

The Quest for Passion, Creativity, and Wholeness

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There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.

—Nelson Mandela

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Most of us would agree that the obligation to complete a set of assigned tasks or goals—to collect wood and build a boat—is not on a par motivationally with a deeper yearning, a passionate quest for the “immensity of the sea”—the tantalizing notion to experience the sublime, the endless ocean, untamable in its ever-changing moods. Yet somehow, as we go through life, the grander images and narratives become obscured by the mundane steps and procedures they involve—the ends being swallowed up in the means.

I understand this. Most of my life has been spent on or around the water. Growing up along the Outer Banks of North Carolina, I loved boating and swimming, and I could hardly bear the wait until my dad deemed me old enough to buy my first surfboard. Later in life, as a Coast Guard officer, I remained in awe that the sea could change from placid aquamarine mirror to raging dark monster, or back again—all in a matter of hours or even minutes. The sea was and is my passion (notwithstanding my current residence in Illinois). My love is not for sailboats or surfboards, per se. They can only take me there—to the unfettered horizon where water touches sky, to the crest of the ride of my life, to a world of unfathomable beauty that ebbs and flows with the subtle colors of life. All is not safe, comfortable, or predictable in that world—far from it—but it excites my being (and well-being) every time I am in its presence and inspires wonder at what new experiences in life could be possible.¹

The sea is one of my passions. I have others more foundational—God, family, friends, research, music. What are your passions? And what does it actually mean to say that we are passionate about life or toward certain aspects of life? What difference does passion make in our thinking, emotions, attitudes, choices, performance, and creativity? How do passion and creativity impact our wholeness and wellness, as well as the wellness of others—the individuals and collectivities with whom our lives are intertwined?

What is passion? It can mean many things, but is often associated with “desires, behaviors, and thoughts that suggest urges with considerable force.”² Hence, passion is often associated with romantic love or strong emotion. Its origin as a word goes back to the passion of Christ as he was crucified (from the Latin *passio*, or suffering). Passion can also be more clearly understood and enacted in one’s life in terms of its relationship to identity and motivation.

Passion And Identity: “Is This Really Who I Am?”

To do anything in life with *passion*—pursuing one’s dream, discerning a vocation, investing oneself in an academic degree, growing a family, contributing one’s talents toward a cause, or even engaging in leisure activities or hobbies—almost seems equivalent to doing those things in life that resonate most harmoniously with one’s sense of self—identity. For example, it would seem nonsensical to say, “Well, I’m *passionate* about playing the piano (or writing short stories, or playing tennis), but it’s *not really me*.” Intuitively, we know that we are passionate about certain activities *precisely* because they fulfill our sense of self—our self-identity—whether actual or aspirational (the self that we want to become). We may also be passionate about certain activities and goals because we perceive that they develop relationships that we believe are important to who we are—our social identities—and thus further our priorities of aspirations, beliefs, and values.

Indeed, one definition emphasizes that a “defining characteristic of passion is that the passionate activity has been *internalized in the person’s identity* [italics mine].”³ Thus, passion goes beyond mere engagement in *what* we are doing and *where* we are doing it, to be seen as an integral, perhaps necessary, part of *who we are*.⁴

For example, classical musicians can endure—even thrive on—long and grueling daily practice sessions not only because they are passionate about the interpretation and performance of music, but also because they are engaged in an activity that fulfills and develops their identity—“I am (or want to become) a virtuoso musician. That is not only what I do; it is part of who I am.” When the streams of identity and action converge, the confluence is the swirling and beautiful river we call Passion.

It could well be said that the difference between a job and a discerned calling is the element of passion where one’s work and identity are not only congruent, but mutually energizing (synergistic). Taking it a step further, passion is often realized when we reach beyond our own identity to embrace something greater than ourselves. One of the most powerful forces that both lures and drives a human life forward is a deep, spiritual yearning to transcend the self, or at least narrow self-absorption. The quest for passion is a search for some seemingly elusive “spark” that transforms life into a daily adventure populated with meaningful relationships and inspired by a purpose.

For example, the Apostle Paul commended the Christians in Thessalonica for their “labor prompted by love. (1 Thessalonians 1:3, NIV) Likewise, it could be said that a certain portion of our life’s energy is directed toward the search for an unpretentious labor of love—work energized and sustained by a deeply-held passion for its nature and purpose—something we may do “heartily (from the soul),” (Colossians 3:23, Amplified Bible)

As we scan our social networks and relationships for some super-ordinate goal, our reason for doing and being, that reason may come in the form of a cause, calling, purpose, or person that might engender the long-sought spark of passion. Our passionate engagement in acts of ministry enables us to transcend ourselves in a way that, paradoxically, enables us to realize our authentic selves. Whether we are passionate about working toward the realization of the Millennium

Development Goals, realizing the promise and hope of “Ubuntu”⁵ as our interdependent identity in Christian community as well as in the world, or whatever we find to be the compelling purpose of our time, we lose our self-interest in favor of connection with a greater whole—a purpose much greater than ourselves in connection with others. Such a connection can infuse our work with meaning and creative potential.

Passion And Meaningfulness: *Why Do I Do What I Do?*

George Carlin once said, “Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.” What really takes your breath away? What charges your batteries and causes your life juices to start flowing? Even if the answers to these questions are not intertwined harmoniously with your daily life, there is much that can be done to integrate life and work so that they are both are passionate pursuits and authentic expressions of your identity.

One view of passion is in its relation to human motivation. In Western cultures, theories of motivation have traditionally treated human desire as driven by a relatively superficial and self-interested (though perhaps very real) lack of something—e.g., basic necessities, safety, achievement, affiliation, and power. Lack, or the perception of a gap between one’s desired and actual condition, causes an uncomfortable tension in our lives that spurs relentless efforts to reduce the lack.⁶ Work, no matter how mundane or repetitive, becomes the means to reduce such tension by satisfying our lacks—or desires.

Downside of Traditional View

The downside of this traditional view of motivation is that meaningfulness gets lost in the shuffle. As one social scientist put it, “Discourses around motivation appear when work no longer fulfills or satisfies.”⁷ In other words, when meaningfulness is not found in one’s work, then more mundane and externally oriented forms of motivation (such as reward and punishment) have become “surrogates for the search for meaning.”⁸

These contemporary assumptions about desire and motivation have been effective in controlling worker performance through incentive packages that motivate; however, they have a dark side, as well. The very notion of “desire as lack” signals a deeper cultural problem with the nature of work itself—viewing it only as a self-interested end rather than as an other-directed means to realize one’s deepest-held beliefs about meaningfulness in life.⁹ A passionate view of our life’s work emphasizes the latter—re-infusing work with meaning that energizes and inspires us to approach work as something more.

In my own life’s journey, I discovered much later than I would have liked that life is not just about trying to become less selfish. That perspective alone can be seen as a negative or pathological view of “fixing what’s wrong.” Rather, from a positive perspective, life is also about “strengthening what is right,” and that can mostly be summed up in one word: contribution. As an academic, that point is constantly drilled into my consciousness in the peer review process for academic publications. The one question that must be compellingly answered in research articles is: “What is the contribution?” How does this study contribute in new ways to our knowledge of theory and improvement of practice? To those who are somewhat

philosophical (like me), it is not hard to see that this question applies to life just as well as to research articles. *Life is about contribution*, and that's really about it. What are we creating? What will we leave behind? We are eager to re-imagine what work itself is all about, and we are not fearful of asking the hard questions: What do I really consider to be the ultimate cause and purpose of my existence? And what does my labor of love have to do with that?

However, a brief word of caution: passion is like any other energy. It may be exercised helpfully or hurtfully; it may enhance or harm one's sense of well-being. It may be an igniting spark or a debilitating obsession. How can we know the difference?

Harmony Versus Obsession: *Is Passion Always Healthy?*

Passion is not always a good thing. We all know that the word passion can be used in a less desirable sense—e.g., crimes of passion.” Social science can help us discern the difference between healthy versus unhealthy passion. Human passion can be either harmonious or obsessive. Harmonious passion can actually increase our sense of well-being and performance, while obsessive passion can destroy these things.¹⁰ The reason for this is that harmonious passion is under our self-control and allows us to engage in a variety of activities for a well-rounded life. Harmonious passion does not absorb or overtake a person's identity but is instead well-integrated with it.¹¹ By contrast, obsessive passion results in compulsive behavior not under the control of will and reason, and it thus dominates uncontrollably the life and identity of the one who holds it.¹²

For the ultimate example of a life lived in harmonious passion, we need look no further than the life of Jesus Christ—transparently passionate (to the point of overturning tables in the Temple), ultimately sacrificial (as the very word “passion” is derived from Christ's crucifixion), and the epitome of rationality (the Pharisees had no comeback for his logic) and openness (to little children, adulterers, and tax collectors). Jesus certainly had a clear sense of his identity and that identity was inseparable from the work he came to do. Thus, we see that passion is not the direct opposite of rationality. Instead, healthy passion is a controlled, integrated energy that helpfully enables rather than hurtfully overpowers human activity and relationships.

Creativity And Performance: *What Difference Does Passion Make?*

“Without passion, man is a mere latent force and possibility, like the flint which awaits the shock of the iron before it can give forth its spark.”
—Henri Frederic Amiel (Swiss philosopher, 1821-1881)

What difference does passion make to creative outcomes? I suggest the following illustration:

Imagine that two virtuoso pianists individually, consecutively play the same musical composition to the same audience. They each strike the same notes with nearly identical meter and force, and they complete the piece in the same amount of time. Yet, the performance of one of the pianists creates a high energy and passion to the point of joyful tears in both musician and hearers, while the other performance is just deemed as technically correct. Musicians might describe the passionate performance as having the right “vibe.” Entertainers and critics alike might call such performances “magical” or “electrifying.”

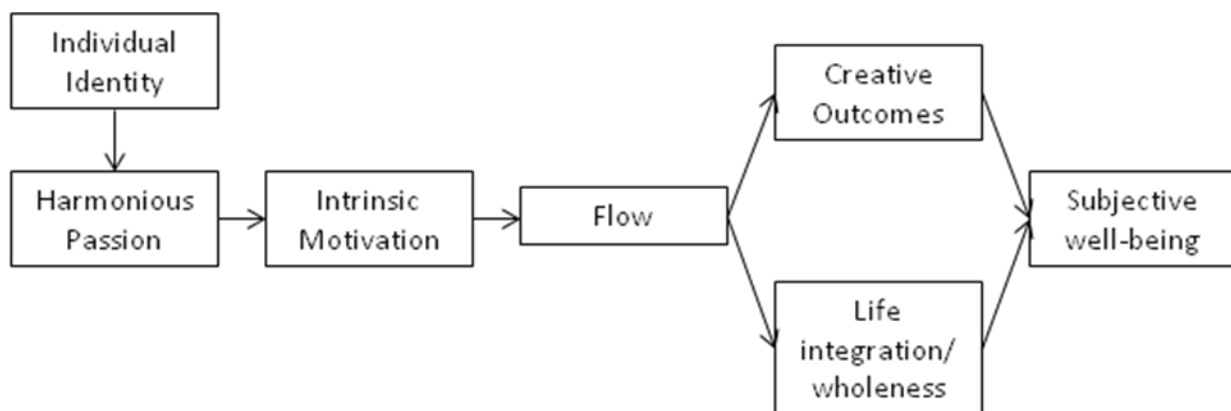
Similarly, two people work in the same area at an identical task. However, one simply goes about the required processes in a methodically proper fashion with little personal investment in or satisfaction from the work, while the other experiences “flow” as self and work become one and as time passes unnoticed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). We could go on, describing how authors and artists talk of being inspired by their “muse”; friends and lovers speak of perfect “chemistry” in interpersonal relationships; sports teams account victory not only to their technical performances but to their team “spirit.”¹³

What may be the most powerful explanation for these stark contrasts between the mundane and the exceptional? Passion! Passion and its transmission to others can make all the difference in the creative outcomes of almost any vocational performance. If people are passionate about an activity, then their motivation to do it well comes from deep within.

Passion And Wholeness / Wellness

As psychologists and theologians alike have been telling us for years, our mental and emotional wellness is linked to our ability to put the pieces of our lives together in a coherent, integrated whole that makes sense to us in our self-concept.¹⁴ We have seen in this chapter how passion is related to our identity as well as creative outcomes. Moreover, we saw that harmonious passion can increase our subjective well-being and quality of performance. Passionate endeavors are much more likely to produce a state of “flow”—the focused engagement of the “whole person” in a task, in which self and work become one and time passes unnoticed. Passion and flow have been linked to creative action and innovative outcomes.¹⁵ To visually summarize all of this, Figure 1 traces the process by which passion can result in higher levels of subjective well-being.¹⁶ Passion, identity, creativity, and holistic wellness are indeed as interdependent as the roots, trunk, leaves, and fruit of a towering tree—all of the parts are needed for the well functioning of the whole and its contribution to larger collectivities (e.g., forests and societies).

A Path Model of Passion to Well-Being



In closing, let me offer a very practical description of passionate people and why they are so often a benefit to congregations and all sorts of organizations, especially those navigating the waters of change. Research on the personality traits of passionate people showed that they like win-win solutions, handle change well, and embrace the new and different in their work. Passionate people enjoy a variety of interests and types of people, are adaptive and innovative, and are able to communicate enthusiasm without losing sight of overall goals. As one researcher put it, passionate people “like to sample a lot of different tastes from life’s menu.”¹⁷

Is it any wonder, then, that we usually enjoy being around passionate people—those who set their eyes on the immensity of the sea so that the collecting of wood takes on meaning, purpose, and joy? Is all this too lofty to attain? How can we live more moments in passionate pursuit of that which takes our breath away? How will we and our world be made better and more whole if we do?

Notes

¹ For a more humorous view of this notion, read *McElligott’s Pool* by Dr. Seuss.

² A. Bennet. 2005. Exploring aspects of knowledge management that contribute to the passion expressed by its thought leaders. [Dissertation, Fielding Graduate Institute] pp. 43-62.

³ C.E. Amiot, R.J. Vallerand, and C.M. Blanchard. 2006. Passion and psychological adjustment: A test of the person-environment fit hypothesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(2): 220-229

⁴ E. Gubman. 2004. From engagement to passion for work: The search for the missing person. *Human Resource Planning*, 27(3): 42-46.

⁵ For a discussion of this term, please see “Toward a Theology of Identity” by the Rev. Michael J. Battle, Ph.D in this volume.

⁶ The classic Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Herzberg’s two-factor theory, McClelland’s three-needs theory, and others serve as examples of traditional needs-based theories of motivation.

⁷ S, Linstead, and J. Brewis. 2007. Passion, knowledge and motivation: Ontologies of desire. *Organization*, 14(3): 351-371.

⁸ Sievers, 1986: 338-339, cited in Linstead & Brewis, 2007: 362

⁹ i.e., what one contributes to benefit some greater whole or what one deems to be life’s ultimate meaning and purpose

¹⁰ R.J.Vallerand, S. Salvy, G.A.Mageau, A.J. Elliot, P.L.Denis, F.M.E. Grouzet, and C. Blanchard. 2007. On the role of passion in performance. *Journal of Personality* 75(3): 505-534.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In other words, passions are not automatically beneficial or positive in nature. Destructive passions, such as greed, inappropriate lust, anger, and so on, seem to be more a matter of carrying an otherwise healthy passion to the degree of obsessive attitude or behavior beyond their more benign form (of harmonious passions). There is even Biblical allusion to this view of passions. For example, greed can be an abusive obsession with making money, but few are likely to argue that making money is an evil in itself. (1 Timothy 6:10) Admiration of beauty may turn into obsessive lust (e.g., David and Bathsheba). Anger is treated as an inevitable response at times, but it becomes destructive when one ruminates on it obsessively into the next day. (Ephesians 4:26).

¹³ M.L. Sheep and P.O. Foreman. 2007. A marriage made in heaven? Exploring the relationships of organizational identity and spirituality. Paper presented at the 67th Annual Academy of Management Meeting, Philadelphia.

¹⁴ E.H. Erikson, *Insight and responsibility: Lectures on the ethical implications of psychoanalytic insight*. (New York W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1964).

¹⁵ “Flow” refers to a totally involving work experience that is sustained by stimuli in the activity itself.

M. Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990).

C. Belitz and M. Lundstrom. *The Power of Flow* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997).

¹⁶ Also see The CREDO Institute, Inc. 2006. *Episcopal Clergy Wellness: A Report to the Church on the State of Clergy Wellness*.

¹⁷ E. Gubman, E. 2004. From engagement to passion for work: The search for the missing person. *Human Resource Planning*, 27(3): 42-46.