Finding Your Passion
By Scott Westerman, Author of *The Spartan Life*

*Life is much more fun when you can work at the things you enjoy.*

I was talking about my favorite topic. The audience was made up of Laboratory Professionals. These are the scientists who analyze our body fluids in search of everything from high cholesterol to cancer. Their lives are, by design, ones of regimentation. Strict protocols must be followed if meaningful results are to be obtained. That culture seems to flow outward into the organizations where they work. Regimented hours and tight human resource policies are the order of the day.

As a right-brain centered idealist, I wondered aloud, “How many of you would still be at work on Monday if you won the lottery?”

Surprisingly, the majority in the room raised their hands. There were a few in this group who said, “I would show up on Monday, but only to give my two weeks notice!” But most of my audience believed strongly that the work they did saved lives. They are proud of their profession and are always eager to engage in the latest innovation in testing in the hope of improving what they do.
And what about those who didn’t raise their hands? “What would you do,” I asked, “if you were working for love and not for money?”

As they pondered that one, I was thinking of one of the happiest people I’ve ever met. He was a porter at the Omni Hotel in Jacksonville, Florida. This joyful gentleman wouldn’t make the Forbes list that Bill Gates is on. He told me that, at age 64, he’s making less than $20.00 per hour.

But as we rode the elevator from my high perch to the lobby, he exuded joy. He enjoys living in a place where he can see the ocean every day. He maintains his health by taking long walks. He loves to read. He travels when he feels like it (almost always by train; he was once an Amtrak porter). He volunteers on Saturday mornings at the local homeless shelter. And he has a network of good friends across the country, “A buddy in every county,” he says.

And he loves his job.

“I reckon that I’m a happier man than about 90% of the people in the world,” he told me. “And if I can rub some of that off on a guest or two each day, it’s a good day.”

I turned my attention back to my audience. Studying their expressions, I could see that some were beginning to think, maybe for the first time, about what might define their joyful life.

What really excites you? If you could take a pill that would guarantee that you would succeed in anything you tried, what would you do?

If these questions make your head spin, think about the values that are important to you. A wise person once said that *inner peace only happens when activities and values match.*

"When work, commitment, and pleasure all become one and you reach that deep well where passion lives, nothing is impossible." - Anonymous

Discovering your true passion is an exercise that’s well worth the work. But how do you do it?

**Make a list of the things you enjoy** - Investing the time to objectively explore what activities, people, places and things really excite you can help you select the right job, the right home, and the right life partner.

When have you been the happiest?  
What were you doing?  
Do you know someone who impresses you as a person who is living her dream?  
What are the factors that make it so?
As you fill in the blanks, your antennae will automatically begin to search for situations where this environment exists.

**Find a Passionate Role Model** - When you zero in on a possible target, find someone who does that job well and is happy doing it. Take them to lunch. Confirm your observation and ask them:

“What is it that makes you love this job so much?”
“How did you discover your mission in life?”

The answers to these questions can help you get a step closer to your dream situation.

**Try it out** - Wherever you are on life’s continuum, it’s still ok to test-drive your ideas. Every profession has its virtuosos. If you think you have found something fun, find a way to spend a day, side by side, with that person who does it well. Even if it turns out that the gig doesn’t live up to your expectations, chances are you’ll learn something from the person doing it that you will want to incorporate into your life.

Don’t be afraid to try out your possible career. At a recent conference, one attendee told me that he was terrified that any time he might invest in trying out a career idea might be wasted if it turned out he didn’t like it. “I could be building seniority in my current role,” he said. “Going down a rabbit hole that doesn’t pan out would be lost time,” he said.

I felt sorry for him. No matter how young or old you might be, no matter how much education or experience you may have, you should always be bracketing your passion and doing everything you can to move toward it.

**Act like the person you want to become** - It may begin by volunteering in that space, working part time, or taking classes to learn more about it. A funny thing happens when you start acting like the person you hope to be. You inevitably end up becoming that person.

As Earl Nightingale once said, “We become what we think about.” So think productive thoughts. It’s also true that we tend to emulate those we associate with. So hang out with positive, directed people who share your character and ethics.

If you can discover what you love to do and figure out a way to get paid to do it, you will have joined the small percentage of people out there who are truly happy at work.

And chasing happiness is really what all of this is about. Even in the best of work situations, there are bad days and bad people. We can’t always choose what happens to us along the way, but we can always choose how we react to it.
Choose happiness!

While researching one of my Monday Motivators, I came across Bronnie Ware. She works with people who have gone home to die. In a recent blog post, she identified the top 5 regrets reported by individuals who have entered the last lap of their earthly adventure.

1. *I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.* - Have your worries about the perceptions of others kept you from chasing your dreams? You may regret this later. Try making a few of those dreams real while you still have your health. As Brittany Renée says, “I would much rather have regrets about not doing what people said, than regretting not doing what my heart led me to and wondering what life had been like if I’d just been myself.”

2. *I wish I didn’t work so hard* - The birth of our first grandchild combined with Colleen’s escape from cancer totally refocused us on the everyday milestones that make a lifetime. It’s easy to get hooked on things and spend a lot of our energy earning the money to get them. Your career and your material possessions are only two dimensions of your existence. They do not truly define who you are. What does define you? Are you investing some time in that direction?

3. *I wish I’d had the courage to express my feelings.* - Conflict avoidance is the road to mediocrity. If you swallow too many emotions your body will manifest them in uncomfortable ways. Clearing the bad juju out of the imaginary wheelbarrow you push around will make your burden lighter. Having the courage to give honest feedback to someone is the greatest gift you an give them.

4. *I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.* - Aside from our families, we have many acquaintances, but very few true friends. Who are yours? How are you celebrating and nurturing those relationships? During the toughest moments of our lives, our family and friends make all the difference.

5. *I wish that I had let myself be happier.* - Here’s the essence. Happiness isn’t something that happens. It’s not where we live or even where we work. it’s a state of mind, an attitude, a decision.

I would add one more to Bronnie’s list:

6. *I wish I had taken better care of my body.* - We feel invincible when we are young. That can open the door to unhealthy habits. Every day we add or subtract from the bank of energy we’re given for a lifetime. Be thoughtful of what you put into your “marvelous machine”. You may get to keep it longer.
In the final analysis, passion is that fire that burns inside each of us. It's the desire to become the person we dream about. To discover the life we were meant to live.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson writes:

“To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

So how do we start? The journey toward any objective begins with commitment. Make the decision today to live a life, not an apology.

In the words of some long forgotten sage, “Accept the pain, cherish the joys, resolve the regrets; then can come the best of benedictions – ‘If I had my life to live over again, I’d do it all the same.’”

More Resources

- [http://www.ineedmotivation.com/blog/2008/04/7-questions-to-finding-your-true-passion/](http://www.ineedmotivation.com/blog/2008/04/7-questions-to-finding-your-true-passion/)
- [http://humanresources.about.com/od/success/tp/happy_work.htm](http://humanresources.about.com/od/success/tp/happy_work.htm)

*Scott Westerman is the Associate Vice President for Alumni Relations and Executive Director of the Michigan State University Alumni Association. He is the author of* The Spartan Life, a series of essays on life and leadership.

*scott@spartanology.com - www.scottwesterman.com - @MSUScottw*