

Guiding Principle

Erik Erikson (1902 – 1994) is written into virtually every introductory psychology textbook. His claim to fame rests on the fact that as a developmental psychologist, he was one of the first to discuss human development across the human lifespan, from birth to death. Other developmental psychologists of the day such as Jean Piaget, tended to concentrate on child and adolescent development, or late adult development such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who is known for her work on issues of death and dying.

Erikson discussed various stages of human development in terms of opposing forces meant to be reconciled for the successful transition to the next stage. Of interest to the issue of a guiding principle, is the final stage of life Erikson talks about. The opposing forces to be reconciled are conceived as “integrity versus despair”.

To understand, imagine you are old, very old, and on your deathbed. From your deathbed you are taking stock of life. Imagine you have a ledger, a balance sheet, and into it you are noting on one side, those things about which you feel good. On the other side of the ledger you are noting those things about which you feel bad. According to Erikson, if those things about which you feel good outweigh the bad, then you die with integrity – a good feeling about yourself and your life. If however the things about which you feel bad, outweigh the good, then you are assumed to die in despair, feeling poorly about yourself and life.

The goal of course, is to die with integrity.

Here’s the rub. By the time you are on your deathbed, the ledger has already been written. It has been written by all the behaviours and choices made throughout your life leading to the time of your death. By the time you are on your deathbed, it is too late to undo mistakes of the past. They are now taken to the grave.

This concept has profound implications for the behaviours and choices we undertake today.

With every single decision, we are thus in the position of asking ourselves, will this lead to integrity or will this lead to despair? Will this decision or behaviour enhance my life and those of my loved ones or will it detract? In the end, the real end, will this cause me to feel good about myself?

The simple truth is we will all die. We mostly do not know when or how, but we all know it is inevitable. According to Erikson, as the time comes we will take stock.

As such and given reasonable health now, we are all in the position of dying with integrity. Integrity in death will be achieved by choices and behaviour we make now. Integrity in death may require correcting for previous choices and behaviours to date. The point is, start now.

Different people will define integrity for themselves differently. Generally speaking though, it will involve close connections with friends and family. Our children’s presence and even the presence of grandchildren and perhaps great grandchildren will be valued and likely factor into the equation.

So with every behaviour, with every decision, consider Erikson’s last stage of human development, “integrity versus despair”. Chose wisely. Your successful transition to the afterlife just may depend upon it.

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