

STORYLINES

EMBRACING PURPOSE

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A couple of years ago, there was a change in the administration of the next-door offices. Soon after, inspirational frames started appearing on the walls, above the cupboards and even on the doors in our common kitchen area.

“live your purpose” says one of the frames across from the electric kettle. It sounds nice in my mind when I read it. The colors and the wave-like shapes add to the positivity of the message. And the absence of capital letters renders the message more tameable somehow. The problem is, I’m not sure what “live your purpose” means.

I roughly know what purpose is. If one of my children asked me to define it, I would probably manage fairly well. “It is the real reason for which you do something,” I would say, “for example, the purpose of going to school is to learn and make friends.” Well, that was easy!

However, purpose is far deeper than that. It is a weighty concept that I have held at arm’s length out of fear. I have been afraid that if I searched, I might realize that my career choices are misaligned or, worse yet, that I might be unable to identify a purpose onto which to anchor my life’s decisions.

However, I have learned that it is unwise to be afraid of asking myself questions. So, what is my purpose?

The Search

For better or for worse, whenever I think purpose, I think work. Almost two decades ago, when I was a medical student on a surgery rotation, I was asked to go see a consultation in the emergency department. “Busy” was the minimal qualification that could be made of the surgery service. We were always putting out fires, it seemed. Wearing my scrubs and my short white coat which identified me as a student, I squeezed myself in the narrow space between the curtain and the stretcher.

As I started gathering information – using all my might to ignore the sounds around me – I realized that the patient and I had difficulty understanding each other. As time went by and the conversation continued to be arduous, I started raising my voice and repeating my questions with greater emphasis. I became more and more invaded by irritation and distress, feeling the pressure of time and of my duty to complete the consultation. Up to that point in my training, I had not acted nor reacted in this way.

Perhaps due to the novelty of my negative behavior, I had a sudden moment of insight. It was as though I was observing the situation from above. With clarity, I saw myself being the antithesis of what I wanted and expected myself to be as a healthcare provider. Here was a vulnerable person seeking help, undoubtedly scared by his sudden health problem. And here I was, deepening his sense of vulnerability and fear with my intimidating attitude. In that moment, I had lost touch with the strong desire that had landed me in medical school two years earlier: to alleviate suffering with compassion, gentleness and respect. In that moment, my only goal had become to complete the “task” in a timely manner and report to my superiors.

That encounter has remained etched in my mind as a representation of what I did not want my work purpose to be. It also confirmed my resolve to base all my medical interactions, first and foremost, in respect and compassion.

Over the years, I have been able to live by this resolution. But unfortunately, I have felt a lot of pressure from different constraints that threatened to compromise the type of care I provided. The conflict between systemic demands and my desire to continue practicing “slow medicine” weighed more and more heavily on me. And so, I became deeply disoriented, unsure of the value of my self-identified purpose in medicine. Perhaps, I thought, the greater needs are too pressing for me to hang on to my ideals.

Beyond Medicine

Alongside these professional doubts, different events in my life took place. The wisdom they provided led to new priorities taking shape. Priorities that, I now realize, are purposes of their own: striving to live with humility and gratitude, guiding my children with love, preserving and cherishing my marital relationship, and making people – whether family, friends or patients – feel seen and heard.

Though I avoided the question of purpose for years, embracing these fundamental priorities has brought me tremendous lucidity. I have discovered that purpose is a pervasive force in my life that transcends the distinction between the “personal” and the “professional”. Therefore, I can now question and examine whether my choices – at home *and* at work – align with my purposes. And I can now see that continuing to practice in a way that is faithful to my understanding of medicine *is* one of my purposes.

Navigating Vastness

When I think back to the frame in the kitchen, the wave-like shapes had more wisdom in them than I thought. I realize now that our purpose arises from the ocean of our deeper convictions and personhood. And like waves, our purposes shift throughout a lifetime.

Perhaps then, to “live our purpose” we need to navigate our everyday choices with exquisite awareness and respect for our waves and ocean. Perhaps we need to do this not just once before applying for a degree or a job, but regularly, repeatedly, purposefully. Perhaps only then can we continue aiming faithfully at the right destination. ■

Biographical Note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.