

PAiLS

INTRODUCTION

In an age and place where people are not forced into a particular occupation or consumed on a daily basis with the very act of survival, they are instead left with choices about what they will do with their lives. Gandalf the wizard perhaps most succinctly stated this in the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*: “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

For many of us, however, this is easier said than done. Instead of deciding, we go through a dance of not deciding, until circumstances and events decide for us. In the end, we're merely *at the end*, neither having followed a definite plan nor even having considered what we were about along the way.

Bronnie Ware, a woman who worked for years with the dying, wrote an article sharing “The Top Five Regrets of the Dying”:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish I had let myself be happier.

There are many such studies. What is striking is how similar the results all seem to be. It appears that when it comes to the living of our lives, we are all a bunch of amateurs. We tend to miss the main things a large part of the time.

Frederic Tudor had a bent toward business from an early age. Deciding to skip the Harvard education that was expected of him as the son of a wealthy lawyer, Tudor instead got the idea to ship ice from his family's New England farm to Cuba and the Caribbean. He would have his employees carve out lake ice in rectangular blocks that could be stacked closely together in a ship's hull. Then they would cover the stack with straw and wood chips for insulation from the heat. Upon arrival in the hotter climates, the slightly depleted ice would be moved into icehouses and sold to the wealthy in small quantities as a luxury for their drinks. Over those next early decades of the 1800s, however, ice became more and more useful in food storage, and the Tudor ice business grew exponentially.

At some point in the development of his thriving business, Tudor hauled apples packed around his ice to the south and brought bananas, limes, oranges, and pears around remaining ice blocks on return journeys back to the north. Although these first efforts at transporting tropical fruit failed miserably, he had inadvertently invented refrigerated transport! For some reason, however, Tudor never concentrated on this staggering discovery and

distracted himself instead with speculating in coffee futures. As a result, his main business of ice hauling languished. In the end, Tudor recovered his losses in coffee futures by focusing again on hauling ice, leaving the enormous discovery of refrigerated transport to be developed by others years later. Evidently, Tudor missed the invention of refrigerated freight because he considered himself to be in the ice shipping business.

Many people use up the days of their lives and waste the time they've been given because they, much like Tudor, have the wrong idea of what it is they are doing. Life is not about advancing day by day through the calendar, merely finding something that works financially and trying to enjoy a little time off on the weekends. It is not about "getting by" or "doing pretty well." There is much more at stake than any of that. It is also not about heading for happiness directly, the endless pursuit of pleasure, or achieving fame and financial success. As we will see, those who live in such a way are missing the bigger picture of who they could be and are merely hauling ice instead.

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist in Germany during World War II. He turned down his chance to leave the country on an exit visa because he felt duty-bound to stay behind and be with his aging parents as the Nazi threat loomed larger. Eventually, he and his entire family were hauled off to concentration camps. His parents, brother, and pregnant wife were all killed. Frankl himself survived the horror of four different camps over the course of three years, emerging with a firsthand case study of human psychiatry that would be the basis of his work for the rest of his life.

Frankl wrote, "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life...This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone." Frankl further wrote, "Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it."

It seems that if Frankl was correct, part of the consideration of what to do with our time must concentrate upon *meaning*. And in the pursuit of that meaning, Frankl suggested that there is a specific mission in life unique to each of us. So far, so good. But still, one question underlies all of this. And that question is: *How?* How does one go about choosing what to do with the days that are left for him or her? How does one find and pursue a meaningful life? And just how, exactly, does one go about uncovering his or her unique mission in life?

For thousands of years, humans have used maps to navigate unknown territory (presumably because they didn't have Gandalf nearby). The task of seeking to answer these questions about pursuing a life of meaning strikes me as much like navigating dangerous waters or unknown lands. It would be helpful to have at least some rendering or course to follow. Without such a guide, we either won't get where we want to go or won't know where we are once we're there.

Sailing off into one's life without some sort of map to follow seems a lot like Columbus heading west and stabbing a flag into the beach of the Bahamas, thinking he was in India. Columbus's journey would have been much easier if he'd had an accurate map of the territory—one showing, for instance, that there was a whole continent between where he landed

and where he thought he was.¹ Fortunately for us, however, many, many people have sailed these waters of life before us. Many have found meaning and fulfillment and, yes, even discovered their own specific life's mission. We can learn from them and chart our courses accordingly. That, in short, is the purpose of this book.

So what type of map can we construct to help us find the unique mission in each of our lives? The best maps tell us where we are, show us clearly where we want to go, and display the routes to get there. For an idea about how to do this, let's go back to Frankl. In one of the most profound paragraphs I've ever read anywhere, Frankl wrote:

The opportunities to act properly, the potentialities to fulfill a meaning, are affected by the irreversibility of our lives....For as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited. In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost, but rather, on the contrary, everything is irrevocably stored and treasured. To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.

In other words, the past, present, and future are all equal entities! What a concept. If this is true, we can look at our lives as consisting of three states, all of which are equal in importance and relevance:

1. Potential (what will happen in the future)
2. Actualization (what we are doing in the present)
3. Legacy (what we have "rescued into the past")

Potential is the easy one. In fact, it's the condition upon which most of our modern society focuses. *New York Times* op-ed writer David Brooks wrote, "The unofficial religion of America is futurism." We focus on potential so much one might almost call us obsessive. We talk about our future, our potential, or up-coming opportunities, etc., etc. We talk about the importance of youth, the freshness of un-lived days stretched out before us, and we get all misty-eyed. We emphasize education and credentials, preparation and training, all in the name of potential.

Actualization is, quite simply, where things become *actual*. Another term for actualization might be "doing." Actualization is the step in which we act upon our potentials and turn them into reality. In general, potential is more exciting than actualization because "doing" means—well, doing. And that means work. But this is where Frankl talks about finding and fulfilling one's life mission, one's true and unique purpose. We have no problem focusing on this phase either. It is an undeniable fact that we value an achievement orientation at the expense of almost everything else.

We lose our balance, however, when we get to legacy. Legacy is the sum total of all our

actualizations. It represents the grand total accumulation of everything we have done, experienced, and lived. What blew me away about Frankl's classification of our individual legacy, to coin a clunky term, was its "artifactness." He didn't view the past as most of us do, as something dead and buried, over and done with, washed away in the draught. Rather, he saw it as a solid, undeniable reality. He represented it as being on an equal footing with our potential and our actions. This is huge when we consider how we should go about choosing what to do with our time because what he has suggested is that each passing moment (and what we choose to do with it) *matters*. It's not gone; it's transformed from potential into past by the actions we took toward it. Deep stuff.

As soon as I came to grips with Frankl's idea of the equality of future, present, and past, I pictured one pail pouring out our life's potential into another. The pouring pail is our Potential, the receiving pail our Legacy. The water flowing between the two represents our Actualization, or the living out of our potential in the present moment.

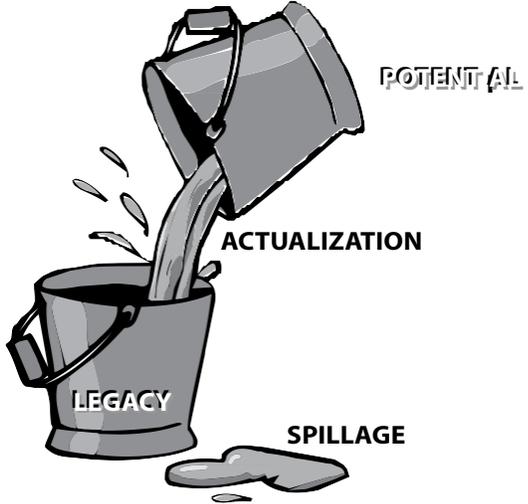
These three pieces together have almost given us the map we sought, although, to be sure, a diagram of a pair of pails is not nearly as cool as, say, a seventeenth-century pirate treasure map. But if one intelligently digs into the truths behind each of these symbols, the treasure available to its discoverer is more than any- thing ever hoarded by Edward Teach.²

However, there is one last feature to consider. Obviously, some of our potential goes unrealized. We don't actualize everything into our legacy, as most certainly, we waste some of it. In reality, we waste quite a large portion of it. In fact, we ought to aspire, as one of our chief goals, to be the best stewards we possibly can with this potential. After all, it's entirely a gift. So for the sake of completing the treasure map (okay, diagram), let's add the loss or waste of our potential as *Spillage*.

There.

Now what have we got?

A really bizarre acronym, for one. **PAiLS = Potential and Actualization into Legacy and Spillage**. More seriously, we've got a framework or a simple map for the territory of our lives.



Using this basic diagram, we can begin to answer the question of how to take Gandalf's advice and make the most out of the time we've been given. Even now, as time ticks off the clock, our potential is flowing into our legacy.