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What Is Your Quest?

by Gregg Vanourek

What is your quest?

Where are you going? And why? What quest are you on in your life and work?

In days long gone, there were many quests. For Power. Glory. Fame. Riches. New Lands. Discoveries. For Love. Wisdom. Truth. Beauty.

Nowadays, our quests have changed, but we still have them. Quests: For Success. Recognition. Wealth. Big houses. Happiness. Travel.

Maybe we're on more than one quest. The poet Walt Whitman wrote, "*I am large. I contain multitudes.*"

My father had a quest when he graduated from business school: "*I want to run something.*" His quest, as he will tell you, started with an ego trip that took years to overcome.

As for me, I was on a quest for validation. I felt the glare of expectations. I didn't want to let people down. I didn't want to fall short. In truth, I didn't know what I wanted. But I knew what I wanted to *avoid*: a hit to my ego. I was afraid.

And so it was with Warren, a handsome and tall young man with dreadlocks working as a lawyer in a prestigious government agency, with a good salary, proud parents, and admiring friends. One day, he found himself at a Tibetan Freedom Festival listening to a song by Radiohead, and three questions popped into his head out of the blue:

*Are you there?
Are you you?
Are you ready?*

His answers were *Yes, No, and Yes*. Thus, began Warren's new quest.

And so it was with Kimberly, a small-town girl with sandy blonde hair and a friendly smile who moved to the big city and found herself working as a paralegal. She was successful by all traditional accounts, but she was also working long hours, tired, lonely, and uninspired. When she returned from a two-day yoga retreat and reflected on her current path, she realized something surprising: *"This is not me. My life is killing my soul."*

And so it was with Gerald, a healthy and athletic son of immigrants raised in an industrial town in Massachusetts. He was an enterprising young professional who had worked in finance and then went on to help build one of England's fastest-growing startups at a punishing pace for years. Then one day:

"I looked over the side of my desk in London. It was 2 a.m. and I couldn't see the ground. It was just black. I couldn't even see the rug below me. It was like looking into the abyss. Right there, I realized that I wasn't doing what I needed to do with my life. Then I went home and gave myself grades as a father, husband, friend, community member, and business person, and I only got one A—and the A was as a business person. I said that's the last time in my life I'm going to look in the mirror and give myself those grades, period."

Thankfully, we have the freedom to change course when our quest no longer serves us well. But that just begs the question: Change to what?

Meanwhile, the justifications keeping us on toxic tracks are strong:

*I'm paying my dues.
I'm doing it for my family, my partner, the children.
My work colleagues need me. I can't say no.
What am I supposed to do?*

And so we lose ourselves—and our relationships, and our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health—in work. Chasing something.

I know, because I've done it. (I still do it.)

What about success?

Isn't all this just the price we must pay on our quest for success? Not so fast.

"Failure's hard, but success is far more dangerous. If you're successful at the wrong thing, the mix of praise and money and opportunity can lock you in forever."

-Po Bronson

Bronson was on to something here. Success can be like a prison built by our own ego. After a while, like the graying inmate “Red” in Stephen King’s novella, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, we get strangely comfortable there. We rely on its rock walls to keep our ego comfortably ensconced in a place where it can satiate its need for validation.

Our quest may be turn out to be a trap. At some point, we may outgrow the successes we have chased or achieved. So what then?

That’s where a call comes in.

*Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life.*
-William Stafford, “Ask Me”

Reflecting on these lines from this poem, Parker Palmer says the poet’s words may seem strange to some: *Of course what I have done is my life*. But stop and think: Is what you have done your life, or someone else’s? Palmer recalls an old Quaker saying from George Fox:

“Let your life speak.”

Palmer, using this saying as the title of his book, goes on to say what it has come to mean for him:

“Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.”

Instead of “letting out lives speak,” many of us these days are frequently, but unknowingly, comparing ourselves to others, often on superficial metrics (for example, status, title, income, house, car, looks). Father Robert Spitzer calls it the “comparative ethic.”

“Comparison is the thief of joy.”
-Theodore Roosevelt

Even worse, we are burning ourselves out on this comparative treadmill. Some have called burnout an epidemic in the modern workplace. According to ComPsych’s survey of 1,880

U.S. workers in 2012, 63 percent say they have high levels of stress at work, with extreme fatigue and feeling out of control.

*How many of us are productive but miserable?
Aren't we tired of being tired?*

Of course, there is no simple fix. I believe the antidote is a combination of things: purpose, values, soufulness. But none of that comes without renewal:

“In life itself, there is a time to seek inner peace, a time to rid oneself of tension and anxiety. The moment comes when the striving must let up, when wisdom says, ‘Be quiet.’ You’ll be surprised how the world keeps on revolving without your pushing it. And you’ll be surprised how much stronger you are the next time you decide to push.”
-John W. Gardner

My father taught me about the importance of having “sanctuary” in your life—a place of refuge or practice of peace, whether through meditation, yoga, prayer, music, exercise, or whatever else rejuvenates your spirit. Too many people think they are invincible and wear themselves out, losing themselves on a phantom quest destined to disappoint.

Calling the Questions

What is your quest? Does it still serve you? Does it fill you up or drain you?

Are you there? Are you you? Are you ready?

Is it time to surrender the willful quest of ego and listen for the deeper calling of your soul?

*Do you hear a call?
Are you answering it?*

This is an edited version of a talk Gregg Vanourek gave at the Barrett Values Centre CTT Conference in June 2014 outside Stockholm, Sweden. This talk draws upon two books that Gregg co-authored, Life Entrepreneurs and Triple Crown Leadership, and is also inspired by Richard Barrett’s book, What My Soul Told Me.

