

Answer 6 Questions to Reveal Your Life Purpose by Stephanie Wood

Deep down inside, you know what you most love to do and how you can make your mark on the world. Get ready for some soul-searching.

As a reader, you probably earn a good living but also define success as something more than money and the things it can buy. To you it's a holistic concept—not just financial success, but also happiness, good relationships, and the ability to give back and contribute to society. “You need a higher purpose than just survival,” says Tina Tessina, Ph.D., a Long Beach, Calif., psychotherapist and author of *The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make after Forty*. “Once self-confidence and self-esteem are established, you'll need a challenge to feel satisfied, a way to express your uniqueness and individuality to yourself, to friends, and to the world.”

“People think they will feel fulfilled when they check off their list: getting married, having kids, buying a certain house, getting a boat, reaching a certain title or profit level in their business,” says Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of *Better than Perfect: 7 Strategies to Crush Your Inner Critic and Create a Life You Love*. “But happiness doesn't come from money and success. Even celebrities who make more money than we can imagine doing just one movie don't feel fulfilled.”

What truly moves you and how can you turn that passion into a fulfilling mission in life? Everyone's different, but we've outlined some common strategies that can lead each of you to your unique goal. Here are some key questions to ask yourself.

1. As a child and back in my younger days, what experiences were the most memorable?

What pastimes did I find most fulfilling?

“Make a list of everything that gave you pleasure” as a kid and teenager, recommends Jim Donovan, life and business coach and author of *Handbook to a Happier Life*. “Maybe it was playing basketball or guitar. Start small and resume those activities. Then once you rediscover that passion, look for a way to use it to help others. Maybe you can volunteer to coach a basketball league for underprivileged kids.” Donovan teaches personal development strategies to prison inmates every week. “I don't know how to not do this,” he says. “I need the experience as much as they do.”

A sense of purpose comes from within and isn't imposed or chosen from outside, Tessina emphasizes. “Your purpose may be your livelihood, or it may have nothing to do with how you make a living. Your purpose may be a simple one, like making a good, healthy life for yourself and your children, or it may be more dramatic and based on what you learned by your own childhood experience.”

2. Who is my idol and why do I admire this person?

The answer may or may not be a famous person. You might admire a colleague's giving and thoughtfulness, or that he or she is so in tune with family, Lombardo says. Or maybe it's someone really big, like **Steve Jobs**. An idol like that can be intimidating, but you need to take the comparison out of the equation, she says. Admire his characteristics, his vision and ability to stay focused in spite of the naysayers, but don't try to be him. Learn from him, but be you.

3. What are my core values and beliefs?

It sounds like a simple question, but it's far from it. We can accept certain values because we've been taught they're important, but sometimes they don't work for us. That corner office and CEO title, for example, may cripple your heart and soul. "After years of listening to others, I realized that what mattered to me was freedom," recalls Donovan. "I didn't want a job to run my life, and I think a lot of people feel the same way. The secret is to stop waiting for the company to make it better for you. Make it happen yourself."

Start by making a list of values you think are important, Lombardo suggests. They may include everything from integrity to friendship, faith to humor, patience to spontaneity. Then rank each on a scale of 1 to 10. "All values are good," she notes, "but understanding which are most important to you will help you understand what will give your life meaning."

For those clients who may be blocked, New York City career counselor Roy Cohen, author of *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide*, encourages them to try an activity that neutralizes and contains the distractions, such as meditation, yoga or even a more dramatic option such as an Outward Bound wilderness immersion program (there's one just for corporate team-building). "Sometimes people are in such a familiar place that they can't think creatively," Cohen explains. "They need to remove themselves as much as possible from their comfort zone, so that the roles they typically play are stripped away. Being on their own and relying entirely on their initiative to survive and thrive is often transformative. It may take six months of meditating plus a wilderness trip plus therapy, but collectively those experiences will produce a spark and something will emerge from the process."

4. What causes are near and dear to my heart? And how can I use my professional credentials to help those causes?

Watch the evening news for a week or check out the online headlines: What gets you most upset? Maybe it's the stories of child abuse or the parents working three jobs who still can't pay their bills. Maybe it's the lack of vaccines in underdeveloped countries that could stem the spread of preventable diseases. "Just get your feet wet," Lombardo says. "You don't have to find one thing and stick with it forever. Just open your mind to the possibilities and you'll be amazed what presents itself."

Understand, too, that it can take a while to settle on the right focus for *you*, so plan on doing a lot of networking and research before settling on a cause or a role. "Talk to the people who are involved in an organization or area you're interested in: What challenges are they telling you about, what is their biggest need, how can you fit in and contribute?" recommends William Winn, Ph.D., a consulting psychologist with the Boston advisory firm New Directions, which helps professionals reinvent themselves. Think of it like transferring into a college, he

says. The people and systems are already in place, unlike when everyone arrives as freshmen together. You need to figure out how to fit into that existing culture.

Many people may at first feel as if they want to get away from the tasks they perform at work, Winn says. “If they’re in a financial job, they think, *I don’t want anything to do with numbers*. But the reality is, the charity that you have your heart set on may really need your accounting or investing skills,” he says. “And performing those tasks for a nonprofit is going to be a completely different experience because the environment and objectives are different—you’re performing them to do good, not just to make a profit.”

5. What goals should I set for myself?

Take stock of each segment of your life, Donovan says, and write down what you visualize as the ultimate goal in each area. Include your career, family, health, relationships, spirituality and travel desires. Ask yourself: *What would my best health look like? Who are the people I most want to spend time with? What do I most want to change?* Write down each ultimate goal and make a habit of visualizing each one on a daily basis: you, running a marathon; your family enjoying dinner together; you and your partner building a home for the needy or embarking on a missionary trip to an underdeveloped country. “If you don’t understand and set your own goals, you will end up living someone else’s,” Donovan cautions.

Next, you need goals for the challenge or cause you’re focusing on. “I tell people to create a business plan,” Cohen says. “Since successful people tend to be metrics- and model-driven, they need to begin with research and information gathering, assess and evaluate what they have learned, and then turn that insight into a life-plan that is more meaningful.”

6. What do I want my legacy to be?

The ultimate question for anyone considering how to make a greater contribution to his or her world: *How do I want to be remembered by those whose lives I touch?* A simple way to get to this answer is to write your own obituary. Sometimes referred to as an “autobituary,” it’s a chance for reflection that also forces you to realize that your time is limited and to take a hard look at the way you’re spending it. “Your 30s, 40s and 50s are an intense time at work and in building relationships, and the self takes a backseat to all this,” Winn says. But when business is good and your children are getting older, it’s time “to press the reset button and ask, *What matters to ME now?*”

The “autobituary” exercise is a way to discover that. Just start by recording the facts, then add in others’ opinions that you would hope to be true: *He was a good friend. She was a parent who really understood her children. He spent countless hours volunteering in his community.*

If the idea of an obituary feels too morbid, think about your 90th or 100th birthday party, Lombardo says. “Who do you want to be there, and what do you want your guests to say about you in their birthday toasts: ‘He was a loving father and husband’; ‘She donated money and time to this cause.’ Or ‘I loved working for him because he was patient and helped me learn from my mistakes,’ and ‘He always understood family was just as important as work. He was the best boss I ever had.’ ”

Whatever form it takes, “In the end, a re-examination of our lives seldom talks about money

and power, but focuses instead on the ways we have all made a difference,” Winn says. Let that be your guiding principle for the next, best stage of your life.

Your Personal Mission Statement

Here’s a quick way to get a sense of your life’s purpose.

By reviewing the kind of person you are and the abilities that come naturally to you, even if they got you into trouble in the past, you can gain insight into your life purpose, says psychotherapist Tina Tessina, Ph.D., author of *The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make after Forty*. Do so by writing down a list of descriptions about yourself in each of the following categories:

Personal qualities (e.g., friendly, intellectual, a good communicator)

Your talents (e.g., painting, motivating people by public speaking, athletics, mentoring)

The circumstances that tend to repeat in your life (e.g., do you wind up teaching others, listening to people’s problems, working with children or technology?)

Your desires (e.g., traveling, cleaning up the environment, running for political office)

Then take the answer that is most important to you in each category and complete the following sentence:

I _____ (your name) am designed to be a
_____ (insert personal quality) who can
_____ (insert talent) and I find myself
_____ (fill in recurring patterns or circumstances)
often, because I am supposed to _____ (desire).

Example:

I, the President of the U.S., (your name) am designed to be a good communicator (insert personal quality) who can motivate people through my speeches (insert talent) and I often find myself listening to people’s problems (fill in recurring patterns or circumstances) because I am supposed to run for office and improve their circumstances (desire).

Purpose is essential to true contentment—because you may have a great career, be happily married and healthy but still feel that something vital is missing.