some notes in brackets]:

There are two general groupings of successful people. The first group is 'river' people: they have found an activity or a career that has fascinated them and have thrown themselves into it with passion, exuberance, and abandon. They work and play in this 'river' of interest and love every minute of it. Their work is play and

their play is work... [By the way, Dear, I agree with that: it's what I found in science – save for the pain of selling research proposals and dealing with multi-layers of bureaucracy. But in science, itself, I never worked: I just played – very hard!]

The second group of successful people is goal-oriented. They are happy doing many different things. Attaining their goals is important to them. They make up their minds [about] what they want and keep their eyes and enthusiasm on those goals until they become reality. They enjoy life best by wrapping up one goal and starting right on the next one... [And, Dear, I also agree with that: it describes well my nearest-age brother. Some time I'll tell you more. The things he has accomplished are amazing (sailing, carpentry, flying, investing, music, carving, painting...)].

For best results, try to find your 'river' of interest and become goal-orientated. Can you imagine a more unbeatable combination?

I think that the above quotations contain a lot of wisdom, and I hope that you'll give them some consideration. In particular, Dear, think about Grossman's suggestion to search for "your 'river' of interest [or, better, rivers of interests!] and become goal-orientated", and also, think about some of the words he used in the above quotation, including: passion, exuberance, and enthusiasm. If you'll follow such advice, I'm sure that you'll be able to achieve success as a successful bank robber, Mafia member, Mormon...!

And thus, Dear, maybe you see the loose end that I felt I had to tie up, before I went into "plans, procedures, and practices" (e.g., about "How to Succeed"). I'm sure you plan to pursue your trio of survival (or "thrival") goals (of yourself, your extended family, and your values). But, Dear, before you jump on some "How to Succeed" bandwagon, make sure that the wagon isn't in front of the horse: first decide on what you want to be successful at!

And what that means, once again, is that you must decide on the objectives against which you plan to measure your values. And before even that, you must decide on your fundamental premisses. Recall:

The priorities are: first premisses, then purposes – and then principles, priorities, and policies – and finally: plans, procedures, and practices (with perseverance).

That is, Dear, before you start on “plans, procedures, and practices” for, e.g., “how to succeed”, first make sure that your premisses are sound and that your purposes and principles are consistent with your premisses.

As I’ve written many times before, one of your fundamental premisses is whether the universe is entirely natural or if it contains various supernatural entities, such as gods. You know my opinion; what follows is the well-written opinion of Sam Harris, the author of a book that I hope you’ll read (*The End of Faith; Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*; W.W. Norton & Co., NY, 2004).⁸

There is No God (And You Know It)
by Sam Harris

Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind is not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of 6 billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl’s parents believe at this very moment that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it good that they believe this?

No.

The entirety of atheism is contained in this response. Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply a refusal to deny the obvious. Unfortunately, we live in a world in which the obvious is overlooked as a matter of principle. The obvious must be observed and re-observed and argued for. This is a thankless job. It carries with it an aura of petulance and insensitivity. It is, moreover, a job that the atheist does not want.

It is worth noting that no one ever needs to identify himself as a non-astrologer or a non-chemist. Consequently, we do not have words for people who deny the validity of these pseudo-disciplines. Likewise, atheism is a term that should not even exist.

⁸ Copied from http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Sam_Harris/Atheist_Manifesto.html, where “the editor” added the following note: *At a time when fundamentalist religion has an unparalleled influence in the highest government levels in the United States, and religion-based terror dominates the world stage, Sam Harris argues that progressive tolerance of faith-based unreason is as great a menace as religion itself. Harris, a philosophy graduate of Stanford who has studied eastern and western religions, won the 2004 PEN Award for nonfiction for The End of Faith, which powerfully examines and explodes the absurdities of organized religion. Truthdig asked Harris to write a charter document for his thesis that belief in God, and appeasement of religious extremists of all faiths by moderates, has been and continues to be the greatest threat to world peace and a sustained assault on reason.*

Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make when in the presence of religious dogma. The atheist is merely a person who believes that the 260 million Americans (87% of the population) who claim to never doubt the existence of God should be obliged to present evidence for his existence and, indeed, for his benevolence, given the relentless destruction of innocent human beings we witness in the world each day. Only the atheist appreciates just how uncanny our situation is: most of us believe in a God that is every bit as specious as the gods of Mount Olympus; no person, whatever his or her qualifications, can seek public office in the United States without pretending to be certain that such a God exists; and much of what passes for public policy in our country conforms to religious taboos and superstitions appropriate to a medieval theocracy. Our circumstance is abject, indefensible and terrifying. It would be hilarious if the stakes were not so high.

We live in a world where all things, good and bad, are finally destroyed by change. Parents lose their children and children their parents. Husbands and wives are separated in an instant, never to meet again. Friends part company in haste, without knowing that it will be for the last time. This life, when surveyed with a broad glance, presents little more than a vast spectacle of loss. Most people in this world, however, imagine that there is a cure for this. If we live rightly – not necessarily ethically, but within the framework of certain ancient beliefs and stereotyped behaviors – we will get everything we want after we die. When our bodies finally fail us, we just shed our corporeal ballast and travel to a land where we are reunited with everyone we loved while alive. Of course, overly rational people and other rabble will be kept out of this happy place, and those who suspended their disbelief while alive will be free to enjoy themselves for all eternity.

We live in a world of unimaginable surprises – from the fusion energy that lights the sun to the genetic and evolutionary consequences of this lights dancing for eons upon the Earth – and yet Paradise conforms to our most superficial concerns with all the fidelity of a Caribbean cruise. This is wondrously strange. If one didn't know better, one would think that man, in his fear of losing all that he loves, had created heaven, along with its gatekeeper God, in his own image.

Consider the destruction that Hurricane Katrina leveled on New Orleans. More than a thousand people died, tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions, and nearly a million were displaced. It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Katrina struck believed in an omnipotent, omniscient and compassionate God. But what was God doing while a hurricane laid waste to their city? Surely he heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Only the atheist has the courage to admit the obvious: These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend.

Of course, there had been ample warning that a storm of biblical proportions would strike New Orleans, and the human response to the ensuing disaster was tragically

inept. But it was inept only by the light of science. Advance warning of Katrina's path was wrested from mute Nature by meteorological calculations and satellite imagery. God told no one of his plans. Had the residents of New Orleans been content to rely on the beneficence of the Lord, they wouldn't have known that a killer hurricane was bearing down upon them until they felt the first gusts of wind on their faces. Nevertheless, a poll conducted by The Washington Post found that 80% of Katrina's survivors claim that the event has only strengthened their faith in God.

As Hurricane Katrina was devouring New Orleans, nearly a thousand Shiite pilgrims were trampled to death on a bridge in Iraq. There can be no doubt that these pilgrims believed mightily in the God of the Koran: their lives were organized around the indisputable fact of his existence; their women walked veiled before him; their men regularly murdered one another over rival interpretations of his word. It would be remarkable if a single survivor of this tragedy lost his faith. More likely, the survivors imagine that they were spared through God's grace.

Only the atheist recognizes the boundless narcissism and self-deceit of the saved. Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs. Because he refuses to cloak the reality of the world's suffering in a cloying fantasy of eternal life, the atheist feels in his bones just how precious life is – and, indeed, how unfortunate it is that millions of human beings suffer the most harrowing abridgements of their happiness for no good reason at all.

One wonders just how vast and gratuitous a catastrophe would have to be to shake the world's faith. The Holocaust did not do it. Neither did the genocide in Rwanda, even with machete-wielding priests among the perpetrators. Five hundred million people died of smallpox in the 20th Century, many of them infants. God's ways are, indeed, inscrutable. It seems that any fact, no matter how infelicitous, can be rendered compatible with religious faith. In matters of faith, we have kicked ourselves loose of the Earth.

Of course, people of faith regularly assure one another that God is not responsible for human suffering. But how else can we understand the claim that God is both omniscient and omnipotent? There is no other way, and it is time for sane human beings to own up to this. This is the age-old problem of theodicy, of course, and we should consider it solved. If God exists, either he can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities or he does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil. Pious readers will now execute the following pirouette: God cannot be judged by merely human standards of morality. But, of course, human standards of morality are precisely what the faithful use to establish God's goodness in the first place. And any God who could concern himself with something as trivial as gay marriage, or the name by which he is addressed in prayer, is not as inscrutable as all that. If he exists, the God of Abraham is not merely unworthy of the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man.

There is another possibility, of course, and it is both the most reasonable and least odious: the biblical God is a fiction. As Richard Dawkins has observed, we are all atheists with respect to Zeus and Thor. Only the atheist has realized that the biblical god is no different. Consequently, only the atheist is compassionate enough to take the profundity of the world's suffering at face value. It is terrible that we all die and lose everything we love; it is doubly terrible that so many human beings suffer needlessly while alive. That so much of this suffering can be directly attributed to religion – to religious hatreds, religious wars, religious delusions and religious diversions of scarce resources – is what makes atheism a moral and intellectual necessity. It is a necessity, however, that places the atheist at the margins of society. The atheist, by merely being in touch with reality, appears shamefully out of touch with the fantasy life of his neighbors.

The Nature of Belief

According to several recent polls, 22% of Americans are certain that Jesus will return to Earth sometime in the next 50 years. Another 22% believe that he will probably do so. This is likely the same 44% who go to church once a week or more, who believe that God literally promised the land of Israel to the Jews, and who want to stop teaching our children about the biological fact of evolution. As President Bush is well aware, believers of this sort constitute the most cohesive and motivated segment of the American electorate. Consequently, their views and prejudices now influence almost every decision of national importance. Political liberals seem to have drawn the wrong lesson from these developments and are now thumbing Scripture, wondering how best to ingratiate themselves to the legions of men and women in our country who vote largely on the basis of religious dogma. More than 50% of Americans have a “negative” or “highly negative” view of people who do not believe in God; 70% think it important for presidential candidates to be “strongly religious.” Unreason is now ascendant in the United States – in our schools, in our courts and in each branch of the federal government. Only 28% of Americans believe in evolution; 68% believe in Satan. Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.

Although it is easy enough for smart people to criticize religious fundamentalism, something called “religious moderation” still enjoys immense prestige in our society, even in the ivory tower. This is ironic, as fundamentalists tend to make a more principled use of their brains than “moderates” do. While fundamentalists justify their religious beliefs with extraordinarily poor evidence and arguments, they at least they make an attempt at rational justification. Moderates, on the other hand, generally do nothing more than cite the good consequences of religious belief. Rather than say that they believe in God because certain biblical prophecies have come true, moderates will say that they believe in God because this belief “gives their lives meaning.” When a tsunami killed a few hundred thousand people on the day after Christmas, fundamentalists readily interpreted this cataclysm as evidence of God's wrath. As it turns out, God was sending humanity another oblique message about the evils of abortion, idolatry and homosexuality. While morally obscene, this interpretation of events is actually reasonable, given certain (ludicrous) assumptions.

Moderates, on the other hand, refuse to draw any conclusions whatsoever about God from his works. God remains a perfect mystery, a mere source of consolation that is compatible with the most desolating evil. In the face of disasters like the Asian tsunami, liberal piety is apt to produce the most unctuous and stupefying nonsense imaginable. And yet, men and women of goodwill naturally prefer such vacuities to the odious moralizing and prophesizing of true believers. Between catastrophes, it is surely a virtue of liberal theology that it emphasizes mercy over wrath. It is worth noting, however, that it is human mercy on display – not God’s – when the bloated bodies of the dead are pulled from the sea. On days when thousands of children are simultaneously torn from their mothers’ arms and casually drowned, liberal theology must stand revealed for what it is – the sheerest of mortal pretenses. Even the theology of wrath has more intellectual merit. If God exists, his will is not inscrutable. The only thing inscrutable in these terrible events is that so many neurologically healthy men and women can believe the unbelievable and think this the height of moral wisdom.

It is perfectly absurd for religious moderates to suggest that a rational human being can believe in God simply because this belief makes him happy, relieves his fear of death or gives his life meaning. The absurdity becomes obvious the moment we swap the notion of God for some other consoling proposition: imagine, for instance, that a man wants to believe that there is a diamond buried somewhere in his yard that is the size of a refrigerator. No doubt it would feel uncommonly good to believe this. Just imagine what would happen if he then followed the example of religious moderates and maintained this belief along pragmatic lines: when asked why he thinks that there is a diamond in his yard that is thousands of times larger than any yet discovered, he says things like, “This belief gives my life meaning,” or “My family and I enjoy digging for it on Sundays,” or “I wouldn’t want to live in a universe where there wasn’t a diamond buried in my backyard that is the size of a refrigerator.” Clearly these responses are inadequate. But they are worse than that. They are the responses of a madman or an idiot.

Here we can see why Pascal’s wager, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith and other epistemological Ponzi schemes won’t do. To believe that God exists is to believe that one stands in some relation to his existence such that his existence is itself the reason for one’s belief. There must be some causal connection, or an appearance thereof, between the fact in question and a person’s acceptance of it. In this way, we can see that religious beliefs, to be beliefs about the way the world is, must be as evidentiary in spirit as any other. For all their sins against reason, religious fundamentalists understand this; moderates – almost by definition – do not.

The incompatibility of reason and faith has been a self-evident feature of human cognition and public discourse for centuries. Either a person has good reasons for what he strongly believes or he does not. People of all creeds naturally recognize the primacy of reasons and resort to reasoning and evidence wherever they possibly can. When rational inquiry supports the creed it is always championed; when it poses a threat, it is derided; sometimes in the same sentence. Only when the evidence for a

religious doctrine is thin or nonexistent, or there is compelling evidence against it, do its adherents invoke “faith.” Otherwise, they simply cite the reasons for their beliefs (e.g. “the New Testament confirms Old Testament prophecy,” “I saw the face of Jesus in a window,” “We prayed, and our daughter’s cancer went into remission”). Such reasons are generally inadequate, but they are better than no reasons at all. Faith is nothing more than the license religious people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail. In a world that has been shattered by mutually incompatible religious beliefs, in a nation that is growing increasingly beholden to Iron Age conceptions of God, the end of history and the immortality of the soul, this lazy partitioning of our discourse into matters of reason and matters of faith is now unconscionable.

Faith and the Good Society

People of faith regularly claim that atheism is responsible for some of the most appalling crimes of the 20th century. Although it is true that the regimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were irreligious to varying degrees, they were not especially rational. In fact, their public pronouncements were little more than litanies of delusion – delusions about race, economics, national identity, the march of history or the moral dangers of intellectualism. In many respects, religion was directly culpable even here. Consider the Holocaust: the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi crematoria brick by brick was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity. For centuries, religious Germans had viewed the Jews as the worst species of heretics and attributed every societal ill to their continued presence among the faithful. While the hatred of Jews in Germany expressed itself in a predominately secular way, the religious demonization of the Jews of Europe continued. (The Vatican itself perpetuated the blood libel in its newspapers as late as 1914.)

Auschwitz, the gulag, and the killing fields are not examples of what happens when people become too critical of unjustified beliefs; to the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of not thinking critically enough about specific secular ideologies. Needless to say, a rational argument against religious faith is not an argument for the blind embrace of atheism as a dogma. The problem that the atheist exposes is none other than the problem of dogma itself – of which every religion has more than its fair share. There is no society in recorded history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

While most Americans believe that getting rid of religion is an impossible goal, much of the developed world has already accomplished it. Any account of a “god gene” that causes the majority of Americans to helplessly organize their lives around ancient works of religious fiction must explain why so many inhabitants of other First World societies apparently lack such a gene. The level of atheism throughout the rest of the developed world refutes any argument that religion is somehow a moral necessity. Countries like Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on Earth. According to the United Nations’ Human Development Report (2005) they are also the healthiest, as indicated by measures of life

expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate and infant mortality. Conversely, the 50 nations now ranked lowest in terms of human development are unwaveringly religious. Other analyses paint the same picture: the United States is unique among wealthy democracies in its level of religious literalism and opposition to evolutionary theory; it is also uniquely beleaguered by high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, STD infection and infant mortality. The same comparison holds true within the United States itself: Southern and Midwestern states, characterized by the highest levels of religious superstition and hostility to evolutionary theory, are especially plagued by the above indicators of societal dysfunction, while the comparatively secular states of the Northeast conform to European norms. Of course, correlational data of this sort do not resolve questions of causality – belief in God may lead to societal dysfunction; societal dysfunction may foster a belief in God; each factor may enable the other; or both may spring from some deeper source of mischief. Leaving aside the issue of cause and effect, these facts prove that atheism is perfectly compatible with the basic aspirations of a civil society; they also prove, conclusively, that religious faith does nothing to ensure a society's health.

Countries with high levels of atheism also are the most charitable in terms of giving foreign aid to the developing world. The dubious link between Christian literalism and Christian values is also belied by other indices of charity. Consider the ratio in salaries between top-tier CEOs and their average employee: in Britain it is 24 to 1; France 15 to 1; Sweden 13 to 1; in the United States, where 83% of the population believes that Jesus literally rose from the dead, it is 475 to 1. Many a camel, it would seem, expects to squeeze easily through the eye of a needle.

Religion as a Source of Violence

One of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the 21st Century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns – about ethics, spiritual experience and the inevitability of human suffering – in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord religious faith. Incompatible religious doctrines have balkanized our world into separate moral communities – Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc. – and these divisions have become a continuous source of human conflict. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews versus Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians versus Catholic Croats; Orthodox Serbians versus Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants versus Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims versus Hindus), Sudan (Muslims versus Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims versus Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims versus Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists versus Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims versus Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite versus Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians versus Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis versus Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. In these places religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in the last 10 years.

In a world riven by ignorance, only the atheist refuses to deny the obvious: religious faith promotes human violence to an astonishing degree. Religion inspires violence in at least two senses: (1) People often kill other human beings because they believe that the creator of the universe wants them to do it (the inevitable psychopathic corollary being that the act will ensure them an eternity of happiness after death). Examples of this sort of behavior are practically innumerable, jihadist suicide bombing being the most prominent. (2) Larger numbers of people are inclined toward religious conflict simply because their religion constitutes the core of their moral identities. One of the enduring pathologies of human culture is the tendency to raise children to fear and demonize other human beings on the basis of religion. Many religious conflicts that seem driven by terrestrial concerns, therefore, are religious in origin. (Just ask the Irish.)

These facts notwithstanding, religious moderates tend to imagine that human conflict is always reducible to a lack of education, to poverty or to political grievances. This is one of the many delusions of liberal piety. To dispel it, we need only reflect on the fact that the Sept. 11 hijackers were college educated and middle class and had no discernable history of political oppression. They did, however, spend an inordinate amount of time at their local mosque talking about the depravity of infidels and about the pleasures that await martyrs in Paradise. How many more architects and mechanical engineers must hit the wall at 400 miles an hour before we admit to ourselves that jihadist violence is not a matter of education, poverty or politics? The truth, astonishingly enough, is this: a person can be so well educated that he can build a nuclear bomb while still believing that he will get 72 virgins in Paradise. Such is the ease with which the human mind can be partitioned by faith, and such is the degree to which our intellectual discourse still patiently accommodates religious delusion. Only the atheist has observed what should now be obvious to every thinking human being: if we want to uproot the causes of religious violence we must uproot the false certainties of religion.

Why is religion such a potent source of human violence?

Our religions are intrinsically incompatible with one another. Either Jesus rose from the dead and will be returning to Earth like a superhero or not; either the Koran is the infallible word of God or it isn't. Every religion makes explicit claims about the way the world is, and the sheer profusion of these incompatible claims creates an enduring basis for conflict.

There is no other sphere of discourse in which human beings so fully articulate their differences from one another, or cast these differences in terms of everlasting rewards and punishments. Religion is the one endeavor in which "us *versus* them thinking" achieves a transcendent significance. If a person really believes that calling God by the right name can spell the difference between eternal happiness and eternal suffering, then it becomes quite reasonable to treat heretics and unbelievers rather badly. It may even be reasonable to kill them. If a person thinks there is something that another person can say to his children that could put their souls in jeopardy for all eternity, then the heretic next door is actually far more dangerous than the child

molester. The stakes of our religious differences are immeasurably higher than those born of mere tribalism, racism or politics.

Religious faith is a conversation-stopper. Religion is only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet these beliefs often determine what they live for, what they will die for, and – all too often – what they will kill for. This is a problem, because when the stakes are high, human beings have a simple choice between conversation and violence. Only a fundamental willingness to be reasonable – to have our beliefs about the world revised by new evidence and new arguments – can guarantee that we will keep talking to one another. Certainty without evidence is necessarily divisive and dehumanizing. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas.

It seems profoundly unlikely that we will heal the divisions in our world simply by multiplying the opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The endgame for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality. While all parties to liberal religious discourse have agreed to tread lightly over those points where their worldviews would otherwise collide, these very points remain perpetual sources of conflict for their coreligionists. Political correctness, therefore, does not offer an enduring basis for human cooperation. If religious war is ever to become unthinkable for us, in the way that slavery and cannibalism seem poised to, it will be a matter of our having dispensed with the dogma of faith.

When we have reasons for what we believe, we have no need of faith; when we have no reasons, or bad ones, we have lost our connection to the world and to one another. Atheism is nothing more than a commitment to the most basic standard of intellectual honesty: one's convictions should be proportional to one's evidence. Pretending to be certain when one isn't – indeed, pretending to be certain about propositions for which no evidence is even conceivable – is both an intellectual and a moral failing. Only the atheist has realized this. The atheist is simply a person who has perceived the lies of religion and refused to make them his own.

Further, Dear, once you decide upon your fundamental premisses and before you set some of your “thousand-and-one other goals” (such as getting a college degree, getting a job, marrying, whatever), it's critical that you be quite firm about your values. But rather than going through, again, what I consider to be reasonable bases for your values (as I tried to do in **V** and in the many **M**-chapters, dealing with moral values), what I'd like you to do is have a look at someone else's opinion. What follows are the opinions of Joe E. Homan (the same fellow whose “deconversion story” I quoted in the previous chapter and encouraged you to read).⁹

⁹ Copied from <http://www.ministerturnsatheist.org/moralitywithoutgod.html>.

Morality Without God: does it measure up?

by Joe E. Holman

Perhaps the biggest concern to anyone investigating atheism is in regards to the subject of morality. Why be moral without a god? What incentive is there to do right vs. wrong? What is “right” and “wrong” without god anyway? If there is no god, then isn’t morality completely relative with no principles of ethical guidance and directional stability in life whatsoever?

For some, these are the really big questions that need answers. I say, for some, because it is mostly religious people who need the answers here. They need to know how and why non-religious thinkers live stable, upright lives and how we can call a thing “good” or “bad” with any sort of meaning. To atheists and other grades of freethinkers, morality is a very simple subject, explained completely by natural principles. So keep these questions (above) in mind. We’re going to come back to them later.

I. Contract behavior is the basis of all morality

Contract behavior is a mandatory arrangement of standards or rules, which must exist to keep a society in existence and in order. This is not a layout of any particular set of laws or moral regulations, per se, but a simple principle that allows societies to remain intact ethically when all the members of a group agree to abide by certain rules. Generally, all intelligent animals, including humans, honor this principle.

Humans have rules that say stealing is wrong and that murdering one’s own kind (without cause or provocation) is wrong. All humans everywhere have these rules, but so do bears, lions, and baboons, etc. So, too, with each and every intelligent form of life in existence that happens to be higher than mindless bacteria. Granted, the specifics of the morals are different from group to group, but the high points of contract behavior are the same. Try stealing a lion’s food – you will find out the hard way that they have a principle against stealing as well!

Despite what ignorant people would have you believe about the animal kingdom, animals do not kill outside of necessity and a moral code. They kill based on their own systems of morality. Wolves will attack any one member of their pack who tries to mate if he is not the alpha dog. One bear will attack another to safeguard their cubs. Lions will kill the offspring of another male to preserve his own seed and to protect himself when he is older. Baboons may well kill each other fighting over a mate. However terrible these “laws of the jungle” may seem to civilized you and me, they are rules nonetheless, and rules that remain constant and uphold the species that adopt them; there is method behind the madness! The more complex a society becomes (i.e., humans over lions), the higher the form of morality.

Humans face multifaceted issues that lions don’t face. A human boy must determine what he should do when his girlfriend dumps him. In a rage, he can kill her, or he can seek the affections of someone else and try to make her jealous, or he can cut his

losses and just mentally move on with his life. A father must decide whether he should have an affair with his secretary and risk his wife finding out, or whether or not he can live with himself, knowing that by having the affair he is breaking her trust, and he would be disappointed if she did the same to him. A boss must decide how to reprimand an employee who breaks the company rules. He can fire him and tell him to get his stuff and get out of the building and risk coming off like a hard-ass, or he can sit him down calmly in his office and politely tell him that for the sake of the company and himself, it would be best if he started looking for another job.

Animals don't face complex issues like we do and this sometimes gives us the illusion that we are not animals, but something "higher." This simply isn't true. It is typical human arrogance that causes us to see ourselves in that light. We are every bit as much animal as our primate, meat-eating remote cousins, despite our enormous 1400 cc brain sizes.

We have the same emotions, like love, confusion, excitement, and anger. We play and show juvenile aggression in games of competition and challenges. We kill members of our species (sometimes without cause or an unworthy cause). We break laws and contracts that we make with each other, whether verbal or written. We fight over mates and show egotistical tendencies in relationships with our fellow man. On and on we could go. We might look down on our distant animal kindred, but their issues are just as significant to them as ours are to us. A wolf that refuses to dismount mating because he is not the alpha dog with rites to mate, must defend himself or be killed. Occasionally, that wolf leaves the pack and decides to start his own – a very dangerous maneuver! That wolf is ostracized or ex-communicated, much like a shunned, impenitent church member who leaves the fold.

In a simplistic way, animals, like humans, break contracts – the agreements they make to live with each other. Chickens have a "pecking order." Should any chicken peck out of that order, they will be chastised. That is their way. The members in the wrong must suffer the consequences for their actions (wounds, ostracism, death, etc.). They have an evolved working order to which they hold, a basic form of morality, the beginnings of culture even. So the same principle that tells lions not to steal from one another gives humans and bears and baboons the same lesson – a society cannot exist without social structure and therefore, a "wrong" and a "right." These terms have differing meanings among different species, but they are always constructed out of the need for social order. Regulations supporting these socially ordered behaviors are contracts, and contracts upheld and contracts broken form the basis of moral or immoral behavior. Thus, I refer to the principle as contract behavior.

As an example of just how simple this morality issue is, let us ask the same questions (asked above) that god believers ask about atheist morality and apply the answers to animal morality. Why should these animals be moral (in their own ways) without a god? Because their society and their identification with it demands that they abide as "good citizens." The animals have no knowledge of even one god or goddess, but they morally conform in the framework of their worlds each and every day. Without

god, what incentive is there for these animals to do right vs. wrong? The incentive is acceptance by the fellow members of their group, and the purpose they find in doing what makes them useful units to their groups. Emotional creatures need the love and support of their fellow members of the pack. If they do “wrong” they are ostracized, if “right” they are praised – even though a different branch of the animal kingdom has a different set of moral standards. What is “right” and “wrong” to animals without god anyway? The terms “right” and “wrong” only have meaning according to the accepted ways of the given animal species. Regardless of the varying particulars of different cultures, the highlights of morals were made to keep social order and promote the progression of the species. If it could be conclusively shown that no god existed, this would not make stealing or cold-blooded murder one bit more acceptable to a society, and if it could be indisputably shown that a god did exist, this would not make conforming to principles of social order one bit more right.

Like humans, morals for animals exist apart from a divine being. If there is no god, then isn't animal morality completely relative with no principles of moral guidance and directional ethical stability in life whatsoever? No. The animal kingdom is full of species that feel need and significance in honoring the standards of their own societies without the slightest feeling that their ways are more or less moral than species X. They have not the faintest knowledge of the existence of or the pleasing of a god for their actions, and they have no fear of burning in a place of fire for refusing to abide a certain way. They don't, for a moment, suppose that if there is no chicken or wolf or lion god, that their ways are useless and that they can do whatever they want without fear of consequences.

II. Now how about atheist morality?

Let's ask the questions that god believers ask about atheist morality and answer them directly. Why should atheists be moral without a god? Because our society, and our identification with it demands that we abide as “good citizens.” Atheists have no belief in even one god or goddess, but they morally conform in the framework of their worlds each and every day. Without god, what incentive is there for atheists to do right vs. wrong? The incentive is acceptance by the fellow members of our group (fellow humans), and the purpose we find in doing what makes us useful units to our species. Like anyone else, atheists need the love and support of their fellow “members of the pack.” If we do “wrong” we are ostracized, if “right,” we are praised – even though different human cultures have different sets of particular moral standards. What is “right” and “wrong” without god anyway? The terms “right” and “wrong” only have meaning according to the accepted ways of the human species. Regardless of the varying particulars of different cultures, the highlights of morals were made to keep social order and promote the progression of the species. If it could be conclusively shown that no god existed, this would not make stealing or cold-blooded murder one bit more acceptable to a society, and if it could be indisputably shown that a god did exist, this would not make conforming to principles of social order one bit more right.

Morals exist apart from a divine being. If there is no god, then isn't atheist morality completely relative with no principles of moral guidance and directional ethical stability in life whatsoever? No. Like anyone else, atheists feel the need and significance in honoring the standards of their own societies without the slightest feeling that their ways are useless if they didn't come from some infallible source. They have not the faintest knowledge of the existence of or the pleasing of a god for their actions and they have no fear of burning in a place of fire for refusing to abide a certain way. They don't, for a moment, suppose that if there is no god, that their ways are useless and that they can do whatever they want without fear of consequences.

III. Relativism and the Iron Rule?

Humans are complex creatures, living in a plethora of complex and varying societies worldwide. But one thing unites us, not a god, but contract behavior. The Head hunters of Borneo are a warrior people, and though they have been recently touched with a hint of civilization, still tribal violence occurs in their homeland of Malaysia. These warriors are taught from birth that to be a "good" headhunter and to earn the right to mate and be an adult, you must take the head of one of your enemies. This has been their way for thousands of years, no matter how terrible it may seem to us westernized Americans. I would love to step out and take a long look down on these people and call them "evil," but I cannot do that. They are not "evil" by their standards, though they would be considered so by our own. But despite the drastic moral differences between Americans and the Head Hunters, contract behavior still joins us. In order to keep society going, stealing and murder (the out-of-place taking of life) are still "wrong," despite the moral variances otherwise. And the same is true of literally every culture on earth.

Let's assume that a society existed without the prohibition of cold-blooded murder or theft, how long would it last? You've gone ahead of me and reasoned out the very obvious conclusion that a society without contract behavior could never survive! Reason is what dictates the truth of this fact. No matter whom and no matter where, contract behavior is what keeps societies together.

Since it is in the nature of our very genes to survive and adapt, as life evolved, certain mental predispositions evolved as well – contract behavior, helping members of a species work together in a fight or flight situation. Some might well consider this an example of moral relativism, but it is not. There is really no such thing as moral relativism (except in cases where wayward, reckless humans choose to disregard morality) since the changing morals of the different cultures are adhered to by those cultures. In other words, though I put no stock in Hindu rules for life, and such rules are relative to me, the people that submit themselves to this system of government do not look on it as relative because, in their case, Hinduism attaches to itself the enforcement of contract behavior, which, as we have seen, binds them and directs them. It has power over them like our own beliefs do over us, and the world continues to go round, morality intact!

It is at this point in the discussion that the dissenting theist voices his disagreement: “But that’s still moral relativism because I can still disregard my feelings for others and live only for myself, killing, torturing, robbing, and manipulating everyone to my own advantage!”

This objection is no objection at all, first, because people do this all the time. Rapes, bank robberies, execution-style murders, etc., happen all the time. Anyone can become a criminal if they choose to, and when they do, they mark themselves as enemies of the greater good who must be dealt with. So, should I decide that I don’t care about others, but only myself, and decide that it is in my “self-interest” to rob a bank because I think I can get away with it, I become an enemy, a lawbreaking, contract behavior-violating threat to society. I must then be stopped. This is the way of the world even with the majority of society maintaining god-belief.

The second reason why this objection is useless is found when we consider how few people choose to totally disregard the safety and wellbeing of others and commit heinous, immoral acts. In a world of over 6.1 billion people, only thousands of serious criminals commit crimes every day! This is a strikingly small number, given the population. People can and do maintain a non-religiously-based status quo morality.

Even in situations where dictators, Hitler for instance, orchestrated many horrible acts upon Jews, we find that only 3% of Germans claimed the Nazi party! Much the same way a band of chimps will stand up for a relative attacked by a foe, the world stepped up to eliminate Hitler when he exhibited his barbarous attempts to dominate his “inferior” opponents (which, by the way, Hitler sought to exterminate out of his religious fervor against those “Christ-killer Jews”). Hitler violated contract behavior and got what was coming to him.

Generally, it can be said that mankind demonstrates great compassion for others of his kind. It can therefore, be called a “natural law” when humans exhibit emotional and moral concerns, strongly promoting preservation, instead of the destruction of other races and peoples. However, we would be remiss if we left our discussion without facing the ultimate truth of naturalistic morality: the Iron Rule (that might makes right) is true, in the final analysis.

Suppose another race of beings visited our world today. Suppose they came down and, for whatever reason, decided that they needed to learn more about human anatomy; so, they find an isolated human, fishing in a lake. They abduct that person and perform whatever experiments on them they choose. The poor human is screaming bloody-murder to be released. Naturally, he feels violated and terrified beyond words. He endures what amounts to sheer torture. He will never be the same again. According to this man, these beings are “evil,” and perhaps “demonic forces,” but do you really suppose that these beings would care what this lower life form thought? Being that they are more powerful and obviously working according to the best interest of their species, is not their morality higher than ours?

Logically, we must say that it is, the same way our morality is higher than the fried chicken dinners that we consume before us so thoughtlessly. That chicken had it's own will to live, but your morality had a higher say in the matter. The higher/greater/ more powerful good must always be served: you are less important than your race as a whole. First Officer Spock was right – “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.” The cheetah is not evil when it consumes the gazelle as his meal. It is feeding, a thing that brawn, ruthless nature put into play. Even with mankind, when push comes to shove, it is our dominance, our power that determines right and wrong, though this only applies to collective powers (races, factions, groups, causes, etc.); it does not apply haphazardly and individually to mere “bullies”.

This is certainly not encouraging to think about, but it is indisputably true. We must remember that we live in a universe that doesn't give a damn about our hurt or our wellbeing, either way. Sad, but true.

IV. The second principle of morality

Enlightened self-interest is the second principle of a freethinker's morality. When all is said and done, we live for ourselves, whether it's through eating, drinking, hunting, or fighting, etc. It is primal instinct to survive, and that we do. But morality goes beyond this to social situations, especially complex social situations with societies that have grown as large and complex as has ours today. The principle of enlightened self-interest states that I will serve myself except when it is in my best interest to serve and help others. So I will look out for myself first, but I will also look out for you, since that is in my best interest, too.

Two hunters work better than one on the hunt. Man realized long ago that working peacefully together as a society gets everyone much further than if they lawlessly served only themselves. This is why the vast majority of sets of rules and regulations exist in our world today. We may get sick of them from time to time, but they are ultimately set up to work to our advantage as a group unit.

V. The alternative: morality through a theist's eyes

Now here is the picture that god-based morality gives us. According to theologians, all morality, the highest morality, can only stem from a god (most of the time, the believer's own god). God is in the sky, constantly shaking his finger at man, warning him not to cross the line by doing something bad. It is as though man is incompetent of doing anything good were it not for this “godly” influence.

According to god-believers, the highest morality comes from god, even though a growing number of theists will now concede that atheists and other non-believers can be moral without god belief, but that all secular morality that we atheists follow is simply borrowed from god, so they say, who originally made all things. In other words, “Christian” America is only law abiding because it gets its principles from god.

In response to this, I will point out what is obvious both in and out of our study thus far; even before man (when our ancestors were not yet human) morality existed as it exists in all animal life today. So this “Christian influence” idea doesn’t hold water, but the most major flaw with theistic morality is that it is motivationally inferior all-around. The Christian does a good thing for a bribe, for a reward (Heaven), and avoids doing a bad thing to escape a punishment (Hell). I will consent that the laws of our land operate this way (people have to know how to act; there must be punishments to a certain degree), but one should not have to be motivated by rewards or punishments.

One who keeps the law only to get a reward, and one who abstains from an action out of the fear of punishment is not a principled individual; instead, that person is operating out of intimidation. Who would you rather commend: one who does great deeds out of the desire to be paid a large amount of money, or one who does so because he believes that it is the right thing to do, that it is imperative that his action, his principle, be followed for the good of society?

It doesn’t take a Solomon to see the glaringly obvious selection that just about all of us would pick! A criminal who is sentenced to prison, makes life changes, and is paroled is to be desired over one who regrets getting caught and intends on maintaining good behavior and a sense of humility to get paroled so he can try to wrong the world again, only this time, without getting caught!

I am not going to “be good” to get some awesome prize up in the sky, nor because of a bully’s threat that eternal fire awaits me if I refuse to comply! Though most god believers will claim to serve god out of a “higher” desire to love him, when push comes to shove, it is still basically a fear-motivated service. Should they apostatize from faith and religion based on reasoning, trying to think for themselves for once, their god becomes a galactic bully who punishes with eternal fire. God is a bully who demands service under threat of damnation and promises blissful blessings beyond the imagination if his ways are followed – this is clearly an inferior system of morality! I will stick with the freethinker’s system of enlightened self-interest.

VI. The conclusion

We have established logically that, as with animals, so with humans...

- 1) Morality is obvious and reasonable, by means of contract behavior, for all intelligent life to follow as they see fit.
- 2) Morality has nothing whatsoever to do with a god: if a god exists, “good” and “bad” stand as valid whether or not a deity is considered to be the source of the morality.
- 3) “Good” and “bad” are relative terms except to the species or group that embraces said principles, and the principles are always connected with contract behavior. This makes morality neither solidly objective nor flippantly relativistic.

- 4) The principle of enlightened self interest is the system that freethinkers use to determine right from wrong. We serve ourselves, but ultimately, go beyond ourselves in pursuit of happiness of our species because that adds to our own happiness.
- 5) The highest type of morality is neither reward nor fear based, but comes from the thought-out desire to do what is right in the context of human volition.

Therefore, using reason, we conclude that a secular morality outshines a superficially divine one in every conceivable way.

If your values are clear (including your conception of who belongs to your “family”), then in pursuit of your prime goals (i.e., your trio of survival goals – of yourself, your “family”, and your values), you can set your “thousand-and-one lower-priority goals” with confidence. Then, referring to the internet or in any of many books, you can find a huge number of illustrations of such “good ideas” about “How to succeed” (in the pursuit of your goals). But don’t forget: one of your prime goals is to keep your health, and to do that, you’ll need to get more exercise!