

Reading Fulfillment Backward

Read the article first. *How Do I Find My Purpose? Two Different Questions Hiding in One* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com. The post separates a goal from a purpose, and separates the half of us who already know our purpose from the half who do not have the data yet. This sheet is for both. Search “how do I find my purpose” on the site.

A purpose is not a goal. It is the set of conditions under which we feel most ourselves, and it is already visible in the experiences we remember most vividly. Fulfillment has four ingredients: the emotions we were prioritizing, a value honored rather than violated, an activity that used our strengths, and someone to share it with. This sheet takes two experiences and reads each one backward for those four. Page four asks what state we were in, who the purpose makes uncomfortable, and what a small expression of it looks like this week. There are no scores and no single answer. Most of us have several purposes, and they change.

MOVE ONE

Pick an experience that was unmistakably fulfilling

Not the best day on paper. The one that still has charge in it. If nothing comes, start smaller: a time we were surprised, in awe, or in a great deal of pleasure. Even a food we prefer counts as data.

MOVE TWO

Describe it concretely, then strip the concrete away

Not “the hike” but what the hike contained, sorted under four headings. Emotional: which emotions it met. Ethical: whether a value was honored or violated. Contextual: whether it used our strengths. Relational: who was there, and who heard about it afterward. The abstract variables are the transferable part. The goal was one way to get there.

MOVE THREE

Do it again with something that looks nothing like the first

A canyon route and three days at a resort share almost no activity and can both be fulfilling. The overlap is less important than the two lists. The lists are the purposes, in their current form.

MOVE FOUR

Read the context, the discomfort, and the week

The same variables burnt out produce nothing, so our condition belongs in the question. Then: who does this purpose make uncomfortable, and what have we been saying instead of honoring it? Last, one expression of each variable small enough to do this week.

“I do not know my purpose” is sometimes the safest available sentence for a person who knows it exactly.

Experience one

Directions: one experience that was unmistakably fulfilling. Describe it, then check the variables that were in it. A few words per space is enough.

WHAT HAPPENED

Where, who with, what we did, how it ended. Concrete.

WHAT IT CONTAINED

Check every variable that was present, then add any that are missing. Each is tagged with its ingredient. An ingredient with nothing checked is the one that was thin.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Emotional · Freedom, picking our own line | ☐ Emotional · The unknown, novelty, surprise |
| ☐ Emotional · Risk, real stakes | ☐ Emotional · Rest, recovery, pleasure |
| ☐ Ethical · Congruence with a value, even through pain | ☐ Ethical · Being needed, being of use |
| ☐ Ethical · A rule kept for people who come after us | ☐ Ethical · The ethics settled in advance, out of the way |
| ☐ Contextual · Mastery, competence in use | ☐ Contextual · The body pushed, somatic pleasure |
| ☐ Contextual · It used what I am actually good at | ☐ Contextual · Creativity, making something |
| ☐ Relational · Companionship, a friend beside us | ☐ Relational · Intimacy: emotional, conversational, physical |
| ☐ Relational · Pride in people we have raised or taught | ☐ Relational · The story told afterward, to someone who attuned |

READ BACKWARD

The heading these variables sit under

Adventure and competence. Recovery and pleasure. Generativity and family. Service. Make up the heading that fits. It does not have to be one of these.

THE GOAL

What the goal was, and what it was serving

The concrete thing we set out to do, and which variables above it was a vehicle for. When the goal was over, what remained?

Experience two

Directions: pick one that looks nothing like the first. If the first was adventure, try rest. If the first was solitary, try one with other people in it. Then the same reading.

WHAT HAPPENED

Concrete, as before.

WHAT IT CONTAINED

Check every variable that was present, then add any that are missing. Each is tagged with its ingredient. An ingredient with nothing checked is the one that was thin.

- | | |
|--|--|
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READ BACKWARD

The heading these variables sit under

A different heading from page two is normal. Purposes are plural.

BOTH PAGES TOGETHER

What I now have

Two lists, two headings. Not one activity. Write the variables that appeared on both pages, and the ones that appeared on only one and still matter.

Condition, discomfort, and the week

Directions: three short readings. The first asks what state we were in. The second is for the half of us who already knew. The third brings one variable into the next seven days.

CONDITION

What state was I in?

Rested or depleted, early or late in a chapter of life. The same variables burnt out produce nothing. Which of my variables need me rested, and which work anyway?

DISCOMFORT

Who does this purpose make uncomfortable?

Name the person and the fear. Then the value of mine that their discomfort presses on (not causing discomfort, being seen as responsible, not appearing to have it easy).

WHO, AND WHAT THEY WOULD SAY

THE VALUE OF MINE IT PRESSES ON

WHAT I HAVE BEEN SAYING INSTEAD

The sentence that protects me from that discomfort. "I do not really know what I want." "It is not a big deal." The safer version of the trip I take instead.

WHAT ELSE IS IN THE WATER

The guilt stays. What belongs beside it: exhilaration, pride, gratitude, relief. And who can hear the story without handing the guilt back.

THE WEEK

One small expression of each variable

Freedom at the scale of an afternoon. Intimacy at the scale of one conversation. Small enough that it cannot fail. One per line, with a day beside it.
