Biography Work: Living with Questions

Anyone who wants to examine their life can easily go adrift. It is necessary to find a point of orientation, a beacon to determine the course you must steer. The question of what matters to you with regard to your work and your life is such a beacon.

**Step 1. Consider the following:**

1. Reflect quietly on these questions:
   - What are the thoughts and feelings I have regarding the needs of the world and my calling in life? What matters to me?
   - What led me into this inquiry (to this website, book)? What struck me when I heard about it or came across it?
   - Why do I want to start working on these issues? What results do I expect? What are my aims?

2. Now simplify your response—the thoughts and feelings you have about the above questions—into one single sentence: the question about your work and your life which you want to clarify in the near future. In your formulation, keep the following criteria:
   - one short sentence
   - containing the word “I”
   - ending with a question mark
   - aimed at what you want in the future

3. Now find an anchor for your question: relate it to experiences in the past and specific visions of the future.
   - Think of one or more specific situations in the past in which your question played a part. Try to remember what actually happened, where it took place, and which people were involved.
   - Then try to imagine your situation in the future as it will be if you do not take any active steps and do not work on your question. Where will you be then? What will happen there and who will you be involved with?

**Step 2. Write down your question.**

The questions are different for everyone. Examples include:
• Do I want to stay in my current situation for the rest of my life?
• How can I make a conscious choice about my work and my life?
• What must I learn to influence this situation to get what I want?
• How can I stay healthy in the work that I do?
• How can I relax and leave work to others (delegate) even though it is so important to me?
• Am I going to continue to specialize, or am I going to find a broader field of work?
• How can I make the content of my work meaningful for the new few years until I retire?
• What should I do now that my job is under threat of downsizing?
• What is needed and wanted in the world that I am uniquely qualified to do?
• How can I serve, or make a difference socially or environmentally, through my work?

Step 3. Invoke memories and a vision of the future.

The memories we will call up concern situations in which you were actively involved not so long ago. Although your memory may evoke feelings and emotions, it is not a matter of reliving whatever you liked or disliked. Focus on the factual aspects of the situation or event as though you are looking at them as an outsider. Try to see the situation before you as if it were a film, and concentrate on:

- The time: when and what time, what happened first and what happened next, and how long it took;
- The place: where, indoors or outdoors, colors and smells, light and dark, plants and objects, materials, people and their appearance, movements, and gestures;
- The interaction: speaking and listening, question and answer, remarks and responses, verbal and non-verbal behavior, your own thoughts, feelings, and inclinations.

Visions involve the future. Use your imagination to create a specific vision of the situation in the future. Do this in a factual sense as you did for memories, i.e., look at the time, the place, and the interaction. Do not say, “I can’t do that.” Follow your spontaneous impulses and trust your imagination. The ideas that you come up with may never become reality, but by creating a picture of your future you will come closer to the essence of your question.

Share your question and your memories and visions with one or more other people. Ask them to listen without comment. When you are finished, ask them to indicate what struck them about the situations being described. Finally, ask them what they feel to be your question. It may be that after this discussion you will be able to formulate your question more accurately or more concisely. If so, restate your question.

Adapted from, Workways: How to Build an Enterprising Life, Kees Locher and Jos van der Brug, Hawthorn Press, 1997, Stroud, UK