

January Book Summary

By Dan Brent

Heroic Living: Discover Your Purpose and Change the World by Chris Lowney
Loyola Press, 2009, \$22.95.

Author Lowney sets out to coach the reader in “three vital skills”. “1. Articulate a purpose worth the rest of your life. 2. Make wise career and relationship choices in this changing, uncertain world. 3. Make every day matter by mindful attention to your thoughts, actions, and results.” (p.ix)

Corporations need to reinvent themselves based on the changing marketplace. The author uses Kodak as an example. Kodak had to shift from the leading name in photography when that was a chemical business to finding a role as a competitor in digital photography. People must grapple with similar issues as their life situations change. “Who are we? Why are we here? What are we trying to accomplish?” (p.7)

The search for meaning begins with a recognition that we need to make that search. “We in the developed world have failed to make ourselves any happier or more fulfilled than we were decades ago. We don’t have the satisfaction we crave, yet we are too shortsighted to notice that the road we’re traveling won’t get us there.” (p.32) So we need to begin by figuring out what we want from our life. Lowney quotes Seneca, the Roman philosopher. “If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable.” (p.39) For the Christian, the goal has been set out by Jesus. “We claim a common Father, yet we don’t always treat our brothers and sisters accordingly. . . . We know the kingdom has come when love of God above all else, and when love of neighbor as oneself, determine our thoughts, words, and deeds.” (p.42)

“Your values,” the author writes, “are not what you say or print in a brochure, but how you treat people.” (p.82) He illustrates consistency between values and behavior with several stories. One of them is about Johnson and Johnson and its 1982 corporate decision to recall all 30 million bottles of Tylenol when someone used the medicine to kill randomly. And values must capture our hearts if they are to direct our lives. Ignatius found himself reduced by a battle injury from a proud warrior to a deformed invalid. But his subsequent conversion captured his imagination and his enthusiasm and drove the rest of his life.

Your goals and values now drive the choices you make. Making good choices requires openness, a willingness to take quiet time to ponder options, and attentiveness to the internal signs that hint at whether possibilities being considered are positive or not. “The best indicator of a sound choice is that head, heart, and spirit converge around a common answer.” (p.132) An outside counselor is also helpful, as is the effort to see the advantages and disadvantages of a course of action from a variety of perspectives. The book has an effective section on embracing decisions. “Think of it this way: only when you are free to risk failure are you free to risk success. . . . In life, as on that J. P. Morgan trading floor, we often profit only by taking appropriate risk.” (p.143) Failed decisions

become learning opportunities. Besides, risks are unavoidable. “In fact, our choices are the only bridge between where we stand now and the port to which we want to head.” (p.144)

The reassuring reality is that God participates in our major decisions. Elijah did not hear God in the wind or earthquake but in the sound of silence. And “the gifts and talents God has given us are clues as to God’s plan for us.” (p.151)

The final section of the book is about getting results, making things happen. “Often we don’t get things done for the simple reason that we don’t focus intently on what we should actually be doing. We aspire to lofty goals but don’t figure out what to do tomorrow and the next day to make those goals reality.” (p.157) The emphasis is on *focus*. “Great managers (at Morgan) made tough either-or choices that directed effort and talent toward a limited number of objectives.” Lowney quotes Archbishop Oscar Romero, “We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and do it very well.” (p.163)

“We need to live ‘inside out’ by setting our own standards of personal success.”(p.169) We need, the author is suggesting, to think through and personalize what we want from our lives and our spirituality. As with other components of our lives, we need to set goals, monitor our progress, and hold ourselves accountable. Lowney believes that the daily “examine” is an effective tool for our ongoing accountability to our aspirations.

Each section of the book finishes with a short set of questions to shape personal reflections on the reader’s personal quest. For example, in the context of personal accountability, the author asks, “*What would success look like in your work this week? In your personal life? In your most important relationships?*” (p.171) These sections make it easy to use this book for prayer or to structure a retreat experience.

“We’re better than we think we are. We are not quite what we want to be or can be: we have more potential than we imagine.” (p.191) So, “with a clear strategy and the courage of our convictions, we can embrace great purpose, make good choices, and get things done every day of our complicated lives.” (p.194)

If you’re familiar with typical business value statements, goal-setting, and performance evaluations, the material in this book will all sound familiar. But where before have you seen it applied to the spiritual life?