

## Reigniting the passion for life

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My clinic manager asked me to teach the practitioners in the clinic principles of NLP and hypnotic communication. During a short round, checking for expectations, the participants all spoke of real desire to rediscover motivation for the work. Our job is hard, they said, and we have forgotten the passion that once brought us to practice. We arrive to work at the beginning of the week and cannot wait for it to be over. We notice that, our clients notice that, and it corrodes us.

So I would like to share a poem with you. Dawna Markova, the poet, has struggled with cancer for any years. Once she was even told she had three more months to live (she is still practicing, writing and lecturing). This poem is, for me, a celebration of life: of the willingness to open to the passion within us, to the meaning beyond us – to commitment to the life into which we were born.

### **I will not die an unlived life**

I will not die an unlived life.  
I will not live in fear  
of catching fire.  
I choose to inhabit my days,  
To allow my living to open me,  
To make me less afraid,  
More accessible,  
To loosen my heart  
until it becomes a wing,  
a torch, a promise.  
I choose to risk my significance,  
to live so that which comes to me as seed  
goes to the nest as blossom,  
and that which came to me as blossom  
goes on as fruit.

Dawna Markova.

Somehow, there is a common illusion that our job has to be difficult, unpleasant, and that life rests over the ocean, outside of our working life. Considering the fact that most of us will spend at least forty active years at work, at least eight hours a day – and a bleak picture is painted before us. We go to work and we ‘do what’s needed doing’, so that we can go home, too exhausted to enjoy our leisure time, our friends and family (is that not what we work so hard for?).

‘You are being unrealistic’, I have frequently been told, when I spoke of our responsibility to find a way to be present to ourselves in our lives; to reject being turned-off all week and wake up only in the weekends. Something in this belief, that we are required to suffer and struggle at all times is strongly embedded in our societal psyche (that is, unless we are on a bender of self-medicating life). Because it is true – life isn’t a theme park, and we all find ourselves (and will find ourselves in the future) in painful, difficult places; sad and angry, despairing or mundane and meaningless. Such is life, changing and moving without asking us for permission (or checking that we are comfortable with these changes). Yet, somehow, within this movement, we are still genuinely indebted to this rare gift we have been given, to this glimpse of a life.

Dr Stephen Gilligan, my teacher and friend and Milton Erickson’s student, often emphasizes two major questions that we are called to ask ourselves. The first is – *What do I want of life?* What do I want to achieve, to become, to develop in me? And we are personally responsible, this is a real responsibility, to invest our resources to achieve that. There is nothing sweet, or noble or humble in avoiding our personal dreams because ‘there’s no real chance for me to get there’ or because ‘there are more important things’ or even ‘I don’t want to be disappointed, so I will not invest in my dream’. This is not a realistic attitude, but a defeatist one. Naturally, life does carry failure, disappointment and pain with it; yet even if we stay in bed, covered in our duvet with our eyes closed we will still not manage to avoid the pain, the disappointment, the failure. As far as I understand, this gift – this time limited gift – of life, is so rare that when we are not coming towards it with open arms we engage in sinful behaviour. Do you know these romantic films, how at the end of the movie an old man on his deathbed summons his wife, confessing his love to her and apologising for not having shown it all his life, only to draw his last breath and die? Well, our commitment to the life that we want is about being active, so that our end will not be such, so that we can express our meaningfulness within our lives, and not only outside of our lives or at the end of it.

The second question, says Gilligan, is *What does life want of me?* *What am I here to do?* Gilligan assumes that life does not begin and end with our personal satisfaction. The good life, according to Gilligan, requires active pursuit of meaningfulness and further giving meaning to life. Our duty to our families, our friends and the society within which we live creates a crucial facet in the meaning-giving to life. And the answer to this question need not necessarily be political

activity or social involvement. It can simply be an acknowledgement that my family requires my time, or the importance of nature in my life.

Even in times where security and fear take such a significant space in our personal and collective consciousness (and perhaps even more so in such times), we ought to stop being ashamed in our seeking meaning and aspiring meaningful life. On our deathbeds, when we contemplate the life we had, trying to decide if it was a life worth living, to be able to answer affirmatively we need to invest. A life without consciousness and readiness to invest in our personal dreams and societal duties will not end happily. A happy life is not (merely) a result of luck and coincidence, but a process requiring work and investment. And when we are easily willing to invest many hours of our lives to have a better car, bigger house, smarter cloths, stronger jets, this lack of investments in our souls becomes sadder still.

But how can we reconnect to our dreams? How can we reconnect to the passion we once possessed, to the big dreams we held so dear before life had given us a lesson or two in humility? And how can we do so without giving up groundedness and realism? Without giving up our duties to our families, to society, to being functional and productive members of our community? I really am not sure! I haven't got an answer to this big and important question.

But I feel that, by the very willingness to ask these questions, time and again, even when this is uncomfortable or challenging our decisions, we contribute to finding answers that will be right for us.

A simple NLP exercise that might help connect to meaning is Chunking up. The idea behind it, is that even our most mundane actions, however small and insignificant, are connected to core beliefs and values. When we remember these beliefs and values and acknowledge them, it is easier to maintain connection to meaning – our actions can be realigned with their intent. I like to practice this before a long working day:

To use this exercise, simply ask yourselves: *As I think about the day ahead of me, what would I have liked of this day?* In answering, make sure you answer what you want, rather than what you don't want of the day.

This answer is 'chunked up' by asking the following question: *Suppose I already have what I would have liked, what would it have given me? (or What would it do for me?).* We carry on chunking-up until we reach that special place where something inside flutters, where a presence inside is touched or stretched or becomes uncomfortable – this is when we touch meaning.

Let me give you an example:

- *As I think about the day ahead of me, what would I have liked of this day?* I would like to feel rested, and that I spent some quality time with Tom (my wife).

- *Suppose I have rested and spent quality time with Tom, what would it have given me?* I'd feel refreshed and ready towards the coming week.
- *Suppose I am refreshed and ready towards the coming week, what would it have given me?* I'd feel energised, but not anxious – energised and relaxed.
- *Suppose I am energised and relaxed, what would it have given me?* I would feel good in myself, and more present to my clients.
- *Suppose I feel good in myself and am more present to my clients, what would it have given me?* I would be excited from every session, from every contact with people. Every piece of life would have touched me.
- *Suppose every piece of life would have touched me, what would it have given me?* A feeling of belonging, I'd feel that I am not alone in my need for touch, for connection.
- *Suppose I had that feeling of belonging, of sharing the need to touch and connect, what would it have given me?* A clear breath
- *Suppose I have clear breath, what would it have given me?* (Thinking of this question, my eyes become moist. Something in me shivers when I contemplate an answer) I would connect to my need to receive, and to give.

We can go on and on, but the goal here is not necessarily to reach the 'right answer' or the final one. The process in itself can remind me why I invest my time at work, why I write during my weekend. The coming day can therefore be informed by this remembrance and understanding, that even if I still uncertain how exactly it is connected, walking hand in hand with Tom to the supermarket for food shopping helps me connect to my need to give and receive; that this is what I am here for.

Psalm 34 examines the good life and the need to focus, and practice, positive thinking and positive and honest speech. It reads:

*What man [is he that] desireth life, [and] loveth [many] days,  
That he may see good?  
Keep thy tongue from evil,  
and thy lips from speaking guile.  
Depart from evil, and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.*

However, I believe that the first two sentences are the important emphasis here. The original Hebrew version separates the two first sentences and it may be translated slightly differently to mean:

What man is he that desireth life?  
He loveth many days to see good!

It is our very commitment and responsibility to see the good in our days and love our lives, to make the effort to invest in ourselves, in others and in our surrounding that allows us to desire life, and to love ourselves.

May we dare to insist on what's important, and not shy from pursuing the good life.

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