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Find Your Mission

In May 2002, the New York Times website had a front-page obituary for a make up artist named Kevyn Aucoin. The deaths of many accomplished scientists, politicians, and artists do not receive that kind of coverage, so I was a bit startled. While makeup in the 1980s and earlier was typically considered an alteration of a person's look (e.g. the expression "put my face on" to describe applying makeup) and was often characterized by heavy and often unnatural tones, I learned that Aucoin practiced a natural aesthetic that enhanced a person's innate beauty. Model Amber Valetta said of Aucoin "He challenged conventional stereotypes of beauty... He thought that any woman had the right to stand up and say 'I'm gorgeous.' ... I just think that's more powerful than we can ever imagine."

His book "Making Faces" debuted at the number 1 spot on the NY Times best seller list and he became a household name. That Aucoin was pursuing his natural calling was evident to all those he worked with. He had a level of passion and commitment that led him to not only great personal success, but to changing the lives of many people who learned how to use makeup to bring out their unique natural beauty rather than to conceal "flaws." As a young child, he wrote about his baby sister's "tan lips and big brown eyes", her "short hair" and "brown eyebrows." And, by age eleven Kevyn was experimenting with makeup and photographing his little sister. At the time of his death, his signature natural aesthetic was shown on most women famous or not.

The literature on expertise provides compelling evidence that such talented people are not naturally gifted in their skills. Whether it is brilliant chess players, graceful athletes, or emotive violinists, the idea of a born prodigy yields no support from the extensive research on the subject. Surprisingly, no differences in IQ or general memory are observed between chess masters and ordinary people and no differences in general reaction times are measured between professional athletes and average folks. Rather the old joke "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice" fits the evidence. Elite levels of expertise in many fields (including meditation) typically reflects at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice which focuses on setting specific goals, obtaining immediate feedback, and concentrating as much on technique as on outcome (Ericsson et al. 2006). This work suggests that you should do what you love because otherwise you are not likely to practice enough to obtain an elite level of performance.

The research on the experience of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1998) contends that this state of elation is the product of doing something very challenging that you are very good at. Living a life in which you are often at the very edge of your competence in your work and your play will not only bring you the kind of happiness entailed in flow, but will make you an expert in your professional and your recreational life. The question then is how do you "find your mission" or that calling for your particular existence that deserves the commitment of time, energy, and focus that is required for expertise?

There is an old Quaker saying "Let your life speak" which has been translated by writer Parker Palmer as "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent." He relates the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Zusya who said "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'" Palmer concludes that the "The deepest vocational question is not 'What ought I to do with my life?' It is the more elemental and demanding 'Who am I? What is my nature?'"

Discerning your nature is certainly the essence of the Socratic admonishment to “know thyself” and it is also a lifelong process. This kind of discernment is not merely a mental, or a physical, or an emotional, or a social, or a spiritual project, rather it is a process that will hopefully reflect your whole being, thus discernment should involve and integrate your whole being. One observable result of this kind of process might be a written mission statement or it may simply be a purpose driven life. The Tao Te Ching says that the “Tao (Way) that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.” You are looking for your personal Tao. Perhaps it will be written, perhaps it will be lived, and perhaps it will be both.

Finding your way involves quieting, listening, and doing. We often live an existence that is noisy outside as well as inside. To hear our vocation, our calling, we must first find quiet. Quieting your external environment includes quieting the voices of your friends, your culture, your mentors, your peers, your culture, your education, your family, even your faith. Then, quiet your internal environment, quieting your body, your mind, your heart, and your soul. In midst of all this quiet, you might begin to hear the soft, still voice inside you.

Thus begin to listen. Listen to your body. What are the things you do and have done that build your energy when you do them? Listen to your mind. Where do your thoughts run to when you don’t have to think about anything? Listen to your heart. What in your life has consistently brought you deep joy? Listen to your soul. What causes your spirit to leap or to weep? Listen to yourself in space. What parts of you are constant even when the environment you are in changes? Listen to yourself in time. What parts of you are consistent over the span of hours, days, weeks, months, years, and decades? Listen to your hopes. What do you want those who you have loved most to say about you at the end of your life?

Listen to your environment. Consider the people you admire: the children you admire, the peers you admire, the middle age people you admire, the people your parents age that you admire, the elderly that you admire, and those who have died that you admire. What characteristics in those people resonate with your being? What feedback from those who know you well, your mentors, your friends, and your family, is part of your truth? What values of the cultures you have experienced ring through to your core? What truths of your faith tradition are your truths?

If you believe you have started to hear your truth, then try to start living your truth. If it is your truth, then it will be true in the doing, not merely in the believing. As you act, return regularly to the disciplines of quieting and listening. Discerning your truth will likely entail correcting your course along the way.

However, just because it is your truth does not mean it will be easy, or comfortable, or pleasant, just that it will be your truth in action. Many of the highest callings lead those who are called into loss, suffering, and death. But concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl quoted Nietzsche in his book Man’s Search for Meaning “When there is a why a person can bear almost any what.” What is your “why”?

For me, my purpose is reflected in a written mission statement. A long discernment process culminated in two years actively engaged in writing a single, long sentence. I identified all of the roles in my life (social, teaching, researching, spiritual, and self rejuvenating) and the goals I have for each. In my role as a teacher, my mission is to “enable my students to learn joyfully, think clearly, read carefully, and write well.” I try to read my mission statement daily and it serves as a sort of constitution for my life. In shaky times, it has been a foundation, in dark times, a beacon.

Your mission is just that, your mission. While I believe that developing your skills and managing your anxiety are both important to learning joyfully, finding your mission is at the heart of joyful learning and joyful being. Kevyn Aucoin found his mission in helping people to discern their natural beauty and thus changed our culture. What is your mission?

Kevyn Aucoin (1999) Making Faces (\$13.97)

Parker J. Palmer (2000) Let Your Life Speak (\$12.89)

Viktor Frankl (1945) Man’s Search for Meaning (\$5.99)

Richard Bolles (2007) What Color is Your Parachute? (\$12.21)