

LIVING A PURPOSE-FULL LIFE

BY JAN JOHNSON

1

HUNGRY FOR PURPOSE

Have you ever had one of those hectic days when you wondered, *Would the disciples have run their lives by daily planners in little loose-leaf notebooks?* You've crossed off the errands on your to-do list and you've gotten all those telephone calls made, but you wonder, *Did God intend for my life to be so frantic?* Or, you find yourself having more life-defining moments when you sit in places such as hospital waiting rooms and wonder, *Has my life counted for anything? Have I made a difference for someone else?*

These two crosscurrents -- too much activity and too little meaning -- have created a floating dissatisfaction among women. The first is a surging torrent of morning-noon-and-night busyness while the other is a quiet ticking away of life's minutes without purpose. These two processes add up to penetrating self-examination -- *Why am I doing these things? What is all this for?*

If that's how you feel, you are not alone. While interviewing many women for this book and staying up late talking to others as I have taught at retreats, I've heard varied questions and comments regarding purpose in life, such as:

I don't really like my job, but what can I do?

There's so much I'd like to do -- how do I decide?

I may be fifty, but I'm still trying to decide what to be when I grow up.

Linda, for example, has achieved her career goal of becoming a nurse-manager and although she's a competent one, she feels something is missing. She considered going to medical school to become a doctor. "But I thought about it and figured out it was only so I could own a luxurious home and have more people look up to me.

"It all eludes me. I go to church and read my Bible, but I don't make a difference in this world. After a wasted evening of unplanned television watching, I feel guilty. Sure, I'm nice enough to fill in for other nurses when they have a sick kid at home, but I don't ever go the extra mile as

Jesus said to. My work is my work and my faith is my faith. Patients represent more things to do, not people with souls that God loves."

Things came to a head when Linda attended her twenty-year high school reunion. "I saw my life was ticking away. I have only a certain amount of time left. I want to do the things I thought were meaningful. Is what I'm doing still meaningful to me? I've got to figure that out."

Denise is at home with three children and enjoys the coming and going of a mom's life. But in the quiet moments as she rocks her crying toddler, she wonders if the latch key kids down the street can operate the microwave without burning themselves. She wonders where the bag lady who was digging scraps out of the fast food restaurant dumpster sleeps. "Yes," she says, "I'm taking care of my kids, but isn't there something we could do together to be like Jesus?"

Mary began working as a bank teller years ago because "I didn't want to think about my job after hours, so I'd be free to focus on my husband and kids." Even though her children are now grown, her after-work hours are filled with running from thing to thing -- picking up prescriptions, going to church meetings. She didn't think much about purpose until her friend's son was diagnosed with AIDS and Mary helped care for him. After he died, she went to a grief group with her friend. "They helped each other so much -- I envied that. I do good things, but is anyone's life better because of what I've done?"

One night after giving a dinner party where she entertained the big kahunas at her husband's work, Mary became almost angry as she cleaned up. "Where am I going in life, except going?" she asked her husband. "Yes, I care for you and I enjoy my job. I want something to live and die for besides a clean kitchen counter and a car that's fun to drive. We haven't made it this long together to do nothing, have we?"

Women from twenty to seventy, single and married, are searching for meaning in the midst of nonstop coming and going. Sometimes this questioning is spurred by decade birthdays: thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, or an event such as a reunion at which you realize life is no longer a dress rehearsal. Sometimes it's triggered by a loss or failure: divorce, children leaving home, loss of job, loss of a breast, or death of a parent who has wisely and lovingly directed you. That catastrophe creates a space in your life, and you're not willing to go back to the hectic way things were. One woman whose last child was leaving home said to me, "Will I ever find anything as meaningful as parenting my children?"

Achievement can spawn introspection as well. A successful certified public accountant working for a large firm told me: "When I chose this field, I was an insecure, bleached-blond nineteen-year-old. I've achieved her goals and it wasn't such a big deal after all. What will I do now?"

IS GETTING OUT OF THE HOUSE THE ANSWER?

Especially since the onset of the women's movement, women have broken barriers and defied discrimination. When I was young, girls wrote to NASA asking what it took to become an astronaut and were told girls need not apply. In the decades since, NASA has said to women, "Please do apply!" If barriers have melted, how come the dissatisfaction remains the same?

Getting out of the house is not the definitive road to fulfillment because even if she leaves home, a woman's not guaranteed meaningful work. A study presented in *Journal of Organizational Behavior* found the notion that women have higher job-turnover rates than men to be true. A survey of nearly six hundred male and female executives, managers, and professionals revealed women were twice as likely as men to leave their jobs within two years (12.2% of the men versus 22.2% of the women).

Why do women change jobs or leave the workforce so frequently? The study looked at reasons such as wages, tenure, benefits, working conditions, job security and paid vacation. As I examined this study, I assumed women left jobs to avoid discrimination, to stay home with kids or to glide in the "mommy track" (working less hours or less demanding jobs). I was wrong. According to the survey, the primary reason women quit their jobs is lack of satisfaction with the job itself. This study, described in an article aptly titled, "Ain't Got No Satisfaction: Working Women," shows women often don't find their jobs meaningful and they're rankled by that.¹ While income is important, a paycheck is not enough to hold many women to a job.

In fact, the trend of women joining the workforce is reversing itself -- women are leaving.² As he described the trend, author Leith Anderson told this story in *Christianity Today*:

Karol Emmerich, 45, was listed by *Working Woman* magazine as one of 73 female executives "ready to run corporate America." As vice president, treasurer, and chief accounting officer of the Dayton Hudson Corporation, she became the highest-level woman in the \$18 billion retailing company. Then, in May 1993, she resigned to pursue community-service projects and offer her expertise to Christian organizations. Said

Emmerich, "I recognize that career advancement is not going to fill all the needs in my life." She says she is after a "more balanced life" where she can focus on "nurturing relationships -- with God, my family, old and new friends."³

Even in a top-level job, certain things are missing that women want from life: meaningful partnership in God's purposes, connectedness with others, making a difference in this world. Better jobs and more respect haven't brought us what we want. Instead, we have discovered materialism breeds discontent, trying to be SuperWomen breeds fragmentation, and working in an office (even a church office) staffed by humans with egos breeds disillusionment.

The lostness is so pervasive that "legacy coaches" (a combination of mentor, taskmaster, motivational speaker, business consultant and therapist) are the runner-up hottest consulting track, says *U.S. News & World Report*.⁴ Those hiring coaches include women looking not only for career counseling, but also seeking direction and meaning in life. Amy Watson of Coach University (a Houston-based classroom-without-walls founded in 1992) tells about a female university professor who was overwhelmed with the demands of life, especially teaching and publishing responsibilities. She hired a "legacy coach" to figure out which projects were most crucial to her, which she could let go, which tasks to delegate to colleagues, and how to manage her workload.⁵ Like her, many of us are trying to figure out what is *most important* and how to arrange our lives around that.

Women who stay at home with children face similar struggles. They understand that one of their life purposes is nurturing children, but the long-term picture is fuzzy. Changing diapers and cleaning up messes, when done with love, make a huge difference. Yet these women desire to do as women throughout the ages have done -- be mothers *and* obey the commands of God to be a light to God's world in some way (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Tim. 4:10-11).

SOMETHING BIGGER THAN ME

What these women are crying out for is purpose in life, or what may be referred to as a "sense of mission" or a "calling." Our purpose in life is a narrow slice of God's enormous purposes. For example, the apostle Paul had one single-minded mission: "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). But purpose in life is more than a task to do. Paul didn't just preach; he did whatever was necessary to win a people for whom his heart was broken -- the Gentiles (Gal.

1:16; 2:2, 8; Eph. 3:1; 2 Tim. 4:17). Like Paul, Peter also had that special mission of establishing the church, but primarily to the Jewish world. Obviously, the same specific purpose may be lived out in many ways, depending on an individual's opportunities, temperament and relationships.

Some women couldn't state their purposes in life if asked, but it runs through their lives thematically, woven through their tasks and relationships on a daily basis as a red thread spanning the length of a garment. When I asked my friend Barbara Dauer what her purpose was, she could not articulate it, but I've watched her for years and it's obvious to me. She educates the have-nots in our culture.

When I first met Barbara, she was befriending and teaching English as a second language to Cambodian refugees in addition to her part-time job. When she began teaching kindergarten, it wasn't long before she was asked to teach the "wise 5s class" -- a pre-kindergarten class for children who "had not" the readiness for academic kindergarten in a scholastically-focused school. A few years later, she was offered a job at an inner city school and since I'd lived near that school, she asked me, "Is it a safe neighborhood?" I told her it absolutely was not safe and drive-by shootings were common. "But this neighborhood is filled with people of great courage, overcoming obstacles you and I will never experience," I added. "Living there gave me the courage to begin writing." Even though Barbara has had to work hard at overcoming fears in her life, she took the job. Show this woman a marginalized, ill-thought of person and she'll wonder how she can teach them to read and write.

Our purposes in life answer the unfulfilled longings we have to communicate what we believe is important or to change the things about the world that break our heart. When we don't pay attention to these longings, we feel empty and isolated no matter how well-paid, well-loved or well-coifed we are.

If you sense the heartbreak of God and cannot express it, you will be frustrated. This appears to have been the case with Elizabeth Dole several years ago. Based on what she has said and done, one of her life purposes appears to be to improve conditions for those in need. In the early 1990s as labor secretary, she prepared a massive initiative to prevent abuse of farm workers and improve their working conditions. In her plan she wrote: "I was shocked and deeply moved by what I witnessed [when touring the fields]. I saw conditions that are not only unnecessary and unacceptable for any workers, but also are an affront to human dignity." Her initiative was rebuffed, however, and so conditions remained unchanged. A labor source familiar with the plan

said it was a factor in her resignation four months later.⁶ When she went on to become president of the American Red Cross, I was not surprised. This is a woman who has an obvious heart for the hurting and she chose a job that let her express that.

Our bond with God is such a deep one -- being created in his image -- that we won't find meaning unless it's in God (Gen. 1:26-27). The apostle Paul described this pull toward God: ". . . men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (Acts 17:27-28). Depend upon this truth: we -- as God's offspring, living and moving and having our being in him -- can expect to feel lost when we are out of relationship with God or existing outside his purposes. We were created for a love relationship with God and in that relationship we are inspired to fulfill the purposes of God. If we don't know Christ or make him known, we will long to do so.

That's why a purpose-oriented life must be lived in conversation with God. Through that conversation, we fall in sync with God's purposes. When we've done this, no one has to ask us to do something within our purpose, because we've already gotten involved or started asking questions about it.

The benefits to giving ourselves to purpose-oriented living are enormous. We stop wondering what we should be doing and start looking for time to do what tugs at our thoughts. We look forward to today's tasks because they're more likely to be related to our purposes. We feel our contribution is respected and appreciated -- maybe not by the world at large or by the next door neighbor or anybody at church. But we know these tasks are linked to God's purposes and therefore important and worthy of respect. When describing the work to others, we emanate satisfaction and appropriate pride because we have a sense of God's hand reaching back to lead us while his other hand stretches forth unseen into his will.⁷

DOING WHAT GOD HAD CREATED ME TO DO

As a woman staying at home raising preschoolers, I knew what I was doing was important, but I longed for God to use me in other ways too. One of my joys was teaching teenagers in the urban church where my husband pastored. I worked hard to help kids see how relevant and exciting the Bible was. (I would later state this purpose at the top of my résumé as, "making the Bible come alive.") Surviving in a teenage Sunday school classroom with several languages and

nationalities wasn't easy. My college degree in Christian education wasn't cutting it, so I attended workshops on how to make learning fun for my teenage students. Through one of those workshops, I was invited by an editor to submit samples of how I changed the publisher's lessons to fit my urban teenagers. The thought terrified me so much that I didn't send them anything until a few years later when I was turning thirty. I thought, *Gee, my life is going to be over soon. If I'm ever going to write curriculum, I better do it now!* (Yes, I thought this at thirty!) My lesson plans were published.

So during my kids' preschool years, I spent their naps writing Bible study curriculum for teenagers. (No, my kids didn't sleep perfectly each time, but they had a few "bed toys" to keep them content.) For two hours a day, I entered another world in which I hashed out biblical principles, bonded with Bible figures and plotted to make them live in the minds of kids whose parents were divorcing, dying or unknown, and who were afraid to use the bathroom at school because they might be jumped. When my own kids' naps ended, I was terribly drained and terribly refreshed.

When someone important to me minimized it one day -- "so you're writing those little teacher's books" -- I tried to explain what writing curriculum meant to me. I saw myself going unseen into classrooms around the nation, helping teachers motivate confused teens and introduce them to a down-to-earth, but high and holy Savior who loved them just as they were. As I finished, my listener rolled his eyes and I felt embarrassed I had spoken with such passion. Yet it also felt right. I knew I was doing one of the things God had created me to do. I knew I was entering territory that had something to do with my purposes in life, although they weren't yet clear to me.

Now, fifteen years later, people ask me if I've "gotten past writing curriculum" because I've also written books and magazine articles. I try to explain more calmly why I love curriculum writing. Writing Bible study curriculum wasn't just a smart career move to bring in enough money to buy a computer. It grew out of a passion born in me as a child. On Saturdays, I went to bars with my dad and on Sunday I went with my mother to church. I often imagined the Jesus I heard about on Sunday being authentic enough to mingle, eat with and befriend the people I met on Saturday at the Oasis Cafe. When I write those "little teacher's books" (for adults now), I imagine adult class members with every possible hurt and sin -- greed, illness, bankruptcy, snobbishness -- and I try to equip their teacher to make God come alive to them.

As time has passed and I've begun speaking at retreats, I've mentioned this idea of purpose in life and received several reactions: blank stares by those who have never considered they might have a purpose; "ah ha" expressions by those who were once inflamed with purpose but let it go; knowing looks, beaming grins and hearty handshakes by those who have a sense of God's hand upon them and can't believe that someone is putting into words this unspeakable feeling. Participating in this adventure of purpose in life drives us to God, over and over, asking him questions and seeking his face. It forces us to look outside ourselves to the world God *so loved* (John 3:16) and ask God what it would mean for us to live as Jesus Christ did while he walked on this planet.

My twenty year plus journey of purpose and my interaction with people, especially women, has led me to write this book, hoping that readers will seek God for their purposes in life. I've seen how discontent women are -- and should be until they are filled with God and partnering with him for eternal purposes. This book is about that journey and speaks to women at different places along the way. In the first section, "A Purpose-Filled Life" I'll clarify what purpose in life is and isn't, what God's purposes on this earth are and whether women have a part in that. In the second section, "Uncovering Your Purpose" we'll go about the gritty work of recognizing purposes already within us, but seem fuzzy or unrecognizable. In the third section, "Moving Down the Road" we'll talk about the foundational processes needed in pursuing purposes. If you feel thwarted, one of these issues may be holding you back. In the last section, "Staying on Track" we'll look at the snafus encountered once you're pursuing your purposes in life. How can we focus on God-given purposes when everything around us would pull us away? In each phase of the journey, the thing that makes it interesting and not too scary is the rich and surprising interaction with God.

At the close of each chapter, I've included questions to help you ponder what this material means in your life. You may wish to use the questions at the end of each chapter for journaling or for exploring them with a friend. And you'll want to try each "Experiment in Listening Prayer," laying the specified questions before God as you walk or drive or wipe off the kitchen counter. I believe you'll be surprised at the answers that come to you in the silence and throughout the day. I've also included specific Bible passages that touch on the theme of each chapter. I hope you'll spend some time reflecting on these verses and considering what God might be saying to you through his Word regarding your purpose.

The Bible studies at the back of this book will help you delve even deeper into what God wants you to know about his purposes, and I hope you'll find insight and direction as you prayerfully work your way through his Word. In each phase of the journey of purpose, the thing that makes it interesting--and keeps it from being overwhelmingly scary--is the rich and surprising interaction with God.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER OR DISCUSS

Have you envied someone who seems to have a sense of purpose? If so, what exactly did you envy?

Who are some of the women you most admire? Why?

If you fit on the chart below, where do you fit?

(This chart is adapted from "The Three Stages of Vocational Awareness."⁸ The terms -- surviving, searching and being -- don't refer to how much money is made, but the attitude with which a job is done, whether it be mothering or running a corporation.)

Surviving
<p>Looks for money, status, approval or prestige</p> <p>Motivated by greed or workaholism</p> <p>Driven by fear, anxiety, inadequacy</p> <p>Swings from "I'll make it no matter what" to "What's to become of me?"</p>
Searching
<p>Wonders, Is this possible for me? Can I do it? Do I dare?</p> <p>Finds a fit between own interests and wants of others</p> <p>Enjoys self-improvement</p> <p>Engages in long-term strategic planning</p> <p>Feels "divine dissatisfaction," restless; mood swings; wants a road map now!</p>
Being
<p>Cares for the greater good</p> <p>Feels she was born to do this</p> <p>Experiences joy, creativity, courage in work</p> <p>Is confident</p> <p>Able to ask for what she wants</p>

EXPERIMENT IN LISTENING PRAYER

When you pray (or even when you ponder as you walk or drive or wipe off the kitchen counter), lay these "experiment in listening prayer" questions at the end of each chapter before God and see what comes to you there in the silence and throughout the day.

Ask God, What events or feelings prompt me to daydream about purpose or to itch with discontent?

BIBLE PASSAGE TO CONTEMPLATE

Spend some time reflecting on the verse(s) at the end of each chapter and consider what God might be saying to you through this verse regarding your purpose.

Sit quietly and reflect on 1 Timothy 4:12, 14. What words or phrases most speak to you?

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

As you ponder, complete these sentences:

Don't let anyone look down on you because _____.

Do not neglect your gift, which _____.

¹"Ain't Got No Satisfaction: Working Women" *Psychology Today*, July-August 1993, p.18, no author cited.

²according to Richard Hokenson, chief economist for Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette Securities in New York. Hokenson's original study was released in October 1993, and republished in U.S. Economic Outlook on March 4, 1994, and then featured by Barron's (the Dow Jones business and financial newspaper) on March 21, 1994.

³Leith Anderson, "Clocking Out: Women Are Choosing To Leave The Work Force In Increasing Numbers" *Christianity Today*, Sept 12, 1994, p. 30.

⁴Katherine T. Beddingfield, Dana Hawkins, Timothy Ito, Tracy Lenzy and Margaret Loftus. "20 Hot Job Tracks" *US News & World Report*, October 28, 1996, p. 92.

⁵press release from Amy Watson, Coach U., Profusion Communications, undated.

⁶Michael G. Wagner, "Did Politics Kill Farm-Worker Aid Bill? Elizabeth Dole Plan Thwarted By White House, Ex-Aides Say" *Sacramento Bee*, Sept. 24, 1992, p. A1.

⁷Frank Laubach, *Man of Prayer The Heritage Collection* (Syracuse, NY: Laubach Literacy International, 1990), p. 22.

⁸Marsha Sinetar *To Build the Life You Want, Create the Work You Love* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 14-15.