

WHO'S TO BLAME?  
PEOPLE, CIRCUMSTANCES, OR DNA?

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THE **NO-EXCUSE PLAN** FOR  
OVERCOMING LIFE'S OBSTACLES

**DR. HENRY CLOUD**  
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THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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This book is dedicated to all those who cope with other people's blame and those who want to deal with their own. May you find solutions for your struggles and accomplish your dreams.  
God bless you.

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## Introduction

**I**t has been said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who get what they want, and those who don't. Winners and losers.

Have and have not. And the sad thing is that some people feel that they are stuck in the wrong group and forever destined never to get what they want out of life.

In reality, however, it is not that black and white. While there are some clear winners and losers, more often we see that most people have some areas of life where they are able to make it all work, and other areas where they are stuck. Since you are reading this, it is doubtful that everything in your life is failing. It is likely, however, that there *is* some area where you have not quite been able to close the gap between what you desire and the results you are actually getting. If that is the case, this book is for you.

While it is not altogether true that people can be divided into two types clearly labeled winners and losers, they can be divided into two types in another way. And which of those types you are *will absolutely determine whether or not you find more of what you want in life*. What are the two types?

*Those who take responsibility for their lives, and those who don't.*

That is the topic of this book. We can assert with the utmost confidence, from both research and experience, that the information and guidance we'll give you in these pages has the power to transform not only those areas where you are stuck and want to get moving, but even seemingly hopeless situations. This is not just theory. This No-Excuse Plan has been proven to work for as long as history has kept records of changed lives.

### **WINNERS IN A CULTURE OF BLAME**

We live in a culture of blame. People will blame anyone or anything for their misery sooner than take the responsibility to own it and make it better. Blame has become institutionalized in our courts, legislatures, and schools; it pervades our psychology and medical thought and even our moral and spiritual lives. The result? More people with more misery, but always with someone or something else to blame it on.

While blame may ease some of the anxiety, guilt, fear, or sense of responsibility, *it does nothing to solve the problems*. As long as we think, feel, or act as if there is nothing we can do about whatever we struggle with, we will remain stuck.

You probably know or have known people who always have an excuse, never taking ownership for what they could do to make their situation better. If you know such a person, then you know the frustration of trying to help someone who will not take responsibility. As psychologists, we have seen it a thousand times. Often, within the first five minutes of talking with someone, we can tell that solving his or her problem is going to be a long, uphill battle. Not because the particular problem itself is unsolvable or the condition untreatable, but because the most important factor required for overcoming it is missing: the ability to take responsibility for one's own life.

On the other hand, when someone *does* have that one ingredient—the ability to take responsibility—we have more than just a vague hope for him or her. *We know that this person will get better.* It borders on absolute certainty.

And that is what we believe about you as well. If you are willing to do what all the winners in the world do in that area of your life that seems stuck, then your future can be different. Taking responsibility in this way does not at all imply that your situation is your *fault* or that you caused it. It only means that since you find yourself in it, you are willing to put your arms around it and take ownership to make it better.

We understand that it sometimes takes more than just willingness. There are willing, responsible people who sometimes remain stuck. But in those cases, the missing ingredients are usually the information, guidance, and resources necessary to bring about change. And we will help you by supplying those very items. We will join your willingness to take ownership of your life, even if you did not cause your problem or situation, and we will guide you in taking the steps that can lead you to the place where you want to be. Sometimes all it takes for good, responsible people to take ownership of a situation and make a change is just to know what the next steps are.

For example, a person may be in a relationship with someone who truly is a “problem.” It really *is* the other person’s fault. But even when dealing with a problem person, you will learn that if you just know what responsible steps to take from your side, you can change a relationship and sometimes even turn the person around. Or if you know what responsible steps to take in a situation like depression or anxiety, where the symptoms are sometimes caused by trauma or bad treatment from others, you can change a situation that you did not cause.

## FINDING THE MISSING PIECE

Whether it involves a clinical issue, such as depression, anxiety, or addiction; a relational problem, such as marriage or dating; or a career that will not get moving—if you are willing to be the kind of person who takes responsibility for what you *can* do and change your focus from what you *cannot* control, you can improve the situation or solve the problem. God designed you to be able to do that, and he will empower you to bring it about.

So, to both kinds of people reading this book—those who have not yet taken responsibility for their lives, and those who are ready to do it but do not know what to do in a particular situation—we invite you to read on. Discover how *responsibility* is not a negative word, but the one piece that has been missing in your quest to realize your dreams and desires.

Henry Cloud, Ph.D.  
John Townsend, Ph.D.

1



**You Can Own  
Your Own Life**

# 1

*Excuses change nothing, but make everyone feel better.*

—MASON COOLEY

Where should the line be drawn between an individual’s own responsibility to take care of herself and society’s responsibility to ensure that others shield her?”

What do you think these words could be referring to? What evil does the questioner suggest is lurking out there that society needs to come to grips with so you and I will be safe?

Nuclear war? I agree. A society should place the responsibility on its own shoulders to protect us all from nuclear holocaust. How about serial killers? Another good guess. The FBI spends a lot of time and resources taking responsibility for making sure that you are safe from the Hannibal Lecters of the world. What about an outbreak of bird flu, E. coli, or some other deadly disease? Right again. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has your back covered.

So which of these mortal dangers was the opening quote referring to when it asked where society should step in and make sure that you are okay?

The answer: *none*. Guess what the culprit was that spawned this quote. I will give you a hint. The quote comes from a ruling by a United States Federal judge. Still wondering?

The perpetrator so dangerous that protection from it may require the collective power of our entire society is—

## *a McDonald’s hamburger.*

Just think. It took a judge in United States Federal Court to figure out the answer to that question. Why? Because two girls were overweight and claimed that McDonald’s was responsible for their eating habits. The attorney for the plaintiffs argued that McDonald’s food was “physically or psychologically addictive.” From that perspective, the poor girls just did not have a chance. The Golden Arches reached out and grabbed them, pulled them in, and force-fed them.

But, common sense—and as we shall argue—the created order, prevailed. Part of the judge’s opinion held that “if consumers know (or reasonably should know) the potential ill health effects of eating at McDonald’s, they cannot blame McDonald’s if they, nonetheless, choose to satiate their appetite with a surfeit of supersized McDonald’s products.”<sup>1</sup>

Thank you, Judge, for bringing some sanity to this picture. But it begs a bigger question. How did we get to the place where someone would even think that they could sue a hamburger chain for their weight problem? Was it the permissive sixties that did away with personal responsibility in our culture? Was it humanism that said humanity is basically good and it is our poor environment that causes us to make

mistakes? Was it permissive parenting that taught an entire generation to think that nothing is its responsibility—nothing bad that happens is ever my fault? Was it the psychologists who said that to discipline a child might hurt his self-esteem? Or was it all those hamburgers we ate that made us think this way?

Actually, as much as we like to talk about how far society has gone astray (and there is truth to that), blaming others is not a new problem created by twenty-first century America. Though we do seem to have perfected blame as a cultural and legal art form, it is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, it has been part of human nature from the beginning of time.

When God asked Adam the equivalent of “Why did you eat the hamburger?”—in Adam’s case the forbidden fruit—Adam quickly blamed his wife: “The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it’” (Genesis 3:12 NIV).

When God asked Eve about the issue, she offloaded responsibility in a similar fashion. “Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate’” (Genesis 3:13 NIV).

All Adam needed was an attorney and he could have sued God, Eve, and the serpent. Or maybe they could have bonded together and filed the first class-action suit. But the truth is that there is a fundamental problem with human nature, as philosophers, psychologists, and theologians have noted for centuries. The problem is simply this: *we fail to take responsibility for our own lives.*

We shift the blame, and the responsibility, to others. It is just a part of who we are, and it has been that way from day one. We did not learn it from our environment, although our environment can augment it. Instead, we bring it into the world as a tendency that comes with being human.

Now, certainly we have *reasons* why we do not take ownership for our own behavior and lives. Adam and Eve did it, in part, because they were ashamed and afraid. Those are big reasons for us as well. No one ever said that we blame for no good reason. Even the girls in the McDonald’s lawsuit had struggles and determinants that were making self-control difficult for them. There is no doubt about that. Perhaps they felt ashamed, powerless, or afraid. Anyone who thinks they are going to help an overweight person by just saying, “It is your choice. Stop eating,” has either never been overweight or has never worked with many overweight people or addicts. External factors do influence our behavior. Even the Bible affirms that.

But, the fact that there are reasons that drive us to do things, and the question of whether we are responsible for what we do with that are two very different matters. The bottom line is this: No matter what reason drives someone to overeat, whether it’s stress, McDonald’s advertising, boredom, lack of education, a bad childhood, or whatever, there is still a reality: *if you overeat, you will gain weight.* The “why” you did it, no matter how valid, will not solve the problem. The same thing happens in people’s lives every day. *When we succeed in blaming someone for our problems, we still are no closer to a solution for them.* Still, we do it anyway to make ourselves feel temporarily better. And when we do, we still have the problems.

If these girls had won their lawsuit, it would have been the worst thing that could

have happened to them, for it would have reinforced the belief that someone else was in control of their behavior. Thus, it would have gotten them no closer to solving their weight problem.

It may have helped the girls feel better in some way to have been awarded a big settlement for McDonald's having made them fat. They might have temporarily gotten over some bad feelings about being overweight. I don't know them, so I can't say. But, I can say one thing: they would not have been one step closer to being a normal weight. Not one ounce. Not one fraction. Why? *Because they are the only ones who can do anything about the real problem. They are the only ones who can refuse to eat the burgers.* They are the only ones in control of that. And in the end, it is all about control. Who ultimately has it? As we shall see, that is ultimately the only thing that matters.

## IT IS ALL ABOUT CONTROL

I know a man whose childhood was not the greatest. His mother used him for her own needs and his father did not provide the crucial support to give him confidence to accomplish his dreams. In very real ways, he was shortchanged. Now he works at a job that he doesn't like and dates a woman who treats him much like his parents did. She uses him and is not supportive.

Every time he thinks about his hated work or his poor relationship, he reacts in a familiar pattern. He gets bugged and complains. None of his problems are his own fault. He complains about how the company doesn't care about him, and how they use their employees for their own ends. And he complains about how his girlfriend thinks only about herself, and how she always gets her own way. When I asked him about looking for a new job, he said his girlfriend has a lot going on right now, and he spends so much time helping her that there's little left for job hunting. "Plus," he said, "they really aren't hiring in my field right now."

"What about another field?" I asked. "What about your interest in computer science that you told me about?"

"Well, I would have to get another degree," he said.

"Yeah, so why don't you do that?" I asked.

"Well, you know how schools are with mid-career people. They don't like to admit students into those adult programs without experience in the field. The ones with the experience are the ones who get the spots," he said.

Thus the conversation continues in an endless circle. Finally I give up. *Poor guy*, I think to myself. *He's stuck in a prison.* But the thing about his prison is that he is the one who holds the key, and yet he doesn't know it. He is the one in control of his life and yet he feels as if everyone else is. He is the only one who can do anything about his problems, and yet he is the one who says he can't do anything. From his perspective, his troubles are not his fault. If only his girlfriend would become less needy and demanding; or if only his company would care and do more for him; or if only colleges would get more understanding—only then would his life ever be different. It is always up to someone else to make it better. And since they don't, it gets

no better.

Now, if you were to ask him, he would not say this outright. But that is, in effect, what he *is* saying and living out each day. For, if his girlfriend, his employer, and the college are the reasons that things are not better for him, then his only hope of anything ever getting any better is that they change for him. In his mind, they have all the power and control over his life.

The overweight girls had the same attitude. “If McDonald’s made me this way, then my only hope is for McDonald’s to do something to make me different.” Guess what. Neither McDonald’s, my friend’s girlfriend, his company, or the colleges are holding meetings right now on how they plan to make these people’s lives different. The people themselves are the only ones who can do that.

I have another friend from a similar background. Very little support, encouragement, or help from her family. They hurt her in two ways: first, by the various harmful things that they inflicted on her. And second, by depriving her of the good things she needed. But her reaction was quite different from that of the first friend I mentioned.

Somewhere along the line she learned the difference between what happens to us and what we do with it. She learned that it’s not the bad things that happen to us that determines our destiny; it’s how we respond to them. She learned that no one can have control over your life if you do not let them. In short, she learned that she “owns” her life, not someone else. And it is the owner who has the rights.

She learned that if her family did not provide the support and validation she needed, she was free to find it from other people. And she did. She joined a spiritual community that loved her and supported her. From that base, she grew to be emotionally strong. Although her parents inflicted lots of emotional pain on her, she learned that she was free to find help in dealing with that pain, to learn new patterns of relating, and to get well. So she diligently went to sustained therapy, joined support groups, and overcame the significant pain in her life. Today she is very healthy.

Although this woman’s parents did not support her intellectual pursuits in any form, including financially, she learned that she could make her own choices and take responsibility for those interests herself. So she got jobs, paid for school, and eventually achieved a graduate degree and became a professional in a high-paying field.

This woman also learned that no matter how hurtful one’s relationships may be in early life, in your adult life you can choose relationships with people who will not be hurtful. She chose to marry a good, honest, and responsible man.

Even though God did not instantly deliver this woman from suffering the very moment she prayed, either in childhood or beyond, she learned that she did not have to choose to believe that he is not there or does not care just because healing is not instantaneous. Instead, she chose to believe what he says about our living in a world where people have freedom and choices, and sometimes they use that freedom to hurt us. She understood that he is not to blame for that. As a result, she kept alive a faith that led her to many experiences of his intervention, healing, and deliverance. She did not become bitter toward God or, like the Israelites facing the difficulties of the desert, give up her faith and abandon God. Instead, she became one of those who followed

him *through* the desert to the Promised Land.

And, in what I think is her greatest *achievement*, this woman learned that although your own parents might not give you what you need in life, you do not have to continue that pattern and pass it to another generation. Instead, she gave her children great parenting, and they grew up to be healthy, responsible people.

Her life did not belong to her circumstances, her parents, her lack of resources, or her lack of options. Her life belonged to her. It was a gift from God. And she was not going to allow what had happened to her be in charge of the rest of her life. Just because how she was treated was someone else's fault, which it was, she did not wait for someone else to make it better. She owned her life. Even if she didn't cause the problems, she was proactive about solving them. She was in charge of what went on from that point forward. That was the difference between my two friends. One was a perpetual victim, and the other was a victorious person.

## WHAT IS A PERSON?

In the beginning, the Bible tells us, God created people "in his image" (Genesis 1:27). This means a lot of things, but one thing stands out as it relates to our present subject: the ability to choose what one wants to be. This ability to choose is what is referred to as "will." Literally, the term "will" means "desire." But for humans created in God's image, it means much more than that. The animals have desire, or appetite. But only humans have the ability not merely to desire things, but also the *creative* will to take responsibility for that desire and bring about the achievement of it. That creative ability resides in the nature of God, and he has passed it on to us. Your dog is pretty much going to live where you decide he will live. But you, being human rather than canine, have a creative choice. God has delegated two things to you:

The ability to create and respond to life

The reality consequences of those choices

Often you cannot choose what happens to you. You cannot determine which cards you are dealt. But you can always do something:

*You can always create, seek, and find a range of options to determine how you will respond to what happens, and how you will play the cards in your hand.*

Adam did not choose how many trees were given to him in the garden. But, he did choose which to eat from. The girls in the lawsuit did not choose for McDonald's to make and advertise food that could make them gain weight. But, they did choose how they would respond to that advertising. My first friend did not choose parents who taught him what non-supportive relationships were like. But he did choose to find a girlfriend who was like them. Furthermore, he chose to allow her non-support and self-centeredness to control his life. He also chose to stay in the state that his family left him in rather than make an attempt to grow out of it. It was easier to blame than to change. As a result, he was choosing his life, one sentence of blame at a time.

We do not always like the enormous freedom to choose that we actually possess. It frightens us. It makes us responsible. But it is a reality. That freedom to choose is the element that explains the difference between my two friends. Both were from difficult

backgrounds and faced difficult obstacles. But the way each chose to respond to those circumstances was very different. And their different choices created very different outcomes.

Each of us faces difficult circumstances in life. God grants each of us talents, brains, and abilities with which to meet them. And then he gives us the choice as to how we will respond. He gives us enormous freedom and responsibility. Listen to how this delegation of responsibility is described from the beginning:

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (Genesis 2:19 NIV)

God did not name the animals for Adam. What he did do was give Adam the creative ability to come up with options and name them. Had my first friend been the one in the garden, he might have said, “That’s just like God, isn’t it? Tells me to name all these creatures but doesn’t even provide me with a list of possible names. How am I supposed to do this? He’s so non-supportive. Maybe I’ll sue him for a non-supportive work environment, lack of training, and poor employee assistance.”

That is very much like what the loser in the responsibility lottery said in the parable of the talents. Remember the story? The master gives three people different amounts of resources to invest. The first two make their investments and get nice returns. The master rewards them with more resources. But the third was like my first friend. He blamed the master for not giving him what he thought he needed to make it work, so he did nothing with what had been entrusted to him. Listen to his words:

Then the man who had received the one talent came. “Master,” he said, “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.”

His master replied, “You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

“Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:24–30 NIV)

Notice something. God did not say, “What are you talking about? I have not been mean to you! I have given you everything you needed to be successful with your talent!” Nor did he say, “Gosh, you are right. It is tough to only have one talent. Here, I will do your work for you.” Neither what God had given this man nor what he had not given him was the issue. The issue was just one thing: what had he done with what *was* given him? How had he used it? How had he responded to the options that were available to him? Had he tried his best and failed, he would not have been graded on the failure. He was graded simply on whether or not he had acted responsibly with what had been dealt to him.

When the man made excuses, accusing God of harshness to the point of expecting too much of a person, God could have said, “No, I am not harsh. I do not ask for a return where I have not given anything. Didn’t I start you out with a talent?” But he didn’t say this because *the issue was deeper than whether or not the servant had a good excuse*. In fact, God’s answer to the man recognized that his excuses may have been real! But they didn’t matter. He said that even if those things were true, the man

still should have at least done *something* ! At the very least he should have taken responsibility and put the money to some kind of use. In other words, *there is no excuse*.

Perhaps our excuses may somewhat define and describe our options, but they do not do away with our responsibility. We still have the freedom to respond to whatever comes our way, whether we get tons of talents or only one.

All of us have certain areas of our life in which we only get “one talent.” And those are the areas where we will be most afraid to make a positive choice. But God has designed the universe in such a way that he expects us to use the freedom he has given us to take responsibility for our situation, find the possible options, and respond to them.

And the results of our choices will simply be what they are. He does not always shield us from bad results, although at times he may. Most of the time, he allows us to reap the rewards of our choices, whether positive or negative. He will not smile indulgently at our foolish choices and think he is responsible for bailing us out. In fact, that was part of the devil’s temptation of Jesus. Satan told Jesus to just jump off the high precipice, and not to worry, because God would save him. He even used a Bible quote to back up his temptation. But Jesus came back with a very firm reinforcement of the principle of responsibility. “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Luke 4:12 NIV). It is not an act of faith to fail to take responsibility for our lives and then think that God is somehow responsible for the outcome.

It began with God giving Adam and Eve a Paradise along with the abilities to rule it, and then holding them responsible for what happened. That was simply the created order of things. And that created order still remains, although now it’s marred and mixed up by sin. God gives us a life and various degrees of resources to manage it and cope with it. Sometimes he allows bad things to happen and offers us help and other ways out of, or through, the difficulty. But even when he helps us and gives us resources, he still requires responsibility from us to live our lives by making responsible choices, and the results will always testify to how well we make those choices.

This is not just some brand of theoretical theology. If you don’t believe me, step on the scales and look at reality. McDonald’s or not, the scales don’t lie; our lives weigh-in at what they truly are. Reality is what it is. And much of what ultimately constructs that reality is our choice. Much of it is up to us.

## HOW WE GIVE AWAY OWNERSHIP BY DEMANDING THAT LIFE BE FAIR AND JUST

When we think of the terms *just* or *fair*, we are thinking about the way life *ought* to be. The dictionary defines *just* as what is *right* or *deserved*. When you say, “He got his just desserts,” you are saying he got what he deserved in the situation. He got justice, and justice is one of the most important concepts in the universe. One of the hallmarks of a spiritual person, according to the Bible, is practicing justice and seeking it for those who are not getting it, especially those unable to seek it for themselves.

But the very reason that God asks us to seek and practice justice is that we live in a world that does not operate justly. The stark reality is that the world as we find it today is not a just or fair place. It does not operate according to the rules of how things “ought to be.” People often do not get what they deserve. In fact, people often get things they don’t deserve, awful things that hurt them in significant ways. That is the reality we encounter in this world. And part of believing in God and serving him is to right anything we find that is hurting someone, thus dealing with this harsh reality.

People who own their lives own them in reality, not in the fantasy world of the way life *ought* to be. That means they take ownership of their lives in the world that is, not the world as they wish it were. They own the fact that we live in a world that is neither fair nor just, and they deal with that reality. They do not spend a lot of energy protesting that unfair reality, demanding that the world be different. They deal with their world as they find it. As a result, they are effective in finding solutions to life, even when life has dealt them hard realities that just “should not be.”

Other people, however, do not face reality so realistically. They refuse to own their lives in this world in which they find themselves. They want a different world—one that is fair and just, where people do what they are supposed to do. They want a world where people treat them the way they are supposed to be treated, and where good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. That is fair, and that is the way it should be.

That is a wonderful wish. That kind of world was God’s desire for us from the beginning. But that is not the world as it is. God came to grips with the fact that sin had messed up the created order, and he offered forgiveness to imperfect people, along with a chance for them to work through the unfairness and injustice to achieve a fulfilling life. But some people never get it; they never come to grips with the fact that the world is no longer perfect. They still want it to be perfect and sit around protesting the fact that it is not. They blame others, sometimes even rightly so, for their situations. It’s not their fault. And while they waste time thinking about how life *ought* to be, they remain stuck with their problems because they will not deal with reality as it really is.

Effective people are like my second friend. They desire justice and seek it. But when it does not show up, they do not remain stuck. They get active and find the best solution to their situation. They find answers that are not provided by those who are diminishing their lives with unfair burdens. Like God, they look at an imperfect world and deal with it. They don’t get stuck in the “life ought to be fair, and I am going to sit here and demand that it is” syndrome. They choose the “when life is not fair, I will do everything in my power to find an answer to the problem at hand” attitude.

One day on our radio show, a woman called in and said that her mother had treated her miserably during the Thanksgiving holiday. The caller had gone back to school and was pursuing her dreams, and her mother had criticized her for wasting time trying to improve herself. “My mom was so critical,” she said. “She just said the meanest things, like, ‘Why are you doing that? You’ll never make a living in that field. You are too old for this. Why don’t you just get a real job and get on with it?’ It was horrible. She ruined my whole holiday.”

Sensing that this caller was not a child, I said, “That’s terrible. By the way, how old

are you?”

“Forty.”

“So, is this the same mother you have had all those forty years?”

“Of course.”

“And is this the first time that she has ever been non-supportive or critical?”

“Why, *no!* She does this all the time. She is so mean. She always ruins my plans and dreams. She has never supported me.”

“Hmm. And what was it about this particular holiday that made you think that she was going to magically change and be a different person?” I asked, adding gently, “Why did you expect that to happen? Who do you think the crazy one is here?”

The caller did not like my point, but she got it. Sure, her mother should be a supportive person. In a perfect world, everyone should have a supportive mother. But her mother wasn't, and everyone doesn't. So the caller was ruining her life by dealing with it in a “life should be as it ought to be” manner. Instead of telling herself, “My mother is not a supportive person, so I had better come to grips with that and take responsibility for my needs to be supported,” she had plunged blindly ahead and acted in accord with the way that she wished the world was. As a result, she was disappointed.

If she had not held on to that fairness requirement, she could get on with life. Her call to me would have been different. I would have heard something like this:

“I just had the greatest holiday. After enrolling in school I went to see my mother. As usual, she ridiculed my decision and gave me a hard time over it. In the old days, I always wished for her to be supportive, and when she was not, I was always hurt and deflated. But now, instead of thinking that she should be something she is not, I got my support from friends who were able to give it before I visited my mother. So I didn't need to look to her for it. Instead, I was able just to be with her and love her as she is. I accepted her for who she is with her limitations and enjoyed her and the visit. As a result, I did not give her the power over my life that she used to have. It was a great holiday.”

That, by the way, is an actual conversation I had with a real person who was the kind who takes ownership of her life. As a result, she is able to live and love in the way that God does, accepting people for who they are and reality for what it is. That's the only way to deal with life effectively.

The big lesson here is this: *deal with life as it is*. Do not get stuck in protesting reality for what it “ought to be.” If you give up the demand that life and the people in it be something other than what they are, you will find creative solutions to every difficult situation. And you will be a more loving person.

And, before you get pessimistic that the person you care about can never change, that is not what we are saying. We'll have more to say later about how you can be an influence for change with people you love. But first, you must take ownership for your own situation, whatever it is. If your difficulty is a non-supportive husband or wife, accept the reality of the problem and take ownership of dealing with it. Then and only then will you be able to find the best solution. If you just remain stuck and complain that he or she ought to be different, and you remain powerless and miserable until that