

What Are You Up To?

September 2, 2014

When people seek me out as a coach, they often bring questions that will not let them alone—questions that keep them up at night and interrupt their thoughts during the day. Questions like: “Can I live a fulfilled life?” “How can I create the work and life I want to have?”



When we begin the coaching process, I always ask them three of my own essential questions: “What are you UP TO?” “What gets you UP in the morning?” “What keeps you UP at night?” If these questions seem too taxing, I ask, “How are your days?” “Tell me about your days, what are they like?” Then I ask, “What kind of days would you like to have?” “What would you be doing or feeling as you move through the hours of your ideal day?”

Last week on a flight from Minneapolis to Washington, DC, I found myself sitting next to a seemingly pleasant man who introduced himself as the marketing director of a medical device company. We began with a polite exchange, sharing a few details about our shared city of Minneapolis and the reasons for our own visits to Washington. After a few minutes of conversation, I reached for my writing tablet, signaling that I wanted to write quietly. But instead of taking the hint, my seatmate launched into a monologue about his work life. I listened courteously for about five more minutes before I declined further conversation with my standard “I’ve got a publisher’s deadline” excuse.

As I got back to my writing, I realized that I’d asked him that essential first question, “What are you UP TO?” But I assumed that he would say a few things and then leave me alone. I clearly recall the urgency he seemed to have for someone, anyone, to just listen to his story.

That story came back to me last month as I boarded a flight for Kilimanjaro airport in Tanzania. I had had a very nice first leg of the journey from Minneapolis to Amsterdam, sitting next to an older gentleman who this time asked me what I was UP TO? He had noticed me focusing on writing. Several hours later as we walked together down the Schipol Airport Concourse E, I realized that I had become that person who bored strangers on planes with my story. I had talked non-stop for over an hour without the decency to even pause and ask him about his life.

It’s easy to be consumed by what we are UP TO in our lives and work. And it’s rare to have a “committed listener” who cares enough to hear our story. When we do get the opportunity, we go for it!

My work as a coach is centered in “committed listening.” But if you don’t have a coach and your partner or friends are really not interested in hearing your story, in whom do you confide? Where can you take those everyday anxieties and sleepless nights? Here are three thoughts:

1. Create a Life Map™. A Life Map helps you clarify your own story first. It documents what you want in the next year in these areas: purpose, vision, values and goals (work, personal, financial, relationships). It helps you identify to yourself, what’s essential to you to live a full life. It helps you create boundaries and maintain momentum. What’s on your map for this year?
2. Select a “sounding board.” Find a partner, colleague, mentor, or friend for a regular downloading session. Meet weekly and give each other the gift of 30 minutes of uninterrupted “sounding off.” This is a great pressure release valve for you. Who could be your “sounding board” partner?
3. Remind yourself that you are not what you do. I often use this axiom with my coaching clients: “If you are what you do, when you don’t you aren’t!” However much you love your work, (and I do!) it is a mistake to identify yourself exclusively with your work. Think about your personal definitions of purpose—“What is your definition of life success?”

Finally, recall that your life is made of days. You cannot shape a whole life. But you can, when you awake in the morning, live this one, sacred day. A colleague and friend of mine, Steve Newman, who has lived in Paris for over thirty years, once explained *l’art de vivre* (the art of living) to me. He said, “Enjoying small things on a daily basis—a brisk walk, a favorite café, lovely flowers, reading a book sitting in the park, the color of the sky, the song of a bird, the companionship of a colleague, an hour to yourself with a glass of wine—will help you with whatever you are ‘up to!’”

Great wisdom. Whatever you choose, however you decide to use your days, the shape of your days will ultimately become the shape of what you are UP TO.