

It's Your Choice--What Else Could It Mean?

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What does gasoline at over \$4 a gallon mean to you? Have you been looking for ways to reduce travel in your car? I offer this as an example because rising gasoline prices are affecting all of us! (That "over \$4 a gallon" phrase from 2008 would be "over \$5.50 a gallon" in 2023 due to inflation.)

Many times, we underestimate our power in making choices. We all make decisions in three vastly different but related areas. Today's article focuses on "What meaning do you make of the situation you're now facing?"

Look on my website (address below) for two other articles that address choices you often face:

- "It's Your Choice--Where Will You Focus Your Time and Energy?"
- "It's Your Choice--What Will You Do?"

Back to my example--we often make snap judgments about circumstances, and it influences our behaviors. You and I "make meaning" of every situation we face, even when we don't understand all the implications! For example, many people are complaining about the high price of gasoline. (Oh yes, I don't like those costly tank fill-ups myself!).

Higher fuel prices may stimulate many of us to curtail travel. Less traffic, however, means less pollution, lower insurance premiums, and fewer deaths on the highway. To reduce energy consumption, some organizations will transition to a four-day workweek. Some individuals will eat out less and walk or bike more, so our national obesity rate may drop. That's not all bad!

Further, you might decide to pursue an entrepreneurial venture involving research and application of alternative fuel use, providing breakthrough technology for all of us. Aside from you paying more at the pump, what else could higher gasoline prices mean? As noted, there are some beneficial effects of higher prices, right? We each make our unique meaning of every situation we face.

Last week, my wife was uncharacteristically quiet. I thought she was upset with me, and I couldn't imagine why. Occasionally, as I went about my business, I'd see a look of disapproval cross her face. The more I tried to figure out what I had done wrong, the more bewildered I became.

Finally, I asked. Turns out that she was thinking about a big project she's been working on, and the looks of disapproval were her disappointment with opportunities she had overlooked. She wasn't thinking about me at all! I was attributing erroneous meaning to her facial expressions!

Avoid my mistake. Communication is essential. Jumping to conclusions about your colleagues and team members will only bring trouble. Instead, ask. You could be surprised by what you learn. Create an environment where those you influence feel safe in revealing what's on their minds.

Reading Viktor Frankl's 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning* provides great insight into our freedom to choose our responses to any situation. Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist interred in a Nazi concentration camp. He observed the varied prisoner responses to the abysmal conditions.

Some inmates settled into apathy. Many gave up hope and slowly withered and died. A few used their limited energy to serve the others. Frankl wrote, "Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment." You decide what meaning you give to the comments and actions of your customers, colleagues, and suppliers.

From that meaning, you then choose what actions you will take to respond to current and future situations. It never hurts to ask yourself, "What else could this mean?" Next week, I will explore your power to consciously choose where you focus your limited energy and time.

[Added after publication] Martin Seligman, in his 1991 book *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, identifies that optimism or pessimism lies in the way you explain the events that happen to you. We all have the capability of being optimistic or pessimistic, yet most of us unconsciously rely on our habitual way of categorizing events.

Seligman suggests you first recognize the automatic thoughts flitting through your consciousness. If you choose, you may dispute those thoughts by marshaling contrary evidence. What else could the situation mean? What else might have caused what's happening? What else might be the implications of what's occurred? What else might result from what's happening? What unique actions might you take that are different from your normal responses?

Seligman (along, presumably, with Viktor Frankl) would say that you have significant influence over what you decide to do about what is happening to and around you!

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