SAMPLE CHAPTER

MARION MILNER

With a new introduction by Rachel Bowlby

A Life of One’s Own
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The next day I made another voyage; and now, having plundered the ship of what was portable, and fit to hand out, I began with the cables; and cutting the great cables into two pieces such as I could move, I got two cables and a hawser on shore, with all the iron work I could get; and having cut down the sprit-sail-yard and the mizen-yard, and everything I could to make a large raft, I loaded it with all those heavy goods, and came away. But my good luck began to leave me, for this raft was so unwieldy, and so overladen, that after I was entered the little cove where I had landed the rest of my goods, not being able to guide it so handily as I did the other, it overset and threw me and all my cargo into the water.

Daniel Defoe

In the last chapter I have tried to describe certain experiences which stand out in my memory as being of a different quality from my everyday perceptions. Such delights, however, were essentially solitary; I had never been able to find them when I was with other people, except in the loneliness of a crowd. But I was not content with a central point to my life which should cut me off from humanity, and I felt convinced there was more if only I could find it. I realized that the greater part of my days were spent with other people, partly by the necessities of work, partly by habit, partly by choice based on a vague desire to find something in companionship which continually eluded me; but not only did I fail to find any satisfactions approaching those of my
solitary moments, I also continued to suffer from those fears, anxieties and boredoms which had prompted my first setting out on this journey of discovery. So, during this time when I was trying to follow up and observe the habits of these strange birds of delight which I could sometimes tempt into my garden, I was also busy cultivating my own potato patch.

To follow the instructions given in a book was in a sense a reversal of my main principle, since the very aim of my enterprise was to try to observe the facts of my own life and to find out what was true for me. But at first my intention ran ahead of my capacity. Having found that it was not so easy to determine the facts, and being impatient to reach my goal as soon as possible, I was tempted by the glowing promises of the handbooks on mental training. So I went back over all the instructions that I had ever vaguely tried to follow at various times in the years before I had begun to ask what were the facts of my life.

From these books I had gathered that my chief task was to practise exercises in concentration, for they maintained that in order to adapt oneself to other people without tongue-tying self-consciousness it was necessary to control one’s thoughts as the occasion might demand. This had seemed sensible enough and I had then read that the essential first step in learning to concentrate was to decide what was one’s aim in life. So I had sat down cheerfully one day with a pencil and paper for this preliminary task, thinking to finish it and be ready to begin the exercises in half an hour or so. But I had found it was not so easy. The handbooks had suggested that one should want some definite achievement – to be promoted in one’s business, to earn so much money, to get something done – but none of such special aims that I had been able to think of seemed sufficient to enchannel all my enthusiasms. It seemed then that every time I had tried in the previous years to gain control of my thought I had been stopped at the outset by this difficulty. There had of course been times in the past when I had actually worked for a purpose, such as, for instance, obtaining training for my professional work. Whenever I had managed to hold such a partial purpose in mind I had certainly achieved more than I had
ever expected, but neither the working for a purpose nor some measure of success had brought the indirect results promised by the mental training system. I would still have had to put large ticks on their self-examination lists against: ‘self-conscious’, ‘lacking in will-power’, ‘wandering attention’, ‘self-distrustful’. And I was still quite unable to achieve the clear all-embracing purpose which it was said would cure these defects.

Certainly when I had first looked at my activities and tried to find an underlying motive, the dominant one had seemed to be trying to please people, to keep up with what was expected of me and to avoid offending. This was despicable, I felt, but perhaps the cure for it might be a dominant aim of my own which would lead me to be independent of what other people thought? Here I remembered an incident when I had not minded what other people thought, so strong had been my own urge. It was at the Zoo when I had been looking at the desert mice in the Small Mammal House. I suddenly had the idea that I would like one as a pet (I had had a series of dormice, lizards, white rats, as a child). The keeper told me it would be possible to buy one but I must apply at the office. Being Saturday the appropriate official was away. But I was not to be put off and surprised myself by the urgency of my determination to get that mouse. With a most unusual tenacity I went ahead, overruling the opposition and natural irritation which I encountered. In the end I went home in triumph with my mouse, vaguely puzzled at having been so importunate.

It seemed then that I was not incapable of strong purpose. The problem was really how to bring such energy of desire into relation with my everyday life – I could not build my life around the possession of a desert mouse. So, giving up for the moment the attempt to find a single purpose, I looked amongst my papers and found a list I had once tried to make of all the things I thought I wanted. There is no date on the scrap of paper on which this is written but I think I made it before I began to keep a daily record of ‘wants’ in my diary. Here is the list, and I have added notes to explain what I remember was in my mind at the time:
– a perfect companion (when writing this I remembered how, as a child, although I had several very good friends, I was always looking for one who would really share my interest in birds and animals. I used to review hopefully all new children who came to live in our road).

– to be famous for some service to the race, a great pioneer work (this was in my moods of uplift).

– a great many friends.

– to achieve a unique work of art (I think I meant, paint a great picture).

– to ‘plumb to the depths of human experience’.

– to be recognized as a unique individual (I wanted my separateness recognized, for I remembered how sometimes my father used to attribute to my elder sister something which I had done, confusing our names).

– to be in people’s confidence (I had always felt a little out of it at school and one day when very young I was delighted because two girls I admired told me a secret. I went home singing: ‘I know a secret, I know a secret’).

This was all very well but I could now see why it had not brought me much further; for I had never been able to decide which one of these could be made the central purpose of my life. I could easily make lists of whatever came into my head but could not decide between them because in one mood one would be important, in a different mood another; I had never followed any one of them whole-heartedly. I had thought I wanted a great many friends, but had often refused invitations because I hated to feel the beautiful free space of an empty day, free for me to do what I liked in, broken into by social obligations. I had thought I wanted to be a unique individual, but had been filled with shame when anyone disagreed with me, hastening to take back what I had said. I had thought I wanted to be importantly useful in the world, but avoided all opportunities for responsibility. I had thought I wanted to plumb human experience to the depths, and yet had striven to remain immaculately aloof from all emotional disturbance.

One thing struck me as odd. The actual aims were
expressed in adult terms but the ideas which I felt explained them were chiefly in terms of childhood memories.

Then I found the record of another attempt to define my main purpose. One Saturday afternoon (still before I had begun to write my diary) I had been walking along the Thames tow-path towards Richmond, idly watching the crews practising on the river, when it came into my head that I knew what my purpose was. Now my work at that time was such that I must seek knowledge, read books, always be trying to amass more information; and – influenced no doubt by the current emphasis on science – I had thought at times that this was also my chief purpose. For instance, once after scanning some book on the history of the suffragette movement I was filled with the glow of noble inspiration, and wrote: ‘These people were epoch-makers politically ... surely the pioneers of the next advance will be dealing with the mind. Anyhow your job is the mind and to find out how it works.’ At that time I was still easily stirred to noble enthusiasms. But now in the grey February afternoon by the river I had known this was not true in the sense I had meant it; for the quietness of the weather had lapped over into my mind and stilled it so that I could see clearly into myself. When I came home I had scribbled on a scrap of old paper:

I want, not knowledge, but experience of the laws of things; to suffer them, not only to observe them. To apprehend with regard to the things I come across – the necessities of their being, what immutable law makes them what they are, their physics and chemistry and actuality, to feel it. . . . Knowing is no good unless you feel the urgency of the thing. Maybe this is love; your being becomes part of it, giving yourself to it.

When I had written this I immediately forgot it. Several years later I remembered the sense of understanding from that afternoon but not what I had understood. And now, when I was once more deliberately looking for a purpose, I happened to find the paper and although when I read it through it did not seem to mean much, I still had the feeling that it was important. Actually it has taken me many years...
to understand what I wrote then, so although I think now that I was right in looking on it as a true expression of my purpose, it could not serve as a principle by which I could deliberately guide my daily affairs. Certainly it did not seem at the time that I had found an aim which would give point to the exercises in concentration.

By now I had reviewed all my past attempts to find happiness by following the instructions of mental training experts. Gradually a conclusion began to emerge. Instead of, as always before, assuming that they were right and therefore my inability to reach the promised results must be due to my own weakness, I began to ask whether this really was the way to find what I wanted. I had been continually exhorted to define my purpose in life, but I was now beginning to doubt whether life might not be too complex a thing to be kept within the bounds of a single formulated purpose, whether it would not burst its way out, or if the purpose were too strong, perhaps grow distorted like an oak whose trunk has been encircled with an iron band. I began to guess that my self’s need was for an equilibrium, for sun, but not too much, for rain, but not always. I felt that it was as easily surfeited with one kind of experience as the body with one kind of food, and that it had a wisdom of its own, if only I could learn to interpret it. So I began to have an idea of my life, not as the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but as the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know. I wrote: ‘It will mean walking in a fog for a bit, but it’s the only way which is not a presumption, forcing the self into a theory.’

It took me a long time to realize the meaning of this discovery. Although I had kept a fairly regular diary for six months, had made records of my moments of delight, had made excursions into the hinterlands of my own mind, still I did not understand what was the crux of the problem. I had even achieved several of the things I had wanted in external life; for I was married, had reached America, and had opportunity of doing the kind of work I had hoped for. Yet my thoughts were still hovering round this problem of purposes. For in New York I wrote:

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I want to change my attitudes; it fills me with restlessness that I am always striving after something and I don’t know what it is. I envy people, artists chiefly. I want to achieve the play attitude. By this I mean concentration in an activity which has no apparent use just for the delight of doing it. Why do I want this? I don’t know quite, it just seems very desirable. Perhaps it gives freedom from this endless pursuit of one’s soul’s salvation . . . ‘he that would save his soul’ . . . I want to lose it . . . Play means to me freedom – freedom from fears. It is an expression of the dignity of the soul, enslaved in no bondage of justification. Perhaps then if I am to learn to play I must go down to hell and find what taskmaster is lurking there.

I walked down Fifth Avenue in the sparkling sun, impelled to be idle, but impelled to find some justification for my idleness. I was always full of purposes, always driving myself to do more things – to read more books, to learn more languages, to see more people, not to miss anything. Always I must ‘get on’, even amusing myself in the ordinary ways, going to night clubs, dances, was ‘getting on’ – ‘getting on’ in knowing about the ways of the world, a miser-like grabbing and piling up of experience.

I tried to reckon what I must pay to change this attitude. I wrote:

How many theatres and cinemas will I give up to think it out? Will thinking do it? How much shall I leave undone my official work for which I can receive justification? How much shall I amass fewer acquaintances? What self-idea must I throw overboard? The social self which wants everybody’s approval? I think her master is a fear in hell.

Here I felt was a most praiseworthy attempt to be business-like and count the cost of my intended enterprise. The trouble was that I did not know how to answer my own questions, and though guessing that I must give up something, I could not tell where might lie the crux of the surrender. Only I had a suspicion that my constant worry over the worthwhileness of what I did was concerned with some
dominating fear hidden in the dark hinterlands of thought. A little drawing, which I scribbled at the time, unknowingly, now seemed to illustrate the issues.

There is a figure on the right at the bottom who is separate from all the confusion and noise, and unable to achieve either the absorbed action of the sharp-shooter girl on horseback or the swooning abandon of the lady on the left. The drawing seems to show what the separated figure wants, but cannot get. Her attitude also shows the way she was trying to get it – by intense effort, determination. Although at the time the drawing meant nothing to me, I could now see it as a graphic expression of the fact that I did not know that I
could only get the most out of life by giving myself up to it. The markings on the left seem to express the general clash of impulses I felt, and the horses at the bottom probably stood for feelings of unused energy within.

It seemed then that my purpose in life was to get the most out of life. And because I was not capable of more than very muddled thinking, I still assumed that the way to this was to strive to do more and more things; and this, in spite of my intuition about the need for surrender. Here then was a deadlock. I wanted to get the most out of life, but the more I tried to grasp, the more I felt that I was ever outside, missing things. At that time I could not understand at all that my real purpose might be to learn to have no purposes.

This deadlock continued for more than a year. I still kept spasmodic diary records but had no idea how to begin to make use of the experiences I recorded. Then, still exasperated by my own incapacities and sense of inadequacy, I set out yet again to learn concentration by practising exercises. Again I read in the handbook of the need to define my chief purpose and also my subordinate purposes. And again I began with a question-mark under the heading of chief purpose, for I did not remember the purpose I had found by the river, or my dim guess of the need, not to grasp, but to give up. But under ‘subordinate purposes’ I wrote forty items. These comprised all the things I found myself trying to do or making plans for in my leisure moments. Here is a selection:

No. 2. to have enough money to have a child.
5. to dress moderately well.
7. to know what is going on in the world.
11. to be able to talk well.
17. to get to know M. better.
21. to answer my letters.
27. to feel at ease and adequate with all the people I meet.
28. to do things because I really want to and not because other people do them or to please them.
34. to read French easily.
36. to express my feelings, be impulsive and emotional, not consistent and aloof.
38. to be able to detect and bring out the significant things
in the people I meet: not miss ‘so much and so much’ through blindness and ego-centricity.

Then, although I still could not say what my main purpose was, a certain sense of direction began to emerge. While drifting with the crowd in the past years I had been trying to get the most out of life in quantity; it was the number of different experiences I had had which pleased me, whether I had lain by the shores of the Mediterranean, or danced in a Harlem night club, or watched the Yale-Harvard ‘ball game’. When friends came and told me of things they had seen and I had not, I was downcast and felt a failure. But consideration of my store of delights was leading me to a different aim. I began to want intensity, not extensity, to look for quality, not quantity, in living. And to find this I had to learn to distinguish good quality from bad quality. So I wrote:

This is really what I want. I want to discover ways to discriminate the important things in human life. I want to find ways of getting past this blind fumbling with existence.

Gradually, and very spasmodically at first, I seem to have begun this attempt to discriminate.

Last night I was tired and things seemed colourless. . . . D. suggested finishing our game of chess after our baths, so we sat on the bed after midnight. He made me feel again that things are not what they are supposed to be, that the important things are the undefined things – as if one did not know the name of one’s love, and so could never find him except by chance. It is something to do with understanding one person and their many moods, understanding their silences, the times between, the doings that have no purpose beyond themselves. R. and T. are nearer it. S. W. and P. B. make me forget it, and want exciting things to happen, flirtations, success, wide contacts.

One day I wrote:

The squares and angles of the outhouse from my window are most comforting. There’s a phrase in my head,
'the texture of experience’. These are facts and more vital than the attempts to prove things. . . . What’s it matter if they prove them or not? There was a boy playing in the ditch. . . . Are all these seeming ‘intimations of immortality’ but evasions, escapes from the struggles of life? Hell, I wish I knew! What seemed far more important was the clatter of horses’ hoofs outside echoing in the air of the first warm day.

Then came another attempt to express my main purpose:

But this is what I want. To make discoveries about human beings, to know what they are. And I suppose my trouble is that I am not convinced that intellectual study of the human being is the way to it. Maybe to be a complete human being oneself is the only way. And how does one do that?

Yet I still thought that all this was probably too vague, I should have determined on something more objective, something to be done, ‘to be Prime Minister, like Disraeli, or to find out the truth about the atom’. But all such specific purposes still seemed to me to exclude something, to run the risk that if I had a preconceived idea of where I was going I might ‘miss the many-splendoured thing’. I wrote:

I feel too blind, or too lacking in desire, to feel I have any overmastering purpose to force upon the world.

All the same, I thought I was clear enough now about the sort of thing I wanted, I thought I had formulated enough of the general direction of my purpose to make it possible to try the exercises in concentration. For it was obvious that I had so often failed to get the most out of whatever I did because my attention was always wandering to something else. So I began to try, and the result was a sense of new possibilities in richness of thought. In my ordinary way of thinking a table, for instance, only existed for me, as it affected myself; if I banged my knee against it – ‘Oh, bother that table’, if my back ached – ‘Oh, this table is too low’. But unless it immediately concerned me I took no notice of it, for
it was something too familiar to bother with. So I thought as I began this exercise that I was in for a dull time, but since my table was the nearest concrete object it would do to begin with. Now, however, almost at once, my sense of dull duty to be performed vanished, and the table began to exist in its own right.

Next time I tried a lump of coal on the hearth. From having been aware of it simply as something to burn I began to feel its blackness as a quite new sensation, to feel its ‘thingness’ and the thrust of its shape, to feel after its past in forests of giant vegetation, in upheavings of the land passing to eons of stillness, and then little men tunnelling, the silence and cleanliness of forests going to make up London’s noisy filth.

Then I chose a small tin mug. It was an ugly object. Nevertheless I tried to keep my thoughts fixed upon it for fifteen minutes. This time I did not become concerned with its origin but simply let its form imprint itself upon my mind. Slowly I became aware of a quite new knowledge. I seemed to sense what I can only call the ‘physics’ of that mug. Instead of merely seeing its shape and colour I felt what I described to myself as its ‘stresses and strains’, the pressures of its roundness and solidity and the table holding it up. This sense did not come at once and I suppose it might never have come if I had not sat still and waited. But from this few minutes’ exercise on a tin mug I had found a clue which eventually led me to understand what was the significance of many pictures, buildings, statues, which had before been meaningless.

Now concentration began to possess a quite new meaning. The word had always in the past been connected with the dull and burdensome, it was like having a purpose in life, it meant missing things, shutting out the unexpected; just as being ‘good’ at school meant turning from the lovely things, whipping oneself away from lazy moments in the sun and from chances of escaping the class-room into glorious loneliness. But now, concentration, instead of being a matter of time-tables and rules, was a magician’s wand. By a simple self-chosen act of keeping my thoughts on one thing instead of dozens, I had found a window opening out
across a new country of wide horizons and unexplored delights.

But even so, I did not continue my concentration exercises. The reason was partly, I think, that although I found them fascinating in themselves, they still did not seem to have any effect on the day-to-day boredoms and inadequacies of my life with other people.

In spite, however, of no marked immediate results following from this endeavour to learn control of my thought, the attempt to define my purpose in life had stimulated certain ideas which were to bear fruit later. I had certainly found that I was continually whipping my will to effort after endless goals, goals which might be actually shutting me away from what I really wanted. Why I felt such a desperate urge to reach these things I could not tell, but I had at least begun to guess that my greatest need might be to let go and be free from the drive after achievement – if only I dared. I had also guessed that perhaps when I had let these go, then I might be free to become aware of some other purpose that was more fundamental, not self-imposed private ambitions but some thing which grew out of the essence of one’s own nature. People said: ‘Oh, be yourself at all costs’. But I had found that it was not so easy to know just what one’s self was. It was far easier to want what other people seemed to want and then imagine that the choice was one’s own.