

The Choice (2024) - Dr. Edith Eger

The Choice

Even in Hell,
Hope Can Flower



'The Choice'
is a gift to
humanity'
Desmond Tutu

EDITH EGER

THE MILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



About Dr. Edith Eger

Hungarian-born American psychologist and Holocaust survivor who became an expert in treating trauma. At 16, she was sent to Auschwitz, where she survived after being separated from her parents. She later became a psychologist, helping others heal from trauma, and wrote two best-selling books, *The Choice* and *The Gift*, which draw on her life experiences to offer lessons on healing and resilience.

[What follows are quotes from the book above. These quotes stood out to psychotherapist Emil Barna in his reading of the book in 2024. They are not meant to be exhaustive nor representative of the entire book. All quotes are to be read in this context and must not replace medical and/or other professional advice. Note: Any typographical errors occurred through the transcription process and do not reflect what may be found in the book.]

Blurb

In 1944, sixteen-year-old Edith Eger was sent to Auschwitz, where she was made to dance for the infamous Josef Mengele. Over the coming months, her courage helped her sister to survive and led to her own rescue during a death march. When their camp was finally liberated, Edith was pulled from a pile of bodies, barely alive. Today, Dr Edith Eger is an internationally acclaimed psychologist whose patients include survivors of abuse and soldiers suffering from PTSD. Drawing on her experience of the Holocaust and the remarkable stories of those she has helped ever since, she shows how true freedom becomes possible once we confront our suffering. With all the power of Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, but exceptional in its own right, *The Choice* is life-changing.

Warm and compassionate, it is a profound examination of the human spirit, and our capacity to heal.

Foreword by Phillip Zimbardo

*Psychologist and professor emeritus at Stanford University, Phil Zimbardo is the creator of the famed Stanford prison experiment (1971) and author of many notable books, including the New York Times bestseller and winner of the William James Book Award for best psychology book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007). He is founder and president of the Heroic Imagination Project.*

"When Edie is introduced to young audiences, she is often called "the Anne Frank who didn't die," because Edie and Anne were of a similar age and upbringing when they were deported to the camps. Both young women capture the innocence and compassion that allow a belief in the basic goodness of human beings, despite the cruelty and persecution they experienced."

"Viktor Frankl presented the psychology of the prisoners who were with him in Auschwitz. Dr. Eger offers us the psychology of freedom."

Part I: Prison

Introduction - I Had My Secret, And My Secret Had Me

"War had taught me to sense danger even before I could explain why I was

afraid."

"I had to pay attention to my body's warning system without letting my sense of danger overwhelm my ability to help."

""Why now?" I asked. This was my secret weapon. The question I always ask my patients on a first visit. I need to know why they are motivated to change. Why today, of all days, do they want to start working with me? Why is today different from yesterday, or last week, or last year? Why is today different from tomorrow? Sometimes our pain pushes us, and sometimes our hope pulls us. Asking "Why now?" isn't just asking a question—it's asking everything."

"His pain, whatever its cause, might be muted by the drugs, but it wouldn't be resolved. He might feel better, or feel less—which we often mistake for feeling better—but he would not be healed."

"when we force our truths and stories into hiding, secrets can become their own trauma, their own prison. Far from diminishing pain. whatever we deny ourselves the opportunity to accept becomes as inescapable as brick walls and steel bars. When we don't allow ourselves to grieve our losses, wounds, and disappointments, we are doomed to keep reliving them."

"If you asked me for the most common diagnosis among the people I treat, I wouldn't say depression or post-traumatic stress disorder"

"I would say hunger. We are hungry. We are hungry for approval, attention, affection. We are hungry for the freedom to embrace life and to really know and be ourselves."

"suffering is universal. But victimhood is optional. [...] victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimization. We develop a victim's mind—a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy limits or boundaries. We become our own jailors when we choose the confines of the victim's mind."

"I don't want you to hear my story and say, "My own suffering is less significant." I want you to hear my story and say, "If she can do it, then so can I!""

"Often, the little upsets in our lives are emblematic of the larger losses; the seemingly insignificant worries are representative of greater pain."

Survivors don't have time to ask, "Why me?" For survivors, the only relevant question is, "What now?"

Chapter 1 - The Four Questions

"Memory is sacred ground. But it's haunted too."

"We use denial as protection. If we don't pay attention, then we can continue our lives unnoticed. We can make the world safe in our minds. We can make ourselves invisible to harm."

Chapter 2 - What You Put In Your Mind

"The soldier shoves her out of his way. He holds a gun. What other proof of his dominance does he need? This is when I start to see that it can always be so much worse. That every moment harbors a potential for violence. We never know when or how we will break. Doing what you're told might not save you."

"anyone who comes close to the outer fence is shot without warning. A girl only a little older than me tries to run. They hang her body in the middle of the camp as an example."

""Dicuka," she says into the dark one night, "listen. We don't know where we're going. We don't know what's going to happen. Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your mind.""

"I see the sign: ARBEIT MACHT FREI, Music plays. My father is suddenly cheerful. "You sec," he says. "it can't be a terrible place." He looks as though he would dance if the platform weren't so crowded. "We'll only work a little, till the war's over," he says."

"Josef Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death. [...] As we advance toward him, I can't look away from his eyes, so domineering, so cold. When we've drawn nearer, I can see a boyish flash of gapped teeth when he grins. His voice is almost kind when he asks if anyone is sick, and sends those who say yes to the left. "If you're over fourteen and under forty, stay in this line," another officer says. "Over forty, move left." A long line of the elderly and children and mothers holding babies branches off to the left. [...] It's our turn now. Dr. Mengele conducts. He points my mother to the left. I start to follow her. He grabs my shoulder. "You're going to see your mother very soon," he says. "She's just going to take a shower." He pushes Magda and me to the right."

Fear circulates among us, but curiosity too.

""When will I see my mother?" I ask her. "I was told I'd see her soon." She gives me a cold, sharp stare. There is no empathy in her eyes. There is nothing but rage. She points to the smoke rising up from one of the chimneys in the distance. "Your mother is burning in there," she says. "You better start talking about her in the past tense.""

Chapter 3 - Dancing In Hell

""How do I look?" is the bravest thing I've ever heard. There aren't mirrors here. She is asking me to help her find and face herself. And so I tell her the one true thing that's mine to say. "Your eyes," I tell my sister, "they're so beautiful. I never noticed them when they were covered up by all that hair." It's the first time I see that we have a choice: to pay attention to what we've lost or to pay attention to what we still have. "Thank you," she whispers."

"In my first weeks at Auschwitz I learn the rules of survival. If you can steal a piece of bread from the guards, you are a hero, but if you steal from an inmate, you are disgraced, you die; competition and domination get you nowhere, cooperation is the name of the game; to survive is to transcend your own needs and commit yourself to someone or something outside yourself. For me, that someone is Magda, that something is the hope that I will see Eric again tomorrow, when I am free. To survive, we conjure an inner world, a haven, even when our eyes are open. I remember a fellow inmate who managed to save a picture of herself from before internment, a picture in which she had long hair. She was able to remind herself who she was, that that person still existed. This awareness became a refuge that preserved her will to live."

"Food fantasies sustained us at Auschwitz. Just as athletes and musicians can become better at their craft through mental practice, we were barracks artists, always in the thick of creating. What we made in our minds provided its own kind of sustenance."

"When my mother said to me, "I'm glad you have brains because you have no looks," those words stoked my fear that I was inadequate, worthless. But at Auschwitz, my mother's voice rang in my ears with a different significance. *I've got brains. I'm smart. I'm going to figure things out.* The words I heard inside my head made a tremendous difference in my ability to maintain hope. This was true for other inmates as well. We were able to discover an inner strength we could draw on—a way to talk to ourselves that helped us feel free inside, that kept us grounded in our own morality, that gave us foundation and assurance even when the external forces sought to control and obliterate us. *I'm good, we learned to say. I'm innocent. Somehow, something good will come of this.*"

"I asked her how she was managing to go on. "I heard we're going to be liberated by Christmas," she said. She kept a meticulous calendar in her head, counting down the days and then the hours until our liberation, determined to live to be free. Then Christmas came, but our liberators did not. And she died the next day. I believe that her inner voice of hope kept her alive, but when she lost hope she wasn't able to keep living."

"I worked to develop an inner voice that offered an alternative story. *This is temporary, I'd tell myself. If I survive today, tomorrow I will be free.*"

Chapter 4 - A Cartwheel

""We've escaped the gas chamber, but we'll die eating potato peels," someone says, and we laugh from a deep place in us that we didn't know still existed. We laugh, as I did every week at Auschwitz when we were forced to donate our blood for transfusions for wounded German soldiers. I would sit with the needle in my arm and humor myself. *Good luck winning a war with my pacifist dancer's blood!* I'd think."

"As long as I can be angry with her, I am spared from feeling fear, or the inverted inside-out pain of what almost was."

If the guards don't pull a trigger, the body does.

""You know how I'm going to get revenge?" Magda says. "I'm going to kill a German mother. A German kills my mother; I'm going to kill a German mother." I have a different wish. I wish for the boy who spits at us to one day see that he doesn't have to hate. In my revenge fantasy, the boy who yells at us now—"Dirty Jew! Vermin!"—holds out a bouquet of roses. "Now I know," he says, "there's no reason to hate you. No reason at all." We embrace in mutual absolution. I don't tell Magda my fantasy."

"Worse than the fear of death is the feeling of being locked in and powerless, of not knowing what will happen in the next breath."

""You," he says. He sounds disgusted. I close my eyes. I wait for him to kick me. I wait for him to shoot. Something heavy drops near my feet. A stone? Will he stone me to death, the slow way? No. It's bread. A small loaf of dark rye bread. "You must have been very hungry to do what you did," he says. I wish I could meet that man now. He's proof that twelve years of Hitler's Reich isn't enough hate to take the good out of people. His eyes are my father's eyes. Green. And full of relief."

Chapter 5 - The Stairs Of Death

"Magda is bruised and coughing, but her eyes shine. "I said, No!" she says. "I said, 'No!'" For her, it is a marvelous beating. It is proof of her power. She held her ground while the guard lost control. Magda's civil disobedience makes her feel like the author of choice, not the victim of fate."

"I'm going to die a virgin. I don't want this to be my last thought. I should think about God. I try to picture an immovable power. Magda has lost her faith. She and many others. "I can't believe in a God who would let this happen," they say. I understand what they mean. And yet I've never found it difficult to see that it isn't God who is killing us in gas chambers, in ditches, on cliff sides, on 186 white stairs. God doesn't run the death camps. People do. But here is the

horror again and I don't want to indulge it. I picture God as being like a dancing child. Sprightly and innocent and *curious*. I must be also if I am to be close to God now. I want to keep alive. the part of me that feels wonder, that *wonders*, until the very end."

Chapter 6 - To Choose A Blade Of Grass

There is always a worse hell. That is our reward for living.

"Magda flirts. That is her answer to death's beckoning. [...] Even in the depths of this horror there is chemistry, person to person, that gallop in the throat, that brightening. [...] This is what the living do. We use our sacred pulse as a flint against fear. Don't ruin your spirit. Send it up like a torch."

"Here in hell, I watch a man eat human flesh. Could I do it? For the sake of my own life, could I put my mouth around the skin left hanging on a dead person's bones and chew? I have seen flesh defiled in unforgivable cruelty. A boy tied to a tree while the SS officers shot his foot, his hand, his arms, an ear—an innocent child used as target practice. Of the pregnant woman who somehow made it to Auschwitz without being killed outright. When she went into labor, the SS tied her legs together. I've never seen agony like hers. But it's watching a starving person eat a dead person's flesh that makes the bile rise in me, that makes my vision black."

"I see an American handing cigarettes to inmates, who are so hungry they eat them, paper and all."

Part II: Escape

Chapter 7 - My Liberator, My Assailant

"war does not end anti-Semitism."

"Be careful, the Americans warn us in broken German. There's no peace yet. Anything could happen."

"The soldiers bring us to the room where we will sleep. It's the nursery. We are the orphans of war. They lift me into a wooden crib. I am that small; I weigh seventy pounds. I can't walk on my own. I am a baby. I barely think in language. I think in terms of pain, of need. I would cry to be held, but there's no one to hold me."

"Maybe in our silence we are trying to create a sphere that is free from our trauma. Wels is a limbo life, but presumably a new life beckons. Maybe we are trying to give each other and ourselves a blank room in which to build the future. We don't want to sully the room with images of violence and loss. We want to be able to see something besides death. And so we tacitly agree not to

talk about anything that will rupture the, bubble of survival."

"I am still so weak, but I can feel the potential in my body, all the things it will be possible to say with it when I have healed. Many years later I'll work with an amputee, and he'll explain the disorientation of feeling his phantom limb. When I dance to Glenn Miller six weeks after liberation, with my sister who is alive and the GI who almost raped me but didn't, I have reverse phantom limbs. It's sensation not in something that is lost but in a part of me that is returning, that is coming into its own. I can feel all the potential of the limbs and the life I can grow into again."

Chapter 8 - In Through A Window

The irony of freedom is that it is harder to find hope and purpose.

"Now that I am recuperating, now that I am facing the irrevocable fact that my parents are never coming back, that Eric is never coming back, the only demons are within. I think of taking my own life. I want a way out of pain."

"This is how we will heal. Yesterday, cannibalism and murder."

"Yesterday, choosing blades of grass. Today, the antiquated customs and proprieties, the rules and roles that make us feel normal. We will minimize the loss and horror, the terrible interruption of life, by living as though none of it happened. We will not be a lost generation."

Chapter 9 - Next Year In Jerusalem

"We try to put a happy spin on the day, but all of the absences tug at us."

"Orphans marry orphans. Later I will hear that we marry our parents. But I say we marry our unfinished business. For Béla and me, our unfinished business is grief."

"Denial is our shield. We don't yet know the damage we perpetuate by cutting ourselves off from the past, by maintaining our conspiracy of silence. We are convinced that the more securely we lock the past away, the safer and happier we will be."

"At Auschwitz we didn't get our periods. Perhaps the constant distress and starvation were enough to stop our cycles, or maybe the extreme weight loss. But now my body, the body that was starved and emaciated and left for dead, houses a new life."

"I have found a good and lucky life. There is no need for her to see to my survival now. But if there is one small piece of hell I miss, it is the part that made me understand that survival is a matter of interdependence, that survival

isn't possible alone. In choosing different directions, my sisters and I, are we in danger of breaking the spell?"

"Out of the razor-sharp haziness of labor comes the memory of the pregnant woman in Auschwitz who labored in agony with her tied-together legs. I can't stop her face, her voice from coming into the room with me now. She haunts me. She inspires me. Every impulse in her body, her heart, pointing to life, while she and her baby were both consigned to an unspeakably cruel death. The sorrow breaks across me. I am a landslide. I will break myself open on the sharp edge of her torment. I will accept this pain because she didn't have a choice. I will accept my pain so that it might erase hers, might erase every memory, because if this pain doesn't destroy me, memory might."

"Yesterday's Nazis become today's Communists"

Chapter 10 - Flight

"I can't look like a person who is fleeing. Everything I say for the rest of the day, for as long as it takes to get us to safety, I will say in that language I find under duress, that way of being that is not authoritarian or domineering but also is not cowering or weak. To be passive is to let others decide for you. To be aggressive is to decide for others. To be assertive is to decide for yourself. And to trust that there is enough, that you are enough."

"I make eye contact. I smile. I will treat him not as he is, but as I trust he can be. I will talk to him as though I already have the thing that I want. "Thank you, sir," I say in Slovak, "thank you very much for giving my daughter back her father." His forehead creases in confusion. I hold his eyes. I take off my diamond ring. I hold it toward him. "A reunion between a father and a daughter is a beautiful thing," I continue, twisting the jewel back and forth so that it shines like a star in the dim light."

Part III: Freedom

Chapter 12 - Greener

"It will be more than twenty years before I will have the language and psychological training to understand that I was having a flashback, that the unnerving physical sensations—racing heart, sweaty palms, narrowing vision—I experienced that day (and that I will continue to experience many times in my life, even now, in my late eighties) are automatic responses to trauma. This is why I now object to pathologizing post-traumatic stress by calling it a disorder. It's not a disordered reaction to trauma—it's a common and natural one."

Chapter 13 - You Were There?

"A reflex to protect. Since my pregnancy with Marianne, when I defied the

doctor's warning, when I chose that my life would always stand for more life, I resolved not to let the death camps cast a shadow over my children. That conviction has hardened into a single purpose: *My children can't ever know.* They will never picture me skeletal with hunger, dreaming of my mother's strudel under a smoke-thickened sky. It will never be an image they have to hold in their minds, I will protect them."

"Marianne grows ever more curious, and is a voracious reader. [...] In 1957, when she is ten, she sits Béla and me down [...] She opens a book that she tells us she found hidden behind the other books on one of our shelves. [...] She points to a picture of naked, skeletal corpses piled up in a heap. "What is this?" she asks. I am sweating, the room spins. [...] I could have predicted this moment would come, but it is as surprising to me, as arresting and terrifying, as if I had walked into the house to discover that the live alligator pit from San Jacinto Plaza had been installed in our living room. [...] I run from the room. I vomit in the bathroom sink."

""I am a survivor," I say, shaking. "Have you read this?" He shows me a small paperback: *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. It sounds like a philosophy text. The author's name doesn't ring a bell. I shake my head. "Frankl was at Auschwitz," the student explains. "He wrote this book about it, just after the war. I think you would find it of interest," he says, offering it to me."

"I am staring directly at the thing I have sought to hide. And as I read, I find I don't feel shut down or trapped, locked back in that place. To my surprise, I don't feel afraid. For every page I read, I want to write ten. What if telling my story could lighten its grip instead of tightening it?"

"In those predawn hours in the autumn of 1966, I read this, which is at the very heart of Frankl's teaching: *Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*"

Each moment is a choice. No matter how frustrating or boring or constraining or painful or oppressive our experience, we can always choose how we respond. And I finally begin to understand that I, too, have a choice. This realization will change my life.

Chapter 14 - From One Survivor To Another

No one heals in a straight line.

"I had written about imagining myself onstage at the Budapest opera house the night I was forced to dance for Mengele. Frankl wrote that he had done something similar at Auschwitz—in his worst moments, he had imagined himself a free man, giving lectures in Vienna on the psychology of imprisonment. He had also found a sanctuary in an inner world that both shielded him from his

present fear and pain, and inspired his hope and sense of purpose—that gave him the means and a reason to survive."

"I liked the emphasis on myths and archetypes, which reminded me of the literature I had loved as a girl. And I was intrigued by the notion of bringing the conscious and unconscious parts of one's psyche together into a balanced whole."

"I also felt drawn to Carl Jung's vision of therapeutic analysis: *It is a matter of saying yea to oneself, of taking oneself as the most serious of tasks, of being conscious of everything one does, and keeping it constantly before one's eyes in all its dubious aspects—truly a task that taxes us to the utmost.*"

"right after Béla and I separated, the migraines disappeared"

"I am so obsessed with proving my worth, with earning my place in the world, that I don't need Hitler anymore. I have become my own jailor, telling myself, "No matter what you do, you will never be good enough."

"the gift of my divorce: the recognition that I have to face up to what's inside me. If I am really going to improve my life, it isn't Béla or our relationship that has to change. It's me."

Chapter 15 - What Life Expected

"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us, Viktor Frankl writes"

"Seligman [...] answered a question that had nagged at me since liberation day at Gunskirchen in May 1945: Why did so many inmates wander out of the gates of the camp only to return to the muddy, festering barracks? Frankl had noted the same phenomenon at Auschwitz. [...] Seligman concluded that when we feel we have no control over our circumstances, when we believe that nothing we do can alleviate our suffering or improve our lives, we stop taking action on our own behalf because we believe there is no point."

"Perfectionism is the belief that something is broken—you. So you dress up your brokenness with degrees, achievements, accolades, pieces of paper, none of which can fix what you think you are fixing."

"Richard Farson's calamity theory of growth [...] Very open it is the crisis situation... that actually improves us as human beings. Paradoxically, while these incidents can sometimes ruin people, they are usually growth experiences. As a result of such calamities the person often makes a major reassessment of his life situation and changes it in ways that reflect a deeper understanding of his own capabilities, values, and goals."

I met a lot of survivors who remained in the past. "Never, ever will I forgive," many told me. To them forgiveness meant forgetting or condoning. Many of the people I interviewed harbored revenge fantasies.

"It's important to assign blame to the perpetrators. Nothing is gained if we close our eyes to wrong. If we give someone a pass, if we dismiss accountability. But as the fellow survivors taught me, you can live to avenge the past, or you can live to enrich the present."

"Expression is the opposite of depression."

Chapter 16 - The Choice

"In a home with punitive discipline, children grow accustomed to hearing threats, and these threats can escalate quickly or, at the other extreme, prove empty. Although I was speaking kindly, she was looking to see if my words and tone were going to escalate into an angry criticism or admonition, or if I wasn't really going to leave the room, if I was just a pushover."

Chapter 17 - Then Hitler Won

"Most of us want a dictator—albeit a benevolent one—so we can pass the buck, so we can say, "You made me do that. It's not my fault." But we can't spend our lives hanging out under someone else's umbrella and then complain that we're getting wet. A good definition of being a victim is when you keep the focus outside yourself, when you look outside yourself for someone to blame for your present circumstances, or to determine your purpose, fate, or worth."

Chapter 18 - Goebbels's Bed

"This is the work of healing. You deny what hurts, what you fear. You avoid it at all costs. Then you find a way to welcome and embrace what you're most afraid of. And then you can finally let it go."

"revenge doesn't make you free. [...] So I stood on the site of Hitler's former home and forgave him. [...] This had nothing to do with Hitler. It was something I did for me. I was letting go, releasing the part of myself that had spent most of my life exerting the mental and spiritual energy to keep Hitler in chains. As long as I was holding on to that rage, I was in chains with him, locked in the damaging past, locked in my grief. To forgive is to grieve—for what happened, for what didn't happen—and to give up the need for a different past."

""Do you know," I said, "mothers can't rest in peace unless they know the people they have left behind are fully embracing life?" Take off your shoes, I told her. Take off your stockings. Stand barefoot on your mother's grave. Make direct contact so she can finally rest in peace."

Chapter 19 - Leave A Stone

"I see ditches running alongside roads, and I imagine them as I once saw them, spilling over with corpses, but I can also see them as they are now, filling up with summer grass. I can see that the past doesn't taint the present, the present doesn't diminish the past. Time is the medium. Time is the track, we travel it."

"I think of Dr. Hans Selye—a fellow Hungarian—who said stress is the body's response to any demand for change. Our automatic responses are to fight or to flee but in Auschwitz, where we endured more than stress, where we lived in distress, the stakes life and death, never knowing what would happen next, the options to fight or flee didn't exist. I would have been shot if I'd fought back, electrocuted if I'd tried to run away. So I learned to flow, I learned to stay in the situation, to develop the only thing I had left, to look within for the part of me that no Nazi could ever murder. To find and hold on to my truest self. Maybe I'm not losing skin. Maybe I am only stretching, Stretching to encompass every aspect of who I am—and have been—and can become."

"Maybe to heal isn't to erase the scar, or even to make the scar. To heal is to cherish the wound."

"I notice it again, the thing that haunted me those hellish months when this was my home: I can't see or hear a single bird. No birds live here. Not even now. The sky is bare of their wings the silence deeper because of the absence of their song."

Part IV: Healing

Chapter 20 - The Dance Of Freedom

"Our painful experiences aren't a liability—they're a gift. They give us perspective and meaning, an opportunity to find our unique purpose and our strength."

"although it feels like the palette of human feelings is limitless, in fact every emotional shade, like every color, is derived from just a few primary emotions: sad, mad, glad, scared. For those just learning an emotional vocabulary, as I was, it's less overwhelming to learn to identify only four feelings.)"

"The "bad" partner gets a free pass to test all the limits; the "good" partner gets to say, *Look how selfless I am! Look how patient I am! Look at everything I put up with!* But what happens if the "bad" one in the relationship gets sick of that role? What if he shows up to audition for the other part? Then the "good" one's place in the relationship is no longer secure. She's got to remind him how bad he is so she can keep her position. Or she might become bad—hostile,

explosive—so that they can still balance the seesaw even if they switch positions. Either way, blame is the pivot that keeps the two seats joined."

we remain victims as long as we hold another person responsible for our own well-being.

1. *What do you want?* This is a deceptively simple question. It can be much more difficult than we realize to give ourselves permission to know and listen to ourselves, to align ourselves with our desires. How often when we answer this question do we say what we want for someone else? I reminded Ling and Jun that they needed to answer this question for themselves. To say I want Jun to stop drinking or I want Ling to stop nagging was to avoid the question.

2. *Who wants it?* This is our charge and our struggle: to understand our own expectations for ourselves versus trying to live up to others' expectations of us. My father became a tailor because his father wouldn't allow him to become a doctor. My father was good at his profession, he was commended and awarded for it—but he was never the one who wanted it, and he always regretted his unlivable dream. It's our responsibility to act in service of our authentic selves. Sometimes this means giving up the need to please others, giving up our need for others' approval.

3. *What are you going to do about it?* I believe in the power of positive thinking—but change and freedom also require positive action. Anything we practice, we become better at. If we practice anger, we'll have more anger. If we practice fear, we'll have more fear. In many cases, we actually work very hard to ensure that we go nowhere. Change is about noticing what's no longer working and stepping out of the familiar, imprisoning patterns.

4. *When?* In *Gone with the Wind*, my mother's favorite book, Scarlett O'Hara, when confronted with a difficulty, says, "*I'll think about it tomorrow... After all, tomorrow is another day.*" If we are to evolve instead of revolve, it's time to take action now.

"It's okay to help people—and it's okay to need help—but when your enabling allows others not to help themselves, then you're crippling the people you want to help."

"Viktor Frankl writes, *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; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.* When we abdicate taking responsibility for ourselves, we are giving up our ability to create and discover meaning. In other words, we give up on life."

Chapter 21 - The Girl Without Hands

"when you lose your temper, you might feel strong in the moment, but really you are handing your power over. Strength isn't reacting, it's responding"

"I think that a certain amount of risk is always inseparable from healing."

"Beatrice wasn't in denial about her trauma, as I had once been. She had been able to talk about the past and to process it intellectually. But she hadn't yet grieved for her interrupted life."

""Forgiveness isn't you forgiving your molester for what he did to you," I told her. "It's you forgiving the part of yourself that was victimized and letting go of all blame."

"Repeated encounters with a past event can reinforce rather than release the fearful and painful feelings. In my practice and in my own experience, I have seen the effectiveness of mentally reliving a traumatic episode, but it must be done with absolute safety, and with a well-trained professional who can give the patient control over how long and how deeply he or she stays in the past."

Chapter 22 - Somehow The Waters Part

"We want so much to understand the truth. We want to be accountable for our mistakes, honest about our lives. We want reasons, explanations. We want our lives to make sense. But to ask *why?* is to stay in the past, to keep company with our guilt and regret. We can't control other people, and we can't control the past."

Chapter 23 - Liberation Day

I used to ask, *Why me? Why did I survive?* I have learned to ask a different question: *Why not me?*

[A very brief commentary: *I have recommended this book, I think, to my clients more than any other. The reason? It lives the example of making a choice of how to see your circumstance, without turning into a victim ... no matter the situation. Eger is a true warrior. Why not her to live, to write this book? Well, the impact it's had on me is one reason. And the way I've been able to share it with others. To help them live and love and learn ... and lead. A good book to read following this is The Gift. Also by Eger, it explores themes found in The Choice in greater depth, with a clinical focus. A focus on making changes. Great stories therein, great lessons too. Another recommendation is Eger's The Ballerina Of Auschwitz which explores her story from a 16-year-old's perspective. Most of it is the same material you'll find in The Choice, but with about 30% new content—it covers her earlier life experiences until just after the Holocaust. Two other works Eger draws heavily on are Viktor Frankl's Man's*

Search For Meaning and Corrie Ten Boom's The Hiding Place. Both exceptional in their own right. Both survivors of the Holocaust.]

These notes were collected by psychotherapist and author Emil Barna in 2025 in his efforts to assist with professional development and further education for himself and those who read them. You can find out more about Emil by visiting www.barnacc.com