

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY BEING A MORAL STEAM ENGINE IN YOUR OWN LIFE

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Before we begin, I must express my deep appreciation to TTPer Joe Katzman for his unsolicited thoughtfulness in posting this on the TTP Forum. Thank you so much, Joe!

“We’re using [Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions](#) in our homeschool. At \$189, it was an excellent investment that I would recommend to every parent and grandparent.

Joel goes to the underlying basis of our moods, and what they’re supposed to do for us. Our moods and emotions have jobs. That’s why it’s a bad idea to suppress them.

If you understand the jobs they’re supposed to be doing, you can recognize them and work with them. Joel gives concrete helpful tips for that.

At \$99, it falls into the ‘if you have a teenager in the family, buy this and use it’ category.”

Now – here we go. There are times in a life, or in a world, where a single idea, conceived, committed to, and followed through, can bring about the most breathtaking change.

There is a very moving film that came out in 2006, *Amazing Grace*. It is the story of how a small group of people brought an end to the slave trade in England.

In 1807, at a time when slavery was a universally accepted part of life, at a time when the livelihoods of some powerful people in Great Britain were dependent to a large extent upon the slave-driven plantations in the

Caribbean (slavery was never of much economic benefit to the regular people or overall wealth of a country); for the slave trade to be abolished was a singularly heroic and inspiring feat.

Shifting the perception of slavery from accepted practice to abhorrent evil is one of the great moral leaps of mankind.

While *Amazing Grace* focuses on the life of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the British member of parliament who tenaciously held to his purpose for 23 years, there is a fantastic book, *Bury the Chains* by Adam Hochschild, that centers around the life of the man who *inspired* Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846).

Clarkson's role was to travel the country, gathering information and evidence of the slave trade's abuses, and generating support among the population for the abolition of the slave trade. Without Clarkson's single minded and tireless pursuit of his goal, Wilberforce would not have had the evidence or the popular support he needed to bring his substantial efforts to pass.

There is one moment, and one decision, that made this possible...

Clarkson had been on his way to London to begin a promising career in the Church of England, having won the country's Latin contest (a huge accomplishment and honor at that time). The subject for his essay was, "*Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?*"

Unfortunately for Clarkson's budding career, but very fortunately for the world, he took his research into this essay very seriously.

What he found so disturbed and horrified him that, on his ride to London, haunted by what he now knew, he stopped and made a decision:

"Coming in sight of Wade's Mill in Hertfordshire, I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought came into my mind, that *if the contents of the essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end.*"

And that is exactly what Clarkson did.

That decision made Clarkson the "Moral Steam Engine" (this is what Samuel Coleridge called him) of the abolition movement. In Hochschild's words: "If there had been no Clarkson, there would still have been a movement in Britain, but perhaps not for some time to come."

My point here is twofold: To encourage you to read this book, and see this movie, because to my mind it is one of the truly heroic and moving moments in history; and to demonstrate the power of a compelling idea.

I have been honored to see moments of epiphany in my clients over the years, in which seemingly all of a sudden, they make a decision, or come to an understanding, or have a vision of possibilities that utterly and irreversibly changes their lives.

It is often in those moments that we take possession of ourselves and set a course and purpose for our life.

I don't know how to advise you to go out and get such an epiphany. I don't know that the moments that I've witnessed in my clients had to do with anything that I did or said.

It seems to come from a kind of preparation, an attention and a focus upon something that makes fertile the soil of one's heart. I suppose that the lesson is to pay attention to what moves us; to pay attention to what we care most about, and to take seriously our hopes and dreams.

But there is a further lesson here.

When I consider the story of these abolitionists, I think of the grand course of the progress of humanity. In a sense, history can be seen as the story of the growth of empathy and respect for the individual, and the challenges, tragedies and triumphs of the men and women who shepherd these qualities along. (And as we will see in coming columns, the dignity and liberty for ordinary people to innovate – the shift in ideas that allowed for the Great Enrichment we have been in the midst of since about 1800).

When I think of what such people have done, the feeling I get is of profound gratitude, awe, and reverence.

If not for people like Clarkson and Wilberforce, there could easily have been a continuation of the slave trade for many years beyond 1807 (The United States also abolished the trade – though unfortunately not slavery itself – in 1808, as soon as was legislatively possible following the move by Great Britain).

If not for Johannes Gutenberg, there may have been no printing press for generations, and the literacy that has been at the heart of our humanitarian revolution could have been delayed significantly.

If not for Thomas Jefferson, we would not have the beautiful Vision Statement of America that moved the world: the Declaration of Independence. If not for the thinkers from whom he learned – Aristotle, Locke, Voltaire, Bacon, Newton – he and the other enlightenment thinkers and actors on the world stage may never have imagined that vision.

These are just a few of the big names, but our liberty, our prosperity, and our increasingly humanitarian civilization have been built by countless men and women who have taken their ideas and their values and committed them to action – and they have seen their commitments through to their end.

You may be one of them. *Each of us has the capacity to be a moral steam engine in our own lives.*

Not in the name of perfection, or in an irritated and impatient comparison to some imagined ideal. But as a commitment and ownership of our own deeply held values; and in profound gratitude for the giants, and the ordinary people doing extraordinary things who have brought us this far... moving us along our humanitarian revolution.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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