

Going Upstream:
Moving from Limitations to Possibilities
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A Story: A young woman was walking along a riverbank when she suddenly heard a young boy yelling from the river, “Help me. Help me.” As luck would have it, she was a triathlete, a powerful swimmer, and had been a lifeguard in college. Seeing the boy struggling in the water, she quickly dove in. In a short while, she reached the boy and was able to bring him safely to shore.

Just as she was about to talk to him, she heard a second cry for help and saw a young girl struggling in the middle of the river. Once again, she dove into the river, swam out to the girl and was able to bring her safely to shore.

Again, just as she was about to talk to the young girl, she heard a third young child crying for help. However, this time she didn’t dive into the river. Instead, she told a man who had run to help to get the third child, because she was going to go upstream to find out how these kids were falling into the river.

A Distinction: Just like the kids struggling in the river, when we’re downstream, we experience the consequence of events. We deal with the impact of things. External factors seem to be in control. We often feel overwhelmed. Many times, we feel angry and frustrated. We sometimes even feel burned-out and depressed. We’re often in a *reactive position* living a *life by default* having to deal with emergencies but with limited options.

When we’re upstream, we deal with things at their source. We have a greater sense of control. Since we have more options, we’re in a *responsive position*. We’re able to creatively live in alignment with our vision and values. We are able to live a *life by design*.

When we move from downstream to upstream, we often experience a significant improvement in our lives.

An Example: About five years ago, my sons, Morgan and Joey, were four and seven. We had a downstream approach to getting to school. We were often late getting out of the house, had a hectic stressful drive to school, and many times the boys were late for school.

One day, true to our pattern, we were, once again, late getting out of the house. Once again, the traffic and the traffic lights weren't cooperating with us. Once again, I anticipated being late for school. But this time, out of stress, annoyance, and frustration, I yelled, "That's it! There'll be no TV, video, or computer tonight!"

Moments after my outburst, from the back seat of the car, I could hear woeful sounds from my sons. Those sounds reminded me of times when my mother had yelled at me and had punished me for some small crime or misdemeanor. I also remembered how unfair and arbitrary her punishment had seemed to me. It was so unexpected. It seemed to strike like a bolt of lightning.

With this in mind, I said to my sons, "That doesn't seem very fair does it?" They both agreed that it didn't. So, I said, "How about this, starting tomorrow, if you're not in the car and ready to go by 8:00, then you'll be late and there will be no TV, video, or computer. Do you think that's fair?" They both agreed that would be fair.

Starting the next day, we implemented the new approach. During that first month, the entire family adjusted to the new routine. By the end of that month, the new pattern had become the rule and not the exception. Since that time, my sons have occasionally been late in getting to the car, but we haven't been late for school. What has been even more important has been the change in the quality of our drive to school. What was once a context for stress and frustration has become the setting for relaxation and enjoyment. In fact, during the 10-minute drive to school, we often have "car talks" in which we tell stories and discuss various ideas and topics. These rides have become not just a delightful way to start the day; they've also become an ongoing opportunity for relationship building.

By going upstream to the source of our problem, we were able to trade stress and frustration for connection and delight.

Going Upstream

“The unexamined life isn’t worth living.”

-- Socrates

- 1. Take Inventory:** Since so much of what we do is out of habit. It is important to become of aware of the various practices and patterns of your life. One approach to this is to ask yourself, “What’s working in my life?” and “What’s not working in my life?” You can then simply make a two-column table. Such as the one below.

What’s Working	What’s Not Working

In the above example, our family’s going-to-school pattern wasn’t working. It would go in the right-hand column. Our family’s practice of regular family meals was working. It would go in the left-hand column.

- 2. Appreciate What’s Working:** Many people become so focused on what’s not working in their lives that they forget what is. Therefore, I encourage you, on a regular basis, to reflect on your life and appreciate what’s working, what you value, and what brings you delight. *The importance of this was brought home to me during the last days, weeks, and months of several members of my family as well as in my work with cancer patients.*
- 3. Recognize Potential:** Recognize that each item on the *not working* side of your ledger has potential as a catalyst for change. Simply ask yourself, “What would I like instead of this downstream pattern?” For example, *our stressful going-to-school pattern became a catalyst for sharing and connection.*
- 4. Select Pattern to Change:** Select one item from your *not working* list. Ask yourself, “What do I need to do differently in order to move upstream?” Your answer to this question will give you clues to what

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steps you will need to take. *We needed to organize our family around an 8:00 AM departure.*

5. **Take Action, Go Upstream:** Unless you take action, you will continue to have downstream problems. It is critical to actually start the ball rolling. Once you get started, you will often find increased motivation and momentum. *Almost immediately, we found the ride to school more enjoyable,*
6. **Track Results:** It's important to keep track of your results. Some people use charts and graphs. Others use some form of journaling. The purpose of tracking is to focus your attention, which is a critical step in making changes.
7. **Integrate New Practice:** Give yourself time to integrate the new practice. I recommend that you allow a month to adapt to the new practice. This allows time for the new behaviors to become integrated and for new norms to be established. *This is what happened during the first month of our family's new going-to-school routine.*

Discussion: Individuals, couples, and families can all implement upstream practices. An individual might start a practice of daily exercise. A couple could have a daily practice of touching base via emails and phone calls. Many families with young children have a nightly practice of bedtime stories, while families with older children have a weekly practice of family game night. All of these upstream practices have an immediate as well as long-term beneficial impact. They not only enhance your immediate experience but they also tend to prevent downstream crises and problems.

Although you may have already targeted specific changes to make, I've listed a number of upstream practices that I often recommend to clients and seminar participants as well as practice myself:

- **For Individuals**
 - Spend Time in Nature
 - Listen to Music
 - Exercise Daily
 - Meditation

- **For Couples**
 - Daily Stress-Relieving Conversations
 - Regular Date Nights
 - Parting and Greeting Rituals
- **For Families**
 - Family Meals
 - Family Planning

In going upstream, I suggest that you select only one upstream practice. Focus on it for a month so that it becomes a habit. Then consider selecting a second practice to incorporate into your lifestyle. By systematically incorporating upstream practices into your lifestyle, you will be limiting the number and impact of downstream crises as well as increasing the quality of your life.

Addendum: While it is beyond the scope of this article, organizations can also implement upstream practices. One organization with a definite upstream approach is Geoffrey Canada's [*Harlem Children's Zone*](#). His programs offer an excellent example of a comprehensive upstream approach to educating disadvantaged children and families. The results of these programs have documented the success on an upstream orientation.

In Conclusion: I hope that you find the upstream/downstream distinction not only useful but also motivational. I urge you to take time to examine your life, appreciate what's working, realize the potential in your downstream patterns, and take action by moving upstream. It will make a difference.

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