

Man's Search for Meaning

'Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not', said Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1800s. Steve Punter (with the help of a few fellow travellers) expresses similar sentiments for 2004.



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OK, so I pinched the title from Viktor Frankl's book – but what an interesting title, for the first article of 2004. This time of year is notorious for conscious/subconscious turmoil, sometimes gazing at the stars for long periods, wondering just what it's all supposed to be about. As any *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* fan will tell you, the answer is 42. That's about as sensible an answer as any other I've heard. Maybe we're just not supposed to know.

LIFE GOES ON

Frankl studied the survivors of concentration camps from WWII and came up with this conclusion – 'all those who made it through had:

- Something significant yet to do with their lives';
- Something important to them, lodged in their minds as a concept or picture (now called vision), which needed to be done, achieved or completed.

It was this 'thing' which caused them to keep going in appalling, extreme and inhuman circumstances, while others around them simply gave up and died.

FEEL GOOD FACTORS

In putting this article together, I'm addressing the many of us out there who, while not looming large on the International Mega-Achievers

of the Year scoreboard, nevertheless are driven by some kind of compulsion:

- To be good at what we do;
- To feel we add value to others;
- To be appreciated for what we do;
- To feel that when we finally 'shuffle off this mortal coil' – another pinched quote – we leave the world a better place than we found it – we have made a difference.

At least that's what drives me, and I think I'm normal.

MERCENARY MISTRESS

Perhaps I need to add 'normal for the profession I'm in', because it seems to me that a hell of a lot of people out there are more concerned with amassing material wealth at the expense of others. For what purpose I'm darned if I know because when the crematorium has finished with them, there'll be no difference in the composition of their ashes and mine, ie, carbon, trace elements, and minerals.

My own sense of self-mockery is yelling 'pious bastard' at me, so let me say right up front that money does interest me, yes, absolutely. But she's a hard task master, this mistress called 'money'.

At my annual head session with our accountants, I learned that the little nest egg I had accumulated

through having a good year was needed by impoverished and destitute tax collectors far more than it was needed by me. The reason I was in a position to donate it to them, was precisely because I had had such a good year, so aren't I lucky.

As a circular argument (a 'Boolean Loop' in IT terms) I'm sure that makes sense to someone but it completely mystifies me.

TO THE POINT

OK my point is this:

- Should we look at great achievers, yearn to be as successful as them and feel somehow inadequate that we aren't in that league?
- Should we strive to imitate that success?
- Or it more important that we determine what 'success' is, in our own personal terms (not caring a hoot what other people may think), and strive toward our own vision of success?

FIELD OF VISION

I've run vision workshops many times but always for the corporate team. I've run stress/time management and team and self-motivation workshops for years. Part of my thinking in this article is a blend of elements of all those workshops, and I've learned something from every workshop I've run:

Maybe we're just not supposed to know...

- Much of the disharmony within teams stems from the absence of a shared and agreed vision;
- Much of the stress comes from a frustrated desire to achieve some goal, either imposed by others, or 'convention', or self-imposed, that is perhaps unrealistic given the present circumstances.

Time management, inseparably linked with stress management, becomes just so much easier when you've found the secret to prioritisation – working out what is important and what is not. Spending time working on important stuff leads to a feeling (and actuality) of achievement.

How can you figure out what's important if you don't know what you're supposed to be achieving... and now we're back to vision.

IT'S A GOAL

Coming back to the original quote – 'all of those who made it through had something significant yet to do'. How do we define 'significant'?

Well we can turn to Victor Vroom's work on motivational force, where his research links two main elements that determine how much motivational force someone will apply in the effort to reach a goal:

- Expectancy – do you truly believe you are capable of reaching the goal?
- Valency – do you truly feel the goal is a valuable one?

If the answer to both those questions is a robust and loud 'YES!', you will apply a lot of motivational force in achieving the goal.

If the answer is anything less than that loud 'YES!', then the motivational force will be weaker, and that in itself may lead to non-achievement.

VALUABLE PURSUIT

In pursuing this topic of *Man's Search for Meaning*, I think it's the valency part that has most impact for me. The key seems to be that the individual must see the goal as valuable – in other words:

- It doesn't matter a damn how valuable others may think the goal is;
- It must be intensely valuable to the person who is supposed to achieve it.

We're all different.

DIFFERENT STROKES

On 10th January there was an earthquake in NZ. It wasn't a big one – 2.9 on the Richter scale – it just happened to be 5Km's deep, right under the Wairakei resort wherein I was lodged. Sliding doors moved around, windows rattled, there was a loud roaring noise. Another one followed shortly after.

My partner in life, the Mother of my Child – a Wellingtonian well acquainted with such phenomena – shrugged and went back to sleep (it was around 11pm). Sleep? SLEEP? THE EARTH MOVED AND YOU SLEEP?

Perhaps it was a case of 'ignorance is bliss' (said a tad unwisely

at the time). Part of the Earth's crust just ground its inexorable way past another piece with the explosive force of a couple of million tons of TNT, from which we were protected only by the lucky intervention of 5Km's of rock and soil, and people SLEEP?

I was on the internet five minutes afterwards, looking at the website of one of my clients – Geological and Nuclear Sciences – checking the seismometers – a fascinating thing in itself, you should try it next time you're feeling secure and smug. I read the report that had already been posted – thank God someone else finds it important!

Did you know that Auckland NZ – my home town wherein I can occasionally be found – sits on 49 volcanoes. Did you know that it is a matter of 'when' not 'if' the next one happens, that it is almost unpredictable, that the next one will not occur in the same place others have, and that the Auckland Regional Council has a 'plan' to attempt to 'cope' with it? Apparently the first sign will be that the ground over an area of about a mile circle will start to 'rise', and that there will be time to evacuate...

But there is the nub of my grist – to coin a phrase:

- How many people find these examples either fascinating or worrisome?
- Some of you couldn't give a toss, right?

We're all different. I bet you worry about something. Just because you know you are paranoid, doesn't

mean they're not out to get you.

TIME OF YOUR LIFE

So if you have done the same thing I do each new year – wonder what the hell it's all about – perhaps, and this is just a suggestion, you might want to take some time to:

- Ask yourself why you do what you do;
- Determine a goal that is valuable to you, something that will make you feel good no matter what 'society' or your 'peer group' may feel is the right and proper thing.

It's easy (I do it sometimes too) to fall into the trap of looking to the left or right, at what others are doing and comparing yourself to them. You will all too often be left feeling superior and smug (a recipe for complacency), or inadequate, which is a nasty and completely unnecessary little stressor that eats away at you.

Set a goal for 2004 that you believe is achievable and valuable, that meets your personal needs and that in some way adds value or benefit to those around you. If you finish 2004 having achieved that, then perhaps that is all the meaning we're supposed to have.

And if you make a million bucks on the way, then... damn your eyes. You buy the boat, I'll skipper it for you – weekends only. And if you're visiting NZ when the Big Shake strikes, or when you suddenly find your Auckland hotel getting a little higher above sea level each day, remember... 'evacuation'. An entirely salubrious response. ●ERA

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