

THE PASSIONATE LIFE

How come some people generally wake up singing, go enthusiastically off to work or play with a smile on their face and a heart full of happy anticipation, ride through disappointments and negativity like a dolphin on a wave, and spread good feelings like syrup on warm pancakes?

Are they just lucky? Genetically blessed? Crazy? Unrealistic? Out of touch with reality? Living in denial? Pollyanna optimists?

Do they know something other people don't know? Or do they **not** know something other people do know about life?

For a substantial portion of my adult life, I couldn't stand these people. In my mind, they were missing the point of being a grown-up. I believed that it was normal for children to be uncommonly happy, easily satisfied and consistently resilient. But I believed that when people grew up, they got serious, determined, and "realistic" enough not to be goofy any more. For me, the turning point was college graduation and taking on important responsibilities. I had been completely carefree, high-spirited and ecstatic about life most of the time. I became a tired and serious person, older than my years, with two demanding part-time jobs, going to graduate school and trying to start a marriage with a man who was about to be drafted and sent to Vietnam.

I was smug about having at last grasped how complex and difficult real life was and I avoided people my age who weren't pursuing life purposefully. I went from being a lively party participant to a dispirited party pooper, in a few grim months. I worked with and made friends with and felt most comfortable with people who were driven and intense. I was tough on everyone around me, and brutal on myself. It didn't matter what I achieved, it didn't seem good enough to me, given how hard I worked and how much more I could have done. Nothing came easily to me. If it was possible to make something ten times harder than it needed to be, I found the way. The best feeling I had was something like determination; most of the time I just felt overwhelmed and pressured.

I lived like that for years, as did most of the people I knew well. We were pretty darn proud of ourselves. We were upstanding citizens, models of industriousness and accomplishment, "players" in our respective fields of endeavor. We felt sorry for people who didn't take life seriously enough.

Then, things happened that tarnished our pride. Friends began to become ill and even die, way too young. People we had written off as "silly" or insufficiently resolute began turning up at reunions or in magazine stories as brilliant, quirky successes, innovative, creative leaders in their fields of endeavor. We often sat sadly on the sidelines and

watched others having a good time, taking things lightly, bouncing back from adversity, finding joy in life. We were missing something as our years droned past.

I was taken aback when, about 20 years ago, I re-encountered my family doctor from my childhood. He was in his early 90's at the time. He was exuberant, full of energy, full of laughter. He seemed almost to glow with mischief and enthusiasm. People sought him out, eager to spend time with him. After I had spent a day and an evening with him and his wife, he took my hand as I was departing and said, "You know, people die from seriousness. It's an illness of the soul. I hope you get over it."

I burst into tears. "I don't know how to get over it," I said. "Yes, you do," he said. "Just find your heart and follow your passion."

Those instructions were baffling. I had a pretty clear idea my heart was not located anywhere near my head full of incessant self-doubt, judgments, observations, to-do lists and analysis. The idea that one would or could "follow passion" was so odd I couldn't fathom it. It sounded like something my mother would say could lead to ruin.

I decided to start, like the Tin Man, by finding my heart. The question that seemed most likely to lead me to it was, "What really matters?" Still enamored of my commitment to intellectualizing everything, I made a list of things in my life, an inventory of interests, people, activities, plans. And then I sat down and looked at it and asked myself, "What really matters?"

I was surprised to discover that the first thing that really mattered to me – finding joy and fulfillment in service to others – was not even on my original list. Nothing from the original list made it to the "what really mattered" list. I was further surprised to discover that the thing that really mattered to me was the thing I was constantly putting off and putting aside and putting last on my to-do list so that I could meet my obligations, follow my plans, see the people I was scheduled to see, get my work done, rise to others' expectations of me.

What if I put what really mattered first? What would change? What if "joy and fulfillment in service to others" was the criterion that determined the interests, activities and plans I undertook? I regret that it took another few years for me to face the answers to those questions because I didn't understand what it meant to change my mind. I got frightened by the free fall into the unknown implicit in those questions. I kept on keeping on, frequently haunted by the idea that what really mattered to me really *did* matter and I couldn't ignore it forever.

It wasn't until I met someone for whom "joy and fulfillment in service to others" was the sole criteria for what to do that I could start to look at answering my own questions. Life would become simpler and more straightforward. I wouldn't do things just for the sake of

doing them or because I thought I should or because they were there to do or because someone else wanted me to do them. I would do the things that mattered because they were close to my heart. If I did that, I would be following my passion. When this idea stepped suddenly into my mind, its entrance was not heralded like lions trumpeted into an apocalyptic spectacle. It was small and gentle, like a kitten jumping onto a sofa. Yet it had eluded me for years. At first, I felt it couldn't be "just that easy." Do what you love to do; follow it with fervor and enjoyment. If you don't love what you're doing, look to find what you do love. Know what really matters and the rest will take care of itself.

For years now, I have started with every group I work with by asking, "What really matters?" Most often, they are surprised by their own responses, just as I was by my original response. When the answer comes to people, it is usually not the focus of what they are currently doing. And yet, when the answer opens fully, it is clearly what rings in their hearts and the passion that sings out to them. And when they turn to it, a clear path opens before them.

Sometimes, it's a bit scary, at first, because it summons them to change. Or to venture beyond the known and familiar. A friend sent me a note just the other day with a reminder of a quote he had often used with his colleagues as they pioneered new work. It is from the 13th century poet, Rumi: "Feel the key turn in the lock of your fear; risk everything for love." When we first consider finding our hearts and following our passion, it feels like something is at risk. We can become immobilized by the idea of risk.

But as I look at that quote now, I realize it isn't quite right. When the lock is truly turned on fear, the word "risk" has no meaning. How can it be a risk to do what is obvious and clearly meaningful to do?

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