

About the Meaning of Life:
Finding Your Path©

Originally Written by Jim Earley in 1994

The first time I remember really struggling to find my path in life I was probably about 19. I can remember sitting on the front lawn one summer night around midnight staring up at all the stars. I pleaded with those stars to tell me what to do. I couldn't see that I had any particular life direction.

Over the years I've pondered the question about finding my path. I've also sought to define my purpose. I've also tried to create, invent or detect my mission in life. I've also tried to decipher my personal vision. And I've frequently wondered what the heck was the difference between all those terms.

Summary

Experts from Plato to Covey exhort us to find our purpose and live it. But where do you start? You start here:

1. Commit yourself to the process of self discovery. Expect the events of your life to reveal their unifying connection. Expect that you have a purpose. Look to find it.
2. Have you decided that your world is a friendly place? If not, be clear that is a choice you've made. It's not a fact.
3. Be clear that sometimes the best life gets is having the opportunity to take one step into the fog of self discovery.

Square One: Inner search

Staring at those stars, I suspected there must be a life I was supposed to lead. If I could only find the path that would take me there.

One day, after years of searching, I found myself in a seminar (one of those expensive "meaning of life" seminars) when I was hit by a lightning-bolt insight.

I realized that I had thought of my "path" as an eight-lane highway. In "finding my path," I expected to have an insight that would be the equivalent of coming upon a road sign like the one you see below to lead me to peace and success.

Insight #1: There isn't any "path."

Sitting in that seminar, the instructor said something that shattered my image. My notion of an eight-lane highway and a road sign disappeared, and in its place appeared the image of a landscape-trees, boulders, mountains, and brush. I realized it would be my job to make it through my uncharted territory.

YOUR UNCHARTED TERRITORY.
THE PATH YOU MAKE IS THE ONLY "PATH" THERE IS.

Insight #2: The only path is the one you left behind

As I've considered that notion, I've realized I was only partly right. There is a path. But it is behind, not in front.

If you stop for a second and turn around, you can see your most recent footprints. Like the tall grass flattened as you crossed a field, they reflect where you've come from, and only by inference where you might be going.

Insight #3: If you see a path in front of you, you're probably lost!

My next "path" insight came watching Public TV and seeing one of the interviews between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell (The Power of Myth).

Campbell recounted the myth of the Holy Grail. According to that myth, King Arthur's Knights searched the world looking for the Grail (believed to be the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper). From time to time, a Knight would discover a prepared route (a path) that seemed easier than the struggle through the forests and mountains of life.

Campbell said the risk of following the path was that a "path" could only exist if it were the trail left behind by another Knight. Campbell said that, in taking that path, the second Knight would be following the path of the first. He'd be living the first one's life instead of his own.

As I brought these insights together, they rattled and clanged a little. They didn't quite fit together.

For example, take Campbell's myths. In those stories, it's typical for the hero to stumble around, raising havoc for him// or herself for most of the story. Then, just before the story ends, we see that all the hero's bumbling had a useful impact on his or her life. It had a purpose.

Even if the hero did as the Grail-chasing-Knights did and followed another's path, it seems as if, in the end, that "mistake" had some purpose in their life, too.

So, even when they were off their path, they were on it. Or were they? Maybe they were off their path, but still managed to fulfill their purpose or learn the lessons they needed to learn?

Or, maybe...

Help, I'm giving myself a headache!

To help sort out my own confusion, I called my friend Kevin Cashman (see picture below). He's a 20-year veteran of this stuff. He's an expert. President and founder of the Minneapolis career management firm Market Share, he's writing a book about these issues!

Below are some notes from our conversation and from his book *Success from the Inside-Out*.

My first question to Kevin was simple: "What do you mean by the word 'path' as in 'finding your path in life?'"

"Your path is the accumulated choices you've made in expressing your purpose.

"Being on your path means you have an orientation towards self-discovery and a means for integrating the events of your life.

"It means you have an awareness that the experiences of your life are coming together in a way that fulfills your purpose. You have enough self-awareness and self-knowledge to take all your different experiences, good and bad, pull them together, and experience the integration of your life.

"The problem the Knights had [in the myth of the Holy Grail] was that they were searching for something external. Some physical thing. Well, if you think your path is something out there, you are lost. It's the experience of your life unfolding.

" If we're not viewing life this way, what happens is we define our lives in terms of their circumstances. Actually, we let life define us in terms of our circumstances instead of by who we are and what our reason for being is."

Cashman's clearest point is made in the first sentence of that quote: "Your path is the accumulated choices you've made in expressing your purpose. It's like saying that your true career is the sum of all purposeful (job) choices you made while expressing you uniqueness.

But there's something more subtle here. Before you can have any awareness of purpose, you must believe there's something to be found in looking at your life. You must believe there is an integrating context or explanation for your choices, experiences and circumstances. You must expect to find meaning.

Bottom line #1

Seeing the purpose behind your path requires looking into your life for an explanation that holds it all together in a way that has meaning for you.

This notion is well supported, starting with the keeper of the "meaning" flame, Victor Frankl: "Man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life. That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition to be sure, that his suffering has meaning." Frankl, a survivor of four Nazi death camps, knew something about suffering.

This thought is echoed in the book *Fire in the Soul* by Joan Borysenko. She discusses how people cope with the tragedies of life:

"Studying people whose lives had been disrupted by misfortunes that ranged from rape to life-threatening illness, Dr. Shelley Taylor found that those who readjusted well incorporated a search for meaning in the experience" as part of their recovery.

The implication here is that all we need do to find our purpose and be on "the path" is to be introspective. But what if we identify ourselves as victims of an unfair world? Borysenko says that "if our interpretation creates a negative, fearful [context], recovery from trauma is impeded." That's a literate way of saying you'll be up a major creek!

This could throw us into a big conversation about optimistic and pessimistic views of life. It could be a useful conversation, but I'm going to short circuit it with this, also from Borysenko's book:

"At one point, Albert Einstein was asked what he thought was the most important question that a human being needed to answer. His reply was, 'Is the universe a friendly place or not?' Indeed, our answer to that question is the cornerstone on which many of our values and beliefs inevitably rest. If we believe that the universe is unfriendly and that our very souls are in danger, peace will be elusive at best."

Bottom line #2

Your chances of finding peace in this life start with how you answer Einstein's question. Take care how you choose.

So the real key is believing that there is an integrating context to find. It's then our job to trust life and then to expect it to unfold in a way that allows us to make the connections that will give us our direction.

We're on the home stretch now, folks, just one final point. For me, the times in my life when my doubts grow big enough to have me take the kind of hard, intro-spective look we're talking about here can be pretty hard times. Dark, lonely times. Instead of having a long list of steps to take, I only have a glimpse of a single next step that I'm not very crazy about.

I still hate that part of how it is for me, but I don't get as bugged about it since reading a section in the little book *How to Find Your Mission in Life* by Richard Bolles (published by Ten Speed Press).

Final Bottom line

Often, the most life offers is one step at a time into the fog.

So welcome to the fog of self discovery. Your job may not be easy, but it is crystal clear: Expect you have a purpose, trust life and take your next step.

What is YOUR next step? It could be something you've been aware of for years (changing jobs, seeing your doctor). It may be as simple as reading one of the books quoted here. It may be to talk to me.

Expect that there is purpose in your life. Trust life. Take your next step.

(Below is my adaptation of Bolles'. His approach is very God centered. That may put some people off a little. I believe the essential point is powerful regardless of your beliefs.

The Uncomfortableness of One Step at a Time

Imagine yourself out walking in your neighborhood one night. You're walking and walking when you notice it's getting foggy. Suddenly, you find yourself surrounded by such a dense fog that you've lost your bearings and cannot find your way. You can barely see one step in front of you.

Then you hear a friend's voice out of the fog. Your friend extends their hand and you take it. You hold tight as your friend leads you. You, not being able to tell where you are going, trustingly follow, even though you can only see one step at a time. Eventually you arrive safely home, filled with gratitude. The next day, as you reflect upon your experience, you realize how terrifying it was to have to keep walking when you could see only one step at a time, even though you had guidance you trusted.

Now I have asked you to imagine all of this because this is the essence of the second Mission you and I are called to lead in this life. It is all very different than we had imagined. When the question "What is your Path in life?" is first broached, and we have put our hand in God's, as it were, we have a particular picture of how we will be shown our Path. We imagine God will lead us up to some mountain top, from which we can see far into the distance. We imagine we will hear God say Look, look, see that distant city? That is the goal of your Path. That is where every step is leading.

But that isn't how it goes. Instead of a mountain top, we find ourselves in a valley - wandering often in a fog. The voice in our ear says something quite different from what we expected. It says, Your Mission is to take one step at a time, even when you don't see where it all is leading, or what the grand plan is, or what your overall Mission is.