

WHAT LIFE AM I LIVING?

“When we ask, “Am I following a path with heart?” we discover that no one can define for us exactly what our path should be. Instead, we must allow the mystery and beauty of this question to resonate within our being. Then somewhere within us an answer will come and understanding will arise. If we are still and listen deeply, even for a moment, we will know if we are following a path with heart.

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have forgotten this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart. When we ask it about our current path, we must look at the core values we have chosen to live by. Where do we put our time, our strength, our creativity, our love? We must look at our life without sentimentality, exaggeration, or idealism. Does what we are choosing reflect what we most deeply value?”

(Jack Kornfield)

We all need to ask ourselves, “What life am I living?” if we are to ever live our lives to the full. The danger is, if we don’t ask this question and answer it honestly, we could waste the precious gift of life. Everyone has an inner force – something that motivates and drives us forward. It wants to grow, to be expressed and lived out. But we need wisdom and understanding to know how to channel that inner energy into actions that bring life to ourselves and the world around us.

It’s also true to say that we are part of an amazing world, far too big for anyone to fully understand, that is always revealing itself to us, teaching us about itself and about ourselves. It is always throwing us challenges and opportunities that invite us to learn and change. Your own life gives you a choice. You can either live in your comfort zone, or you can live at the ‘growing edge’, by taking on life’s challenges big and small, stretching yourself to meet them. The challenge might be to heal, to speak out, to start something up, to face facts... Whatever the challenge, the goal is the same – to become who you are meant to be. People who have the courage to lead a richer life often display the inner peace that comes from knowing they are making the most of the gift of life. They have freedom, creativity, kindness and love, and they are not afraid to upset people who are being selfish or hateful.

Deep, generative listening can help us hear what life is trying to tell us, and to understand the life we are living. It can help us grow, so we can express our true selves more generously and creatively, so we can live our lives to the full. Deep, generative listening to others is about

helping others tune in to the ‘growing edge’ of their lives, so that they too can keep growing and become more and more fully alive.

These are **10 principles** for living your life to the full:

1) Trust Yourself:

You are the only expert of your own life and experience. Other people and experiences can really help you, but at the end of the day no-one else is responsible for the choices you make about your own life. Everyone has the inner resources to discover and live out the fullest life they can, if they are willing to. Each person has to decide to do the work that they need to do. If it helps you, you can work with others you respect, by following a tradition, or guru (teacher) or being part of a bigger group. But there’s a difference between letting others help you live your life to the full, and letting others decide how you should live. If you want to live life to the full, you need to learn to listen to your own inner teacher and discover your own truths.

2) Be Aware:

Everything boils down to awareness. If we’re not very aware of ourselves, others and the world we live in, we will get trapped in unhelpful ways of thinking and behaving that cause misery to ourselves and others. (The comfort zone can be surprisingly uncomfortable!) But if we learn how to recognise what really needs attention in our lives, and pay deep and unflinching attention to those things, we can break free and start to fulfill our potential. Life is always putting us in situations we can learn from if we are willing to pay attention and ask ourselves the right kinds of questions. Things we can use to become more aware of how we are living can be as simple as the moods and emotions we experience every day, or as complex as losing things we love, or finding ourselves in conflict with others.

3) Live Life in the Now:

Life is made of moments we call ‘now’. Once now is gone, it’s gone. We only ever have the present moment, and life can only ever be lived in the here and the now. But it’s easy to get stuck mulling over the past, or trying too hard to control how the future pans out, so that we miss life itself – which is happening now! The present moment contains wisdom that we can tap into if we learn to listen to what each moment is trying to tell us.

4) Live from your Truest Desires:

Deep inside us at any one moment are all kinds of desires, and these power our decisions and actions. Think of desires like powerful horses. If we harness the power of our desires to a clear

goal it brings immense energy to what we are doing. But if we let our desires run out of control, they can cause massive destruction. We all have many desires and they often conflict, so we have to choose what to harness them to. Superficial desires are usually demanding, noisy and disruptive, like immature young horses. They demand all our attention so we lose awareness of our truest desires, deeper inside. Our truest desires are the ones that make sense of our lives. That's why they are more reliable. The energy of superficial desires burns out quickly, but our truest desires have stamina, like fully grown horses. The challenge is to get to know and understand ourselves and all our complex desires, so we can get in touch with our truest desires – the ones that make most sense of our lives – and harness our energy to something fulfilling. Some people think will-power can overpower our desires, but the truth is that one desire can only be overpowered by a stronger desire.

5) Let go:

What stops so many people from fulfilling their true potential? We get stuck in a comfort zone made of things we don't want to let go of. These things can be possessions, jobs, relationships, traditions... the list is endless. But when we get so attached to something that we can't be free to live, it's most likely because it's part of how we like to see ourselves: successful, or reliable, or clever, for instance. Letting go means facing up to who we really are – no better or worse than anyone else, but with something unique to give to the world. Life is always giving us choices about how we want to live, and it's often a choice between 'having' in the comfort zone, or 'being' who we are meant to be. Choosing to grow is always, in some way, shape or form, a decision to let go.

6) Read your Moods:

One aspect of everyday life that is always there to make use of is our ever changing moods. Our emotions and feelings are like a window into our desires and direction in life. We can learn to recognise our moods, work out about their source, and notice where they are leading – whether they are heading in a creative or a destructive direction. There is a skill to this. To begin with you can easily get sidetracked judging yourself or others, but with practice you can learn to ask really useful questions to get to the deeper, often subtle truth about what our moods are trying to tell us. This gives us much greater awareness from which to make good decisions.

7) Do your 'Shadow Work':

We all have a 'shadow side' that we try to keep hidden from other people's view. It's an impulsive, wounded, sad, or isolated part of ourselves, made up of all the thoughts or feelings or impulses that we have been taught to be ashamed of. Because we keep these aspects of our own personalities out of sight, we lose touch with them and bury them deep down where we are no

longer aware of them. But they can still influence our motives and actions, hijacking our best efforts to help others and sometimes even taking over our lives – for example through addiction. There is no way to reach a free, fulfilled life that brings life to others without getting to know ourselves completely, including our shadow sides. Shadow work is about learning to understand and love even those parts of ourselves we are ashamed of. When we have the courage to do our shadow work, we discover all kinds of benefits. It can be a source of emotional richness and vitality, a pathway to healing, and a key that unlocks our ability to be true to ourselves.

8) Decide from the ‘Sweet Spot’:

There is a ‘sweet spot’ from which to make important decisions in our lives. The key is being honestly open to either path. Once you feel this inner freedom and balance, you can choose the path that will best lead to the flourishing of yourself and others, even if that way is hard. Then you know you were not pushed down one path or another, and you no longer need to blame anyone else for your choices, because you have confidence that you made a free choice – the best choice you could at the time. To reach this sweet spot, we need to do some letting go (number 5 above). If we can’t let go of fixed ideas of how we like to see ourselves, we’ll never really be free, and we’ll force ourselves down the wrong paths for ourselves and others. The sweet spot also involves learning to find a balance in our moods – neither down and exhausted nor manic and buzzing – but a solid middle ground, from where we can observe our lives and options clearly and make a wise decision.

9) Live organically:

A fulfilling life that is true to who you really are is more like a plant that is “grown” than a model that is “made”. If we attempt to “make” a life according to some set of rules about what we are supposed to want or need, we will either fail, or end up deep in the comfort zone thinking we’ve got nothing to learn – a lifeless model. If we can let go of our need to know all the rules of life, we can get on with being alive. Then we can let ourselves grow and unfold like a flower, trusting life to teach us what we need when we need it. If this is our attitude, then we’re always looking out for life’s messages to us, in serendipity and synchronicity, and we’re always listening to the voice inside that knows the best way to fulfill our destiny.

10) Embrace reality as it is:

In the end, we all face a challenge: are we going to accept reality as it is, or hide from it and pretend it’s how we wish it was? If we can’t face up to the truth about ourselves and the world we live in, our lives will be wasted fighting against reality in a futile attempt to make it fit our comfort zones, our belief systems, or fantasies. Until we can embrace reality as it is, both its dark and its light, its death and its life, we will never find peace. You might think that accepting

reality as it is would lead to apathy or indifference – if you accept it you don't need to change it. But life is change. Things that don't change are dead. So when we learn to accept and love reality as it is, including how it's alive and always changing, we end up in the best position to bring about a more beautiful world. We can be the change we want to see in the world!

"Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts... ? Let your life speak."
(Quaker Advice)

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