

How to Thrive in the Battle of Life

[How to Thrive in the Battle of Life](#)

by [Academy of Ideas](#)

October 31, 2020

The following is a transcript of this video.

“It is no more possible to make life easy than it is to grow a herb of immortality.”

Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition

In many ways life is a battle. A battle against our self-destructive tendencies, our weaknesses and fears. A battle against our mortal nature and the limits of time. A battle against bad habits and people who try to pull us down. And depending on the period of history in which we live, a battle for our freedom against enslavement by tyrants. But lest this conception of life bring us down, we should also recognize that full participation in the battle of life is what produces meaning and fulfillment. For as Jung notes, life is hard, there is nothing that can be done about this, but we can choose how we face up to the battle of life and depending on our chosen approach the hard life can become a good life. In this video we will explore how to achieve this ultimate of feats.

To prepare for battle, knowledge of the conditions is essential and in the battle of life the defining feature is

change. The state of the outer world, the inner world of our psyche and the interaction between the two are forever in flux. The process of aging slowly alters how we experience life and death forever changes the set of people who populate our world. What is more, life is punctuated by the unforeseen and unpredictable. Cruel twists of fate and remarkable opportunities radically, and sometimes rapidly, rupture the entire fabric of our being. And so, as life is defined by change, successful navigation of the battle of life requires above all else the ability to adapt, or as the great military strategist Sun Tzu wrote:

“Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain.”

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

The importance of adapting to the constant change of life, and modifying tactics to suit each new challenge, becomes evident when we look at individuals who lack this ability, individuals, in other words, who are defined by their psychological and behavioral rigidity. Rigidity, in thought or action, almost guarantees failure in the battle of life. For when we are overly set in our ways, our options in the face of change are limited. We can try to apply our old ways to new challenges, but this only works if the challenge is not too novel. Alternatively, we can flee from our battles, deny they exist, or try to avoid them. But the more we avoid life's challenges, the less we live and as Carl Jung wrote:

“Unlived life is a destructive, irresistible force that works softly but inexorably.”

Carl Jung, Civilization in Transition

To be one of the few who truly lives, rather than merely exists, we must be willing to face up to our battles with the adaptivity that best promotes success. But how can we begin to live like this? How, in other words, can we escape the laziness and fear that keeps so many people locked in rigid ways? One approach is through the re-ordering of our sense of self so as to replace what is called a constructed self with a discovered self. To understand what type of self defines us we should ask the following question:

“Is [our] self-concept based upon our job title, income level, physical attributes, age, educational level, the present location of [our] home, the car [we] drive, or having important friends?”

Al Siebert, The Resiliency Advantage

If we answer this question in the affirmative, then we have a constructed sense of self. Our self-concept, in other words, is built, or constructed upon, the attainment of external goods and values and while this form of self is very common in the modern world, it is far from ideal, for as the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer explains:

“The ordinary man places his life’s happiness in things external to him, in property, rank, wife and children, friends, society, and the like, so that when he loses them or finds them disappointing, the foundation of his happiness is destroyed. In other words, his center of gravity is not in himself; it is constantly changing its place, with every wish and whim.”

Schopenhauer, The Wisdom of Life

When our self-concept is tied to

external things then the order of our self mirrors the order of the outer world. When that order is stable so too is our sense of self. But, when that order breaks down, perhaps from an economic, social or personal crisis, then those with a constructed self also tend to breakdown. To avoid the vulnerability of a constructed self we need to replace it with a discovered self. A discovered self is cultivated through the development of virtues, skills, character traits, and other personal capacities rather than being constructed upon external achievements. This sense of self is discovered in that it is who we become as we actualize our latent potentials and develop our unique capacities in interaction with the world and as Al Siebert explains:

“Resiliency comes from a discovered self, not a constructed self. It comes from the gradual emergence of your unique, inborn abilities in a process called individuation. The better you become, the more unique you become as an individual – and it never ends. If your identity is based mostly on external factors, you will feel anxious about change that threatens your identity sources. You will try to keep the world around you frozen in place. If your identity is based on your personal qualities, abilities, and values, you can let parts of your world dissolve away without feeling threats to your existence. With a strong inner sense of who you are, you can easily adapt to and thrive in new environments.”

Al Siebert, The Resiliency Advantage

A discovered self is far more effective in the battle of life for two main reasons: firstly, the inner order to which it is anchored is far more stable, and under our control, than the outer order of the constructed self. Secondly, a discovered self is far more adaptive as the process that leads to its emergence, namely self-development, imbues us with all sorts of skills and capacities that can be used to confront

life's battles. Michel de

Montaigne, a 16th century philosopher, was a man who spent much of his life in active pursuit of a discovered self and the following passage could easily serve as the ethos for the rest of us who want to follow on this path:

"Not being able to govern events, I govern myself, and if they will not adapt to me, I adapt to them."

Montaigne, Of Presumption

The surest way to the cultivation of a discovered self is to find a life purpose or mission and to orient our days around its pursuit. A purpose can be any meaningful long-term goal that promotes human flourishing. It can be a creative goal such as mastering a craft or skill, a practical goal such as starting a business, or a courageous goal such as devoting ourselves to a culturally important value such as freedom. But whatever we choose, our purpose must be challenging and inspiring, and it should be chosen by us, not for us.

When we find a purpose and begin living the purposeful life our discovered self begins to emerge. For with a purpose we are confronted daily with new tasks and challenges and so we create an ideal training ground for our self-development. When we live with purpose, in other words, we expand our skills and capacities voluntarily, not only when forced to, and in the process we actualize our potentials and unearth the discovered self.

While some may view the call to live with purpose as cliché, in actual fact it can be a matter of sanity versus madness or even life versus death. This point was stressed by the Dutch doctor and author Joost Meerloo who lived through the Nazi invasion of Holland and was a member of the anti-Nazi resistance. Meerloo spent time studying the psychological effects of being a prisoner of a concentration camp. As he

notes, most people when plucked from their homes and shipped to prison merely for reasons of political corruption and human cruelty do not cope well. But as he further points out, there are some individuals who not only endure such conditions, but can even be said to flourish in spite of them, and integral to this astonishing ability is living with a purpose, or what Meerloo calls in the following passage, a mission or inner goal:

“When we look at the varieties of human behaviour under extreme and pressing circumstances, we see how easily man can be subdued, and at the same time we see that certain factors seem to have a positive effect on his morale, keeping him from despair and collapse. When these factors are operative, the spirit revives and people are enabled to live with integrity in spite of dangerous circumstances. There are many such morale boosters. . . Perhaps the most effective is the sense of having some mission and inner goal. This ideal with which a man identifies can be love of the native land, love of freedom or justice, or even the thought of hate and revenge. Whatever it is, at the moment of calamity a guiding idea is as much needed as mere physical strength and endurance.”

Joost Meerloo, The Rape of the Mind

The psychologist Viktor Frankl who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp echoes Meerloo's observations. Frankl went so far as to say that for him and his fellow prisoners, a purpose was the difference between life and death. Without a purpose or a “future goal” to look forward to, prisoners found it very difficult to endure the uncertainty and brutal conditions of camp life. Frankl notes that many purposeless individuals succumbed to what he called “give-up-itis”. One morning, they simply refused to get up, and as he wrote:

“At that moment we knew that for the next forty-eight hours

or so we would watch them dying.”

Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

While hopefully, we will not be a generation forced to endure the brutalities of government prison camps, what the future has in store for us is never known. Social uncertainty is clouding our future, tyranny is intensifying across the globe, and our ability to live free and economically prosperous lives is under grave threat. And so while living with a purpose and cultivating a discovered self is a wise choice even at times of social stability, as it promotes greatness of self, in our generation it may be the difference between thriving in tumultuous times versus merely suffering in response to the chaos that swirls around us:

“If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, The American Scholar