As a teacher, coach and trainer, one of my jobs is to help people discover tools for positive change, growth or even transformation in their lives.

One of the tools that has created the most positive transformation in my own life, is the idea that “Circumstances Are Neutral.” “Circumstances are Neutral” means that how you relate to a set of circumstances is entirely up to you. While some extreme circumstances (like war or famine) don’t seem very neutral, even in those extreme cases you still have a choice in the attitude you bring to it.

This idea allowed me to transform a long prison sentence for drug trafficking, into a time of considerable personal growth and spiritual deepening—rather than a debilitating journey full of bitterness, anger and despair—what serious prison time is for so many.

It allowed me to embrace the situation, own my part in creating it and accept all the harm I had caused, without veering into either self-protective denial and blaming others, or into destructive self-blame and shaming.

Instead, I was able to employ the tools of meditation to see how I created this circumstance, and what it was going to take to transform it and repair the harm I had caused.

My life shifted to focusing on others and serving my prison community, instead of getting caught in the anger, shame and blame, existing in my prison environment. Incarceration is by definition a limitation of one’s choices, but choices still abound.

Employing Circumstances Are Neutral, I chose to embrace the fact of my long term incarceration, and focus on the creative and generative choices I had, rather than the limitations I faced.

Of course some circumstances are not of our making. We may correctly feel that we made no contribution to the circumstance. Nonetheless, the future course of our life will be based on how we choose to respond to the circumstance.

Our choice may be to seek the support, empathy and healing we need. Our choice may be to seek justice in some form. Our choice may be to help prevent such a thing from happening to others. Our choice may simply be to not give up. It may be extremely difficult to shift our focus from hurt, devastation (or worse) to choice, but at some point reconnecting with some element of choice is our only way out.

Circumstances Are Neutral is not about self-blame or blame at all; it is about ownership and choice vehicles to self-empowerment and freedom. Of course, most of the garden variety circumstances we face day to day are not terribly dire and yet, we mostly don’t experience them as neutral, do we? We might believe that our feelings are caused by, or attached to, the circumstances themselves, rather than our perception, and the meaning or significance we give to the circumstances we encounter.

How liberating would it be to begin to discover the neutrality, and thus, the choices available to us in the circumstances we face day in and day out, rather than being imprisoned by our conditioned responses and habitual reactions?

If the more extreme circumstances you can imagine, or may have unfortunately or tragically experienced, are still getting in the way of this concept becoming useful for you, consider the experience of Viktor Frankl, author of Man’s Search for Meaning, an Austrian psychiatrist of Jewish descent who survived Auschwitz, perhaps the most horrific death camp of the Nazi holocaust.

(continues on page 3)
Frankl lost most or all of his family in the Holocaust, imprisoned in the work camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau where the vast majority of prisoners quickly died from starvation, exhaustion, the elements, disease and despair. Frankl sought both to survive and to understand what distinguished those who survived these horrific conditions. For the most part, he saw that the survivors were able to create some sense of future, something to live for, even if it was only to one day tell the truth of what had happened there in the hopes of preventing future holocausts.

He also discovered that even in the most horrific conditions one can imagine—starving, stripped of any shred of human dignity and possibly facing the barrel of a gun—we still have choice… that choice is over the attitude or mindset we bring to the situation—how we choose to meet and respond to a circumstance.

"Many times we think it’s the circumstances that are controlling our destiny, but it’s really not the circumstances… It is our response to those circumstances that create our destiny.”

― Frankl, The Gift of Life