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# The Art of Living Consciously: The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life

By Nathaniel Branden



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**The Art of Living Consciously: The Power of Awareness to Transform Everyday Life** By Nathaniel Branden

***The Art of Living Consciously* Is an Operating Manual for Our Basic Tool of Survival**

In *The Art of Living Consciously*, Dr. Nathaniel Branden, our foremost authority on self-esteem, takes us into new territory, exploring the actions of our minds when they are operating as our life and well-being require -- and also when they are not. No other book illuminates so clearly what true mindfulness means:

- \* **In the workplace**
- \* **In the arena of romantic love**
- \* **In child-rearing**
- \* **In the pursuit of personal development**

Today we are exposed to an unprecedented amount of information and an unprecedented number of opinions about every conceivable aspect of life. We are thrown on our own resources as never before -- and we have nothing to protect us but the clarity of our thinking. In *The Art of Living Consciously*, Branden gives us the tools with which to draw out the best within us.



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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

With a Ph.D. in psychology, and a background in philosophy, **Nathaniel Branden** is a practicing psychotherapist and a corporate consultant, and is widely recognized as the world authority on self-esteem, a field he pioneered more than three decades ago. His many books include *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, *Taking Responsibility*, *Self-Esteem at Work*, and *A Woman's Self-Esteem*. His newest book is *My Years with Ayn Rand*. He lives and works in Beverly Hills, California.

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### Introduction

A few months after completing my previous book, *Taking Responsibility*, I was at a dinner party, and someone asked me what I was writing next. I answered that I was about to embark on a book that would examine what it means to live consciously.

An older woman, her face lined with bitterness, frowned and shook her head disapprovingly. "Live consciously?" she said. "Not a good idea. Who would want to live consciously? Life would be too painful."

I asked, "Is it less painful if we live unconsciously and mechanically, without knowing what we are doing, and blind to opportunities to make things better?" But she did not answer.

Someone else at the table remarked, "Well, even if living consciously does have advantages -- isn't it still a lot of *work*?"

### **Like a light that can be turned brighter or dimmer, consciousness exists on a continuum.**

It is true that living consciously obliges us at times to confront painful realities. It is also true that it demands an effort. As a way of operating in the world, living consciously has its costs, and we will examine them. A central theme of this book, however, is that the rewards are overwhelmingly greater than any apparent drawback. Living consciously is a source of power and liberation. It does not weigh us down -- it lifts us up.

Like a light that can be turned brighter or dimmer, consciousness exists on a continuum. We can be more conscious or less conscious, more aware or less aware. So the choice is not between absolute optimal consciousness and literal unconsciousness (as in a coma). The choice is between living more consciously and less consciously. Or we might say: between living consciously and living mechanically. And it is always a matter of degree.

The tragedy of so many people is precisely that, to a great extent, they live mechanically: their thinking is stale, they don't examine their motives, and they respond to events automatically. They rarely take a fresh look at anything and rarely have a new thought. They exist at a low or shallow level of awareness. One of the consequences is that they live lives drained of color, excitement, or passion. It is not difficult to see that consciousness energizes, while its absence produces boredom and enervation.

To live consciously is to be committed to awareness as a way of being in the world and to bring to each activity a level of awareness appropriate to it. But what this means is not obvious. "Living consciously" is an

enormous abstraction. We will examine its meaning in the chapters that follow.

I use *consciousness* here in its primary meaning: the state of being conscious or aware of some aspect of reality. Why is consciousness important? The short answer is that for all species that possess it, consciousness is the basic tool of survival and of adaptation to reality -- the ability to be aware of the environment in some way, at some level, and to guide action accordingly. One might as well ask: Why is sight important?

*Living consciously is a state of being mentally active rather than passive. It is the ability to look at the worm through fresh eyes. It is intelligence taking joy in its own function. Living consciously is seeking to be aware of everything that bears on our interests, actions, values, purposes, and goals. It is the willingness to confront facts, pleasant or unpleasant. It is the desire to discover our mistakes and correct them. Within the range of our interests and concerns, it is the quest to keep expanding our awareness and understanding, both of the world external to self and of the worm within. It is respect for reality and respect for the distinction between the real and the unreal. It is the commitment to see what we see and know what we know. It is recognition that the act of dismissing reality is the root of all evil.*

The issue of living consciously versus unconsciously takes many forms. Here are two examples taken from my practice of psychotherapy, in which we can see what living *unconsciously* may look like. Note that these examples merely illustrate the problem; they do not yet suggest the path to a solution.

Arnold K. was a forty-seven-year-old professor of history who imagined he was deeply in love with his wife and was unkind to her in a hundred ways he did not notice. When she needed to talk to him about something of importance to her, he typically was preoccupied, only half listened, and rarely responded in any meaningful way. When she expressed a desire, he smiled and said nothing and soon drifted off to another subject. When she disagreed with him, he swung off into another monologue without dealing with what she had said. When she tried to tell him of ways he hurt her, he did not hear, or apologized instantly and forgot her words within an hour. He knew how devoted he felt, so he believed he was a loving husband. And when the mood struck, he could be truly generous, considerate, and caring. Essentially, however, he lived in a private cocoon that contained himself and his love for her and his image of her but not the actual woman: she was exiled to that foreign realm, reality. So that in real-world terms, she was not part of his marriage. His wife was not the woman he lived with; he lived with a fantasy existing only inside his head. In some subjective sense of his own he may have loved her, but he did not love her *consciously*, did not day by day give the relationship the awareness it needed and deserved. Eventually she became ill and abruptly was gone from his life. Standing at her graveside in agony, he saw that during the twelve years of their marriage he had not been there -- he had been lost inside his own mind. He saw that he had abandoned his wife long before she had "abandoned" him (by dying). What love had not accomplished, death had accomplished: jolted him into waking up, at least for a time.

For many of us, suffering is the only teacher to whom we listen. In Arnold's case, as with the case below, suffering precipitated the decision to seek psychotherapy.

Rebecca L. was a thirty-nine-year-old leader of personal growth workshops. She saw herself as a person who was on a spiritual path and who had attained a high level of consciousness, yet she was oblivious to the wreckage she had created in her family life. Her lofty view of herself

was based on the fact that she was a student of the *I Ching*, took classes in Tantric Yoga, immersed herself in the literature of the contemplative traditions, and had had thirteen years of Jungian analysis. She subjected her two teenage daughters to endless hours of psychological interpretation of their behavior. At dinner she would invite her husband to tell his dreams, which she would then proceed to analyze. If any of her interpretations were challenged, she would respond with gentle compassion; if the challenge persisted, she became first irritated and then increasingly angry -- until everyone retreated into sullen exhaustion. She could quote interminably from many spiritual masters and had no idea that in the privacy of their bedroom her daughters would sometimes talk about how pleasant life could be if only mother would die. Her husband did not appear to indulge in daydreams; he merely barricaded himself behind his work and spent as little time alone with her as possible. She moved through her life in a kind of trance while priding herself on being more "awake," more "conscious," than those around her. She could not understand why she so often felt a vague, generalized anxiety.

Neither of these people was asleep in the literal sense, and neither was awake in the sense required for a successful life. Their stories give us a preliminary sense of the territory we need to explore -- or, more precisely, certain aspects of it; we will see that there are many others.

Sometimes, when we reflect on our life and on the mistakes we have made and regretted, it seems to us we were sleeping when we imagined we were awake. We wonder how we could have failed to see that which now stands out in such bold relief. Of course, this may be self-deceiving, in that hindsight always sees more clearly. At that earlier time, we may have been as conscious as we knew how to be.

However, sometimes our sense of having been sleepwalking through our existence reflects an accurate assessment. We know we were not mindful when we needed to be. Our awareness was diffuse or distracted rather than focused and disciplined. No doubt there were reasons, but reasons do not alter facts. In retrospect, we wish we had been more conscious.

We think, for example of all the danger signals we had ignored at the start of what turned out to be a disastrous love affair -- for example, our lover's incongruous behavior, conflicting statements, mysterious nonexplanations, sudden and inexplicable emotional outbursts. We ask ourselves, Where was my mind at the time? Or we remember all the warnings our supervisor gave us long before we were discharged, and we wonder why the words did not penetrate. Or we reflect on the opportunities we let slip by because in our trancelike state we did not appreciate them for what they were, and we ask ourselves how that was possible. Where was I, we wonder, when my life was happening?

When I discussed the practice of living consciously in previous books, it was exclusively from the perspective of its importance to self-esteem. Here, the focus is wider. What does it mean to act consciously? To love consciously? To parent consciously? To feel consciously? To Work consciously? To struggle consciously? To vote consciously? To legislate consciously? To address the great issues of life consciously?

To offer an example from the political realm: When legislators pass laws on the expediency of the moment, such as price and wage controls, without thinking through the long-term, foreseeable consequences of their programs, which unfortunately is the pattern of most legislation -- and the results are worse than the problem the ...

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