

LIFE GOALS

by Nachum Braverman and Shimon Apisdorf

Many of the obstacles that wound and even cripple a marriage are a direct result of a faulty definition of marriage. Today, marriage seems to be a kind of evolutionary accident. After a period of getting acquainted, dating and becoming romantically involved, comes the stage of restlessness. This is where a couple confronts one of life's most terrifying questions: Now what?

With the only answer to "Where do we go from here?" being marriage, this innocent couple ends up wedged between the panic, split and run ("a part of me will always love you" routine) and deciding to take the only available next step. This next step lands them on the altar of marriage vowing to share their lives -- their joys and sorrows -- "till death do us part." The only thing missing is "and they all lived happily ever after." Because these days, most of them don't.

For many couples the problem begins with a mistaken notion of what marriage is exactly. Jewish wisdom defines marriage as "the commitment a man and a woman make to become one and to pursue together common life goals."

Jewish wisdom assesses the highest priority to clarifying life goals. A clear idea of one's life goals is the surest foundation for meaningful, productive, spiritual living -- and forms the bedrock for a fulfilling marriage as well. Life goals also create a context for living that enables couples to put other matters into perspective. Couples may argue over a stray toothpaste cap, the style of a new couch or whose turn it is to get up with the baby, but no matter how heated these run-ins become, they should never destroy a marriage. Remember this rule of thumb: a marriage that is threatened by where to spend a vacation is a marriage that lacks the bond of common life goals.

Marriages dissolve when two lives are pointed in different directions. Conflicts over the color of a new kitchen can generally be resolved, but conflicts in direction often cannot. Couples rarely break up over clashes in taste, but they do break up over whose career comes first when the two conflict. Couples will break up over whether to give priority to career or family, over whether or not to have children, over the education of their children and over which religion or how much of it to have in the home.

These, and other issues like them, are anything but trivial. These are life goal issues. They are issues every individual needs to carefully consider before inviting someone else to share his or her life. Two people who don't know where they are going should never commit to getting there together...

IF YOU DIED TOMORROW

Life goals are those things you'd regret not having done if you died tomorrow. When it comes to life goals, the problem is that most of us have never been encouraged to consider them -- at least not in a deliberate, thoughtful and ongoing manner.

There is no course on life goals offered in high school or college. You won't find a life goals channel on cable television, your boss won't encourage you to think about them on the job, and there is no apparent connection between clear life goals and your capacity to earn an ever heftier salary.

Nonetheless, the issue of life goals is one we simply cannot afford to overlook. Establishing goals is a necessity, not a luxury.

Everyone has moments when life goal questions flash in and out of one's mind, though these questions rarely receive their due attention. We're too busy living and trying to get ahead to think about where we really want to go. On occasion, usually in the setting of a late night conversation, issues of life goals do make their way into our discussions. As enlightening and inspiring as these after-hour talks may be, by the next morning they have often fallen victim to the relentless pursuit of whatever it was we were pursuing before we stopped to consider the broader context of our lives.

And it's no wonder. After all, we spend years learning how to make a living but rarely consider how much money we actually need to live. We assume we can never have too much, and thus we are constantly in pursuit of more. Why we need all that buying power, in what way those possessions actually enhance our lives and whether priorities exist that supersede our financial goals are questions we are rarely challenged to confront. In some vague sense, everyone knows what he or she wants in life. Everyone wants to be happy, to be good, to have friends, to raise a family and to see a better world.

These are lovely sentiments, but they certainly aren't what paves the path to success today. In the words of Gloria Steinem, "We best know our values when we look at our check stubs." The truest

indication of our values and goals isn't in what we say -- it's in how we spend our time and money that speaks loudest about who we are. The most accurate picture of what we truly care about is painted by the way we live.

WHOSE GOALS?

In truth it is very rare to find a person who has no goals. But who has determined what our goals ought to be? If we fail to grapple with values and define goals, then by default the prevailing cultural currents in society will define our goals focus. And society's standard, the great and elusive goal toward which we are all propelled, can be summed up in one word: Success. "People" magazine is filled with the lives of the rich and the famous, not the fulfilled and the happy. One advertisement for a sleek import car showed a desert sun setting behind the automobile. The caption read: "You are looking at 3,500 pounds of life goal fulfillment."

While we may react to this assertion as being absurd, someone on Madison Avenue knew better. And some corporation wagered a lot of money that this ad would strike a responsive chord in many Americans.

A corollary to success is career. Success is spelled m-o-n-e-y, and money is the objective of most career paths. Think about it. If someone says to you, "See that woman? She is a very successful attorney," what do you think "successful" implies? Does it mean that she is a particularly skilled interlocutor or that she donates a great deal of her services to needy individuals and institutions? Of course not! Though all of these things may be true, what is implied in the word "successful" is rich. By and large our culture has come to define success in monetary terms.

As the philosopher George Santayana observed, "The American talks about money because that is the symbol and measure he has at hand for success, intelligence and power." Successful is a euphemism for wealthy. And since our careers (and the paychecks and perks that come with them) are the way to realize our goal of being successful, we inevitably come to see what we do for a living -- as opposed to what we do while we're living -- as the defining element of our existence...

The western world has been had. We have allowed ourselves to be convinced that the curse of a career is to be the ambition of our lives. It's as though we are working for a final epitaph that would read, "Author of a thousand briefs, filler of a thousand teeth." True, every job involves some sort of service to individuals and society, but there has got to be more to life than a career.

Only the very fortunate do work that is stimulating and challenging, promotes personal growth, leaves them with their dignity intact, and affords a sufficient livelihood to pursue deeper life goals. Only the tiniest fraction of people find true fulfillment through their professions. The rest of us are left to trudge through the years looking forward to weekends and vacations that are but brief bridges of respite to more of the same drudgery.

In addition to their trivialization of life, career and success as life goals pose another problem: they make for lousy marriages. While striving to be a millionaire by 40 doesn't inevitably lead to a watered-down family life, it certainly doesn't help. Success at anything takes time, work, energy and concentration. The massive investment of all these resources into a career leaves people with little capital to invest at home.

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