

What's your one sentence?



“The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.” ~ Albert Schweitzer

In his bestselling book "Drive" (pp. 154-155), Dank Pink references a 1962 conversation between Congresswoman Claire Boothe Luce and President John

F. Kennedy. Sensing that the president had too many competing agendas, she sought to focus him by asking him to think about his “one sentence.”

As Pink wrote:

“In 1962, Clare Boothe Luce, one of the first women to serve in the U.S. Congress, offered some advice to President John F. Kennedy. ‘A great man,’ she told him, ‘is one sentence.’ Abraham Lincoln’s sentence was: ‘He preserved the union and freed the slaves.’ Franklin Roosevelt’s was: ‘He lifted us out of a great depression and helped us win a world war.’ Luce feared that Kennedy’s attention was so splintered among different priorities that his sentence risked becoming a muddled paragraph.”

We all can have single sentences that describe us, even if our contributions are not as deep and lasting as the aforementioned presidents. Whether they say something about us as individuals, as leaders or as community contributors, having the ability to construct a single sentence that captures our essence can serve as a great guidepost and motivator.

Pink (p.155) suggests some simple ones, such as:

- “He raised four kids who became happy and healthy adults.”
- “She invented a device that made people’s lives easier.”
- “He cared for every person who walked into his office.”

Pink ends the section by suggesting that we all contemplate our purpose by considering the question, “What’s your sentence?”

I would like to take this idea a bit further. As I understand it, having a single sentence means that we need to add more purposefulness to our lives. Purposefulness emerges from

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recognizing that our lives have meaning. We understand that we are here for a reason and appreciate our lives as a means through which to grow and serve others.

Still, while we recognize fundamentally that we exist to achieve a deep, meaningful purpose, we can struggle to make that association daily, and to recognize that every moment is a new opportunity for fulfillment.

How can we become more conscientious of our need to live purposeful lives? The following strategies may help us in achieving that goal.

Establish and clarify your core values

Values express our philosophy in life and guide us in our decision making and actions. Take the time to articulate and refine your values, to understand what truly motivates you. Share them with someone that you trust, someone who knows you well that could also serve as your moral compass when you lack clarity. Then, commit to live by them, in thought and deed.

Begin with the end in mind

This concept, made famous by the late Stephen Covey, focuses our attention on how we wish to be remembered. Covey's imagery is that of one's own funeral. What will people say about him? How did they perceive his life, actions and values? What can we be doing each day to cause others to reflect positively on our lives and say that we lived it to the fullest?

Expand your vision and act

People who lead purposeful lives often are people of vision. They see possibilities and growth opportunities where others see challenges. But vision alone is not enough. A person of consequence does not sit idly by. After developing his vision, he rolls up his sleeves, ready to take the steps needed to achieve his goals.

Reflect

Every time you engage in an experience, ask yourself how it may have affected you. Did you grow from it? Could you have approached it differently and achieved better results? This includes interactions with family or your conduct on the road or in a store. In addition, take the time to take stock of your progress as it relates to your values and goals. Are you on target? How can you achieve even more?

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No doubt, the items listed above demand time, energy and much focus. They may be somewhat uninspiring, at least at first, and may even feel burdensome. But they are worth it, as they offer the clarity and direction that we all need in our busy, distracting and confusing realities.

We all seek to live a purposeful existence framed by consistency and growth. As with all other noble endeavors, living purposefully requires a framework, a set of values and motivators that keep us along a straight and narrow path while we dream of future success. When we put those pieces together and then consistently live by them, we are living our one sentence that others will someday record for perpetuity.

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