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Do You Know Your "Why?" 4 Questions To Find Your Purpose

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Careers

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If you've ever faced a significant crisis in your life you'll have experienced the power purpose to tap reserves of energy, determination and courage you likely didn't know you had. Your mission was clear. Your goal was compelling. Your focus was laser-like. Your potential was tapped. The power of purpose is similar to the energy of light focused through a magnifying glass. Diffused light has little use, but when its energy concentrated—as through a magnifying glass—that same light can set fire to paper. Focus its energy even more, as with a laser beam, and it has the power to cut through steel. Likewise, a clear sense of purpose enables you to focus your efforts on what matters most, compelling you to take risks and push forward regardless of the odds or obstacles. 

Unlike animals, which are driven simply to survive, we humans crave more from life than mere survival. Without an answer to the question 'Survival for the sake of what' we can quickly fall into disillusionment, distraction and a quiet sense of despair. The


alarming increase in rates of drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide, along with the growing reliance on antidepressant medications, seems to indicate many are doing just that. Likewise, a quick glance at employee engagement statistics points to crisis of purpose and meaning on an unprecedented scale. 🐦 Given we're wealthier today than at any time in history, there is clearly a marked difference between 'well off' and 'well-being.'



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German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche once said, ‘He who has a why can endure any how.’ Knowing your *why* is an important first step in figuring out *how* to achieve the goals that excite you and create a life you enjoy living (versus merely surviving!). Indeed, only when you know your ‘why’ will you find the courage to take the risks needed to get ahead, stay motivated when the chips are down, and move your life on an entirely new, more challenging, and more rewarding trajectory.

Certainly this has been the experience of Tom Hale, whose company [BACKROADS](#) will top \$100 million in revenue in 2014. “My passion for bringing active travel experiences to more people has driven me over the last 35 years.” In a recent interview, Tom shared with me that in the first seven years of starting [BACKROADS](#), he put in enormous effort for little return. “Given the hours I worked, I think I was earning about 35 cents an hour,” he joked. “However, while I knew we had to make money to grow, I was never driven by the money. Once I got clear that this was my life’s work, doing something else was never an option.” Tom’s leadership of [BACKROADS](#) from a small start up to a major player in the travel industry has created an organization whose employees are as passionate about his company’s mission as him. [BACKROADS](#)’ on-going growth – in both the range of experiences offered and the company’s bottom line profit – speaks for itself.

While there’s no one pathway for discovering your life’s purpose, there are many ways you can gain deeper insight into yourself, and a larger perspective on what it is that you have to offer the world. As I wrote in [Stop Playing Safe](#), your ‘life’s work’ sits in the intersection of your talents, skills/expertise, passions and deepest values  (see adjacent diagram). Reflect on the corresponding four questions below to help find the ‘sweet spot’ that sits in the intersection between what you care about, what you can contribute, and what will be valued most.

What do you want your life to stand for? Know your WHY and you'll figure o...



1. What makes you come alive?

The word inspire comes from the Latin, meaning “to breathe life into.” Accordingly when you are working toward things that inspire you, it literally makes you feel more alive. What makes *you* come alive isn’t referring to taking your dream holiday or watching your favorite team play football (unless you’re called to a career as a football coach or commentator!). It’s bigger than that. I’m talking about a *why* that moves up the food chain from being about you to being about something bigger than you. It’s about connecting with what you’re passionate about, knowing that when you focus your attention on endeavors that put a fire in your belly, you grow your impact and influence in ways that nothing else can.

You don’t have to declare at this point that you want to invent the next iPad, solve the world’s energy problems or cure cancer (though you might!). This is about you connecting to a cause that’s bigger than you are, but which is also congruent with *who* you are what you care about.

2. What are your innate strengths?

In *The Element*, Sir Ken Robinson says that our element is the point at which natural talent and skill meets personal passion. When people are in their element they are not only more productive, but they add more value and enjoy more personal and professional fulfillment. Accordingly, it's also often where they also tend to make more money!

What are the things you've always been good at (sometimes wondering why others find it so hard?) Are you able to see patterns and opportunities amidst complexity? Are you creative, naturally adept at coming up with 'outside the box' solutions? Are you a natural born rebel with an innate ability to identify where the status quo is in need of a makeover? Are you brilliant in the details, naturally good at executing projects with a precision that some find tedious? Or are you a naturally gifted communicator, technocrat, diplomat, networker, leader, problem solver or change agent? For a free strengths survey visit <http://www.viame.org/>

Of course, you can also be passionate about things you have no natural talent for, and talented at things for which you hold little passion. However experience has shown me that we rarely aspire toward ambitions we have no natural talent to achieve. As civil rights leader Howard Thurmon once wrote, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive, then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Indeed they do.

3. Where do you add the greatest value?


Doing work that you're good at, but which you loathe, is not a pathway to fulfillment. That said, knowing your greatest strengths and where you can add the most value—through the application of your education, skills, knowledge and experience—can help you focus on the opportunities, roles and career paths where you are most likely to succeed and therefore find the greatest sense of accomplishment and contribution.

Too often we undervalue our strengths, skills and the expertise we naturally acquire over time. If you reframe the concept of adding value through the lens of solving problems, you can ask yourself what you're well placed and equipped to help solve in your workplace, career, organisation or industry. You can also ask yourself what problems you really enjoy solving, and what problems you feel passionate about trying to solve. You'll then be more successful at focusing on your natural strengths and those things you're innately good at than trying to bolster or eliminate your weaknesses.

4. How will you measure your life?

People who don't stand for something, can easily fall for anything. Deciding how you want to measure your life means making a stand for something and then living your life in alignment with it.

Ultimately, living with purpose means focusing on things that matter most. Ironically the things that matter most are rarely "things." That said, while some people are in a position to trade the security of a regular salary in order to pursue a passion, many simply can't—at least not in the short term or without violating core values (like paying off debt or providing for their family). But following the money and following your heart don't have to be mutually exclusive. By shifting the lens in which you view what you are doing now, you can profoundly shift your experience of it. No matter what your job, you can draw meaning from it and find greater purpose through *how* you do what you do. If you don't think you're the kind of person you'd want to work with, then consider that it may not be because of the job you do each day, but your attitude toward it.

Knowing your purpose may compel you to take on challenges that will stretch you as much as they inspire you. Just as a boat under power can handle any size wave if perpendicular to it, when you're powered by a clear purpose, there is little you cannot do. 

Margie Warrell is the bestselling author of *Stop Playing Safe* (Wiley) and *Find Your Courage* (McGraw-Hill), intrepid traveller and keynote speaker.

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