

STYLUS

Scratching Beneath the Surface

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

by Nina Durfee

I've always been a fair-weather walker.

I enjoy walking outside in the fresh air, in the daylight, when the weather is dry and the temperature comfortable. I don't like to tumble out of bed to walk in the dark, and I don't like to be cold or wet. Mom always said keep your head dry or you'll catch a cold, and for years I believed it. So come December, I blow off my morning walk, rationalizing that I don't have to subject myself to that. It's my choice. Right?

Our choices create our experience. It's sexy to blame another person or a circumstance for unhappiness. It resolves us of responsibility. It also robs us of control, victimizes us and makes us feel powerless.

Claim power by acknowledging that your action results in your experience. Being accountable and claiming responsibility for your choices allows you to step out of the passenger seat and drive the bus.

This morning I donned a water-repellent jacket, put up the hood, and walked. The air felt good, I swung my arms and enjoyed the feeling of my joints loosening, my muscles stretching, and fresh, rain-cleaned air going deep into my lungs. I felt the hitch in my sciatic and bemoaned my choice to take a two-month hiatus, which had also left me with waning energy, inflexibility, mental and physical sluggishness, loss of muscle tone, and guilt – none of which I desired!

As I turned the corner on the third leg of my route, I faced a breeze, just enough to push back my hood. You know how I feel about a wet head. I pulled my hood forward, but the breeze pushed right it back. Determined, I hunkered down, eventually grasping the hood tight around my chin so it wouldn't blow off. It interrupted the rhythm of my arm swing and affected my gait. My brows squeezed together, my face scrunched against the wind, my shoulders and neck stiffened. And I thought:

What's the worst that could happen if my head gets wet?

I'm not prone to colds. I raised my boys in Western Washington, and they were wet ninety percent of the time they spent outside. They weren't plagued with colds and flu. I honestly wasn't concerned that I'd catch cold because of a wet head. And cold was not

an issue, as I was adequately dressed and warmed up from walking. But if I let my hood down, my hair would be soaked, water would run down my face and neck and probably trickle down my back. Yuck! So I asked myself: How will having a wet head affect the next thing I'm going to do?

And I realized that when I got home I would get straight into the shower!

My head would be soaked and water would stream down my face, neck and back. And I perceived that as a *good* thing!

Energized by this little epiphany, I let my hood fall back, held my head up, swung my arms freely and felt the tension in my neck, shoulders, back, legs and face relax. I enjoyed the rest of the walk home.

What's the difference between these experiences?

Attitude determines the experience. I started with a preconceived notion that wet is uncomfortable. Fighting the experience of rain by knotting my hands, squeezing my facial muscles and hunkering my shoulders, I created an uncomfortable experience that robbed me of freedom and joy in my walk.

When I step into the shower I anticipate the *luxury* of water flowing over my body and washing mental and emotional tension down the drain. I create a pleasurable experience by *accepting and anticipating* it. **A conscious change in attitude changed my walking experience from miserable to joyful!**

The choice is yours. In every moment we are faced with multiple choices. We have the power to experience joy or pain, love or hate, sadness or humor, comfort or anxiety by consciously choosing to do so. I now choose to *enjoy* walking despite external elements.

What experience do you want? Create it.

You have the power!

RESEARCH BEARS IT OUT

In his book *Blink – The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell tells of scientist Paul Ekman, who postulated that rather than a product of cultural conditioning, our facial expressions are governed by a common set of rules. Extensive study in the US, Japan, Brazil, Argentina and the Far East confirmed his theory that facial expressions have the same meaning all over the planet. Ekman collaborated with

Wallace V. Friesen to devise a Facial Action Coding System, identifying specific “action units” (muscle movements) that produce various facial expressions.

In part, their research entailed sitting across from each other and practicing specific Action Units to achieve a specific expression. At one point they independently expressed feeling poorly. It turned out they’d been practicing the Action Units for anger and distress. Further research showed that activating the facial muscles associated with anger produced a corresponding elevation of heart rate and increase in heat generating from the palms. Simply placing the face in the expression of anger produces the symptoms of anger in the body!

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CREATE THE EXPERIENCE YOU WANT

Enjoy the best possible experience of everything you do by taking these steps:

1. Name the action you are about to take.
2. List the elements of the action or its outcome that are potentially undesirable.
3. Rephrase each undesirable item into something positive – e.g., instead of “it’s cold outside,” think “I’m warmly dressed.”
4. Articulate the positive feelings as physical sensations – e.g., comfortable; posture erect, energy coursing through veins; composure, confidence, control.
5. One at a time, practice each of the feelings in #4, including for each the physical stance, facial expression, rate of breath.
6. Step into action and enjoy!