

Your Rich and Fulfilling Life: It's a Choice

We all want it, a life that feels full in all the good ways and rich with love, meaning and satisfaction.

But how you spend your life is actually determined by how you spend your days. If your days are filled with the unfulfilling, how can that amount to a fulfilling life?

A good place to start to get yourself back on the path to a meaningful life is to answer this question posed by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver: "What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Your answer to Oliver's question could be anything: doing work you love, caring for and giving love to your family, contributing to your community or the world, creating art, building a business, climbing mountains, making music. Anything. The key is to choose to live *today* how you would choose to live tomorrow and the next day and the next.

For some, the life they live day-to-day is not the life they would describe in answering Oliver's question. Instead, they might use phrases such as: "As soon as..." or "I'd like to..." or "I used to dream..." while explaining a daily life tangled up in too many demands, and never enough time or energy to get to the things that matter most.

It can be a question of values—our personal principles or standards, or defined another way, those qualities that are most important to us. A life based on values rather than reacting to others' needs and wants or the acquisition of material things enables us to live in integrity with ourselves. Values help us create a rich and fulfilling life.

Identifying your values can be as simple as asking yourself how you want to be remembered by others.

As a person who cared about others? Who made a difference in the world? Who kept promises? Who was honest and trustworthy? Think of the qualities you most admire in others; these may be the values you claim for yourself.

Once you become aware of your values, you can begin to restructure your life. With your values as your touchstone, you can create and live the life you really want, achieve your goals and realize your dreams.

Within the boundaries of your values, these guidelines will help:

- 1. Become clear on what you really want.** Be specific; vague and undefined goals are difficult if not impossible to achieve.
- 2. Commit to give what it takes.** Saying "yes" to one thing means saying "no" to another. Acknowledge and accept what you must give up to get what you want.
- 3. Re-commit to your goals every day.** Begin your day by reminding yourself what your priorities are. Be mindful as you go through your day that you are making choices.
- 4. Do something every day.** No matter how small, take some action toward achieving your goals. Remind yourself that a book is written word by word, a marathon run step by step.

An old Chinese proverb goes "If we don't change our direction we are likely to end up where we are going." If you're caught up in a lifestyle that's not the one that you would choose, choose again. *

10 Personal Check-In Questions

Just like doing maintenance on your car to keep it running well, it's a good idea to do a personal check-in to keep yourself on track. Use your journal if you keep one, or just clip these questions, or copy them down for a regular check-in.

- 1. Is there something I need to do that I haven't done?** If an action needs to be taken and you're not taking it, ask yourself what's in the way.
- 2. Am I resisting something?** Sometimes that which we resist most is that which can provide the greatest opportunity for growth.
- 3. Am I holding onto something I need to let go of?** Letting go can be hard, but it's the only way to move forward.
- 4. Am I repeating old patterns?** Do the same problems or situations show up wearing different clothes? If so, it might be time to dig deep into the bottom of this closet.
- 5. Is there something for me to learn here?** Resistance, holding on, repeating harmful or unsatisfying patterns almost always hold a life lesson.
- 6. Am I staying in the present?** Time spent regretting the past and worrying about the future is time lost to the present.
- 7. Am I asking for what I need and want?** Do I act as my own advocate?
- 8. Am I taking good care of myself?** Check in with the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of your life.
- 9. Am I at peace with people, places and things in my life?** Being at peace means being in balance.
- 10. Am I having fun at least some of the time?** Don't forget to laugh! *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



This Spring issue focuses on living a life consistent with our values and a life we love, beginning with poet Mary Oliver's question in the article on page 1, "What do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

The exploration continues on the back page, looking at how to get and maintain balance in our busy life.

Sometimes the changes we want to make in our lives can seem so far-reaching and our goals so long-term that we may feel overwhelmed. This is why it's important to remember that changes don't happen all at once.

But change itself can feel scary, which may lead us to put off making changes. This issue's quiz asks you to find out how well you cope with change. Note that the questions themselves often contain helpful information on the topic. And, the Top 10 feature suggests you perform "maintenance" check-ins with 10 questions to ask yourself on a regular basis.

Finally, in keeping with the article about the importance of laughter, here are a couple of "daffynitions" for your enjoyment:

*Why did the dinosaur cross the road?
There weren't any chickens yet.*

Why do golfers carry an extra pair of socks?

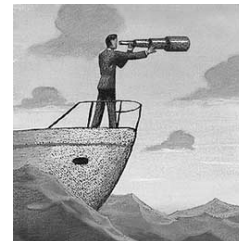
In case they get a hole in one.

You're welcome to pass this newsletter along to others. If you have questions about any of the articles, or anything else you'd like to talk about, please don't hesitate to call.

Best wishes for a happy, healthy spring. And remember to laugh!

How Well Do You Handle Change?

All change carries with it the risk of the unknown and the unexpected. Some find this exciting and welcome the challenge. Others go down the path of change reluctantly, dragging their heels all the way. But, as songwriter Johnny Rivers said, "The only thing that's permanent is change." A conscious, developed awareness of our response to change can help us develop better coping strategies. Take the quiz below to find out how you cope with change.



True False

- 1. I hesitate to make a change until everything is 100 percent right.
- 2. I never make changes unless they are forced on me.
- 3. Generally, I look forward to change as exciting and challenging.
- 4. I'm the kind of person who has to be totally fed up before I'll make any changes.
- 5. When confronted with a change over which I have little control, I review the events and my behavior to determine if I could have done anything differently.
- 6. Rather than feeling responsible for negative changes that come out of nowhere, I take responsibility for my reaction to them.
- 7. I realize that sometimes even "good" changes have an underside that may bring unexpected problems.
- 8. I realize that a positive change in one area of my life won't smooth out all my problems.
- 9. When coming to terms with a major change in my life, I attempt to keep other changes to a minimum.
- 10. When a change or transition occurs, I review how I have handled other such events in my life for lessons on how to cope in this event.
- 11. I look for other people who have undergone similar changes as models for how I might better cope with the change in my life.
- 12. During a time of change, I ask for help and support from those close to me, reliable friends and outside professionals.
- 13. After a life change, I step back from the situation to get perspective and rest in order to regain a sense of balance.
- 14. I try to look at the "big picture" of the change, and acknowledge mixed feelings I might have.
- 15. Rather than blaming or feeling victimized, when I'm caught in a change over which I have no control, I "pick myself up, dust myself off" and continue to move forward.
- 16. I don't hold onto the "way things used to be," but instead move into "the way things are."
- 17. In order to make a necessary change, I am willing to risk the disapproval and lack of support from others.
- 18. When something positive happens for someone that might change our relationship, I don't let my own wants or needs get in the way of being supportive of that person.

If changes in your life are causing you difficulties, or if you need help in developing some skills to cope with change, don't hesitate to ask. *

Laughing Makes You Feel Better—Here's Why

Laughter has been known as "the best medicine" long before Robin Williams' movie portrayal of "Patch Adams," the physician and clown who founded the Gesundheit Institute. In fact, in the 17th century, British physician Thomas Sydenham said, "The arrival of a good clown into a village does more for its health than 20 asses laden with drugs."

Not only is it common knowledge that laughter has all sorts of physical and mental health benefits, there's even an organization called the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, which has more than 3,500 doctors and health care professionals who study the effects of humor on humans. Here's what we know:

- Laughter decreases the amount of stress hormones in the body and increases the activity of natural killer cells that go after tumor cells.
- It has also been shown to activate the cells that boost the immune system and to increase levels of immune system hormones that fight viruses.
- Three minutes of deep belly laughing is the equivalent of three minutes on a fitness rowing machine.
- It takes 17 muscles to smile and 43 to frown.
- By the time a child reaches kindergarten, he or she is laughing some 300 times a day. Compare that to the typical adult who, one study found, laughs a paltry 17 times a day.
- When you laugh, your heart rate goes up. You



increase the blood flow to the brain, which increases oxygen. Laughter increases your respiratory rate. You breathe faster. Your lungs expand. It's almost like jogging, only you never have to leave the house.

- With laughter, there is an increased production of catecholamines. This increases the level of alertness, memory, and ability to learn and create.

- After you laugh, you go into a relaxed state. Your blood pressure and heart rate drop below normal, so you feel profoundly relaxed.

- When you have a deep-down belly laugh, the kind that shakes you, it releases anti-depressant mood chemicals.

So with all their prods and wires and gizmos and gauges, professionals are telling us what we knew all along: when we laugh we feel better.

Laughter is good social glue, too. It connects us to others and counteracts feelings of alienation. That's why telling a joke, particularly one that illuminates a shared experience or problems, increases our sense of belonging.

Want to be more creative? Try laughing more. Humor loosens up the mental gears and encourages looking at things from a different, out-of-the-ordinary perspective.

Besides spackling together our conversations and relieving tension, humor and laughter are coping mechanisms. They provide distance and perspective when situations are otherwise horrible. Laughter is one way to dissipate hurt and pain.

Finally, humor helps us contend with the unthinkable—our own mortality. *

Top 10 Ways to Lighten Up at Work

Work can be a too-serious place. And yet study after study shows that a lighthearted approach enhances productivity and work performance. Here are 10 ways to inject brightness into your workplace.

- 1. Smile.** Doing so short-circuits rising anger and stress and can trigger gentler views of a situation.
- 2. Dress up.** Wear a goofy hat or slip on a pair of red Wizard of Oz shoes when stress is getting thick.
- 3. Keep a playlist** of funny songs on your computer to help clear mental detritus.
- 4. Take a break.** Keep puzzles, ring toss and other diversions in the break room.

- 5. Institute a "fashion day,"** and dress according to a theme.

- 6. Add humor to everyday business.** Presentations, meetings, newsletters, etc. Give a prize for the funniest memo of the week.

- 7. Gather a fun committee.** This group is in charge of encouraging laughter in the office.

- 8. Keep a funny file.** Collect cartoons, jokes, comic strips and stories from newspapers, magazines and friends.

- 9. Play games.** Plan short activities that leave everyone grinning.

- 10. Remember what it was like to be a kid.** Do jumping jacks. Make funny faces. Skip or hopscotch down an aisle. *

Finding Balance on the Tightrope of Life

These days, almost all of us have so many demands placed on our time and energy, life can feel like a three-ring circus. And if you're not up there on the tightrope, you're down on the ground in the midst of tigers and lions, in charge of keeping a couple of dozen plates spinning in air.

Maintaining balance isn't easy. It requires holding steady with the many responsibilities that are a normal and everyday part of life: home, family, friends and work, while at the same time recognizing and fulfilling personal needs and wants. Finding and maintaining balance when life can be so complicated and demanding is both an inside and outside job.

Inside: Only you can take care of yourself
Consider how well you take care of

yourself, physically and emotionally.

- Do you eat healthfully and exercise regularly?
- Do you get check-ups and take preventative precautions? Do you set



aside personal, quiet time for yourself? Do you make time to enjoy nature and art, filling yourself up again and again?

Outside: Reaching outside yourself gives meaning

Think about how you reach outside yourself for sharing and giving

meaning to your life.

- Do you spend quality time with family and friends?
- Do you give back through your time, energy and experience? Contributing to the larger world provides connection and purpose.

Balance: The key to a rich and fulfilling life

To discover how well-balanced your life is, keep a log of how you spend

your time. In a little notebook you can carry with you, write down the hours you spend under the broad headings: "for me" and "for others."

Also make notes of requests for your time (from family members, from co-workers or professional obligations). Include "requests" from your physical and emotional self: "I wish I could take time for a walk today." Or "Gee, I'd love to take a nap."

Jot down your feelings about the time you're putting in. Do you resent the responsibilities at home? Do you feel like you never get to do what you want to do? Do you re-arrange your time, taking away from what you'd planned to do for yourself in order to do something for others?

How does that feel? Honestly?

After a week or two you can expect to have some pretty clear messages on where there is balance in your life and where there is not.

You might also come to see what's important to you, and how you can make changes that will create a life of health, well-being and joy. *

For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.

Bellaire (Galleria Area). Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. In addition to working with adolescents and couple, individual and group therapy.

Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides

713-562-7819

Kingwood, TX 77325

P.O. Box 5731

Licensed Professional Counselor

Margaret Hood Black, MA, LPC