

CHAPTER 9

Inclusive Responsibility

Shouldering the Load

In responsibility both obedience and freedom are realized.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

It often seems easier to complain about the ways things are than to take responsibility for initiating change.

FRANCES VAUGHAN

MORAL METAPHORS

I am walking down Danforth Avenue in Toronto, minding my own business, when a very thin man, somewhat dishevelled, asks me for spare change. "Wow!" I exclaim to myself, "this is the third beggar today." I used to meet beggars daily when I lived in Bombay, but I've never gotten used to the experience. And everyday, I seem to face more demands from other people's needs. What should I do? I could just do what I am asked—in this case, give the thin man money. I could tell him to get a job, or give him a little lecture on self-reliance. I could suggest somewhere to go for help. The simplest thing is to ignore

him and walk on. I have tried all these responses. I have asked other people what they do, and they all answered according to their own values. At one time, perhaps, we agreed on what should be done. Not any more.

NEW MORAL METAPHORS

Today we are all carving out new moral systems. We see clearly that moral principles are human inventions, and as such, are relative. Today it's not just a matter of deciding right from wrong. Often as not, we have to decide between right and right, and wrong and wrong. In our times, as Camus said, we are clear that the cry for clean hands that might come from making the exactly "right" decisions is the cry of a damned soul. There are no clean hands. For many people who appreciate their own degree of moral probity this is painful. The fact is that our time uses a different metaphor and a different set of principles. In many situations we have to deal with, there are no rules. We have only our critical intelligence to determine what is really needed. Today, we ask not what is right, but what is responsible. Not what is good or bad, but what is befitting or appropriate. Not whether it is honest or pure, but whether it is necessary and responsible.

Some time ago, I received a difficult assignment. A colleague's drinking problem had taken a turn for the worse. I was asked to see that he booked into a treatment clinic, then visit him every day, and ensure that he was taking his prescribed pill. Then I was to accompany him to a series of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and when he returned home, continue to visit in order to check on the pill-taking. He was an older man, much senior to me both in years and experience. I was deeply embarrassed at having, in my mind, to treat my elder as a kid; he, for his part, was offended by having this watchdog check up on him. I felt like a heel. I could feel all my liberal tendencies rising up in sympathy for him. I didn't want to ask him the hard questions, I just wanted to be his buddy—a nice, kind, regular guy. When he left the clinic I would visit his home. Finally, I went to see my boss, and said, "Do you know what kind of pain this assignment has given me so far?" He said, "Look, I know it's hard; you want to be his friend, right? But you have to decide whether you're going to be a nice guy, or whether you are going to do what's necessary to get that man sober and back to doing what he does best." So, for another month I kept up the visits and each day asked the question, "Well, Jack, have you taken your pill?" If he hadn't, I would demand that he take it on the spot, then submit to his resentment. If anyone had asked my why I went through with all this, totally contrary to all my natural leanings, all I could have said was, "It was necessary." I felt no virtue in it. It seemed to me that I was being an interfering bastard. But I knew that someone had to be the bear in that situation for the sake of Jack's future, his family's

future and the tremendous talent he had. The old ethical metaphors of “being nice” and “empathizing” and “being a good friend” didn’t help me here.

When we ask what is necessary, rather than what is right or wrong, we up the ethical ante. When we ask what history requires of me or what society or humanness needs, we enter a different ethical space. Similarly with these questions: “Do I need to pick up my child now, or will a little more time help him find some independence?” “Will a glass of Scotch help or hinder me in what I am trying to accomplish?” “Does history require complete honesty or a little white lie?” These questions illuminate a wide canvas of context for the ethic of responsibility.

THE ETHIC OF RESPONSIBILITY

The ethic of responsibility means making decisions from a context that is history-long and world-wide. In this context Socrates, for example, decided it was necessary to be a philosophical wrecking ball over against the double standards of the philosophers of his day. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living in Germany under National Socialism decided, with others, that all of history required that Hitler be murdered. Nelson Mandela, at one stage in his life, decided that armed insurrection was responsible, the only thing that would pose a real threat to South Africa’s apartheid system. Now, relatives of terminally ill patients are deciding that what is responsible is to hasten their death. None of these acts are sanctioned by old moralities. Bonhoeffer and Mandela’s conspiracies were illegal, and immoral, but, judged by the verdict of history, necessary.

I am guided in this section by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *Ethics*. Born in 1906, he played a significant role in the ecumenical movement in Germany during the inter-war years, and from 1935 was in charge of an unofficial, later illegal, theological seminary. After his church activity was forbidden by the Nazis, he left for the United States in 1939. He went through a harrowing process of deciding whether to stay in the safety of the United States or to return and face the music. He decided to return to Germany just before the outbreak of the Second World War because he felt the need to be with his own people.

Bonhoeffer was invited to join Germany’s official counter-espionage service as a secret agent, where a conspiracy against Hitler was being developed. As a member of the counter-espionage he visited ecumenical leaders in Geneva and Sweden, where he appealed for British support for those plotting against Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was executed in the closing days of the Second World War, when the guns of the Allied advance could be heard in the distance. He died at the hands of one of Hitler’s special commandos in the concentration camp of Flossenburg, in Bavaria.

Bonhoeffer's greatest theological influence came after his death, with the posthumous publication of his *Ethics*, and the letters and papers he composed while in prison.

I think Bonhoeffer knew so much about decision-making because of the difficult decisions he had to face in his own life in Hitler's Germany: whether to register for military service? He didn't. How far can a Christian minister use violence? It was he who asked for Hitler's head. Whether to leave Germany? He did, teaching for a year in the United States. Having left Germany, whether to return? Having returned, whether to cross the line and conspire against Hitler? He did. Could he be party to an assassination? He was. I find that I can put great trust in a writer who has wrestled deeply and died on behalf of the convictions he wrote about.

Bonhoeffer helped me understand something for the first time, namely, that responsibility holds obligations and rights, obedience and freedom in the same universe. In a highly charged situation, he showed us not only how to make decisions out of the big picture, but to do so in freedom and ambiguity, while taking the consequences of our deed. I saw that freedom and obligation always exist in tension with each other, a tension which, Bonhoeffer reminds us, is held by the concept of responsibility. In the diagram below, imagine a rubber band holding together obligation and freedom. The tighter we stretch that rubber band, the greater the possibility of authentic responsibility.

So it is clear that we are not going to get anywhere with the concept of responsibility until we clarify obligation and freedom, one at a time. Such a sequential approach has its dangers. It's important to remember that unlimited obligation is always in dialogue with unlimited freedom, so we can navigate this next section.

OBLIGATION

As human beings, we have obligations. Other people and organizations make claims on our life, whether it's the government demanding taxes, the crying child wanting food or comfort, the beggar in the street wanting money, or our supervisor assigning tasks. In

each case, we are expected—obliged—to respond. Our obligations are always greater than we want to admit. It is fairly easy to recognize our obligations to partner, children and work, but we have a harder time saying yes to our larger obligations. Which raises the question of just how much obligation we have?

We know, as employees, that we are obligated to our job; otherwise, we are likely to be fired. But are our fellow employees any of our business? Bonhoeffer says they are. Our own conscience says they are. We know that the boss has an obligation to the whole operation, but what about us? We are obviously obligated to do the work we are paid to do. But what about our relationship to our boss as another human being? Is this stretching it too much? Bonhoeffer says there are times when we need to take responsibility even for the boss. What about our fellow workers? What does it mean to take responsibility for them every day? We are also responsible for the organization becoming what it needs to be. Then, what about the community where we live? Are we obligated to that? We know we are. What about region or our country? We know we are. What about Brazil? Bosnia? Rwanda? The oceans? The answer is yes—our neighbor is all over the place. Relatives make demands on us. E-mail opens up relationships, but also asks for favors and places demands. The question is always, “How much obligation dare we bite off?” Bonhoeffer says we cannot be free *or* responsible unless we are 100 per cent obligated.

As soon as we hear those two words, our stress levels start climbing. As I look at my desk at home, there are funding requests from three different health organizations (give to one, and the rest get you in their databases). I have an e-mail asking for money to let a young lad go to Vietnam as a volunteer. Another e-mail is inviting me to a conference. A facilitator in Bosnia is asking me to send them a construct. My aged mother-in-law wants me to take her to the doctor. An old person on the 18th floor wants me to help her move out of her apartment. The cat needs to go to the vet for annual shots. Every night on the news, I watch the refugees pouring out of Kosovo, the daylights being bombed out of Belgrade, and I struggle to make sense of it. At work, I have a five-thousand word article due on Friday. This is how the comprehensive context of obligation comes to me personally. It is not an abstraction. The point here is not the challenge of responding to all these obligations, but simply the fact that we show up obligated in many different contexts. We can acknowledge that as the way life is, or hide from it.

Individual obligations often come to us as more than we can possibly handle. I remember the first time this happened to me. This was after our family had retired from the hotel, and we were living out along the river. We had a jetty and an open 18-foot launch that I got pretty good at handling. A local businessman was starting the first airline service between our town and Sydney, using World War II Sunderland flying boats. These planes would land on a straight stretch of the river and, by arrangement, use our

property and wharf as a terminal. On the appointed day, the Sunderland made a perfect landing in the middle of the river and dropped anchor in mid-stream. Somehow, the passengers and their luggage had to get to shore, but apparently that part of the arrangement was not very clear. So my dad said to me: "Brian, you'd better go out in the launch and pick up the luggage." I felt like saying, "This could be out of my league." But I steered the launch out to the flying boat. My two twin sisters came with me, consumed with anticipation, because there was to be a swimsuit fashion show on the wings of the flying boat for promotion of the airline. I made eye contact with the navigator. He looked at me, all four foot six inches of me and said a little skeptically, "You are the luggage boat? Blow me down! Well, here comes the luggage."

We loaded the boat with as much as it would take, and at that point I got scared. A wind came up and a chop developed on the river. We had about three inches to the top of the gunwale. And then, amazingly, four people got in. Now water started slopping over the gunwale. Suddenly I realized that I was responsible for the boat, the luggage, the passengers, and probably the future of that air line. The boat could sink in the next few minutes, and the luggage and passengers would be floating down the river. Well, I put the motor slowly into gear and edged out into the stream really slowly and got the chop at my rear, and made my way bit by bit toward the jetty. My two sisters, fascinated by the fashion show, had no concept of the danger, or what I was going through. I got all the way back to the jetty and moored the boat and got everything off without swamping the boat or losing the luggage or drowning the passengers or ruining the airline. For a while, in that situation, I was Atlas bearing the weight of the world and the future of that airline service. On that day, I learned what it means to act without the support of anyone.

We tend to shy away from obligations, but then what dawns on us one day is that there is no limit to obligation and responsibility. Obligation is everywhere. It's easy to say to sundry examples of global need, "That's none of my business." It's all of my business. There literally is no limit to responsibility. It's just there, totally, entirely, it's all one ball of wax and any attempt to divide it up fails.

With so many obligations, is there any time left for what we personally want to decide?" Enter the wonder of human freedom.

FREEDOM

As human beings, we show up obligated. But, as human beings, we also show up free. (Do I hear a sigh of relief?) We have freedom of decision: we can freely make decisions on our own. We are not bound by the past. We don't have to do something a certain way because we did it that way last time, or because "it has always been done that way." We

are not bound by other people's expectations of us. When of age, we can make decisions on our own without asking others' permission. We can dare to risk boldly. We can dare to act. When we are requested to do something, we are free to ask "why?" When old laws no longer serve, we are free to make up new laws.

The ethic of freedom gives us 100 per cent permission to be our unique, unrepeatable selves, making our own decisions, not allowing ourselves to be limited by the images others have of us; free to create our own lives as we want them to be, free to use our time, our resources as we decide.

Freedom is always something to be realized, grasped and used. Without it, we are left to try to fit ourselves into the box of morality. Once freedom is realized, there is no box. Freedom means that we create our own morality. I can play any role needed. In Camus's terms, I can play the role of the lover. Like Don Juan, who loved every woman he came across, I can decide to love any situation I am in to the hilt. If I'm a teacher, I decide to love those kids to the limit through my excellent teaching. Or I move into a situation, decide to love it, and with a few words transform the mood of that situation. Or I can decide to be the actor who can play any role needed: a clown, if humour is needed; a leader, if it's a chaotic situation; or a priest, if there are wounds to be healed.

The experience of freedom is like a heady drug—it's exhilarating, dangerous, full of risks. It's the feeling of diving off the high board, or having the accelerator stick at 80 m.p.h. The only question for us is, "Is that the way life is?"—we test our experience of life to decide what is authentic. Another way to say it is that we live life over the abyss. In the Canadian National Tower in Toronto, over 1,000 feet up, there is a section of the flooring made of transparent six-inch glass. While the signs say that walking on the glass is quite safe, that it is strong enough to support six elephants, it is always interesting to see people's reactions. When I walk out and stand on the glass, I can see the ground below a long way down, but I am symbolically out over nothing. The last time I was there I noticed that some people, in spite of all assurances, refused to step on that glass flooring. The kids, for their part, were dancing all over it. You could see two quite different responses to the idea of being out over the abyss.

Many people refuse the wide-open spaces of freedom, preferring to live on what Hermann Hesse called "the trusty railway track", because it's sure and certain and safe. We get a glimpse of the tragic dimension of this railway track in Margaret Lawrence's *The Stone Angel*. The main character Hagar is near the end of her life, reflecting on it.

I lie here and try to recall something truly free I've done in ninety years.

I can think of only two acts that might be so, both recent.

One was a joke... . The other was a lie.

THE TENSION BETWEEN OBLIGATION AND FREEDOM

There is tension between obligation and freedom: that is just part of the structure of life—the way life is for all of us. We don't like tension: we prefer things to be black or white, cut and dried, straightforward. This tension between obligation and freedom is difficult. Decisions are fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand we want to keep our freedom, and on the other to honor our obligation. How in practical terms can we achieve both? We look for something that keeps the tension, but also serves as some kind of guide.

After these paragraphs on obligation and freedom, you might assume that, when we make a decision, we automatically have to decide between obligation and freedom. Now, the next two sentences need to be written in letters six inches tall. *The alternatives are not between whether we are going to be free or obligated. The challenge in every decision we make is to be one hundred per cent obligated and one-hundred per cent free at the same time.*

Bonhoeffer described, tellingly for me, what happens when we break the tension between obligation and freedom. He said that, if we make freedom independent of obligation, we follow the ethic of the irresponsible genius. That is, we float our way through life moved, not by the vision of what is necessary, but by an unending sequence of spontaneous inspirations without any context.

At university, I ran into a delightful guy, full of great jokes and endless ideas of what to do. One week, he said he was learning Greek, the next week he joined the local dig sponsored by the archeology department. He told me he was going to volunteer in Bhutan. The next week he was madly in love with an archeology undergrad, and vowing he was going to take up pottery. And so it went on, the weird, wild and variegated life of an irresponsible genius.

If, on the other hand, we make obligation independent of freedom, we follow the Kantian ethic of duty: we do what we are told not because it is historically necessary, but, like Adolph Eichmann, because someone has told us to. When Adolph Eichmann was brought to trial, and asked why he killed so many million Jews, he said, "I was only obeying orders." When we abandon freedom because it is too demanding and decide to simply do whatever we are told, we become a slave.

In an article in *INC. Magazine*, Bill Bartmann, founder of Hawkeye Pipe Services describes how he saw his company go under. It owed creditors more than \$1 million. In this situation, most people file for bankruptcy protection or reach a liquidation agreement with creditors, who usually get a fraction of what they are owed. But Bartmann

decided to take the difficult and responsible decision: to pay back his debts regardless of how long it would take." It just seemed inherently wrong to try to escape by using a law as an escape hatch or excuse. "It took him two and a half years from the time he shut down, but Bartmann paid everyone back in full. He said, "Business people understand the reward side very easily. I don't think they understand the reciprocal side is that they should be obligated to pay the piper, if indeed there are any assets with which to do that." The question is, "Do they have a responsibility beyond the legal requirements?" The answer must be: decidedly yes. Existentially, the debt is still there, even if the law says it's been dealt with. As the responsible one, we can no more hide behind the law from one's obligations, than we can hide behind anything else. Of course, part of the pain for those who decide to pay debts all the way is that they can point to people living in five-million-dollar houses and with \$100,000 cars who took the easy and legal way out and offered their debtors 30 per cent or nothing. Doing what is legal is not necessarily the same as doing what is responsible.

Bonhoeffer goes on to say that both the person of duty and the irresponsible genius carry their justification for their deeds within themselves. So if I am a person of duty and someone asks me why I took the dog for a walk on this particular morning, I'll say, "Because it's my assignment this week, and I always do my assignment." Ask the irresponsible genius the same question, and the answer is likely to be: "Because I felt like it, and I always do what I feel like."

But the responsible one dares to act under obligation and in freedom. In responsibility, both obedience and freedom are made real. Responsible action is subject to obligation and yet it is creative. When a truly responsible person is asked why she took the dog for a walk, she will say something like, "It was necessary. Something had to be done. The dog was running round and round in circles, and threatening to scratch the sofa to shreds." The responsible one does not carry her justification within herself but within the context that made the deed necessary. Well, who says it was necessary? She says it was necessary.

What might a free responsible decision look like? We make a lot of such decisions in the constant attempt to balance the obligations in our lives. Suppose my family meal prep assignment chart has me down to do dinner prep on Monday night, and about 4 p.m. on Monday my boss asks me to stay back after work to finish a report. Here are two obligations clashing with each other. The boss is waiting for my reply. Do I automatically give in to the boss? That would be abandoning freedom. How do we hold the prior obligation and make a free decision out of what we sense is necessary? Some quick tactical thinking could solve it. "Mr. Blackburn, I can't fill your request this evening, as I have a prior engagement. But I know someone who could do it for you. How about that?" He's

a real stickler, and says, "Hey, this is what you get paid for." If we find that no one else at home can do the cooking tonight, we see that, either way, we are going to land in trouble. If I assume that I *have* to do the extra assignment because the boss asked me to, and I always do what the boss asks, then I am no longer free; I'm just another slave to duty. Ditto for what my spouse says. So how do I responsibly handle this?. I make a free decision. Maybe, if this kind of thing happens too often, I just go home to fix dinner. Maybe I do the work on the document, and catch a cab home hoping there will still be time for me to prepare a late dinner. Holding the tension between obligation and freedom is never easy.

THE PROCESS OF DECISION-MAKING

At times the ambiguity and perplexity can be excruciating. We have to look at all aspects of the situation and the relevant values. We need to consider the people involved and the purpose of the undertaking. We have to consider all this, weigh up various options, decide and act. Some of us are good at considering, but that's where the process stops. Some are skilled at weighing the pros and cons, but their decision gets lost in the fog of ambiguity. Some can decide quickly but not act, some are good at acting without any evaluation.

At the same time, we need to examine our motives, as well as the prospects of success in the undertaking. Our neighbor always comes as an intrusion into our lives like the baby crying in the middle of the night. We decide what to do in the midst of innumerable perspectives, or as Bonhoeffer says, "in the twilight of good and evil." And sometimes we have to decide not only between right and right, but between wrong and wrong.

Bonhoeffer says that, as free people, nothing can answer for or exonerate us. No law can justify the responsible deed. As persons of responsibility we decide alone without any appeal to authority or attempt at self-justification. We simply surrender the deed, and let history decide whether it was "right or wrong."

An example of this process is when a family decides, following a living will, to take a terminally ill relative off life support. They have to get as much information as possible from the doctors on the patient's prospects. They have to examine their own motives and values and intent. There is as yet no law which will justify their decision. They have to choose between keeping the patient alive and prolonging her suffering, which has been considered the moral thing to do, or cutting off that life. They also know that they are the only ones who can decide, without any attempt at self-justification, but with the simple understanding that this deed was necessary.

In Elliott Leyton's book on the work of Doctors without Borders, two doctors and

an Italian nurse reflect on contradictions in their work. They are really talking about the ambiguity of deciding priorities in emergency situations:

We come here with our European notion of how to avoid cholera, typhoid, dysentery, and we say, "The water you drink carries things that make you sick and kill you and your children, so you must boil your water before drinking it." But if they are to boil the water, then they must spend much more time gathering wood to make the fires—and this is critical time that every member of the family must normally devote to growing their meager crops on their tiny plots. So now they have clean water, but not enough food to eat; now they will die not of cholera, but of starvation.

TAKING THE CONSEQUENCES

One of the most unpalatable aspects of making free, responsible decisions is taking the consequences. For our responsibility does not stop with the deed we have done. There will probably be repercussions or consequences. They go with the territory. We just can't say afterwards, "Hey, I did a responsible deed. That was hard enough. You can't saddle me with the consequences. I did the best I knew how." That's not how it works.

In the movie *Lifeboat*, survivors of a sinking ship occupy a lifeboat. Some sit in the lifeboat, while others are in the water, hanging on to the sides. The ship's mate decides to take responsibility for the situation. The lifeboat is about to sink, because too many people are on board. He commands some of the younger ones to get out and hang on to the side. Those on board rebel against what they consider to be his high-handedness. The mate takes a gun out from the boat's rear compartment and says that anyone who does not obey his orders will be shot. He is clear that the boat is close to sinking, and that the attempt to save one or two more may result in the death of everyone. So he decides to save the ones in the boat. In the process he shoots a couple of people to maintain order. Thanks to the mate's efforts, the lifeboat stays afloat and everyone on board is picked up and makes it to land. A number of those who were saved immediately go to the police and have the first mate charged with murder. He is tried, and on the witness of several passengers, sentenced to life imprisonment. Perhaps there was another way to ensure the survival of the passengers but it, too, would have had consequences, some intended, others not. This is an extreme example of taking the consequences of one's deed.

RESPONSIBILITY DAY BY DAY

Fortunately not all situations of responsibility involve such dramatic responses as in *Lifeboat*. With our systemic understanding of the way life is related to life, the scope of

ordinary decisions that involve responsibility has expanded exponentially. Our awareness of the need to care for the environment has further expanded the context of ordinary decisions. And so we routinely consider what is ecologically responsible when we decide about shopping, waste removal, investments or transportation.

So, when buying a packet of frozen green peas, we may look at the label, and ask, "Is that the company that turfed Indians off their land in Central America in favor of creating massive farms for producing vegetables for the frozen-food industry? Don't they use genetically modified seeds?" Or, if we are buying tennis shoes, "Is this the firm that uses sweated child labor in Indonesia?"

Very often these days, decisions have to be made in situations of incredible complexity. We avoid responsibility when we try to deal with the complexity by taking refuge in one source of information only, and cutting ourselves off from other sources. We have to dare to ask questions, to verify information, and listen to contradictory points of view. In other words, we have to build up our own picture of a situation, and do our own homework. To automatically submit to the dominant view is to surrender responsibility.

Environmentalists always need to be mindful of the whole context and the principle of comprehensiveness. In the spotted owl controversy in the US Pacific Northwest a few years ago, it was a common assumption that the environmentalists held the high moral ground because they wanted the spotted owl protected at all costs as an endangered species. Unfortunately, their approach would result in the loss of many jobs in the lumber and related industries, and several small townships would become ghost towns. A contextual, comprehensive ethic would assume that both the spotted owl and the people who would be out of a job, and the communities which would be disbanded all had rights to be considered as part of a solution.

We know teachers and principals who want to make efficiency and order the prime values that determine day-by-day decisions concerning the classroom rather than creativity, learning, cooperation and plain fun. When the profit motive becomes the only value in business, it is at the expense of workers, safety conditions, a supportive work environment.

A letter from a colleague working for Amoco describes some of the responsibility issues that arise there. They must be true for many workplaces.

The major task here is to distinguish between responsibility and accountability. Responsibility has the narrower definition. For instance, we can delegate responsibility, but not accountability. If we as a manager, delegate the responsibility and the project fails, for whatever reason, it is the manager that gets asked the questions of accountability, rather than those who had the responsibility. This treats

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people like children. Giving line workers responsibility without accountability is tokenism of the worst kind. It dishonors people. It is paramount that workers be given the support they need to be successful.

In our dealings with other human beings, this ethic asks: "What does the other need? Where I might want sympathy for myself, that might not be what the other needs. He may need a good kick in the pants, so to speak. Or affirmation. Or an illusion pointed out. Or the opportunity for reflection. What the other person needs is a very different question from what would I like.

LISTENING TO YOUR HEART

The decision-making approach of Bonhoeffer is quite rational, perhaps over-rational, the reader might say. The analytical side of making a decision does not mean the right decision is guaranteed, any more than making an impetuous decision.

However, there are times in life when rationality gives way to a leap in the dark. We have considered the situation till we are blue in the face. We realize something else is needed. Before I got married, I weighed the matter up hill and down dale. The subject of my thoughts was buxom, fair, had a similar purpose in life, but something in me would not let me take it past the advance and retreat process. One night, I was sitting at my desk with mind at idle, just doodling. The next moment, I was seized by a terrible clarity. I picked up my pen and wrote: "On the fourth of July I will marry Jeanette Marks." The fourth of July was a symbolic day for us. It was my birthday, and as she was American, it was her national day.

There were some problems. We had not dated yet. It was already June. I had not asked Jeanette, or anybody else. At the time, I thought I was out of my mind. I could not understand how I could do such a thing. All I knew is, that at the moment I had complete clarity.

I am not suggesting this as a model way to approach marriage. But sometimes, acting on a strong intuition is exactly what's needed. Well, we did get married and are planning to celebrate our 30th anniversary on the 4th of July. When your heart starts to bellow like a young calf, it is good to listen to it.

Exercise

There are times when all of us land in a real pickle, when life gets so unbearably complex that making even a simple decision seems difficult. It is as if we are caught in such a net of overlapping obligations, values, and assignments that paralysis sets in and we tend to say, "Oh, the heck with it all!" Paralysis often occurs through a combination of putting off tasks to be done and decisions to be made. Self-disgust sets in and we become our own worst enemy. Sometimes, some simple, objective structural methods can help unblock the paralysis.

Here is an exercise you can do in that situation, or in your present situation that may help clarify the next thing to tackle.

1. Make a list of all the things, assignments and chores that are weighing you down.
2. Rank them. 10 for the most important, 1 for the least important.
3. Create a timeline for the next two weeks and slot the most important tasks (say, those that got a ranking of seven or more) into a time when they can be done.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
A.M.	report	proposal				take John to baseball	work on patio
P.M.			call babysitter				
EVENING	taxes	help John with reading	shop for partner's birthday gift	attend community meeting	relax		

DECISIONS

4. Make a list of the decisions you have been postponing.
5. Mark the decisions that need to be made this week (***), next week (**) and some time in the future (*). (Remember you are not doing a strategic plan; you are trying to free yourself up from paralysis.
6. Create a 4" X 6" table below with next week's decisions in the left column and your answers to the next three questions in the three columns to the right.