

A man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard is looking upwards and to the right. He is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and a brown jacket draped over his shoulders. He is holding a large, open map in front of him, which is slightly out of focus. The background is bright and shows some green foliage. The overall mood is one of contemplation and exploration.

The Power of Choice

To discover your voice look within yourself, and tap into your God-given potential.

by Stephen R. Covey

The power to *discover* our voice lies in the potential that was bequeathed us at birth. Latent and undeveloped, the seeds of greatness were planted. We were given magnificent “birth-gifts”—talents, capacities, privileges, intelligences, opportunities—that would remain largely unopened except through our own decision and effort. Because of these gifts, the potential within an individual is tremendous, even infinite. We really have no idea what a person is capable of. A baby may be the most dependent creation in the universe, and yet within a few years it becomes the most powerful. The more we use and magnify our present talents, the more talents we are given and the greater our capacity becomes.

Let's examine our three most important gifts:

First, *our freedom and power to choose*;

Second, *natural laws or principles*, which are universal and never change; and

Third, *our four intelligences/capacities*—physical/economic, emotional/social, mental and spiritual. These four intelligences/capacities correspond to the four parts of our human nature—symbolized by body, heart, mind and spirit.

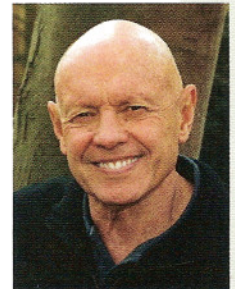
Your power to choose the direction of your life allows you to reinvent yourself, to change your future.



Author Marianne Williamson beautifully expressed how we are oftentimes awed, even fearful, of our native endowments—largely, I believe, because of the sense of responsibility they lay upon us:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the

same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.



Stephen R. Covey is the author of the best-selling books *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*. He is an internationally respected leadership authority, family expert, teacher, organizational consultant, and co-founder and vice chairman of FranklinCovey Co. He and his wife and family live in the Rocky Mountains of Utah.

The Freedom to Choose

If you were to ask me what one subject, one theme, one point, seemed to have the greatest impact upon people—what one great idea resonated deeper in the soul than any other—if you were to ask what one ideal was most practical, most relevant, most timely, regardless of circumstances, I would answer quickly, without any reservation, and with the deepest conviction of my heart and soul, that *we are free to choose*. Next to life itself, the power to choose is your greatest gift. This power and freedom stand in stark contrast to the mindset of *victimism* and culture of *blame* so prevalent in society today.

Fundamentally, we are a product of choice, not nature (genes) or nurture (upbringing, environment). Certainly, genes and culture often influence very powerfully, but they do not determine.



The essence of being human is being able to direct your own life. Humans act, animals and human “robots” react. Humans can make choices based on their values. Your power to choose the direction of your life allows you to reinvent yourself, to change your future and to powerfully influence the rest of creation. It is the one gift that enables all the gifts to be used; it is the one gift that enables us to elevate our life to higher and higher levels.

Feel the Power

Over the years in speaking to various groups, time and again, I have had people come to me and basically say, “Please tell me more of my freedom and power to choose. Please tell me again of my worth and

The potential within an individual is tremendous.

potential, that I have no need to compare myself with others.” Many also comment that as interesting (or boring) as the speech may have been, the thing that literally electrified their souls was the internal sense of their own freedom to choose. This was so delicious to them, so exhilarating, that they could hardly ponder it long or deep enough.

This power of choice means that we are *not* merely a product of our past or of our genes; we are *not* a product of how other people treat us. They unquestionably influence us, but they do *not* determine us. We are self-determining through our choices. If we have given away our *present* to the *past*, do we need to give away our *future* also?

One of the most profound and truly life-changing experiences of my life—one conceptually fundamental to my work on *The 7 Habits*—took place while I was on a sabbatical in Hawaii. One day I was wandering leisurely around the stacks in a library. Being in a very meditative and reflective state of mind, I pulled down a book. In it I read three sentences that staggered me to the core:

Between stimulus and response there is a space.

In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response.

In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.

STIMULUS AND RESPONSE

Stimulus → Freedom to Choose → Response

Intellectually, I had learned from many sources about our freedom to choose our response to whatever happens to us. But on that particular day, in that reflective mood, and in those relaxed circumstances, the idea of the space between whatever happens to us and our response to it hit me like a ton of bricks. Since then I have come to understand and believe that the *size* of the space is largely determined by our genetic or biological inheritance and by our upbringing and present circumstances.

With many who have grown up with unconditional love in supportive circumstances, the space may be very large. With others, due to various genetic and environmental influences, it may be very small. But the key point is, there is still a space there, and it is in the *use* of that space that the opportunity to enlarge it exists. Some with a very large space, when facing adverse circumstances, may choose to cave in, thereby reducing the size of the space between stimulus and response. Others with a small space may swim upstream against powerful genetic, social and cultural currents and find their freedom

expanding, their growth accelerating and their happiness deepening. The former simply do not open this most priceless of all birthday gifts. Gradually, they become a function more of their conditions than their decisions. The latter, perhaps stumblingly and with great, sustained effort, open this priceless gift of freedom to choose and discover the force that releases almost all of the other gifts given at birth.

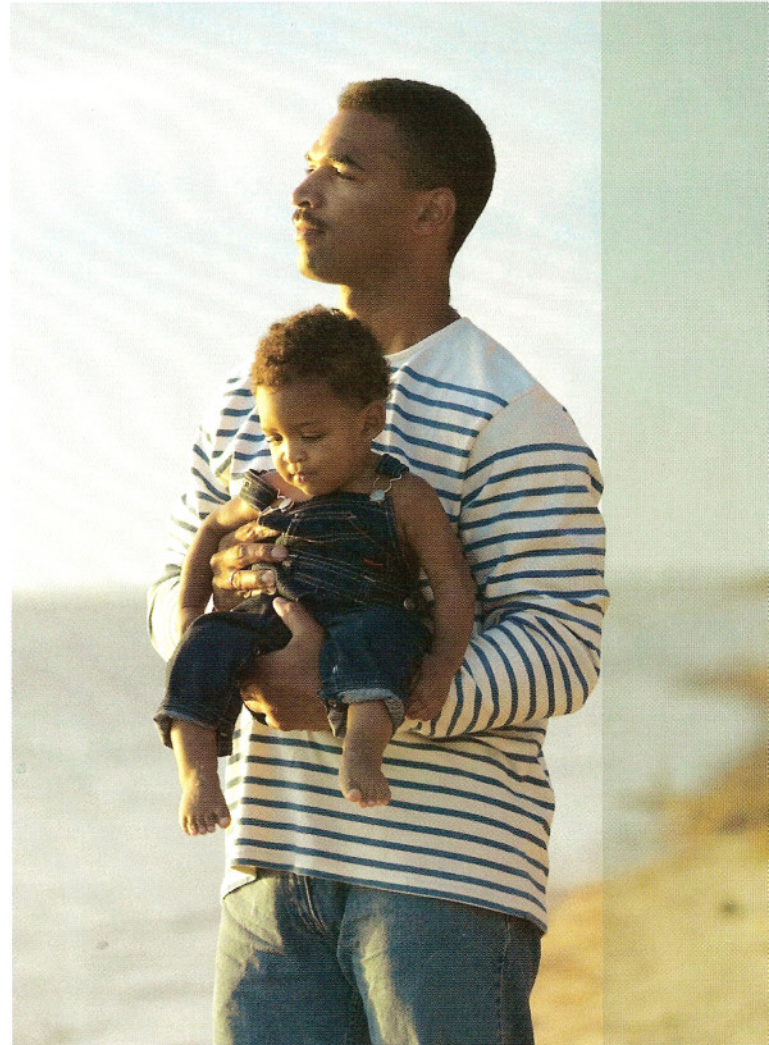
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be?

The maverick psychiatrist R.D. Laing captured in the words below how failing to notice that we have this space kills our ability to change. Humans alone have self-awareness. Read, think about, then reread this quotation:

The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

An awareness of our freedom and power to choose is affirming because it can excite our sense of possibility and potential. It can also threaten, even terrify, because suddenly we're responsible, that is,

“response-able.” We become accountable. If we've taken shelter over the years in explaining our situation and problems in the name of past or present circumstances, it is truly terrifying to think otherwise. Suddenly there is no excuse.



I challenge you to think deeply about this first gift—to reflect on that space that exists between stimulus and response, and to use it wisely in enlarging your freedoms and keeping yourself constantly growing, learning and contributing. Eventually, your exercise of that power will enlarge the response until the very nature of your responses will begin to shape the stimuli. You literally create the world in which you live. The great American philosopher-psychologist William James consistently taught that when we change our thinking, we change our lives. **E**

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