

# 2

## What is the Meaning of Life & Where Did I Leave My Keys?

*“When I hear somebody sigh, ‘Life is hard,’  
I am always tempted to ask,  
‘Compared to what?’”*

—SYDNEY HARRIS

### **All Stressed Up and No Place to Go**

The shrink test said he was motivated, creative, and flexible. Surely this thing wasn't talking about my husband.

My formerly big bucks-earning husband was starting a new chapter in his life. After twenty-three years of selling his soul to corporate America, he'd left his job and was spending quality time contemplating his true purpose in life. Part of the discovering himself process included a whole battery of shrink tests.

As I read the summary about the energetic, talkative guy who could “change directions quickly based on new information,” I thought, “I can't believe it. He lied on the test!”

These tests are supposed to be foolproof, yet the person being described in the report bore little resemblance to the

always tired, rather morose, “I don’t want to try anything new” guy I’d been living with for eighteen years.

I wanted to be supportive; I really did. I know he has his finer qualities, but this test was way off the mark. Selfishly, though, I also knew it wouldn’t be too smart to start eroding the confidence of the man who’s trying to support our family.

So for once I kept my mouth shut. Instead of telling him we should get our money back for this obviously flawed report, I asked him what he thought of the results. “I think it describes me to a *T*,” he said. “I’m really glad I did it.”

Nodding and smiling in a nice, wifely way, I wondered, “How can a guy be so clueless about his own personality?”

And then he handed me the other report. “I didn’t spend much time with this one,” he said, “but it shows how I behave under stress.” Ahhh. Moody, distant, withdrawn, “quits when frustrated and tends to take things too personally.” Now that was my man.

As I contemplated the two reports, I had an epiphany: Maybe he really is that creative expressive guy, but he’s been under so much stress over the last few years I didn’t even know it.

And maybe it’s not just him.

Do we ever really know anyone? Or is everybody walking around so stressed out, the personality we see on the outside has little resemblance to what lies buried within? That positive report rang true for my husband because it described what he had always known himself to be. What I had assumed was his genuine temperament—uncommunicative, grumpy, and tired—wasn’t his personality at all. It was his response to twelve-hour days, heavy travel, and years of mind-numbing corporate crud.

Since he took the test, he's gotten in better shape, read some good books, and is starting a new business. He's actually turning into that positive person described in that initial report. Or rather, I should say, now that he's rid of some of the stress, that creative, exciting person he'd always been on the inside is finally opening up to the rest of the world.

He's not Mr. Sunshine all the time, but I see his new personality often enough to realize it's the real him. That other guy—the stressed-out one who dragged himself through the door every night and never wanted to do anything fun—wasn't the real person. He was just a collective bunch of anxieties looking for a place to rest.

Everybody has different responses to stress, and none of them are too pretty. My husband withdraws. I prefer the control-freak reaction: tense up and start barking orders at everyone. Other people make bad jokes, talk too loud, stay silent, collapse on the bed, work too much, work too little, cry, whine, drink, or watch too much TV when they're feeling anxious.

The point is, there's often a stark contrast between the self everybody else sees and who we really are. And the more stress we're under, the greater the gap. It doesn't matter whether your stress manifests itself in being tired and grumpy or high-strung and screechy, if you act that way most of the time, people are going to assume it's your basic personality.

In hindsight, I wish I'd been more patient with my husband during his corporate years. And I wish I'd spent more time helping him deal with the situation, rather than wasting all my energy being annoyed at the way it affected him.

Funny thing about stress, once you strap on your anxiety mask, the world looks different to you and you look different

to the world. It's such an effective disguise that sometimes even your own spouse doesn't recognize you.

### **Work-Life Balance is a Crock**

Companies may love to yammer on about it, but the reality is—work-life balance is a crock.

It's a fundamentally flawed concept at best. It implies that your work is on one side of the equation, and your life is over on the other. Two opposing forces that must be carefully weighed against each other at all times. Spread enough of yourself around in equal parts, and you have the formula for success.

And we wonder why we're going nuts.

The key to a richer life isn't about maintaining the proper balance, it's about creating congruence. It's about doing work that connects with the essence of who you really are. Each of us has a contribution to make, and when our work is in alignment with our skills and talents, it doesn't take away from our lives. It adds to it.

There's a four-letter word that's the true secret of success, and it has nothing to do with balance—it's L-O-V-E. Yes, you read that right—love.

From the American Revolution to Apple Computer, love has been the cornerstone of every successful venture. Have you ever seen the look on someone's face who truly loves what they do and who loves the people they are doing it with? They shine. They shine because their work reflects who they are as a human being and because they know they're making a contribution that matters.

Love isn't some flower-child, woo-woo concept we need to pursue outside the office. Love is exactly what we need to

bring into our jobs. It doesn't matter whether you're working for Procter & Gamble or the PTA, infusing your work with love delivers a better ROI (return on investment) than any other single outlay you can make.

I've worked as a business consultant for fifteen years. I know how to dissect a P&L, and I've played ball with the big boys at the top of the corporate food chain. I can promise you, if you want better results, love is the answer you're looking for.

Putting love into your work means putting your actions into context. Connecting your contribution to the big picture of your organization and the big picture of your life. It's about paying attention to the moment you're in and being fully present for the people you're with. Love happens when you get your mind, your body, and your spirit in the same place at the same time. Because when you're fully present, that's when you finally give your soul permission to show up. And it's your soul that gives off the shine.

If you're mindlessly going through the motions in a job you hate, your life is on the fast track to misery, no matter how you balance it. But before you start checking the want ads, let me tell you, the meaning you get out of your work is in direct proportion to the meaning you put into it. Whether you're a volunteer or a vice president, you're the one that decides whether or not you're going to bring love into the equation.

Going to work shouldn't dim your light; it ought to ignite it. So forget balance. Start with love and think congruence, connection, and contribution instead. Monday is a new day, and it's Take Your Soul to Work Day. Because, quite frankly, I think a few of us have been leaving ours at home.

So the next time that alarm clock goes off, make the decision to wake up, show up, and shine.

### **The Meaning of Life in Two Words**

Friendship and creativity.

Who would have thought a geeky professor of quantum physics could sum up life's big question in two words? But the second I heard him say it, I knew he was right. It's one of those great ideas like disposable diapers, TIVO, and the theory of evolution. It makes sense the first time you hear it, and the more you think about it, the more you wonder why nobody ever thought of it before.

In this case, the words themselves came from Dr. Casey Blood, a rather brilliant gentleman who spends long hours contemplating the cosmos and other scientific concepts I can't even begin to understand. But the truism of his words applies to regular everyday life.

We're put on this earth to learn how to connect with each other and to use talents to create something wonderful. Our deepest desire is to be cherished while on this planet and to make a contribution that outlasts our stay on it. The concept is simple; it's the execution that's hard, and the biggest challenge is all those other crazy human beings who want the same thing. They plague us with their unrelenting demands; they don't love us the way we'd like; and they insist on inserting their own quirks, ideas, and dysfunctions into our plans.

Ahh, if only they would see things our way, the world would be a perfect place indeed.

Friendship and creativity are relatively straightforward words, but the full context of their meanings can be huge.

True friendship isn't just mindless chit-chat around the water cooler. It stands for love, acceptance, and unconditional support. Who doesn't want more of that in every relationship?

And while we might think that creativity only applies to the whiz kid at the ad agency or the annoying mime pestering you at the street fair, it's actually the core of any meaningful contribution.

Every task offers an opportunity to create. Whether you're a painter, publicist, or parent, your life's work is your legacy. And whether you do it with your hands, your mind, or your heart, creativity ultimately expands when you have the help of others.

Yet that's where the conflict comes in. The difference between the idea of friendship and creativity and their execution is a little like the difference between dating and marriage. And I'm guessing I'm not the only person who was better at one of those than the other.

In a perfect world our relationships would stimulate creativity, and creating together would deepen our relationships. But in the real world, we often lack the time and patience to work through the process.

Who hasn't found themselves thinking, "This project would go quicker if that annoying so-and-so weren't involved?" And I can't tell you how many times I've been convinced my household would run more smoothly if my husband would just adhere to my edicts. Alas, such is the nature of the human ego. Our souls want to be part of something bigger than ourselves, but our egos keep telling us those other people are standing in the way.

Enter the cheap, no-work, pop culture solutions—TV and

shopping. We can create, we can connect, and we never have to put up with real people.

Want to experience the satisfaction of pulling together something great? Forget toiling over a communal garden or cranking out a big, multi-department project. You can surround yourself with artsy furniture or get a fab, new outfit today. Craving some witty repartee? Ditch your family with all their boring woes. Get TIVO and the *Friends* down at the coffee shop will rerun their funny lines forever. Invest in a big screen and Jennifer Aniston becomes nearly life size. Or as life size as a size 2 gets.

The beauty and the curse of television is that it satisfies our desire for intimacy with no emotional work or responsibility on our part. And consumerism feeds off our need for a creative outlet.

I'm no earth mother. I've got a closet full of shoes, and I can recite the scripts of almost every *Brady Bunch* episode since Mike and Carol married. But I also know the deeper meaning we crave can't be found in pop culture solutions. Discovering your true purpose isn't always easy. It takes intention and the discipline to turn away from the quick fixes being marketed to the masses. You're also going to have to make an emotional investment in the people around you.

TV and shopping aren't cheap substitutes for the real thing. They're expensive ones. You deserve the real deal—friendship and creativity. It's really that simple. And it's really that hard.