

Living Deliberately

(Excerpt)

Hrvoje Butkovic

Part 1: What Is Deliberate Living?

Key Concepts Pertaining to Deliberate Living

“We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.”

Thornton Wilder

This book brings together insights and techniques from seemingly disparate fields that, when put into practice, give rise to a state of being that I can only describe as vibrantly and authentically alive. Explaining what those insights are, how they complement one another and how to make effective use of them is what the bulk of the book is about.

Before we can explore the intricacies of deliberate living and how to put it into practice, however, we need to devote some time to seeing just what I mean by the term, as well as introducing the concepts that are associated with it. The laying of this groundwork is what I'll tackle first

There is no single definition of deliberate living. Different people have different ideas of what the term means. Many of those that I've come across operate within the bounds of a rigid belief system. Such an approach is diagrammatically opposed to the one that I'm describing here. If you are aware of alternative definitions, please keep in mind that, whenever deliberate living is mentioned in this book, it refers to an approach to life that is consistent with the definition given below.

The Definition

Deliberate living is known by many names. Some people describe it as thoughtful living, in an effort to indicate how much consideration goes into the making of daily decisions. Others refer to it as conscious living, expressing the high level of awareness at which it is carried out. Still others portray it as authentic living, conveying the high amount of freedom and individuality that are its hallmarks. A few refer to it as autonomous living in an attempt to communicate its independence from social norms. All of these terms allude to a way of living that exhibits very specific characteristics.

Within the context of this book, deliberate living will be taken to mean *living life in such a way that the protagonist is aware of what she is thinking, saying, or doing, understands why she is thinking, saying, or doing it, and approves of it being thought, said, or done, for every thought, word, and action of consequence.*

There are more idealistic versions of the definition. The same requirements that are placed on thoughts, words, and actions can also be placed on feelings and beliefs. Those requirements can be made even more stringent by encompassing *all* thoughts, words, and beliefs rather than only significant ones.

This is an unreachable ideal. It is offered because it is the most worthwhile goal that I can conceive, even if it may lie beyond our reach. Fortunately, it is not necessary to achieve even the less idealistic version of the goal to derive tremendous benefit from attempting to live in this way.

The intentionality alluded to in this definition does not refer to having definite answers to concrete questions like what our vocation should be or whom we should marry. Delivering them to us is not the purpose of deliberate living. Rather, it illuminates the process by which we can arrive at the answers ourselves.

Deliberate living as defined here is also *not* a belief system; it is a state of being. Because of the evolutionary nature of our existence, it is really a progression of states of being, each more purposeful and authentic than what came before. Therefore, knowing what we are doing and why we are doing it does not constitute static information that is the object of one's striving. The knowledge itself is subject to change in line with the evolving nature of one's being.

With this in mind, perhaps the most accurate way to describe deliberate living is as a process – *a life journey that has no final destination, but where each step that we take is its own reward, one that makes the whole journey well worth taking.*

Compatibility with Belief Systems

While deliberate living is not a belief system, it does rest on a handful of beliefs. These are derived from observation and contemplation rather than faith. Because of this, deliberate living is compatible with a wide variety of belief systems, religious or otherwise. It can be pursued without leaving them behind.

What deliberate living is not compatible with is the manner in which those beliefs are often adopted. There is a tendency in our society to use externally acquired beliefs to construct a framework which we then use to guide our interaction with the world. When this interaction produces experience, as it invariably does, we seek to harmonize it with our beliefs. In this process, it is the experience that is malleable, not the beliefs.

The approach presented in this book seeks to do the opposite. It takes our experience as the foundation of our interaction with the world. It encourages us to formulate beliefs on the basis of our experience. Should the two conflict, it is the beliefs that should be malleable, not the experience. Because of this, deliberate living, as described in this book, is fundamentally incompatible with an approach to life that sets the upholding of a belief as its goal.

Usefulness

It may be asked at this point what makes deliberate living a worthwhile goal in itself? Simply put, I cannot envisage a better way to live human life. The most meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling way to live our lives is to ascertain what makes our lives meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling, and then deliberately pursue those things.

This immediately raises another question. *What is it that adds value to our lives?* The significance of this question shouldn't be underestimated. After all, if we cannot resist the temptation to behave cruelly and deceitfully, then we have reason to suspect that other people harbor the same preference. And if we all acted on these preferences, cruelty and deceit would become the norm, giving birth to a society of our nightmares.

I must admit that I do not share this fear, even though I've encountered it on numerous occasions. The very fact that we dread these things is evidence enough for me that they do not constitute the very essence of our being. We may slip into this kind of behavior from time to time, we may struggle to kick our hurtful and destructive habits, but this is not who we wish to be. When the concern is raised, it invariably applies to those 'other people'. Those who raise it don't see themselves as having the same problem, even as they acknowledge their own failure to conduct themselves according to the same high standards.

If engaging in cruelty and deceit is who we truly wish to be, then we should rejoice at the license to adopt them and bask in the consequences that they produce. If the prospect terrifies us, perhaps our true nature isn't as bleak as it may appear at first glance. If harmful behavior is inconsistent with our preferred self-image, then we only stand to gain by setting our sights on who we wish to be and deliberately pursuing that.

Doing so is likely to place several obstacles in our way – lack of awareness of our true nature, lack of understanding of actions and their consequences, and lack of courage to put our knowledge into practice. Any one of these is sufficient enough to thwart our efforts and reduce who we wish to be to nothing more than a fantasy.

Deliberate living can overcome these hurdles. Discovering what we are doing and understanding why we are doing it will give us the awareness of our nature that we need in order to overcome the first hurdle. Learning which actions to choose so that they meet with our approval effectively overcomes the second hurdle. If we engage in this conduct enough times, we will come to appreciate the benefits that it has to offer, which will give us the resolve to choose this path with ever increasing frequency.

Seen in this light, the potential embodied in this approach to living is immense. I do think that it has the capacity to overcome many, if not all of the personal and collective problems that have plagued us and our society for the duration of its existence.

Looking Beyond

The stage of consciousness development associated with deliberate living as described in this book represents the height of most conventional developmental theory in the field of psychology. Termed autonomous or authentic consciousness, it is characterized by authenticity in the individual's expression, instead of his inner nature being warped, suppressed or denied, as is typical of lower levels of consciousness.

Even so, this might not be the height of development that is available to us. Informed by unconventional sources, primarily mysticism, a handful of researchers have advanced theories that deal with even higher states of consciousness. The writings of Abraham Maslow and Ken Wilber on this subject are well known. Another example is Jenny Wade's *Holonomic Theory of Consciousness*, which proposes two levels that surpass the authentic one – transcendent consciousness and unity consciousness.¹

Having never had a profound mystical experience myself, I cannot comment on what states of being are available beyond the authentic one. What I can say is that I'm sympathetic to the view of Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Sufi mystic who was the first teacher of the Sufi tradition in the United States and Europe, and who founded the Sufi Order in the West in 1910. He saw great value in using mystical insights for personal development, what he called "the perfecting of the human personality".²

¹ This is described in her book *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness*.

² From the back cover of his book *Personality: The Art of Being and Becoming*: "The accent in his work is on making spirituality relevant to life by bringing the insights gained in mystical experience to bear on our actions, relationships and aspirations. For him, the perfecting of the human personality is the fulfillment of the purpose of existence, the fruit of the tree of life."

Even if there are levels of consciousness beyond the authentic one that are available to us, it is nevertheless a crucial stage that cannot be skipped, and that most people haven't yet attained.

Summary: Questions to Ask Myself

How deliberate do I want my life to be?

What value do I see deliberate living adding to my life?

What makes my life meaningful, purposeful, or fulfilling?

The Underlying Life Philosophy

“Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? It is the only question God ever had.”

Neale Donald Walsch

Deliberate living, as defined in the previous chapter, is too abstract to lend itself to direct implementation. We can work on the awareness of our conduct, perhaps even uncover our reasons for it, but we cannot give it our approval until we know what it is that we are trying to accomplish.

One more step is needed. We have to set our life in a particular direction. Only once we have a concrete goal to work towards can we tell whether our thoughts, words, and actions are helping us achieve it. This direction amounts to the fundamental goal of our lives, the underlying motivation that sponsors all our other goals. It cannot be derived. It can only be adopted based on what appears to be the most worthwhile way to live one's life.

Perhaps it is unfortunate that the fundamental approach to life cannot be derived, for its choice is crucial – it enables the derivation of every decision that follows. The whole of part two of this book is essentially an attempt to implement the chosen method. Part three examines the effects of following it.

Whether we are sure of which approach to follow or not, it may be a good idea to revisit the choice occasionally, after we have made a concerted effort to implement it. If it proves unable to offer guidance in certain situations, or if the consequences that it gives rise to sometimes turn out to be unpleasant, it may be time to choose again.

The Approach to Life

The approach to life that this book presents can be summarized as an attempt to answer the question *“Who am I?”* in experiential terms. In other words, we strive to answer the question by examining our experiences and deciding which ones accurately describe us and which ones do not. As we gain proficiency with this, ideally we would seek out matching experiences and keep away from those that misrepresent us. By stringing together a series of authentic experiences, we fashion our life into a statement of who we are. This allows us to both experience the truth of our being and demonstrate it to others.

In essence, the answer that we give to the question *“Who am I?”* is our life, as we've lived it.

This is not an attempt to argue that answering the question of who we are in an experiential manner is the inherent purpose of our life. Rather, it advocates the adoption of this purpose as a matter of voluntary choice due to the beneficial effects that this can have on our life. It is a case of

trying to live our life in the most fulfilling way that we can conceive. Whether this is indeed its purpose or not is a separate concern.

ALTERNATIVES:

Deliberate living can be accomplished by many variations on this theme. Choosing a different approach will cause us to ask ourselves different questions. These might lead us to offer different answers as to how we should live our lives, though from my interaction with people who are following these alternatives, I haven't seen a significant difference between our behavior and its effects. What differed was mostly our justification for it.

It should be noted that, if our aim is deliberate living as defined in the previous chapter, then approaches to life that set as our goal adherence to an external standard – such as being a law-abiding citizen or fulfilling our religious duty – do not constitute a viable alternative. The reason is that, whatever guideline we adopt to conduct ourselves by, it must be able to offer us guidance in every situation. This means that it must either contain all the answers, or it must be able to derive answers as the need arises. Externally formulated codes of conduct do neither. They are largely static and limited in their coverage. As such, they can contribute to our conception of how to live our lives, but they cannot define it. Even if we choose to rely on them, we will sometimes be forced to search beyond what they can offer.

The Role of Circumstances

The cornerstone of this approach to living is to view each set of circumstances as a context within which we can express ourselves or as material from which we can fashion representative experience. We can think of them as a palette that we use to paint a self-portrait on the canvas of our lives. It is through the circumstances that we encounter that we add detail to our experiential self-image. The richer and more diverse the circumstances, the greater the range of colors with which we paint and the more breathtaking the end result.

How beautiful this portrait turns out to be depends primarily on the beauty of our nature. Our task is to ensure that it is accurate, that we can recognize ourselves in our own work of art. My experience leads me to believe that an accurate self-portrait will not leave us disappointed.

EXAMPLE:

Careless actions of a group of hikers allow their campfire embers to linger on. Sustained by a gentle breeze, they ignite the nearby dry grass and leaves. From there, the flames travel to shrubs and trees. They soon develop into a full-blown forest fire. The wind picks up and steers the blaze down the face of the mountain, bringing devastation to several small settlements that are located in the area.

Like the other residents of an affected village, Steven is trying to fathom the situation and figure out how to respond. The circumstances have provided him with an opportunity to have a whole range of experiences. He can experience himself as a victim of circumstances by angrily protesting against the disaster that has endangered his life. He can experience himself as a compassionate individual by comforting those who were badly affected by the fire, either by being physically hurt or by having their property destroyed. He can experience himself as a strong-willed, resourceful individual by leaping into action and leading the relief effort. He can have many other experiences as well, and combine them in myriad ways. It all depends on how he uses the present circumstances.

The Role of other People

The role of other people is indistinguishable from that of circumstances – they add to the richness of our palette and increase the detail of our self-portrait. Because people have feelings, values, and preferences and are able to communicate them to us, interacting with them has a definitive effect on our ability to express ourselves.

EXAMPLE:

Sally announces to her parents that her boyfriend of the past two years has proposed to her and that she has agreed to marry him. She knows that her parents don't approve of him, but she expects them to respect her independence and the ability to make her own decisions, including ones of this magnitude. Much to her surprise, both parents again express their dislike for her boyfriend and are vocally critical of her decision to make that mistake permanent.

Her parents' handling of the situation gives her an opportunity to have a whole range of experiences. She can experience herself as a victim of her parents' controlling behavior by going along with their preference while resenting it. She can experience herself as a considerate individual by trying to understand the source of her parents' views and the extent to which they were shaped by social conditioning and their own life experience. She can experience herself as a strong-willed, independent individual by willfully defying her parents' wishes. She can have many other experiences as well, and combine them in myriad ways. It all depends on how she responds to the feelings and behavior of the people whom she is interacting with.

Summary: Questions to Ask Myself

What am I trying to accomplish with the living of my life?

What kind of interplay do I see between external codes of conduct that I've embraced and the internal standard advocated by deliberate living?

How do I approach the people and circumstances that I encounter?

© 2011 Hrvoje Butkovic

Hrvoje Butkovic is the author of the recently released book, *Living Deliberately*, www.american-book.com. He was born in 1974 in Croatia, then Yugoslavia. He immigrated with his family to South Africa when he was 14 years old. This proved to be an auspicious move, with the Yugoslavian civil war breaking out the following year. He currently lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, with his wife and two children.

For more, see: <http://fluffygroovy.com>.