



Wednesday, October 14, 2020

Going with the Flow

“Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive,” wrote author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman.

Even before research told us that pursuing our individual passions can have benevolent effects on the body and soul, Thurman could see that passion sparks a happy life and provides a way to transcend the ordinary. And if you move through life with passion, people notice.

Consider symphony musicians, who have polished skills but often become bored performing pieces over and over. A Harvard University researcher recorded one group of musicians that was asked merely to replicate a past performance. A second group was instructed to refresh their performance of a piece through subtle changes. Audiences overwhelmingly found the mindful performance to be more enjoyable, even though they didn't know why.

Why does passion bring happiness? The answer may lie in *flow*, an enjoyable state that comes when you're so absorbed that you forget yourself and tune out the world. This positive psychology concept from the University of Chicago's Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has reportedly influenced slews of world leaders and sports luminaries, including Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and former Dallas Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson.

Flow is “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost,” Csikszentmihalyi told *Wired* magazine in an interview.

For a deeper look at the play of flow in a passionately lived life, we asked three people with extraordinary passions to share their thoughts.

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Roy Heger, Ultramarathoner

Roy Heger found his passion for ultramarathons in middle age. He completed his first 50-mile race in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, shortly after his 40th birthday. Now 66, he has an astonishing 75 100-mile races under his belt. One favorite, the Massanutten Mountain Trails 100 Mile Run in Virginia, he's completed 20 times.

Most humans of any age would consider running nearly four regular marathons in a row to be grueling, if not unbearable. But Heger makes it sound like nirvana.

"Running on trails like that, you lose track of everything except where you're going to put your next step, and then next step. At night, your world goes down to a circle—you see only the light from your headlamp," says Heger, who lives in Wadsworth, Ohio.

"In the deepest, darkest parts of night, you're supposed to be sleeping," says Heger. "When you run all night, you overcome that, and it changes your brain chemistry. As it gets closer to the second sunrise [of the race], there is a slight brightening in the eastern sky. You feel yourself getting stronger with the light returning. With that little boost, you begin to see, maybe I can make it."



LOOKING FOR YOUR PASSION?

Here are some steps you can take to get started, according to *Psychology Today's* Susan Biali Haas, M.D.:



Inventory our talents. What are you good at or have a natural aptitude for? Are there things you like to do that other people have complimented you on? Perhaps you even dismissed or rejected their enthusiasm. Identifying what you love and what you're good at is a great way to unearth potential passions. Remember that you don't have to be good at something for it to qualify as a passion. You don't have to ever earn a penny of income from it either. Talent can simply be a clue.



Think of what you loved to do as a child. This is probably the simplest way to figure out what pursuits hold the potential to light up your days. Were you obsessed with flying? Maybe you should take a class in aviation. Did you like to sing at the top of your lungs until people begged you to stop? Think about joining a local choir or starting your own garage band.



Notice when you lose track of time or what you don't want to stop doing. Think about what kind of things you do that you need to make yourself stop doing in order to sleep and eat and play. Notice what you love. Notice what makes you feel like a kid. Notice what you long to have more time for.



See your passion hunt as a fun, joyful adventure. Don't put pressure on yourself to find a passion. It's important to cultivate an unserious childlike attitude of play, wonder, and adventure. You're learning and growing as you go and it's all an adventure. Happiness research shows that trying new things increases dopamine levels in the brain, contributing to sustained levels of contentment. So when you deliberately open yourself up to noticing things you might enjoy doing, don't be afraid of getting it wrong.

Heger runs without headphones or music, not even a watch. “A watch is a distraction and hinders achievement of flow. There’s no time inside of flow,” he says.

“Flow comes during exercise when all the fluids in your body are up to operating temperature, and you’re in the moment. Trying to achieve flow is like trying not to think about something,” says Heger. Instead, something about the long exertion, repetitive motions, and sheer physical exhaustion does the trick.

Heger says once you’ve tapped into flow, it spills into other parts of your life—when washing dishes, mowing grass, or weeding the garden. “When you see a dandelion, twisting this way and that, and you pull it just right so that you get the whole root out—that’s flow,” says Heger.

John Bukovac, Modern Gold Prospector

Did you know there are still flecks and nuggets of gold in creeks and streams across the U.S.? John Bukovac used to daydream about prospecting and finding “enough gold to make an engagement ring for a future fiancée or wife.” A few years ago, when he finally tried panning for gold, what he found was a hobby that he enjoys passionately and wants to continue for life.

Bukovac uses a plastic pan with grooves on one side and a *classifier*—a type of sieve for separating rocks from material that might contain gold. He also has a *sluice*, a narrow box with a multi-textured bottom that sits in the flowing water to separate gold from lighter material. It’s a modern version of the wooden sluices used by 19th-century prospectors.

“Every time you see gold in your pan or sluice, it brings a smile to your face. It never gets old, seeing that shiny, bright yellow popping out of the black sands when you’re washing your concentrates in your pan,” says Bukovac, 50, an engineer in Oberlin, Ohio.

Standing in the water and working with extreme concentration lulls him into a meditative zone. “The gold is so small here [in Ohio] that it can easily float on the surface and get washed out. You have to really focus on how much water you have in your pan, and the movements you use to clean the concentrates. It’s very easy to get lost in the process and lose track of time,” he says.

It’s not even about potential riches. “There’s nothing more relaxing to me than being on a creek or a river listening to the sounds and watching nature unfold around you,” says Bukovac. “You can make a little bit of money, but the pay is really the adventure. That’s invaluable to me.”

Stephanie Han, Writing Instructor and Author

A longtime writer and teacher, Stephanie Han says recent life upheavals threw her passions into sharp relief. The surprising result was that she was able to zero in on her true calling: guiding women and girls to be storytellers.

“I was divorced a few years ago. And, really, divorce is a type of death. But it also offers an opportunity to reexamine and reinvent. Like the phoenix, one rises from the ashes,” says Han, 55, who lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Then came the pandemic. Sheltering at home, Han pondered a new path. She loved teaching, but she’d been especially passionate about women’s issues from a young age. Her book of short stories, *Swimming in Hong Kong*, was chock-full of women protagonists. The writing group she’d started in the 1990s had attracted all women writers. “I saw there how the real narratives, even among those who occupy a privileged position in society, are often untold,” says Han.

The realization hit: "There is a gap in education for girls and women. Women want to write their stories down. It's my mission to help them to craft their narrative. The better we write, the more clear we are with our prose, the more we can write into our dreams and stories and move to manifesting our lives," says Han, who launched an online platform to offer writing workshops at drstephaniehan.com.

Getting clarity on her desire to help women storytellers has brought her great joy. "I am different now," she says. "I wake up excited to think about what I will teach. I experience flow for most of my waking hours because I am living my life's purpose now. I feel free," says Han.

It's never too late to pursue an interest that you may have put on the sidelines. Just put some time aside. Make it a gift to yourself. This commitment is what's necessary, more than having any particular skills. "Especially as we age, it's more important to have a great deal of passion about what you're doing than it is to be good at it," says Heger.

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