

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY COMMITTING TO LIFE WITHOUT CRISIS

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The Leap of Faith – Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

I'm used to hearing from people in crisis. As a psychotherapist and life coach, it's part of my business. It may be a crisis in a marriage, a crisis at work, a financial crisis... There are many places for crises to wreak havoc in our lives.

Some crises are unavoidable. We control only so much of what happens in our lives, and sometimes life throws hardship, tragedy, or deeply chaotic circumstances our way. I don't make light of or gloss over the realities of life; but I do make it my business to help people to avoid *unnecessary* troubles, and there is one thing that we *can* do to prevent some of the more predictable crises of life:

Make and hold your positive commitments all the way, without reservation.

It's no mystery that making solid commitments is central to a happy, successful life. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "At the moment of commitment, the universe conspires to assist you."

Pat Riley said, "There are only two options regarding commitment. You're either in or you're out. There's no such thing as life in-between."

And then there are the famous words of Yoda to Luke Skywalker: "Do, or do not. There is no try."

There are so many great quotes and sayings about commitment that it's easy for the profound truth to get lost in the platitudes. Today we're going to ground this abstract concept into a tangible strategy for real-life results.

We all know – in theory – how important commitment is, and yet one of the biggest problems I confront with my clients on a regular basis is a lack of commitment. This undermines their work, their relationships, their striving towards the life they want to live.

So for all the beautiful sayings and lessons about commitment, something seems to be missing.

As with many fundamental skills, it may often come down to the need, as Aristotle would say, to practice this virtue until it is a habit.

Commitment requires something of a leap of faith. Like Indy's Leap of Faith to reach the Grail, we are ordering our future without any assurance of what that future will bring. It asks us to remove the safety harness, forgo the escape hatch, burn the ships that could take us back to our familiar life, and believe that we can handle the risks *and the rewards* of commitment.

Commitment requires trust: trust in ourselves, trust in the people and circumstances we are committing to... and trust in the act of commitment itself. One way to build such trust when we don't already have it is to practice commitment as we can; and to understand why it matters so very much.

By holding a commitment lightly, we make ourselves the victims of passing feelings, idealistic fantasies,

Hollywood and pop-psychology visions of happiness, popular fads and opinion polls, and the vicissitudes of life. We are open to the lure of temptation. A pretty face can draw us from our marriage; a short-term pleasure like surfing the web can disengage us from our work.

Withholding our devotion places us in a passive relationship to life, and to the people and events that fill our lives. External forces can seduce us from our highest values as though we were simple mechanisms of stimulus and response. We “keep our options open,” and by doing so put ourselves at the mercy of whatever options may happen to appear.

We tend to use the passive voice to describe our troubles: An affair “just happened.” The project “just fell apart.” No author, no identifiable cause. The passive voice puts us at the mercy of events; the active voice is the voice of self-ownership and commitment.

A lack of commitment to our highest values can create tremendous anxiety; and turn every conflict, every decision, and every challenge, into a potential crisis. Every small problem can throw the *entire* commitment into question... And *that* is a major source of avoidable crisis.

In a marriage, if we’re in it *almost* all the way – unless it gets too challenging, or someone better comes along – then every conflict will hold a string that can pull at the entire fabric of the marriage.

Whenever there’s a fight, or feelings of misunderstanding, or a significant disagreement, instead of focusing entirely on solving that particular problem – as a team, as allies – part of our thoughts and feelings can send an existential ripple through to the original commitment itself.

“He doesn’t understand me... Maybe I made the wrong decision in marrying him.” “This argument really hurts... Maybe I could be in a different relationship without arguments.” Such thoughts can still cause mischief 20 or 30 years into a marriage. Instead of looking to solve the specific sources of pain – ways of increasing understanding, or learning and changing how we argue together – the temptation can be to get out.

(I’m speaking here of the normal range of marital troubles. There are, unfortunately, circumstances where it is best for such a commitment to be broken – violence, unremitting substance abuse, or other behavior that is just purely hurtful and unacceptable.)

Now to the practical application: *Take a minute and reflect on the difference between those areas of your life where you are unreservedly committed, and those areas where you are not.*

In which of these areas do you feel the most satisfied and successful? Is it where you are most committed? I’d bet that it is. If so, is it possible to bring that same level of commitment to other areas of your life?

Let’s make it more tangible still (courtesy of the work of Peter Gollwitzer of NYU): Choose a goal that matters to you right now.

- Identify the *very first action* you must take at this point to move closer to that goal.
- Commit fully to a time and place when you will take that action.
- Map out the other steps you need to take to reach that goal.
- Commit fully to those other steps. It’s not enough to commit to the goal; it is the commitment to the *steps toward that goal* that will get you there.

This is not a bumper sticker or a parable; it is a concrete plan of action. If you commit to that plan of action,

your chances of actually reaching your goal will be dramatically higher than if you don't.

Practicing and experiencing the power of total commitment in this concrete way can help to grow our trust for committing to our more abstract values as well.

By committing 100% to our marriage, our business, our kids, our important projects... we enlist all that we have toward making those things work. The commitment itself is non-negotiable, inviolable. Any problems that arise must be solved; any conflicts must be resolved or reconciled.

Struggling with these problems and conflicts can be daunting, nerve-wracking, and frustrating. But the energy and focus that total commitment brings is usually more than enough to see them through.

Total commitment sets us looking for strengths from which to draw, not weaknesses from which to *withdraw*... and can spare us many of the avoidable – but all too common – crises of life.

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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