



It's Your Little Red Wagon...

6 Core Strengths For Navigating Your Path To the Good Life

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INTRODUCTION

"It's your little red wagon: You can push it, pull it or just stand and look at it!" That's the deal as I see it. I'm a psychologist and life coach, and I've seen many clients over the years with many different types of challenges. I don't honestly remember when I started using this metaphor, but I know it was many moons ago. My son, while growing up, heard the little red wagon bit again and again. It's probably a blessing and a curse to have a psychologist for a mother!

What this metaphor represents to me, my son and many of the clients I have had the privilege and honor to assist, is a special, shiny, vibrant red vehicle that transports our hopes, dreams, promise and passion. And in order to embark on a fulfilling journey, stay on the necessary course and ultimately reach our personally desired goals, each of us has to take and maintain control. We have to learn and accept that ultimately the wagon's progress must be engineered and navigated by the one to whom it belongs.

That's actually the good news. The fate of your little red wagon – your life as you wish it to be – is in your hands! Former Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, in his quest to help America's youth, has chosen the "little red wagon" as a symbol of hope and promise for children. I believe this is a wonderful symbol for all ages. To transform the symbol into reality, however, requires not only acceptance of the responsibilities of being in charge of your own happiness and well-being, but also a commitment to acquire the help, information and specific tools that can lead to individually-defined success.

Using this metaphor as a theme in therapy and coaching has involved two major components: First, the focus on identifying the client's goals and dreams; and second, the focus on developing the strengths that are instrumental in achieving those goals and dreams.

Six core strengths – *Optimism, Courage, Persistence, Living in the Present, Enthusiasm and Resilience* – are the very means by which these people I have

known so well set out and continue to journey on their special paths. I believe that tapping into and fortifying these strengths is not a difficult undertaking, as long as you're equipped with the right information and a mound of motivation, both of which I hope to provide for you here!

I remember being so touched when one client presented me with a miniature Radio Flyer red wagon. It contained flower pots with the following inscriptions: The nouns – "*hope, spirit, faith, gratitude, wonder, play, adventure, harmony and balance;*" the verbs – "*believe, create, search and discover;*" and oh yes, the sole adjective – "*sassy*" (hmm)! Tied to the handle was a ribbon imprinted with the words "*imagine, dream, inspire,*" and a metal sign inscribed "*thank you.*" You better believe that for a psychologist, it just doesn't get any better than that!

According to a Swedish Proverb, "God gives every bird a worm but He doesn't throw it in the nest." If your little red wagon is not going where you want it to go, here's the good news: Psychology has taken a right turn! It's now in the



business of identifying and teaching the skills that foster well-being, in addition to its longtime goal of understanding and treating psychological problems.

At last, the field is paying very special attention to the strengths that help us design and achieve a life filled with joy and purpose, a life characterized by the ability to weather storms valiantly and, in so doing, restore hope, energy and self-confidence for the ongoing adventure.

This movement is called Positive Psychology, and it is about the good life. The individual primarily responsible for igniting this direction is Martin Seligman, a past president of the American Psychological Association (APA), who, during his tenure in 1998, heralded this as the APA Theme of the Year. Currently there is a groundswell of energy focused on studying and teaching the techniques that enhance the good life. So very exciting!

Which brings me to why I wrote this book and what I hope to accomplish. I would like to help you in the clearest, most concise and most enjoyable way determine the strengths you want to develop, and then provide the information and guidance you need to make it happen. My goal is to appeal to a wide range of people, both hesitant and voracious readers alike.

I've come to understand that not everyone is enamored with reading motivational or self-help books. Some people have trouble concentrating or haven't gotten into the habit of reading or don't have the time to devote to such an endeavor. And, of course, there are those who read one personal improvement book after another!

Over the years I've tried to find inspiring and helpful reading materials for all my clients, many of whom have been reluctant readers. I did this because of my belief and experience in the power of using the right materials at the right time. Reading can be a forceful adjunct in therapy, and it also can serve as a powerful resource for motivation and skill-building.

I recall suggesting to an adult client that he read Seligman's groundbreaking book, *Learned Optimism*, since we were working on that particular strength. The next time I saw him I asked how his reading was going. He said – and I'll never forget this – "He has some interesting things to say, but why doesn't he just cut to the chase?"

Trust me, Seligman's book has a lot of interesting and important things to say, but I understand that for some people brevity and "cutting to the chase" improve the likelihood that they'll find the interest, time and motivation to read and utilize the information.

So I decided to write a book that gets right to the point on each of these six core strengths, telling you straightaway why each is important, what its signature elements are, and what needs to be done to make that strength a potent tool in your "take control of the good life" repertoire.

WHAT TO EXPECT

There are facets of this book I would like to explain in advance. It is all about attitude, beliefs, expectations, thinking and behavior. It's about having a choice regarding all of those factors. It's about developing the necessary tools to take control and discovering your own personal path. As Carlos Castaneda tells us, "We either make ourselves happy or miserable. The amount of work is the same." And the Chinese Proverb warns, "If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed." Here's what you can look forward to:



QUOTES

You will find a copious selection of quotes, quotes, quotes sprinkled throughout the book. This is part of my plan to keep you interested, give you words to live by and remind you of the wisdom of the ages. For as long as I can remember I have been enamored with sayings and quotations. As a college freshman, I put a "thought for the day" on the door of my dorm room. I learned that I wasn't the only one with this fascination, because if I ever missed a day, the women on my floor voiced their disappointment loudly and clearly!

I found quotes to be very compelling in my work as a psychologist in clinical and life coaching practice, as well as in my supervision of Masters and Doctoral students in clinical training at Arizona State University. I've encouraged clients and students alike to use a quote almost as a mantra to remind them of the new beliefs, thoughts and behaviors they want to incorporate into their lives.

For example, if a client is feeling resentment toward her boss because she was passed over for a promotion and is having a hard time getting over it, it might be helpful for her to commit to memory the quote by Malachy McCourt: "Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." Or this one from Ann Landers: "Hanging on to resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head." I'm convinced that most people don't want to be that dumb!

CHARTS ON BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS

The Charts are assessment tools to identify the beliefs and behaviors that need to be changed. These guides will help you understand the areas you need to target in order to fortify a given strength.

THE TREASURY OF MOTIVATORS

The Treasury of Motivators offers a wealth of strength-generating words and thoughts. These will be helpful in maintaining your motivation and resolve on the journey to your chosen destinations. The Treasury features several components that offer stimulating alternatives to tired old ways of thinking and believing. These include:

- **Quotes to Dispute Faulty Thinking**

There are beliefs or self-statements that get people into trouble again and again, diminishing their ability to master a particular strength. I have highlighted some of the negative beliefs that I've heard over the years and suggested quotes that powerfully compete with them. Using the worksheets provided, choose one or more as a replacement.

- **Poems, Prose, Songs**

These are tools to maintain your motivation and keep your eye on the prize. Commit them to memory or carry them with you. Have them ready when "garbage thinking" descends upon you.

- **Movie Synopses**

This is another motivational tool to keep you on track and to provide you with alternative ways of thinking about your situation. Each movie's theme is in keeping with the chapter in which it appears.

- **Motivational Quotes**

This section presents powerful quotations that speak to specific subject categories such as resentment, change, security, failure/success, dreams and perfectionism. I have made suggestions on which subjects are germane to each strength. So, for example, if you have tendencies toward perfectionism, there are quotes intended to talk you out of that particular dead end way of thinking.

When you are discouraged, disenchanted or afraid, use your Treasury of Motivators to bolster your spirits and renew faith in yourself. These tools can help you keep your eye on the prize!

TECHNIQUES TO BUILD YOUR STRENGTHS

There are many strength-building techniques that can get you where you want to go. To do what needs to be done, you'll have to battle errant beliefs, expectations, thoughts, behaviors and habits, and find worthy, positive replacements. You'll also need to manage fear and the stress response. The techniques detailed in this section are designed to ensure an exciting, fruitful journey for you and your little red wagon!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: RECOMMENDED READINGS AND WEBSITES

Books, websites and audiovisual materials that are worthy of your attention are suggested for each strength. Here's to keeping your momentum going, going, going!