

The Path to Purpose

It's Not About You and You Can't Think It Through

by Dick Richards

Two questions about life purpose nagged me for some time: Why does knowledge of purpose arrive for some but not for others? What determines when it will arrive?

In my prior thinking and writing about purpose I contented myself with surveying the work of gurus of purpose in order to find common threads. The findings were published in my book, [*Is Your Genius at Work?*](#), as four points of agreement among those experts:

1. Your purpose is not to be invented. It is, rather, to be discovered, detected or revealed.
2. Your purpose is directed outward.
3. If you know your purpose, you can be more intentional and effective in fulfilling it.
4. Purpose gives focus to a life.

While doing that work, examining my own experience, and reviewing the experiences of people that I have coached, I sensed, but did not explore the idea of **purpose readiness**, that awareness of your purpose won't show up until you are ready for it. It seemed obvious to me that purpose arrives only after a certain point in a person's development has been reached, but the process of reaching that point and the nature of the point itself seemed mysterious.

Now, while I cannot say with any certainty exactly when awareness of purpose will arrive for any one person, I do believe two statements:

1. Purpose will arrive only after the demands of ego have been transcended enough to allow that knowledge to enter awareness. By "ego" I mean that set of personal underlying programs that concern themselves only with their own survival and gain. Those programs rest upon a platform which may contain shame, guilt, willfulness, fear, blame, anger, resentment, craving, or false pride. They are the source of *I Got Mine* and *It's All About Me* bumper-stickers. Those programs drive out what is needed to seize and run with a purpose: courage, willingness, surrender, open-mindedness, and other-centeredness. Ego is the enemy of purpose.

Traces of self-centered ego can be very subtle and tricky, difficult to spot, and challenging to overcome. But purpose cannot exist alongside them because purpose is directed to a higher and common good and not merely to yours.

Awareness of purpose may not magically appear when ego is transcended, but transcendence does clear a welcoming space for that magic to occur.

There is evidence supporting this notion in stories I have been told by people who found a sense of purpose after a single experience, or many years of experience, that brought them to a place of

humility, acceptance, open mindedness, and other-centeredness; a place of transcended ego. (One such story is told on pages 88-90 of *Is Your Genius At Work?*)

2. Purpose will arrive through a process that is experiential and spiritual rather than intellectual. I know many people whose search for purpose has been frustrated and thwarted in attempts to “think it through” or “analyze their situation” or “inventory their strengths” or any number of other intellectual exercises. I know of no person who has arrived at a sense of purpose through any such intellectual process. Each of the people in my experience who held a deep sense of purpose had some life experience that provided them with a call that they could not refuse.

One example is a man that I interviewed, an accomplished leader, who told me, “It makes no sense to spend a life this way.” He is a brilliant guy, with the requisite skills, integrity, and leadership ability to have made a success and lots of money in many arenas. Instead, he has devoted his life to providing learning opportunities for disadvantaged inner-city youths. When he says that his life choice “makes no sense” he means that it isn’t rational by contemporary standards. Neither is it irrational however. It is non-rational; it was born from his experience as an inner-city youth and his spiritual drive to make the difference that fulfills his life.

You cannot think your way to your purpose, and when it arrives it may make no sense to you.

THE PATH

The conclusion to all of those ruminations is *The Path to Purpose*, three things anyone must do in order to find purpose.

1. Learn to frame your experience in empowerment, courage and confidence; in willingness to face yourself; in peace of mind, compassion, trust in your intuition, responsibility, and flexibility; in faith, patience, other-centeredness, and a holistic view of life; and in determination to make your best contribution to the human condition.
2. Seek or welcome experience that stirs your emotions.
3. Remain alert, and accept the call when it arrives.

Finding purpose is neither a quest to pursue nor a puzzle to solve. Purpose will arrive on its own, sometimes subtly and sometimes obviously, dawning slowly or in a bright sudden flash, when the bonds of both ego and intellect have been transcended enough to allow you to heed its call.

In short, you will find your purpose when you become the kind of person to whom purpose calls.