

Self-discovery can't start too early

Story: Dolah Saleh

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When I first explained my educational proposal designed to assist people in making optimal life decisions that support their unique needs, a woman in the publishing field asked: "Is this program a nice-to-know or a need-to-know?"

I thought that was a pertinent question. Is my underlying hypothesis-that a prerequisite for living your best life is to know who you are and what you need from your environment-simply a nice thing to know, or is it truly a necessary step in achieving happiness and success?

For me, the answer is clear. My theory is based on real life experience in the field of education, corroborated by numerous colleagues and championed by every parent I have ever spoken to. The idea of making crucial life decisions, such as the selection of a career, without knowing who we are and how we are motivated seems preposterous-yet it is indeed how most of us live our lives. We live, sometimes painfully, with the results of poor decision making. It leaves many of us feeling lost and alone, confused and distracted. I think we need help first in uncovering the more hidden parts of ourselves and second in embracing and accepting them in order to choose what is best for our work and personal lives.

I once heard a talk by the noted author and lecturer Wayne Dyer, who was quoting someone else when he cautioned, "Don't die with your music still in you." It truly captured the essence of what I felt, knew, and believed. When I heard it said so beautifully, I was certain no one in the audience would forget it. For me, "music" is the metaphor for our truest selves, what we are fully intended to accomplish here, professionally and personally.

The power of self-discovery

My latest work in counseling individuals in mid-life career transitions crystallized my belief in the power of self-discovery for creating happy and successful lives. Because this experience forces people into taking the time to truly reflect, and because one of the first sessions in the process requires that participants get at the truth behind their innermost leanings and motivations, I witness its undeniable value. Getting people to embrace and accept their truth is natural once they have had the opportunity to acknowledge it. My discovery that people choose careers for reasons other than passion (inconsistent with their truest selves), led to my assumptions about decision-making on other critical life aspects, including those of a more personal nature: how we choose in love, how we marry, when and how we decide to parent. Making mistakes in choosing in these personal matters not only causes our own unhappiness and failure but also impacts others.

My research into this concern has assured me that I am not alone in my quest to assist others in making the best decisions at as young an age as possible. I have discovered a few programs operating around the world with similar objectives, all aimed at young adults. Most appear to address the honoring of individual "values," likely initiated by some exercise of self-assessment to help identify the uniqueness of the individual, which I believe is a step in the right direction.

Timing is everything

I once had a boss who warned me never to raise an issue or state a problem without first having thought out a solution. I took his advice and ever since have thought of "problems" as opportunities for improvement. In this case, I think our world is ready for a solution. We have seen the error of our ways-unhappy work lives and failed relationships. But I think we now need to discuss the importance of timing. When is it better to implement some type of life skills education than at the beginning of adult life?

In a May 2001 bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, author David T. Conley discusses "Rethinking the Senior Year." Conley highlights two decades of debate on the need for high school reform, pointing to the steady stream of evidence that the final year is essentially a waste. I remember my own senior year that way and am somewhat surprised to hear that today's experience is little different. This issue was deemed noteworthy enough to create a National Commission on the High School Senior Year in 2000. One of its stated findings is this:

"The American high school needs to shift from preparing some students for college and others for work to preparing all students to live and prosper in an increasingly complex and interdependent world."

That shift is a good reason for providing students with life skills that will help them choose wisely in love, marriage, parenting, and career selection.

Marline Pearson is a sociologist who is presently teaching "Couples Relationships" at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wisconsin. Her belief that teenagers need to get the message before they **hit college** has stimulated her to publish a secondary school-level curriculum for relationships. There are more than half a dozen relationship-curriculum programs in high schools throughout the nation. One recent study conducted at Kansas State University indicates a growing number of students presently seeking help with relationship issues—an increase from 34% in 1989 to 60% in 2001. As Rebecca Winters reports in *Time* magazine (11/24/03), "This new breed of romantic counseling—equal parts sex ed, social science and Dear Abby—is now being offered as formal courses at colleges and high schools across the country."

The article reports on methods for teaching high school students developed by researchers at the University of Denver. The students are taught conflict resolution and provided with "formulas" for success and failure in love relationships. Students take copious notes in these courses "because they're truly dying to know."

We live in a fast-paced world. We spend so much of our time doing without knowing or being who we are. And it is not that we lack the desire to live our best life, it is **more** that we lack the consciousness, and so do not take the time to discover what it is that we were meant to be - If intercessions could take place early on, at a time when we are about to make our most crucial decisions, they would be much more practical and beneficial than if they occurred later in life. And if those intercessions could prompt honest self-evaluation and acceptance of our individual purpose, then I am certain we could all live the lives we were meant to live achieving contentment and peace.

As Wayne Dyer writes in *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace* (2001): "Listen to your music, and do what you know you have to do to feel whole, to feel complete, and to feel as if you're fulfilling your destiny."

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