

Living Life with Passion

In a world where local five and dimes, hardware stores and grocery stores are endangered species due to the invasion of major chains like Walmart, Lowes, and Giant Eagle, and fast food restaurants reign, it's easy to sink into a robotic existence. We get up, get ready for work, stop by the drive through to get breakfast and/or coffee, work our shift, pick up something for dinner or throw something together when we get home, flop on the couch or plant ourselves in front of the computer or video game and tune out for the night until we finally fall asleep. The next morning, we get up and start over. We lose touch with our creativity as our passion for living drips away like oil through a leaky oil filter.

We lose our passion for life because on one hand, we let ourselves get stuck in roles that are not satisfying, and on the other, we don't spend enough time and energy engaged in roles that are satisfying and enlivening. If you feel like you're basically going through life on automatic pilot, I'd like to invite you to explore your satisfaction in the roles that currently play.

Make a list of the 5-7 most significant roles you play in your life. If you're struggling with how to figure out which of the roles you play are the most significant, think about the ones that take up most of your psychic space. They may be the roles you spend the most time doing, the roles you spend the most time wishing you could do, or the roles that you spend the most time wishing you didn't have to do or complaining about. These roles might be relationship oriented (like partner, daughter/son, mother/father, or friend), work or occupation oriented, (like computer programmer, customer service representative, or student) hobby or sports oriented (like artist, guitar player, actor, stamp collector, softball player, soccer player, martial artist, or yoga instructor).

Once you've completed your list, think about how you feel in each of these roles. Do you feel alive in that role or does the mere thought of thinking about the role make you want to curl up on the couch or bed and tune out with TV, drugs or alcohol, or sleep? Note here that it's likely that your interest in a particular role falls on a continuum. That is, on a scale of one to ten, you might rate your satisfaction or aliveness in a particular role as a five or a seven. You might think of ten as, "I feel totally alive and satisfied in this role," and zero as, "I think I might have to start shooting (or am shooting) heroin to do this role/job." It's also possible to feel fully alive in one aspect of a role and want to run away from another aspect of the same role. For example, as a counselor, I love helping clients connect with their core selves and let go of the old, disempowering messages they've gotten along the way. At the same time, I loathe talking to insurance companies.

Now that you've sort of sorted out how you feel about each of the roles you've listed, go through the list and find the role or roles that feel most torturous. If you have any roles on your list that you absolutely hate, ask yourself, "Do I really need to do this role?" If your answer is yes, take a breath and ask yourself again, "Do I really need to do *this particular* role?"

It might be helpful as you are doing this to list why you have chosen to take on and continue with this particular role. If, for example, you are in a job that you don't like, you might want to list your reasons for doing the particular despicable job. Maybe, for example, you hate your job but it was the only job you could find at the time. Or maybe you hate your job but you like having the paycheck and/or insurance benefits that it offers. Or maybe you like your job but hate having to deal with a coworker or supervisor who's a pain in the ass. Or maybe you're bored out of your mind with your job but you like flirting with the cute guy sitting three cubicles away. Or maybe you are really only doing this job because you are trying to please your parents or your partner. If any of these are the case, could you perhaps start looking for another job, either for a different job in the same company or for a different job entirely? If not, why not?

For many people the "No" breaks down to a few core issues: a lack of self-confidence/fear of failure, fear of what others might think, and/or an inability to see other possibilities. These same issues often come up around other less than satisfying roles that people feel stuck in. For example, some people stay in crappy relationships because they believe that not being able to keep a relationship afloat makes them a failure. Some people continue to stay with their partners because they make a lot less money than their partner and worry that people would look down on them if they lost the income. Some people stay in crappy relationships because they can't imagine that anyone else would ever want to date them. If you are stuck in "no" mode, ask yourself, "Is this really true?" That is, if you assume that you can't get better job, my bet is that this isn't really true, at least not in the long run. It's important to explore the root causes of this belief. Sometimes it's helpful to do this with a friend, partner or counselor.

It can also help to explore what the consequences for leaving a particular role might be and critically assess the absolute merit of that position. For example, if you're reluctant to leave your job because of the guy you like to flirt with, would it be possible to cut to the chase and ask him out? If your fear of leaving your job is based on income and/or benefits, is it possible that there is another job that pays as well or better in a different department or company? If not, is it possible to take steps towards changing your career, perhaps going back to school to get the degree that will not only help you rise out of the low wage job ghetto but also open doors to more interesting and rewarding jobs? Or, is it possible that you could look into financial downsizing and cutting expenses so that you don't need to earn as much money as you currently do.

For example, as a counselor, I looked at my loathing of dealing with insurance and asked myself if I really had to do it. My first response was, "If I don't take insurance, I'll never get any clients." But when I really looked into this, I discovered that a lot of counselors don't take insurance and still manage to make a living. In fact, some of the more successful counselors don't take insurance. I also factored the impact of the frustration I felt when dealing with insurance and the number of hours I was spending waiting on hold and the hours I spent worrying about whether or not the insurance companies would actually cover the claims. I finally decided that costs, in terms of time, stress and frustration, weren't worth the checks I stood to get so I no longer take insurance. In the process, I found that I am actually able to charge less and still get by.

It is possible that you really aren't willing to let go of a role that leaves you feeling dead. If this is the case, it's important to recognize this decision as a choice. In choice there is power and in power there is life. For example, I have a friend who, when her mom lost her job and subsequently her house due to drinking, moved her mom into an apartment for which my friend paid the rent. When I asked why she did this instead of simply walking away, she said, "If my mother drank herself to death and I didn't even try to save her, I don't think I could live with myself." It may be possible, even in this sort of tough role, to make changes so that the role feels less painful. For example, my friend set limits on how much time she was willing to spend with her mother and stuck with those limits. She also refused to talk to her mother when her mother was stinkin' drunk.

How to Reconnect to Your Passion

Now that you've explored the roles you play in your life that drain your passion for living and helped you consider how you might let go of or at least manage those unsatisfying roles, it's time to tap into your creativity so that you can live your life with passion and feel really alive.

If you haven't done it already, take a moment to think about the roles that are the most important to you. Make a list of the roles you're in that take up most of your psychic space. They may be the roles you spend the most time playing, the roles you spend the most time wishing you could play, or the roles you spend the most time wishing you didn't have to play. As before, these roles might be relationship oriented (like partner, daughter/son, mother/father, or friend), work or occupation oriented, (like president, pilot, or professional musician) or hobby or sports oriented (like artist, guitar player, or softball player). This time, the focus is on finding ways to bring life to the roles you chose to keep and to expand into roles you wish you could spend more time in. As you think about these desired roles, ask yourself the following questions.

What would I do if I wasn't worried about what other people might think?

What would I do if I wasn't worried about trying to pay the bills?

What would I tell my boss, lover(s), family, and/or close friends if I wasn't afraid of being fired, rejected, or abandoned?

What dream would I follow if the old tapes that tell me, "There's no way you can do this" stopped playing in my head?

What would I do if I listened to my soul?

Let yourself sit with these questions. Breathe and really let yourself have time to reflect on the answers. Once you've gone through the list and reflected on the truth that emerges, write your answers down so that you can keep your dreams in focus.

Once you've created a list of what you would do if . . . , ask yourself, "What keeps me from doing this?" Again, write down your answers – all of them. For most people, the two biggest barriers to taking steps towards changing the roles they play and the way they play them are the litany of "No's!" that echo in their heads. While sometimes the "No's!" are based on practical reality, often the "No's!" are rooted in the old tapes that we play in our heads and on our fear.

So, for example, if I truly listened to my soul, I'd become a full-time professional writer. Yikes! There's a scary one. And the "What keeps me from doing this?" list is pretty long. There are several practical barriers to doing this, at least right now. I have a contract to teach. I have a growing private practice in counseling and it wouldn't be ethical for me to walk away from either of them right now. More importantly, I like teaching and doing workshops and counseling and don't want to give those up. Another barrier: I like to eat and live in a house and the odds are against someone being able to support themselves just by writing. Even Stephen King, who is pretty wealthy by writers' standards, had a day job and struggled to make end's meet before he finally got something major published.

The list gets tricky here because this "No" is loaded. Sure, there's a practical point, but it's also connecting back to an old tape that has been playing in my head for years: "You can't make a living by writing." Clearly this is not absolutely true. A lot of people make a living by writing. It's not necessarily easy, but it's doable. The other part of this "No" is my expectation about how much money I really need. Based on my current income and outflow of money, it seems like I need to make a significant amount of money to get by. Realistically, I know that I could save a lot of money by making my own tea instead of dropping by the local Cup O Joe's coffee shop. I could also save a lot of money if I actually cooked from scratch instead of going out or dropping by the deli department at Whole Foods. These are some of the obvious empty holes in my checking account. I'm sure there are more.

Another "No" on my list has to do with the excuse, "I don't have time to write now." But is this really true? If I'm honest with myself, I know that it's not, or at least it doesn't have to be. I have friends who have kids and work more hours than I do who still find time to write every day. The truth is that I haven't set aside a set time to write every day and when I do sit down to write, I spend a lot of time checking e-mail and surfing the internet. I know that I'm running from the voices in my head that tell me that 1) Nothing I write is good enough, and 2) even if I were good enough, it's impossible to get published unless you have the right connections. I also know that at a very deep level, I'm afraid that if I fail at writing, I will die. This fear drives both my inability to schedule time to write and my procrastination tactics when I do write. Again, I can ask myself, "Is this really true? Will I really die if I fail?" And the answer is obviously, "No." It is at least somewhat comforting to know, rationally, that I won't die if I fail, even if I fail miserably.

If you have really looking at your list of "No's" closely, you are probably starting to feel a little anxious even as you begin to feel a bit relieved. That's normal. Breathe. What

you are doing is warming up to change and for most of us, change is really scary. Remember, you don't have to change everything at once. You can take baby steps. In fact, by acknowledging and exploring your blocks, you've already taken the first step towards change. A second helpful step might be to carve out time in your schedule to do what it is you want to do or do more of. A friend of mine actually got back into her dream of singing and playing piano by setting aside 15 minutes a day. Once you've built in at least a little time for your desired role(s), it's really important to be gentle and give yourself permission to make mistakes. Most of us feel a bit anxious and awkward when we take up new roles, even when it's something simple like becoming a barista at a local coffee shop. Allowing yourself to make mistakes will allow you to let go of the fear of not getting it right so that you can relax into who you are becoming. The more you can relax into the roles you wish to play, the more you can tap into your creativity and live your life with passion.

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