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May – June 2009 Issue

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## A Life of Choice Phil Nuernberger, Ph.D.

There is an exercise that I like to do in my extended seminars and MBA classes. At the very end of training, I have everyone take out a piece of paper. I ask them to take this next exercise seriously and to take as much time as they need. I then tell them that they have only 10 days left to live, and ask them to write out how they intend to spend the last ten days of their life. They have all the resources to do whatever they choose, they won't have any pain or discomfort, but definitely, their time on this planet ends in ten days.

After 30 years of doing this, I am rarely surprised by what is said. In fact, the reports are very consistent. The five or six overwhelmingly consistent activities are:

- Spend time with family and friends
- Tell people how I love them
- Celebrate with family and friends
- Go to a favorite place with family and/or friends
- Do something I have always wanted to do
- Spend time alone in prayer, meditation or contemplation

There are always some unique responses: One woman stated that she will pick out her "forever" outfit so her mother couldn't dress her body in pink; and a trial lawyer from South Carolina wanted to take the last day and go to Washington DC and punch out Jessie Helms. But far and away what is most important to us are our family and friends, and how much love we share with each other.

I don't think that this comes as any surprise to anyone. And so, the question that really confounds me is this: Why do we sacrifice so much of what is meaningful to the god of material wealth? Why do we not only tolerate material gain over health and well-being, over education, and over the welfare of our

entire society, but actively support it? Why is material wealth more important to us than our physical, mental and social well-being?

Take a few minutes to think about what you would like to leave to your children or loved ones. Let's even imagine that you are leaving your heirs some considerable wealth. What would be most in your mind to say to those who you are leaving behind? In the life you have led, what words of wisdom would you like to pass on? Would it be "Grab everything you can while you can!"?

We want our children to value friendship, honesty, integrity, generosity, kindness, respect for others, compassion, and all the good things that we always speak about. Do we model these for our children to learn, or are they expected to read about them in a book, hear about them in a church, and then magically develop these even before they become teenagers.

We are surrounded by examples where material gain rides roughshod over both individual and societal well-being. More recent examples are AIG; and the unregulated derivative markets. We can't ignore the health insurance industry where profit is far more important than customer service, and often base staff compensation on how much they deny payment for needed medical or healing services. In political leadership we suffer from pork-barrel politics where public funds are sacrificed to serve the selfish needs of powerful lobbies and industries who conveniently provide large campaign donations. Then there is CEO compensation that is 400-600 times the producer (read worker) in the plant,

and grandiose retention bonuses while benefits and jobs are being lost (I didn't realize that there were so many "irreplaceable" individuals in the world). The list goes on and on.

In fact, until the damage becomes so drastic as to deeply impact us all, we admire those who make the most money. It's the American Way to seek fame and fortune. Unfortunately, the materialism of our culture is deeply embedded and deeply destructive to individual growth and the social welfare.

Again, why do we tolerate this? Would the increased taxes we would pay for national health care even come close to what we pay for health insurance? Do the late nights spent at the office creating even more wealth have anything to do with the dysfunctional relationship we have with our families? Does air pollution have anything to do with the incredibly high rates of asthma? Why is it that the elderly in our culture are on so many drugs? How does it happen that we rank lowest in all advanced cultures in quality of health care yet we pay far more for this than any other country? (And in the last presidential race, one erstwhile candidate stated that we have the greatest health care in the world. Whatever was he smoking?)

We have all the answers we need – ignorance, vested interests, powerful lobbies, materialism, lack of "family values," greed – the list can seem almost endless. And each answer has some truth, but not one answers the core issue: Why do we as individuals tolerate all this. More than just tolerate, we actively participate in the game itself. Maybe we should stop searching

for “reasons” and simply stop playing in the games that don’t support our humanity. Maybe it’s time for us to take a look at where we invest our energy, time and effort. After all, we create and support the conditions in which we live, and if we stop supporting those activities that are unhealthy for us as individuals and as a society, these activities can no longer exist.

You see, we don’t have to change the world; we only need to change how we interact with the world. I recall a conversation I had with a Cargill executive, a lawyer who worked in their legal department. He was having some difficulty understanding a position I was taking in regard to managing income. He finally asked, “Don’t you want to leave something for your children?” My response was that the only thing I really wanted to leave my children was a legacy of strength. My goal has never been to leave them some financial reward, but rather focus on developing their inner strength so they can handle anything that came their way.

We all tell our children about values and caring for others, but what are their models? We really have very few real heroes anymore, those who provide models of compassion, service, and integrity. Instead, we have egotistic, grab-what-you-can celebrity. Where are the models of selflessness and service? They exist, but the media hype is all about gaining wealth, beating everyone else, and being on top. The top of what? Which heap? Do you really think that a good jump shot really contributes to the betterment of our society or that extremely profitable “big oil” needs tax breaks so they can pay their executives big bonuses?

We live in a country where there is so much commercial storage space built that every American citizen can stand in it. To hold what? All the “stuff” we can’t store in our own homes. Is it really the more we have, the more we win? Or do we win when we live our lives doing the last ten days for an entire lifetime?

It’s really your choice. You decide where you put your time and energy, and this is the legacy we leave for others. Nothing is sadder and more pathetic than a large home filled with things and empty of love, understanding, and communication. Nothing is more joyful than a life of giving, serving and caring for others. Look to your own experience, pay attention to where the joy lies. There is no inherent value or meaning in material things, it lies in life itself, and how we share that life with others.

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*Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.*

*Mark Twain*

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