

DISCOVER WHAT YOU LOVE: EXERCISING THE YES MUSCLE

When we feel like we are stuck in a rut, or feel drained by our lives or our work, it is useful to ask whether we have gotten so immersed in what we are doing well that we have stopped asking ourselves whether it is how we want to be spending our time. Many of us spend our time on things we consider important, and that we are good at, but that we may not love doing.

Work Consistent with Our Values is not Enough

Many of the people in my life-work coaching practice do work they are good at, and work they think is important – as healers, providers of services, artists, entrepreneurs, etc. When they find themselves stressed out and unhappy at work, getting sick too often, or feeling empty and unsatisfied with their lives, they often feel confused and even guilty – unable to imagine why this work, which seems on the surface to be “good work,” feels so difficult now.¹

Gift-Based Living

We all have many gifts, many things we are – or could be – good at, many ways in which we can serve our communities and the people and ideas we want to nurture. If we are committed to doing the best work we can do in service to our ideals, our communities, our loved ones, we need to remember that our best comes when we are happy and energized by what we are doing. In any job, there will be moments or hours or even days which are exhausting, in which we have to do things we don’t like to do or that are very difficult for us. But when we feel drained by our work, day after day, week after week, we are not at our best; we are being sapped of the vitality and creativity and energy we need to do our best, and the world is being deprived of much of what we could give.

Identifying Our Gifts

Gifts are things we are both good at and love doing, things that energize us. Identifying these gifts and the ways in which they might be used is one of the central pieces of work for many of us as we wrestle with being dissatisfied with our jobs or other aspects of our lives. I have found several exercises to be very helpful in identifying our gifts and passions, and evaluating whether we can bring those gifts and passions into our current work. I will suggest two very different, but complimentary, approaches here.

A Lists Exercise

The first is a fairly intellectual approach. Make lists under the following headings:

- Gifts I have but don’t get to use at work (or don’t get to use very often)²

¹ You can substitute “relationship,” “hobby,” “volunteer duties,” “home,” “routine,” or almost anything else that is part of your life, for “work.”

² If this feels like a hard question to answer, there are many books that can help you identify your gifts (they also get called “transferable skills,” “strongest traits,” etc.). Three good ones, which take very different approaches, are *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type* by Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger, *Zen and the Art of Making a Living* by Laurence G. Boldt, and *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Bolles.

- What would have to change for me to be able to use the gifts I don't get to use at work?
- Can those changes happen at this job?
- Kinds of work/job that might allow me to use more of my gifts

Try not to edit yourself too much making the lists – often we get stuck in what we think we *should* think, feel or value instead of what we actually *do* think, feel or value.

The Stones Exercise³

The second, a more intuitive and iterative approach, is one that I think of as learning to exercise the yes muscle – that is, learning to recognize and act on our impulses to do things that bring us joy, to do the things we want to be doing. This is the clearest way I know to get clear about what we are passionate about, what we love doing.

1. Find two different looking bowls of roughly equal size that are pleasing to your eye (they should be about soup bowl size).
2. Fill one of the two bowls with small smooth stones and/or other small objects that feel nice in your hands and are not all exactly alike (horse chestnuts, marbles, etc.).
3. Each night before you go to bed, go to the bowls and review your day. For each thing that you've done that day just because you wanted to – because it felt good to do it – take a stone from the first bowl and move it into the second.

Some days you will move only one stone, other days many. Don't limit yourself to big things. If you took a five-minute break and walked around the block, that counts. If you ignored the phone ringing to finish something you wanted to finish, that counts. If you wrote an article, or a note to a friend, because you had the impulse to do so, that counts. What is important is that you did it not just because you thought it would be a good thing to do, or because it was important, or because it made someone else happy (though any or all of those things could also be true of whatever it is), but simply because you wanted to do it.

Over time, this exercise helps us become aware of our impulses toward doing what we love and strengthens our ability to say yes to those impulses. It also helps us remember (or learn) what we love, something we often lose track of in our lives.

Tasha Harmon is a facilitator/coach living in Portland, Oregon. She can be reached at Tasha@Tasha-Harmon.com or 503-788-2333. You can find more articles like this at www.Tasha-Harmon.com.

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³ My deep gratitude to the person who suggested this exercise (or some form of it) to me. I wish I could remember who you are. If you are reading this, please let me know who you are so I can credit you properly.