

FINDING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

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All of us, from time to time, have moments when we think about the wonderful things we might do with our lives. Become a movie or rock star. Learn to fly. Climb Mount Everest. It's unfortunate that too many people let such moments slip through their fingers. We label our thoughts as daydreams and quickly return to "real life." While it may be true that some of the goals we sometimes fantasize about are unrealistic, the fact remains that these moments are very important, because that allow us to experience, if only for a fleeting moment, what it might feel like to have a sense of mission in life—a purpose that impacts all of our actions and decisions.

Carl Jung, one of the foremost psychiatrists of our time, put forward the idea that we all have a mission in life, and it's our task to find it and do it. I would go one step further. I believe that living life with this kind of passion is our natural state of being.

There is a passion that kindles in every child, and it's one of the important tasks of parenthood to help the child discover their natural gifts. Unfortunately, many parents are still trying to work out their own issues, and the child's growing intention in a particular direction gets snuffed out if it conflicts with what the parent wants. Sometimes this works out for the best. Mozart was lucky enough to have a father who was a famous violin teacher. Mozart was playing the violin by the age of 4 and writing operas before he was twenty. Of course, his father took all the credit. Mozart received adulation from everyone else but his own father. But at least the parenting matched the gifts. Most of us are not so fortunate.

For most of us, our natural development toward a unique path gets knocked off course at some point. A variety of cultural, philosophical and psychological influences combine to teach us that our deepest wants are "selfish" or immature or unimportant, and we grow up to see work primarily in terms of making money. But we need a sense of purpose in life. We need the sense of control that comes from knowing what we want and where we want to go. We need an organizing principle that helps us to prioritize what is important and gives perspective to our day-to-day existence. And that purpose needs to be a passion that enriches our lives with meaning and carries us through the rough spots.

We need to find what psychologists call "flow"—an activity that gives us the sense of an effortless involvement where our energy seems inexhaustible. If we don't, we spend our days basically just rearranging the furniture.

But how do we find this sense of purpose? How do we discover, or perhaps rediscover, that basic, childlike yearning that was to have flowered into the central theme of our lives? It isn't possible to "figure it out." Logical analysis simply will not work. A different kind of mental process is required.

Albert Einstein spent ten years trying to understand why, if you travel at the speed of light, you don't see any light. At some point, he began analyzing the problem from the perspective of the surfer who sees the waves around him as though they were stationary. Early one morning, getting out of bed, he pictured himself riding on a ray of light, and discovered the theory of relativity.

Artists, musicians, scientists from every field have drawn inspiration for their discoveries from this kind of spontaneous visual imagery or other kinds of creative imagination. A similar kind of 'flash of insight' or intuition is the path to discovering a genuine sense of purpose for one's life. But first, we must become open to our own internal signals. We cannot look within our deepest selves unless we are ready to accept the reality of what we are going to find. And this requires self-acceptance. Self-acceptance means we let go of our ideas of what we "should" be and embrace the reality of who we are.

As we begin to allow ourselves access to our own internal signals, we move toward a higher level of self-awareness. We gain access to that part of ourselves (some have referred to this as "the higher self") which has the keenest insight into our innermost needs and possibilities—the part of us which begs our attention during moments of quiet solitude or spiritual reflection. It is this deepest part of ourselves to which we must turn for guidance as to the proper meaning and direction of our lives.

But some additional preparation is required. Before we can look within to discover such meaning and direction, we must lay the groundwork. The answer as to our unique sense of purpose can only emerge from a total picture of who we are, how we came to be and what we want. The subconscious is the most amazing of supercomputers, but, like any computer, it only gives valuable information if it is properly programmed.

The groundwork consists of what I call a "Lifetrack." This consists of your five or six best answers to six questions: Who am I? What forces shaped my life? What do I want? What do I love? What are my core values? What have been the happiest moments of my life? Your best answers to these questions must be reduced to a single page for frequent review. This is your Lifetrack.

The next step is in many ways the easiest but also may be the most challenging. You must find solitude and you must meditate. Meditation is simply a prolonged state of deep relaxation. There are many books that will teach you how to do this. Find the method that works best for you.

The last step is to finish the following sentence: "When I embrace the truth of who I am and what I want my life to be...." Following meditation, write as many endings to this sentence as you can, very quickly. Don't be concerned that your endings necessarily "make sense." You can analyze this later. You must be willing to be surprised by what you discover. You may want to repeat the meditation and writing exercise several times over a period of weeks.

Remember that a full statement of purpose must address two things: (1) what do you want to achieve with your life? And (2) how do you want to achieve it?

The process will work for you, if you want it to work. The answer as to the proper purpose and meaning of your life will emerge, because the world's foremost expert on what is important to you will tell you. And that's you.