

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Obey Your DNA

Recently, I have found the thought that I have both strengths and non-strengths *by design* and that I should major in my strengths to be rather freeing. Sounds like a pretty obvious revelation, huh? But it speaks to an old, wounded place in me: that feeling that I'm weird, that I just don't fit in, that not fitting in is a bad thing, and that I should get busy fixing it or at least doing a better job of faking it if I possibly can. Anyone else have that place in there, deep down?

This week, though, I've been dwelling on the idea that my design may be right on, while it's the "fitting in" place that is off. I suspect that I was made to derive joy and excel in certain things and not others. Period. Because I don't get to control the world, sometimes I'll have to do things I'm not great at and don't particularly like. I'll have to work with others who don't much appreciate my innate design. But that doesn't mean I've been made badly. It just means that to the extent that I can, I should tap into places that match my strengths and pour most of my energy into people who need what I've got to offer because this is what I do *best*. As Frederick Buechner says, my "vocation is where [my] greatest bliss encounters the world's deepest need."

I like the screening criteria this gives me. When someone asks me to do something, or I consider adding another career or activity on the side, I can check in to see if it taps into my deepest passions and my super skills, not my wimpy ones. Then I can decide whether it's a place I can hit the ground running—yee haw!—or if it's just a schedule filler I'm tempted to throw in for the illusion of importance that comes from busyness. It can be so freeing to say "no" with the confidence that comes from knowing that although I might want to do X to please someone, or I feel like I *should* be good at X, Y is what I was made to do, *not* X!

The Pressure to Be Who We're Not

It's kind of hard, though, to just be who I am and not who I'm not. I remember hearing all those messages growing up like "do what you love and the money will follow" or "follow your bliss" or "everyone has something unique to contribute." Looking around at the world, though, it sure felt like some things I could love would make more money than others. Some kinds of "bliss" got a lot more attention and understanding at parties or dates. Some "uniquenesses" felt a lot more acceptable to parents or coworkers.

As we explore who we are during various life transitions and then decide what to do *now*, the pressure from others and ourselves to "discover" that we are made to do something particularly auspicious, tangible, praiseworthy, money making—or even the family's favorite vocation—can be pretty intense. Sometimes it's so intense that it obscures what our personality, strengths, and passions actually are, even to us! It might be years, decades, or most of our lifetime before we have the courage to take a long, gentle, realistic look at ourselves, and then at the mold that was held up for us to fit into, and finally declare, "You know, that's really not me. I might feel like that's who I *should* be, but darn it, that's just not who I *am*!"

The Cost of Being What We Do

As long as we neglect to pop the hood on our identity, take a look inside, and accept what we find there for better or worse, we can't *do* what we actually *are*. So instead, we end up trying to *be* what we *do*. Because so much of what we do does not really fit who we are, we need more compensation. We need at least enough money or praise to make up for the fact that we spend our best waking hours on things that hate or just pretend to like, though they bring us so little real joy.

We also tend to need excessive amounts of other pleasurable things to make up for that hollow feeling that we are not meeting our potential: more food or alcohol than we need, extreme exercise, intense relationships, a packed schedule, tons of sex, super successful kids, "better than thou" stances toward others, exotic vacations, the latest gadgets, video game marathons...pick your favorite over-compensation strategy. Lack of identity-based satisfaction in what we do sets us up for a binge-and-purge cycle of long hours of drudgery followed by increasingly destructive addictions that compensate for the misery, while making us feel out of control.

When We Do What We Are

Figuring out who we actually are is hard in the short run. Not only does it take effort and time to examine our personality, passions, and skills through assessment tools or intentional conversations with those who know us well, it also takes courage to face up to what we find. Both the strengths and non-strengths we discover can be frightening. If we find ourselves particularly skilled, that may raise fears of arrogance or pressure to perform exceptionally well. If we find that we are not strong in areas that our family or culture values, that means that to live out who we are, we will have to say some pretty significant "no's" along the way.

But *oh!* the freedom of knowing our vocational DNA, our design! Of knowing it is fundamentally good and that if it doesn't feel good some place or with some people, it's the place or the people who are off, not our design. I mean, sure, as I psychotherapist I'm in the business of helping people correct their personal "off" places. But it's always to help them to become *more* of who they were really designed to be, not less! It's to help them discover and accept what is there, mourn the loss of who they are not, and rejoice in what is delightful about who they actually are.

What's Under Your Hood?

I ran across versions of this exercise in two separate books this week.* I like it because it cuts beneath questions like "What are you good at?" or "What do you want to be?" which are so laden with social pressure to answer in certain ways. Our joys can provide some really good clues as to what we are designed to do best.

1. Thinking through your life, list 10 events, activities, or projects that have brought you the greatest joy.
2. For each of the 10, list at least 5 specific things about them that made the experience joyful for you. For example, if you liked making a 5-course meal, maybe what you liked was: 1) The challenge of researching recipes, 2) The organization of scheduling the preparation, 3) Having a tangible result of your efforts, 4) Being able to work with your hands, 5) Feeling like the eaters felt truly cared for, 6) Being praised for your work.

3. Looking over your 50+ specific components (10 x 5), note any themes that appear in several or most of your joyful 10. Do creativity, problem solving, physical activity, teamwork, meeting others' basic needs, or other things appear throughout?
4. From these identified themes, which feel most "core" to you? Do you like to problem solve no matter what, but sometimes you do that in cooking, other times in management, and other times in your marriage so that the common element for all three enjoyable events is problem solving? Do you like to create beautiful things no matter what, but sometimes for homeless people, sometimes for holidays, and sometimes for your wardrobe?
5. Once you've identified which elements of your joys feel most "core" to you, take a look at your life: your job, relationships, hobbies, etc. Which of these tap into your core joys or your more peripheral joys? Which joys are missing in your current schedule? Do the places you spend the most time and the people with whom you interact most frequently tap into these joys?
6. Focus on one area that you would like to better align with the way you were designed—a job, a relationship, a hobby, etc. What is one thing that you could do in that area to increase the joy you derive from it?

I had a lot of fun and learned a lot by trying out this exercise this week. I hope you do, too!

Thanks for reading!

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