

DESTINATIONS

Background & Context

We have so far explored how deepening our relationships—in the realms of body, mind, Self, other, Earth, and Cosmos—sets the foundation for living as if life matters. In this final lab, we bring our attention to the most important relationship of all—the relationship that each of us has with our “soul.” The depth and awareness that we bring to this relationship affects the quality of all our other relationships—to body, to Earth, to other ...

To begin this exploration, think of soul as that vital, wild essence that lies at the core of your individual self, deep below your everyday personality or ego. In this sense, it is not the traditionally religious term, but the deepest essence(s) of who you are.

Silencing the Soul

Imagine that you are back in first grade and your teacher smiles at you and asks, “What do you want to be when you get big?” You respond, dreamily, “I want to live in the sea with the whales.” Hearing your response, your teacher says to you, “You can’t do that!” You try again with, “Then I want to live in the forest up in trees with the wind.” Now the expression on your teacher’s face shifts to disapproval and she says, “You will have to get a real job so you can take care of your family.”

Fast forward: You are graduating from high school. By this time you have received thousands of messages, both verbal and non-verbal, from parents, teachers, and others restricting and corralling your sense of what is possible. The aggregate message is that you must listen and heed the voice of authority if you are to survive and flourish. This is a message that engenders fear, coaxing you to separate from your soul’s deepest yearnings. And in the act of separation, you may fail to realize that only you can be you. You are the only YOU that will ever live upon this earth. When you die so will all of your fantastic possibilities.

When we are seduced by the siren song of a dysfunctional culture, we lose the awareness, attention and courage necessary to find our “soul print”—our unique calling. The result is that we become “nice dead people” leading shallow lives that are not our own. Our situation is reflected in the story about the man who found an egg of a wild bird and placed it in the nest of a barnyard hen. Eventually the egg hatched and out came an eagle. The eaglet was reared in the barnyard with a brood of chicks. He followed their example, scratching the earth for worms and insects; he clucked and cackled like they did, and like them he would thrash his wings and lift himself a few feet off the ground. One day when the eagle was several years old, he was awestruck by a magnificent golden-winged bird he saw flying high in the sky and he asked a nearby chicken “Who is that?” The chicken responded, “That’s the eagle, the king of birds; he is different from us; he belongs to the sky. We, on the other hand, are chickens; we belong to the ground. The barnyard eagle lived as a chicken until the day he died because that is what he believed he was.

Might it be that it is no different for us—that our culture, including our education system, has conditioned us to see ourselves as economic animals, meant to spend our lives as producers with our heads to the grindstone; when, in fact, we are “eagles”—beings capable of things beyond our wildest imaginings?

Because of social conditioning most young people who attend college end up majoring in “upward mobility”—a sure path to a life as “chicken.” Sadly, they have been brainwashed into believing that a “successful” life is one benchmarked by a good salary, ample material possessions and a good retirement plan. David Orr (*Earth in Mind*, 1994) challenges this narrow view of success, positing that what really matters in life is not a good paying job but the capacity to discover and then follow one’s calling: “The plain fact is that the planet does not need more ‘successful’ people,” writes Orr, “but it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with ‘success’ as our culture has defined it.”

Never before in the history of humankind has a culture said to its young (as we now do): “It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Study hard so that you can get ahead of those around you; the goal of life is to accumulate money and the things money can buy.” This is a self-alienating and soulless message for we all know, deep down, that life is not primarily about greedily taking care of one’s self. There is no genuine fulfillment, no life, in that. We are not here to make money. Rather each of us is a unique part of the human family—here, alive today, by virtue of actions taken on our behalf by our ancestors going back through countless generations to the dawn of humankind. Now it is our turn to ensure that the human story continues and deepens. In this context the question for all of us is not how are we going to make a killing in the money market, but how are we going create the conditions wherein our grandchildren and their children, and “all our relations”—i.e., the winged ones and the four-leggeds—can flourish? This is a question that calls forth our bigness and fullness of being. It is a question that we can only by answered by “hushing” and listening to our souls.

Check In

The Check in: What would you do with your life if financial constraints were removed? That is, what “work” or activities would you pursue if you were freed from having to earn a living?

The Follow-up, a rhetorical question: You have spoken one dream of where you could go in your life. Yet, if your life is a train, you’re already headed somewhere. **Tell me, where are you going?**

Your Desires: When Last Did Someone Ask?

Introduction

Story teller Ron Jones relates a story about his father, who was a musician at heart but who worked for 35 years selling televisions, refrigerators, and glassware in a department store in San Francisco. One day Ron’s father was told that the store was closing. In those days there were no golden parachutes or retirement benefits, and when the store manager asked if there was anything he could do for him, Ron’s fathers only request was to have the chair he’d been sitting in all those years. They sold it to him.

“He brought that chair to my house on his back one day,” says Ron, “and placed it in my living room and told me about all the years he had sat in it, and then he made me promise that I would never sit down in that chair, ever. It’s in

my living room to this day, and I never sit in it. I just tell the story, and the lesson my father passed on to me through it: Don't sit down in life. All through your life you're going to be asked to sit down, to conform, comply, and compromise, and it can be very deadly if you get in the habit of doing that. Be leery of the price of conformity, my father told me. Stand up, create things, do things.” (Greg Levoy, Callings, 1997)

The search for one's genuine and unique calling is arduous for most young people, especially since most parents (unlike Ron's dad) seldom honor and support this search. With this in mind before our next exercise: “Please leave your parents at the door.” In effect: “You have been told what to do—told how to live—for the last 18 years. Now you are here in college, on your own for the first time and this is your life—not your parent's life that is unfolding before you. Your parent's job is to live their life; your job is to live your life, to bring your unique gifts to the world.” This is in no way any payment of disrespect—at all—to your parents or guardians. This is simply the request that you engage in this exercise with only one voice speaking to you—your “soul's.”

Our desires point to our passions—the things that arouse and excite us and ignite our enthusiasm. Consider, in this context, that “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek work meaning God-filled, reminding us that our enthusiasms, our passions, are sacred. Dave Ellis (Falling Awake, 2002) suggests that the best way to get the future we want is to make contact with our desires. Let's try it ...

Instructions:

1. Everyone, including the facilitator, will have access to (or otherwise receive) a stack of 3x4 index cards. In the middle of the card, write down ONE thing that you desire. *You achieve your desires, Ellis contends, when you are clear on what you desire.* This is one way to get clear. Of course, simply stating a desire, by itself will not ensure that it will come true but it is an important first step. Consider what you want for your life in the realms of health, happiness, love, community, money, and so forth. Write these down, ONE desire per card. You have five minutes... easily enough time to fill fifty cards!

2. One-by-one, everybody will have the chance to read to the group from one of their cards—i.e., one of their desires. In the event that someone reads something that you may desire—or that may spark insight into another related desire—put this down on a new card. Be inspired by what your mates have to offer.

3. Use the four corners of each card to begin to develop a plan for how you might achieve each desire.

- a. **Priority:** The **top right** corner is used to rank the priority or importance of the stated desire. For example, if you experience deep passion around a desire, it would receive a priority ranking of “5.” If, on the other hand, the desire seems uninspired and you are not sure you truly want it, it would receive the lowest priority (“1”). In this vein, it is fruitful to think of some desires as messages from soul (“5”) and others as messages from Hollywood (“1”).
- b. **Category:** In the **bottom right**-hand corner of each card, categorize each desire. For example, a desire might be put in categories such as: relationship, health, education, spirituality and so forth. A second way of classifying the cards is in terms of having/doing/being—i.e., things that you want to have; things that you

want to do; and things that you want to be. As a human, you are more than a “human having” (Category 1) or a “human doing” (Category 2), but also a “human being” (Category 3). Simply classifying one’s goals in this way provides a window into what one is most committed to becoming—human being, human having, human doing.

- c. **Resources:** The **top left** corner is the place to note down the resources at your disposal that could help (e.g., people that one might go to for help).
- d. **Timeline:** Finally, the **bottom left** is reserved for a timeline for achieving the goal/desire (e.g., “I will be financially independent by January, 2010”).
- e. The space on the **back** of each card is used to begin to develop a concrete plan of action.

Equipped with these four classifications (priority, category, resources, and timeline) for each desire, it is possible to sort the goals in various ways. For example, you might first sort by “priority” selecting that subset of cards that are “high-priority.”

Discussion

What did you discover? Did you learn anything about yourself?

Your Life Mission Statement

Introduction:

Your beliefs become your thoughts.

Your thoughts become your words.

Your words become your actions.

Your actions become your habits.

Your habits become your values.

Your values become your destiny.

-Mahatma Gandhi

If you listen to Gandhi, it is the shortest trip from your values to your destiny. Yet, how many of us have ever clearly said, “This is what I am about. This is what I value.” Is it an exaggeration, then, to say that this exercise, which puts words to your values, goes to the heart of your destiny?

Just as companies have mission statements, it is fruitful for individuals to also develop a clear statement of mission. That is what we’re going to do: develop a personal mission statement—a statement of your life purpose. When we commit to forthrightly seeking our calling, our days no longer pass in a blur. Instead, we become awake and attentive to each moment. The knock on the door or the telephone call are no longer regarded as interruptions but as omens or oracles or blessings. We are more alive, experiencing each moment as pregnant with possibility. We know what we are here to have, to do, to *be*.

Instructions

1. You have already reflected on your life goals and desires in the prior exercise; that is the first step.
2. Carefully create a list of things you feel good about right now or have in the past. This could be friends, family, college, a girl/boy friend, etc.

3. Picture yourself seven years from now. Where would you like to be, what would you like to be doing, who would you like to be with, etc. Create another list with these things.

4. With these three sources of inspiration, see if you can articulate your life mission in a statement of 25 words or less. This should be a statement that fills you with passion and enthusiasm—a statement that “clicks” with the core of who you know yourself to be.

NOTE: If you get stuck or are struggling, here are two suggestions. One is to simply imagine that you have been given two minutes of prime-time television to deliver your unique message to the world. Write down what you want to say. Then winnow down your message to its essence by turning it into a bumper sticker logo. If you are still stuck, perhaps, imagine that “God” is sending you a letter. In this letter, “God” is calling you to your unique soulprint—i.e., telling you why it is that you are on Earth. Write this letter from God in two minutes, not allowing your pen to leave the paper. Just allow the words to flow through you, but don’t write beyond your truth.

Discussion

- * What did you learn?
- * Would you (like to) share your statement with the group?

Check Out

Who is the person you most admire in this world and why?

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: DESTINATIONS

Option 1: Ten Things

A. Ask TEN people this question, “What are TEN things you want to have or do or be before you die?” Collect their responses into a list of “100 Things to Have/Do/Be Before Dying.” Ask strangers, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, classmates, family members ...

B. Ask yourself, “What do I want to have or do or be before I die?” Come up with your own list of “100 Things to Have/Do/Be Before I Die.” If you did the work of writing your desires on notecards during the group work, you should already be well on your way.

C. Compose a response piece to the sum of this experience. What did you learn about yourself or about others? Was anything unexpected? If your life were a train, would it be heading toward these “100 Things?”

Option 2: Meeting the Day

Do each of the following, three days in a row, then compose a response piece to your experience.

A. Often we wake up to an alarm clock, our heart racing or perhaps it is the clock radio and the news of the latest tragedy or atrocity that stirs us from sleep. Then, if you are like most folks, it is Chop, Chop...on goes the coffee, into the shower you go, out for a quick bite to eat and so forth. Now, imagine with me a different awakening. You awaken refreshed after eight hours of sleep. Your attention goes to your breath and then extends out to your body, moving up slowly from toes to calf, to thigh, to buttocks, to stomach, chest, shoulders, arms, neck, face and skull. Your day is just beginning, an infant day, and you are present at this “birthing,” just like presencing the beginning of a baby’s life.

Lying there in bed you notice your thoughts—perhaps you remember some unfinished work from yesterday or some commitments and obligations for this day; perhaps there is some anxiety about what lies ahead. Note all this, letting it pass into and through your consciousness. Now, open your heart to this day, this life of yours, and to the opportunities it brings. You are incubating this day. Open your senses to it—What is the feeling of this day? What seeds are ready to sprout?

When you meet the day, you add the influence of your awareness in silence. And what good is that? The effect occurs on a subtle level. It’s like sitting next to a child’s bed just as she falls asleep. Your presence is enough, without words or actions, to settle the child. A day needs to begin in a settled state, free of the residues and eddies of yesterday’s activity. But you are also adding a subtle level of intention by meeting the day. You are intending to let life unfold as it will. You’ve showed up with open mind and open heart. (Chopra, Book of Secrets, pg. 223).

B. Sometime early into the day, ask someone the following two questions. Be sure to give them time to answer the first one before going into the second. If you introduce the context properly, strangers may give the most enlightening and honest responses.

- i. What are you going to do with this day of yours?
- ii. What are you going to do with this life of yours?

C. Find a prompt—something that will act as a reminder (every time you go to the bathroom or every time the phone rings or every time you walk through a door—and every time it prompts you, ask yourself the same two questions: What are you going to do with this day of yours? What are you going to do with your life?

Option 3: Discerning One's Life Question

Each of us, whether we happen to know it or not, has a primal or central question guiding our lives. This is a question that we are, consciously or unconsciously, asking ourselves all the time. This question that guides us has immense power for better or worse. For example, imagine how you would live your life if your life question was:

"Where can I get my next fix?" versus "How can I serve others?"

"Who am I?" versus "How many ways can I be myself?"

"What is my place in the world?" versus "In how many ways can I experience a sense of belonging to the world?"

"How can I be the most authentic?" versus "What will the neighbors think?"

A life question, properly formed and attended to, can lead us more deeply into purpose, meaning, and freedom. Theologian Frederick Buechner saw that the place we are called to is that place, "where your deepest gladness and the world's hunger meet" (pg. 39, Plotkin). Now, here's a simple exercise to locate that "place." Take a piece of paper and make three columns. Then, sit comfortably and allow your breathing to deepen naturally. Then, close your eyes and bring your attention to the center—the heart region—of your chest. Now, when you are feeling relaxed, bring to mind all of the things in life that bring you deep and lasting satisfaction, joy, or pleasure—things that feed your heart. **Write down whatever comes to mind in the first column.**

Then, when you are ready, ask yourself: "What things occurring in my family, my community, my world, cause my heart to ache with compassion? Allow yourself to settle into this question and as answers come, **write them down in the third column**, along the right side of the paper. To conclude this investigation, look over your two lists—all those things that bring you joy and a sense of satisfaction (left column) as well as all those things that cause you to feel compassion for others and for the world (right column) and ask yourself: "Where are the places where my joy and the world's need intersect?" Then, **in the middle column, write down everything that comes to mind.** Don't worry about whether it is practical or doable. Let your heart and imagination run free.

Spend some time to let the results and experience of this work sink in. Meditate on it. Then, find one person with whom you could comfortably engage in conversation, and speak the fruits of this labor. That is, tell them where your joy and the world's needs intersect.

Compose a response piece to this experience.

Option 4: A Rite of Passage

The longing for epic adventure continues to exist powerfully among young men and women in our culture. And yet, as Foster and Little (1992, p. 69) point out, our culture offers no healthy, full-bodied way for our young to come of age and take their place in the world:

Look around you. How many Americans, regardless of age, are caught in an adolescent holding pattern, waiting for the time when they will magically become adult? In the meantime, they will dream the infantile American Dream of wealth and power, addict themselves to alcohol and (legal and illegal) drugs, become enamored of the glittering surface of the material world, fall into puppy love and get married, readily dream the clever dreams manufactured for them by media and politicians, fight their own kind with rocketships, lasers, and nuclear bombs, worship celluloid stereophonic personalities, become obsessed with sex, wallow in the depths of narcissistic depression, persist in self-destructive excess, dislike having to be responsible for personal actions, fantasize as a way of facing tomorrow's verities, try to stay forever young, ignore the eventuality of their own death, put off cleaning up their messy room in the house of the Earth, and restlessly cruise the neighborhoods of the world looking for action. These signs of cultural crisis, and many more, point to the inability of the culture itself to provide meaningful rites of passage by which Americans can initiate themselves into expanded stages of growth.

With rare exceptions (e.g., initiation rites such as Bar and bat Mitzvahs), most young people in America are not guided through the adolescent journey, nor initiated into adulthood in any deep or meaningful way. This is tragic because it is when we are in our teen years that we humans gain the capacity to consider and reflect on the larger meaning and purpose of our lives. When adults are not there to provide constructive rites of passage, kids, left to their own devices, create their own distorted and sometimes destructive rituals (e.g., drug abuse, violence, sexual promiscuity, binge drinking, hazing).

The challenge of this field study—and it *is* challenging—is to devise your own rite of passage, and then *make* that passage. It is all in your hands, entirely. What passage is your “soul” asking you to make? How can you best symbolize the movement from one “place” of your life to another? Only you know these answers. After you have performed this rite of passage, compose a response piece to the entire experience, including how you came to know that you had to make this passage, how you decided upon the rite that would seal it, what you felt or came to know when performing this rite, and what the time intervening has brought to your attention.