

Passion

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This is a quote from Albert Einstein: "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious."

Passion: What is it and how do we get it?

First, we have to know all the ways passion manifests itself in us. We have to know what it is, and be able to recognize it when we feel it. Experts in the field of passion have listed the following guide:

It is a powerful emotion. We feel boundless enthusiasm, excitement, zest, anticipation, exuberance, optimism, energy, joy, and of course love. I'm sure you can add many more to the list. However, passion can also be hatred, anger and lust, but we won't dwell on these this morning.

Deepak Chopra says: Passion is to have a dream, to have a purpose in life. And there are three components to that purpose: (one) to find out who you really are, to discover "God". (the second) is to serve other human beings because we are here to do that, and (the third) is to express our unique talents, and when you are expressing your unique talents, you lose track of time.

For me passion was Passion with a capital P. To me, it was tied up with enormous talent and enormous accomplishment and plenty of sturm und drang. If I couldn't see it, I didn't recognize it to be passion. Thus I used this criterion to come to the conclusion that I was not a passionate person.

Looking at the life of Michaelangelo, we cannot deny that he exhibited an inordinate amount of passion. Who else would climb a scaffold, lie on his back for hours on end with a candle mounted to his forehead over a four year period in order to paint the astonishing fresco masterpiece on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City. What I also didn't see, was that each new project required him to search for new inspiration in order for him to go forward. Passion is acquired when the seeker has settled on an idea that he/she overwhelmingly chooses over all other possible ideas. He chose to start The Pieta in 1499, The David in 1504, and the Sistine Chapel in 1508. If you ever visited The David in the Galleria dell' Accademia in Florence, you would have also seen four unfinished works called "the prisoners", because the images that Michelangelo envisioned are still locked inside the marble. We will not know whether Michelangelo just ran out of time to complete them, or whether he just couldn't summon the passion required to complete them, and so went on to other projects.

Barak Obama seems, by all accounts, to be a very cool and even tempered person. One we might not think of as having an impassioned personality. Especially, if you had mistakenly felt that passion had to resemble undying love, anguish and pain, like the great post impressionist artist Vincent Van Gogh, who, at his questionable demise at 37, left

2100 works of art, or Ludwig Van Beethoven, one of the most famous and influential composers of his time, who began to lose his hearing at age 26 and yet continued to compose, conduct and perform. But just the other evening on TV host Charlie Rose's late night show, I learned another very important lesson in how to recognize passion.

David Axelrod, Barak Obama's political consultant and campaign manager for both campaigns, was asked the question, "What kind of man is Barak Obama?" Axelrod said, "There are two kinds of politicians." (and we might take from that, that he also meant, two kinds of people). "There are those who want to Be Something and then there are those who want To Do something. He placed Barak Obama squarely in the latter camp.

I took from that interview that one of the most important components to acquiring a passionate life is to want To Do something. If we really analyze the lives of the people we admire because of their passionate commitments to their art or cause, we will see that they are the ones who have tried to do something in the world. (Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr.) and a long list of other doers, movers and shakers throughout history.

Even though I canceled Christmas this year, Tom, never the less, bought me Tony Bennett's new biography "Life Is A Gift". (words and artwork by Tony Bennett) the legendary singer, artist, and performer, who has been one of the world's most beloved entertainers for more than six decades. Tom remembered my telling him, that I had seen Tony Bennett in person, when he was no longer in the vanguard, at a New Jersey amusement park. It was a rainy afternoon in an open air arena, with just a smattering of people in the audience. But Tony performed as if there were thousands out there. He said, "If you are willing to sit in the rain to hear me, I'll keep singing." I was so impressed with his professionalism. He was not going to let anything dampen his desire to do the thing he always felt he was meant to do, sing. From the 78 to the LP to the digital age, Tony has done it all and is still at the top of his game. We can attribute this in part to his philosophy on life. For one thing, he does what he loves to do.

About his art, he said, "I never had an ambition to become a famous artist. Instead, I paint because I have a passion for it. It's as simple as that". Bennett is now 87 years old, but still says "I feel that I have a good ten years to go before I can consider myself a highly competent painter -- not excellent, but competent. "You have to have faith, that at some point you can achieve the art of excellence."

Fred Astaire, the great dancer and star of Hollywood musicals was up in age and no longer performing. Fred and Tony were sitting in Bennett's pool house listening to some music on the radio. Tony went to get something from the house, and when he returned, he glanced through the pool house window. There he saw Astaire dancing just as he did in any one of his major films. When Tony opened the door, Fred turned red in the face with embarrassment, that he'd been caught. He said "I can't help it, Tony, whenever I hear the right beat, I just have to dance". Astaire got caught up with the music and was doing moves that most twenty year olds couldn't pull off.

Just the other day I was working with my musical director Keith Ingham, the man who played piano and did the arrangements for all the music on my CD. I asked him if he could tell me how it was possible for him to have maintained such a high level of passion for his music all these years. Keith is now 71. He said, "I just can't help it".

Cary Grant, another Hollywood great said “that when you make a movie, you have to spend all day waiting around in your trailer just preparing to act for fifteen minutes, and you don’t get to spend time with people. “take it from me - it’s no way to spend your life. You might have assumed that he had a passion for acting because he was so incredibly talented. But Grant’s counsel was to “do what you love, and concentrate on what you know best.” At a certain point, he took his own advice, left it all behind and put his energies into enjoying life.

“Do what you love and concentrate on what you know best”. What great advice. I could have used it early on in my life. I finally heard and absorbed the words of a drama teacher who said “Go with your strengths,” and that stopped me dead in my tracks. I was already nearing 60 years old, and I had to admit to myself that I did not really know what my strengths were.

Some people never become aware of what they do best and so they wander through life searching, but never really finding the very thing that could sustain the interest and enthusiasm required to ultimately become passionate about something. One thing that could make a big difference in people’s lives is finding a mentor that will help them find themselves. Tony Bennett says having a mentor like Frank Sinatra meant all the world to him. He showed him the way, and opened a lot of doors.

The great jazz singer and trumpet player, Louis Armstrong, arguably one of the most gifted and passionate performers of the 20th century, did not do it all by himself either. He was fortunate enough to have been mentored as a child by another great New Orleans musician, Joe (King) Oliver. Oliver took Louis under his wing, acting as a father figure, giving him music lessons and even buying him his first real cornet. Ultimately, Armstrong joined the King Oliver band in Chicago, and the rest is history.

Ella Fitzgerald, another jazz great, learned of her passion when she won a talent contest as a teenager at the Apollo theater in Harlem in NYC. From that experience we get this Ella Fitzgerald quote: “I knew I wanted to sing before people the rest of my life. Benny Carter, the well known jazz saxophonist, recognized Ella’s raw talent and introduced her to people that could further her career. Interestingly, Ella had registered as a dancer for the contest, but because a spectacular sister dance act came on before her, she didn’t think she could win. She changed her mind at the last minute, and sang, and the rest is history.

Jack Canfield, psychotherapist, motivational speaker and co-author of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, thinks that one of the things that may get in the way of people being life long learners, is that they are not in touch with their passion. If you’re passionate about what it is you do, then you’re going to be looking for everything you can to get better at it.

A branch of psychology called Positive Psychology, applies a talking therapy to help individuals find and nurture genius and talent in order to make normal life more fulfilling. It offers exploration, and deals with the virtues of mindfulness, vitality, enthusiasm, and positive influence. Hope and optimism are also essential to the therapy. Studies have shown that what we remember may not be the best source for knowing what pleases us. One of the therapeutic methods, attempts to identify the amount of positive affect from one activity to the next, by asking

volunteers to write down the details of their current situation. MRI brain scans, can now be used to identify neural correlations for emotion, and tell us more about all the different ways of being happy.

Barbara Leo asked me to do this paper because she thought I was passionate about my singing. But that could not be further from the truth, because singing is not the thing I prefer to do over all other things. In fact it is rather low on my priority list. My passion was dancing. But as every dancer learns soon enough, it is a short lived career. Most dancers retire before they are 30. This is in part what the Broadway show "A Chorus Line" is about. In fact, it is the true stories of the dancers who originated the show. I know this because one of the leading performers in the show, Sammy Williams, was my dance partner when we were both in the National Company Tour of "Hello Dolly." In "A Chorus Line", when the oldest female dancer was asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" she replied, "young". So when dancers leave the stage and performance, they also leave behind their love of dance and the passion that they have for it. These words are from the song "What I did for Love" from "A Chorus Line."

Kiss today goodbye, and point me toward tomorrow, we did what we had to do. Won't regret, can't forget what I did for love.

So I, along with all the other passionate dancers who left their love behind, was faced with the fact that I no longer knew who I was. Each of us would have to find something else to do with our lives, and hope that there was something out there to fill the void and help us recapture the passion.

There are many reasons why some people cannot find themselves. A lack of positive mentoring is one. I have pinpointed an aptitude test, taken when I was a teenager, as being responsible for my doubting my abilities. I was told by the guidance counselor that the only thing I apparently was good at, was transferring figures from one side of a column to another, and he couldn't recommend any career that this could be applied to. Well meaning parents pushing their children into careers unsuited to their talents and inner most desires is another reason. Even religion ways in, when it teaches that happiness cannot be found until the after life. There are also social mores and self inflicted expectations. These pressures alone, could inhibit a person from pursuing their own self expression. Shame and guilt are powerful forces, keeping people unhappy and stuck in jobs and careers and life situations that they are not suited to.

Once I left the stage, mourned my loss, and recovered from a deep depression, I tried my hand at a lot of things trying to find the fire again. I was an antique dealer. I bought defunked houses and renovated them. I had a moving company, I had a construction company. I was a real estate agent. I had a baking company, I was one of the first female construction workers in NY, a waitress, and a secretary, and in my spare time I was a community activist. Otherwise, I was a Jack of all trades, master of none. When I was forty I went back to school and on and off for the next 14 years slogged through night school until finally I proudly graduated summa cum laude with a BA in psychology. And yet, I still did not know what I wanted to do. But eventually, when I was volunteering in the NYC public schools, it came to me that I could be useful teaching children how to read. At that point, I went to Columbia University for their certification course in Academic Language Therapy. I got a job with Reading Reform Foundation

of NY, an organization that sends trained professionals into NYC public schools to train elementary school teachers how to teach reading. So while I am still a Jack of all trades, I am at last, Master of one.

If I could choose one person to win the contest for the longest sustained passion, it would have to be Ella Fitzgerald, who said, "I sing what I feel". When she was older, in a wheelchair and no longer performing, she begged to be wheeled out on stage. She may not have been able to walk, but she still wanted to sing.

Today, I now know that I am passionate. I've learned enough about myself to know that I am passionate about everything. The secret, is that I do what I really feel like doing, and I do what I really feel like doing, only when I really feel like doing it.

Passion: What is it? I think that's been covered. How do we get it?

Tony Bennett says: You start by figuring out your motivation. Why you want to paint or sing, or do anything in life. Then you hone in on what you're seeking and attempt to become skilled at what that is. Then you find ways to push the envelope further and challenge yourself.

Duke Ellington said it best: "Number one: Don't quit. Number two: Listen to number one."

Assignment: With this guide in mind, I'd like you to write what you think passion is? What have you been passionate about in the past, and what are you still passionate about today?