

Stars, Steppingstones and a Hero's Journey: Finding a Calling in Business

Where Will You Invest Your Life's Treasure?

You want to make a difference in the world. You long to invest your time, talent and energy in something that matters. But how? And where?

Should you seek the power, fortune and fame that come from climbing the corporate ladder? Or would you rather start your own company and be "Master of your own destiny?" Perhaps you just want to make the world a better place, fighting poverty and injustice and helping the less fortunate.

How do you decide where to dedicate your life? What do you really want? What should you do next? Questions like this often make you feel lost. Overwhelmed.

We all come to this place sooner or later. Most of us several times. Either at a major transition in life or when we are just burned out by everyday struggles. Whether it's your first job after college, a mid-career job change or that empty sensation that follows the sale of your first successful business, the feeling remains the same.

In the words of Dr Seuss¹:

*You have brains in your head;
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
Any direction you choose.
You are on your own. And you know what you know.
And you are the guy who'll decide where to go.*

Except that you don't know where to go next. And that is a terrible feeling.

So what's holding you back? Why can't you hear a calling that speaks to your heart? Are you waiting for the perfect job? Frightened of making the wrong choice? Worried about what your parents or friends will think if you fail? Does nothing seem to excite you?

There is great wisdom in Dr. Seuss. *The Places You'll Go* speaks to a Hero's Journey; *Green Eggs and Ham* about the power of perseverance; *Thidwick the Moose* spells out of the dangers of collectivism; and *Yertle the Turtle* warns of the inevitable consequences of pride and hubris.

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This note is designed to help. By helping you find a “Star,” a vision of who you can become and what you can accomplish. By describing “Steppingstones,” concrete steps or actions that can move you closer to your Star. By making you aware of the power of a Hero’s Journey.

Above all, by leading you to seek a “calling,” a special mission that uses your finest gifts and deepest desires to help you make a profound difference in the world.

A Fool’s Errand or a Hero’s Journey?

You have a choice to make. To follow the path of so many talented and ambitious people, pursuing power and riches until you become so wrapped up in your own needs and fears that nothing else matters. Or to choose the more difficult path of a Hero’s Journey, resolving to refine your best gifts and to struggle against incredible odds, in service of something bigger than yourself. By the end of the journey, finding yourself forever changed and fulfilled.

Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.

Henry David Thoreau

So why do so many people live lives of “quiet desperation?” Why are we drawn to the Sirens of money, power and fame rather than listening to our own hearts? Perhaps because most ask: “*Which job will make me happy?*” It’s the wrong question in almost every way.

As a business school professor at a large state university, I was often approached by the best and brightest students and asked: “I have an offer from an investment bank for \$100,000 a year and one from a consulting firm for \$90,000 a year. Which should I take?”

I almost always responded by asking: “What is important to you? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? What do you want to have accomplished by the time you are seventy?”

All too often, the response was: “I don’t know. I just want to take the best offer.”

J. Zink, a noted psychologist who has dedicated his life to helping parents raise happier children, tells a similar story:

There was a man who spent many years studying the foremost issues of his time. One day, one of his teachers turned to him and said, “What are you going to do with your life?” The man was stunned for he loved this teacher and admired him. He had never felt such pressure from his teacher before. Stammering, this man replied, “I don’t know. Finish my studies and get a good job, I suppose.”

“Get a good job,” his teacher repeated. “This is a phrase I have often heard. It is the single worst choice of your generation. Happiness is unlikely to come to the mind whose goal is to ‘get a good job.’”

“Son,” this wise teacher asked, “Would you be interested in some specific advice from an old man who wished he had your youth and energy?”

“Of course, Doctor.”

“Look around you. Take a fresh, hard, and uncompromising look at life as you see it. Ask this question, ‘What needs to be done?’ When you have an answer, and it may take some time to get it, then go and do what needs to be done. Do it better than anyone else does it and the world will beat down your door for your help. Then you will not need ‘a good job’; and you will have more than a career. You will have a mission.”

The teacher was the famous inventor R. Buckminster Fuller. The student was J. Zink. Fools follow a common path, desperately seeking money and power, so wrapped up in petty personal problems that they miss the richness of life. Those who choose a Hero’s Journey look for a calling that is worthy of their talents, under no illusion about the struggles that lie ahead, but confident that the right investments of time, talent and energy will lead to a much more fulfilling life.

Making Small Investments in the Journey of a Lifetime

There are three ways to start on your personal Hero’s Journey. First, to imagine your Star, a vision of what you want to accomplish and who you want to become by the end of your life. Second, to invest in Steppingstones, intentional commitments of time, energy and attention that will open your world to new challenges and opportunities. And finally, to practice setting aside your self centered concerns, so you can open your life to much more exciting possibilities.

Choosing Your Star

Before you start out on a long journey, you should have some idea what lies at the end of the quest. A “Star” is a vision of who you can become and what you can accomplish. It is a vision of what “could be” that holds you to a higher standard.

One way to find a star is to “begin with the end in mind.” Close your eyes. Imagine dinner in honor of your 80th Birthday. The moment comes for speeches in honor of your life. What will others say about you? Will they talk about your accomplishments? Your family? How you treated others?

Another way to find your Star is to seek advice from role models, people you respect who are farther along on the journey. Choose ten people you respect to interview. Pick

“personal heroes,” parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, a priest or rabbi or someone successful who hasn’t lost their family, friends or soul in the process. Listen. Ask. Learn. See if their tales of fighting dragons and giants, real and imagined, internal and external, can help prepare you for the journey ahead.

A final way to discover your star is to read great works of literature. The classics hold the truth about the human condition, told by wise people who have walked before you. Devour the biographies of great men and women. Where were the turning points in their lives? What challenges did they face? How did they handle adversity? Absorb the lessons of the great philosophers and struggle with the most fundamental questions of life to help you find your way.

Setting Your First Steppingstones

A Star reminds you of who you can become and what you can accomplish. Steppingstones are conscious investments of time and energy to move you forward on your Hero’s Journey; milestones that allows you to celebrate your progress or make midcourse corrections.

There are two approaches to setting Steppingstones. The first is to begin with the end in mind and work backwards, decade by decade, visualizing at each stage where you need to be to reach the next milestone, until you have a provisional life plan. The second approach is to reverse direction, starting with the here and now, investing in disciplines, roles and goals that will open new opportunities for your life to unfold.

The wise person experiments with both approaches, in the end coming up with a series of well thought out investments *and* a way to measure progress along the way.

Beginning with the End in Mind

Does the Star you imagined capture who you want to become and what you want to accomplish? If so, begin working backwards, decade by decade, examining the investments in skills, relationships and knowledge you need at each stage to reach the next set of goals.

To reach your lifelong vision at eighty years of age, where must you be by age fifty? Close your eyes and imagine. What does your family look like? How many children? What ages? What colleges will they attend? What does your house look like? Where is it? What kinds of cars do you and your family drive? Where are you in your career? Are you nearing the top of a large company, have you started your own business or do you have a different kind of job? What is your position in the community? What social or charitable organizations do you belong to? How much time do they require?

How do you spend your day? Be specific. How many hours do you work each week? How much time do you spend in other areas of your life? How does the time

spent move you toward your vision by seventy? Are you healthy? What will it feel like to be fifty? How much energy will you have?

How much money does it take to support your lifestyle? Total the annual income (don't forget taxes) that it will take to support the lifestyle you have envisioned. Include house payments, car payments, tuition, clothes, vacations and anything else that comes to mind. Have you picked a career that provides enough income to service your lifestyle? Do you have enough savings to survive temporary setbacks? If your job provides sufficient income, does it allow you enough time for the other areas in your life?

Now back up from age fifty to age thirty. Ask the same questions. Where must you be at thirty to attain your vision at fifty? When must you start a family for your vision at fifty to be correct? What skills, knowledge or personal contacts must you develop for your career? Where should you live? What lifestyle can you afford given the trade-offs between developing skills for the future and saving cash for future needs? What mental, social, family and career foundations must be put in place now to build on for the future?

Given your vision, the priorities you have outlined and the steppingstones you have set, what concrete actions can you take today to reach your first steppingstone? How will your next job provide the foundation for the next leap? How will it affect the other priorities in your life? Where are the difficult tradeoffs you must make? If there are none, you haven't been realistic.

Reversing Direction: Investing in Steppingstone Today

Now begin to work from the present towards your Star. What investments of time and attention will move you in the right direction?

Do you have special talents, in an area that brings you joy; that will allow you to master a certain discipline, particularly one that will serve others? People are attracted to excellence. So are great opportunities. No one is interested in an average golfer; everyone wants to meet Tiger Woods. No one is interested in an average meal; people will drive all day for dinner at a five star restaurant.

Mastering a discipline, doing something you enjoy that helps others, is not only life giving, but provides a deep sense of material security. Even in the face of setbacks, mastery of a discipline will keep food on your family's table.²

² For example, even if a business you started failed, if you were an expert in the discipline of selling, you could always get a job as a salesman to feed your family as you searched for another opportunity. It is likely through the practice and further perfection of this discipline that you will find another opportunity that speaks to you.

Your best gifts and deepest desires can lead you to the right discipline. So can the experience of “flow,” the sense of having time stand still when you are absorbed in a task you love. Below are questions that you can ask to discover a discipline worthy of your talents, time and devotion.

1. *What gifts have you been given?*

We each have special God given gifts. What are yours? What do you do better than anyone else you know? Surprisingly, these are difficult questions for most people to answer. So don't try. Instead, ask ten people who know you the best: “What do I do better than anyone I know?”

2. *What brings you great joy?*

What do you really want out of life? What activities bring you great joy? Most of us want to do something important, so we are pleased by doing something well. This is why it is important to discover your gifts first. What would you practice just for the sake of practice alone, even if you knew you would never compete? When do you feel the most alive? (It is important that the activity brings you joy, rather than something that pleases your parents or impresses your friends.)

3. *When Have I Experienced Flow?*

How will you know when you've found the right discipline? Look for “flow.” Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes “flow” as the feeling that comes when “your mind or body is stretched to the limit in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” Flow is when you are so wrapped up in an activity that you lose all sense of time.

To begin your search, focus on past flow experiences and signature strengths. Begin to notice how you feel at different times. When does flow occur? How would you describe your past flow experiences? What do they have in common? What do you do better than anyone else? (see www.authentic happiness.org for a test of signature strengths.) Be forewarned, mastering a discipline requires more than raw talent; it usually takes ten years or longer of serious focus.

Setting Aside Self Centered Concerns

Choosing your Star and setting Steppingstones are only the first steps towards being called to a Hero's Journey. You also must learn to look beyond yourself and set aside self centered concerns. Self interest is healthy. Self centeredness is limiting. Self delusion is destructive. It is difficult to hear a calling if your own voice is constantly grumbling inside your head.

Discerning between Happiness and Fulfillment

The first step to finding a life that is bigger than yourself is to understand the difference between happiness and fulfillment. You want to be happy. Winning a race, buying a new car, or sitting by a lake on a warm spring day are pleasures that should be enjoyed, but happiness is a momentary pleasure. Sensual pleasures fade when repeated too often and chasing happiness for its own sake tends to destroy it.

Fulfillment is something entirely different. It asks how well you've done with the gifts you were given? Did you seize opportunities? Did you overcome some obstacles and bravely accept those that were insurmountable? Did you reach out often enough in love and charity? Did you have deep and meaningful relationships with your family? Were you surrounded by friends of all ages?

You cannot find a calling that is bigger than yourself without realizing that life is about much more than momentary pleasures, no matter how enjoyable they may be.

Replacing Resentment with Gratitude

Life is hard. You will face disappointments, setbacks and perhaps even tragedy. If you look hard enough, you always will find someone richer, smarter or better looking. Many of us have a bad habit of expecting a worry free life, constantly comparing ourselves to others who seem more fortunate. Over time, this can lead to a corrosive sense of resentment.

The antidote to resentment is gratitude. Try this experiment. Choose someone to whom you are grateful. Write them a letter expressing your gratitude. Then read it aloud to them, in person.

Studies have shown that this single act of simple gratitude can have a profound and long lasting impact on your satisfaction *and* fulfillment.

If you start focusing on the good things that have happened in your life, you will begin to expect that good things will happen again. Search for ways to give back and contribute to others. Serving and gratitude will become the raw materials for lasting relationships. By the end of your life, you will find that deep loving relationships were not only a key to success, but far more importantly, a major source of fulfillment.

Finding a Deep Burning Need

Seeking fulfillment and practicing gratitude will begin to shift your focus from your own wants and needs to a calling that can make a profound difference in the world. Where do you see a deep burning need in the world that calls out to you? What challenges can you not put out of your mind? What stories bring tears of joy or anger? Who can you help? How can you serve? Will the discipline you are mastering and the relationships you are building mean the difference between victory and defeat?

Find a deep burning need, where your gifts and deepest desires can make a profound difference in the world. This is where a calling starts. Pursue this calling with everything you have, and you are well on your way to the fulfillment that comes from a Hero's Journey and a life well lived.

Planning Life versus Living Life

Beginning with the end in mind and hearing a calling does not mean you can plan your life.

Your calling may seem faint at first; your Star may seem distant; your Steppingstones may be tentative.

Stars and Steppingstones are not meant to be a rigid plan, but a set of standards and strengths so you can make intentional choices in the face of the uncertainties of life. Even with all of the careful preparations and millions of calculations prior to an Apollo mission, NASA still had to make thousands of mid-course corrections on the way to the moon. Your life is much more complicated than a space mission.

The Star and Steppingstones you have chosen will act as a guide, but your life will be more like an exciting scavenger hunt than a well planned voyage. You must bravely step out, moving from steppingstone to steppingstone with faith. Stay on course when possible and backtrack as necessary. It's a journey that will only make sense once it is finished.

As long as you don't lose sight of your vision and values, you can make course corrections as you gain knowledge. You may get any number of signals that it's time for a course correction. A traumatic event in your life may shake your faith in your fundamental premises. This signals a need to reexamine your core values and beliefs. If you find yourself continually violating values at the core of your long-term vision, it is time to carefully compare your actions with your beliefs.

Occasionally, the lifelong goal itself will be called into question. A quest worth making will always raise questions, and you should constantly (and honestly) examine your Star. But you should part with a fundamental principle only after lengthy deliberation and self-examination. People who never form long-term visions and people who change them on a whim have this in common: they almost always drift towards despair.

It is a good idea to pause periodically and revisit both your Star and Steppingstones. Often the changes in your world are so gradual that they go unnoticed. If nothing else, the time spent in self-examination and exploration of the world around you will give you renewed purpose and vigor.

A Moral Compass and Ethical Guardrails

If one of your three big questions at the end of life will be "Was I a good person?," you will need a trusted moral compass and ethical guardrails for the journey to help choose between right and wrong.

All too often today, people reject the concepts of good and evil and vow to decide such issues "case by case." A relativist approach to morality is a slippery slope that, when

greased with hubris, ambition and greed, leads to ruin. It is littered with the rotting lives of politicians, priests and executives who strayed too far.

In your questioning of role models, ask how each person faced difficult moral dilemmas, and what they used for guidance. In your reading of great literature, explore and understand the different ethical frameworks people have used for ages as moral compasses, consistent views of right and wrong life; Utilitarian, Justice-Fairness, Virtue, and Judeo-Christian ethics. Choose an ethical framework of your own, use it to draw crisp lines in the sand between right and wrong so you will act in a morally consistent manner.

You also can set “ethical guardrails” to warn you when you are close to the edge. Like concrete guardrails on a highway, they warn of danger if you approach a curve going too fast. I like to think of these guardrails as “I would never” lines. If circumstance, carelessness or pressure forces you to cross an “I would never” line, and do something that violates your principles and values, you must slow down and disengage from the world. You must take time for reflection and healing so you can repair the damage and reconsider what matters most.

False Starts, Dead Ends and Detours

As with all journeys, you may encounter false starts, dead ends and detours. Better to be warned about these before you start, so you can recognize them.

Expecting Life to be Easy

Life is difficult. Too many people believe that finding a calling means that daily annoyances disappear. That somehow life becomes easy. This is a Utopian fantasy.

A calling doesn't make life any less difficult. In fact, the contrary is often true. Heroes' lives *are* difficult. Heroes fight dragons and giants and on occasion are seriously wounded in battle.

Callings do not make life any easier, but they do make the battles worth fighting. Practice that is drudgery to some, is mastering a discipline to someone with the right talents. Hard work becomes the price you pay for the satisfaction of a job well done, and someone well served.

Wanting it All

Others “want it all,” so they see having to make choices as an infringement on their personal freedom. This is another symptom of chasing heaven on earth. We all are given 24 hours a day and maybe sixty or seventy good years. We each have a few special talents. There is not enough time to do everything and each of us has the capacity to do only a few things very well. It is by focusing on a few needs that cry out to be filled, and practicing a discipline until we are prepared to serve, that we can serve well.

Finding your Star isn't about limiting yourself, it's about setting priorities so you have the power to get things done. It's about deciding what matters most so you make sure you don't miss the chance to make it happen. It's about how you're going to spend your last dollar or your best burst of energy. In fact, you're likely to accomplish *more*, if you're focused on your priorities.

“Beginning with the end in mind” means acknowledging constraints and conflicting objectives upfront and making thoughtful choices. If you don't make choices intentionally and at the beginning of your journey, circumstances will sort things out along the way.

Unreal Dreams

Once you have an idea of what is important in your life, have visualized your life at eighty years old and have designed a path with steppingstones; take time for a reality check. Does this plan make sense? Does the timing work? Is it within the realm of possibility – or is it pure fantasy?

Internal consistency is crucial. Your main goals must add up. If you aspire to be a devoted parent, a committed volunteer in your community and to consult with companies around the world; you have a problem. You can't be in two places at once. If you travel internationally, you're unlikely to find time at home for your children *and* your community. Check the consistency of your vision and adjust accordingly.

Another reality check involves comparing your capabilities with what's required to achieve specific goals in the real world. Visions are not fantasy. They are aspirations – realities you hope to create. If you are five feet tall, slow and have no vertical leap, you will not (short of supernatural intervention) become an NBA superstar. Dream big, but don't waste your energy on delusions. You can envision many rich and rewarding futures that lie within your reach.

Have you planned realistically for the passage of time? Is time pressure leading you to imagine unrealistic gaps between your steppingstones? If you want to have children by age thirty and consider it necessary to be at home during their early years, is this forcing you to set unrealistic career goals? Launching an entrepreneurial career immediately after school is a risky move for most. If you are doing it so you can retire by thirty and raise a family, consider carefully the odds of success and the consequences of failure. Unless you account for time realistically, you risk accomplishing nothing.

Letting Someone Else Choose Your Star

Some people care more about the “star” their parents picked for them or a prestigious job that will impress their friends. The applause of relatives and friends will fade quickly and so will your interest in a mission that isn't yours.

Some Final Words

You do not want to wake up at 55 or 60 realizing that you have wasted your life – either that time has slipped past while your dreams waited, or that you never had any dreams at all.

The great constraint on human life is time: we are never given enough. Age 55 or 60 usually is too late to start over. There are not enough hours in the day, or days in the year. Stars and Steppingstones may draw you away from the comfort of the crowd, bring you face-to-face with your fears and limitations, and incite you to bet everything on the one dream that counts. It will also spare you the ultimate horror of a meaningless life.

You cannot start on a journey without taking a first step. Take that step today. Resolve that by the end of the day you will set goals for the next week and next month. And tomorrow start keeping those promises to yourself. Make your goals the smaller Steppingstones to the larger Steppingstones of disciplines and roles.

Set time aside to write your eulogy or retirement speech. Take time to write down your vision for your life as you back up decade by decade to the present.

Choose the first five role models you will interview. Choose five great books you will read in the next month. Decide to test yourself to discover your best gifts. Find your discipline; practice hard and master it. Write down your goals. Post them somewhere you can see them. Refer back to them. Either get started on your journey, or admit to yourself that you are not yet willing to pay the price.

Above all, Stars, Steppingstones and callings are about making choices in a free society. Choosing a Hero's Journey so you can change the world in a profound way.

A Star will help you set high standards for the journey, beginning with the end in mind. Steppingstones will encourage you to intentionally invest your time, energy and talent, one step at a time, so that you move forward on a calling that focuses on a worthy mission.

Few in history have enjoyed the luxury of being able to choose. It is a luxury, like your life and your gifts, that is too precious to be squandered for lack of imagination, initiative or courage.

Good luck on your mission – may it bring you all the happiness that I have found in mine.