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If you were designing a custom home, your dream house, the house that you have always wanted, where how would you begin? Chances are that you would begin by contacting an architect who would help you put your ideas, your vision, on paper. The architect would ask you, "What kind of house did you have in mind? What did you envision?" The process would begin with an idea of what you wanted. You would literally see the house in your mind, whether it was a house openly connected to the outdoors or a formal house in which you felt secure. You would have some idea of how the rooms would be connected to each other and the areas of the house that you would use for entertainment, for sleeping, for eating, and so on. In short, you would have a concept of what you wanted the house to represent. From the preliminary conversations with the architect, to the sketches, to actual blueprints that would be sent out for bids by a contractor, you would see your ideas develop into a concrete plan. And this plan would guide the contractor to build your dream house. You would not be surprised if it took months to develop this plan or even years, depending upon the degree of complexity and the details that were to be included in the house. The more details, the less likely there will be problems along the way.

You would engage in a similar process if you were designing a business. You would have to develop a well thought out business plan. You would begin with a vision. You would have an idea for the business you wanted to build and you would develop a plan for how you intended to develop this business. You would want to translate your vision into action. Each aspect of the business would have to be thought out in advance. You would want to know how much capital you would need, how many employees, what size facility, the cost of products, supplies, and personnel. You would have to figure how to market your business, where to advertise, and how to promote the business in general. You would figure out mark-ups, profit margins, projected sales, etc. Your business plan might take months or even years to develop. The better your business plan, the more likely you will be to succeed. And the plan must be in writing. No one would hire an architect or contractor to build a house who said, "I have the plans in my head." No bank would loan money to an entrepreneur who said, "I have my business plan in my head."

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is based in part on a chapter from Dr. Dreyfus' book, KEEPING YOUR SANITY (IN AN INSANE WORLD), Xlibris, 2003 which can be downloaded at his website [www.docdreyfus.com](http://www.docdreyfus.com).

Yet, when it comes to building our lives, rarely do we hear people say that they have a “life plan.” Most people spend little or no time developing a plan for their life. Fewer even consider writing a life plan. Most people’s lives look like they have been developed without having a plan. People’s lives look like they have been thrown together haphazardly in the hopes that they would work. People have lives that don’t have architectural integrity; they don’t hang together as a whole. Parts of their lives work, while other parts are falling apart. Much like a house that’s built without a plan, the living room may work, but the kitchen doesn’t seem to fit with the rest of the house. The rooms seem off, skewed, as if they were simply banged together like so many boxes.

Imagine what your life might look like if you actually designed it in the same manner as you would design your dream house.<sup>1</sup> Imagine if your life had the same attention to detail, the same integrity, and the same sense of craftsmanship as that custom built house you would love to own and live in. Imagine how you would feel living that life, as you would feel living in your dream house.

The question is, “Are you willing to put in the time and effort to design, plan, and construct your dream life?” Henry David Thoreau declared that most people live lives of quiet desperation. There is no doubt that the folks to whom Thoreau was referring did not design their lives. The truth is that most of us simply fall into our lives. It sort of develops around us as we are pursuing our careers, motherhood, or merely trying to make ends meet. We tend to operate in the world like a horse with blinders on. We pursue our careers with focus and dedication trying to get ahead, but we seldom look around us to see what affect our single-mindedness is having on the rest of our life. We decide to become parents almost as an end in itself, with little concern for what it will mean to the rest of our life or where it will take us in the future, or how children will fit into our life. Rather, we build our life around the children, with no thought to what will happen when they leave. For the most part we think only of the immediate and short-term, seldom looking down the road to see where our choices may lead us in the long term.

The closest many people ever come to having a life plan is, “I want to have a good job, a lovely/handsome wife/husband, nice house in the suburbs, a couple of children, and a two cars.” Not much of a plan. It would be like telling one’s architect, “I want a nice house with four bedrooms, a big yard, and a two-car garage.” Without a clear, well-defined, well-articulated, detailed plan, we run the risk of living a life that is bland or, at worst, unsatisfying. We use more imagination in preparing for an important dinner party or event than we do in planning our life.

We often admire other people’s lives, homes, careers, events, etc. and think that we could not have anything that even resembled theirs. The only reason those “others” seem to have what we want is because they took the time to plan for it. They put in the energy to be creative. Regardless of how much money they had, they designed their situation with maximum attention to detail. One does not have to

have the best that money can buy. However, one can have the best that one's personal circumstances permit. It takes desire, time, commitment, energy, creativity, discipline and the motivation to make one's dreams come true. As Napoleon Hill proclaimed, "conceive it, believe it, achieve it!"

I operate from the assumption that a life based on a well thought out, detailed, and integrated plan will be more gratifying and fulfilling than one that is not. I further believe that having such a plan, in writing, and following it, while at the same making adjustments as needed, will be more rewarding and more balanced. If all of the parts of your life are integrated into a whole, you will experience an extraordinary sense of power. You will be able to reach a higher level of mastery over your world and realize more of your human potential. Clearly some plans are better than others. A poor plan may be no better than no plan and in some cases may be worse. The quality of the plan matters in business, in houses, and in lives.

### RE-MODELING vs. BUILDING NEW

When we think about designing a home, we often have to confront the issue of whether we should re-model our current residence, buy another home, or build a new home. When it comes to our lives, however, few of us have the choice of whether to create a totally new life or re-model the life we have. We certainly cannot go out and buy another life...a life that someone else has already lived! Most of us cannot simply discard the life we have and start anew; we are already living a life. We cannot say, "Stop the world; I want to get off!" so I can build a new life for myself. Therefore, we have to resort to re-modeling the life we have.

Once we decide to re-model we should do a thorough inspection and evaluation as a beginning step in the process. This inspection will help determine the vision and the plan for what we want to accomplish. The inspection includes an evaluation of the infra-structure and foundation. Similarly, in re-structuring a life we must examine our own foundation. We must examine our personality, our history, our beliefs, our values, our aspirations, our hopes, and so on. This personal inventory will significantly influence the life we construct. Sometimes it is necessary to do some serious soul-searching; sometimes it may require that we call in a consultant to help us correct some psychological issues that affect our functioning. The point is, we cannot re-model our lives on a shaky foundation any more than we could re-model a home on a shaky foundation.

Once the foundation is supported, shored, or repaired, we can decide on what type of structure it can support. Just as we cannot build a two-story house on every foundation, we may not be able to construct an elaborate life on a foundation that cannot sustain it. Whether a life or a home, we must be realistic!

When re-modeling, we must have a plan in mind and it must be put in writing. Writing out the plan keeps us focused. It keeps us on track. We can make notes as we go along, correcting and modifying as needed. In architectural terms, these are called field changes, i.e., changes made in the field to take into account

new information. Hence, flexibility is necessary. Similarly in life there are many contingencies that must be taken into account that were not predicted at the outset.

#### FAIL TO PLAN = PLAN TO FAIL

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” This adage ordinarily applies to business, projects, and other activities that require planning. But it is also true for how we live our lives. As I have suggested previously, we plan for many things in our life, parties, vacations, home construction, weddings, and so on. But we don’t plan our lives. We just live them. I suggested that we would not consider building a house without a well thought out plan, indicating all of the steps necessary for the desired outcome. When it comes to housing, businesses, vacations or even weddings, we know what we want the outcome to look like. We have a vision and we develop a plan for achieving that vision. Yet, most of us do not have either a vision or a plan for our lives. And then we wonder why our lives seldom evolve in the way in which we had hoped. Our lives resemble a house that was built without a plan.

I recall when my children were just kids and they wanted to plant a vegetable garden in our backyard. I thought it would be a great idea for us as a family - a joint venture. I asked them what kinds of vegetables they wanted to plant and suggested that we sit down and plan out the limited space we had for the vegetable they wished to plant.

Well, as you might well imagine, they did not want to take the time to plan the garden. They wanted to just go out to buy the plants and get them into the ground. Not wanting a battle on my hands, I agreed. We went out and bought the plants: zucchini, watermelon, string beans, tomatoes, radishes and carrots. The plants were very tiny in their individual containers. The kids wanted six of each. We brought them home, cultivated the soil, and planted them trying to give them as much space as the small plot of land would allow. My children had a great time planting. Now they had to wait for the plants grow. They were ready to harvest. And the plants did grow.

Over the next several weeks of summer, they grew and grew and grew. The zucchini and the watermelon grew huge; the string beans snaked throughout the garden, as did the tomatoes. The carrots and radishes didn’t stand a chance. The other larger and more aggressive vegetables soon crowded them out. What started out as cute little plants all lined up in their freshly cultivated and fertilized rows, ended up as a jungle, with each vegetable tangling with the others, fighting for the available nutrients. It was a big mess. Eventually, only the zucchini survived.

My children learned a valuable lesson, the value of planning. What looks cute and workable in the beginning may turn out to be quite a ways off the mark when fully executed. When planning one must

think long-term. Slightly off at the beginning, can lead to being way off months or years later. Just think of the trajectory of a bullet, slightly off as look down the sight will be way off as it approaches its mark.

#### A LIFE VISION

So now that we understand the concept, how do we begin designing our life? As with any other design, a designing a life begins with a vision. If we are going to have a vision, the vision should be complete. It should cover all areas of your life, as you would like to live it. Your vision should be vivid, crisp, so much so that when you visualize yourself in your life you can almost feel it as though it were real.

There is no sense visualizing a sloppy life. If you were visualizing yourself playing golf, you wouldn't visualize bad shots. You would visualize yourself playing the perfect game. Every shot would be solid and true. Similarly, when you visualize your life it should be solid and true. In order to visualize your life, you must know what goes into a well-balanced life.

#### A WELL-BALANCED LIFE

Most researchers agree that are eight areas that make for a balanced life. The data is derived from explorations of high achieving individuals, studies in self-actualization, and research into what makes for highly effective individuals. These areas are:

- Personal growth
- Spirituality
- Recreation
- Health and fitness
- Community involvement
- Career
- Family and social life
- Financial security

*Personal growth* refers to activities that are geared toward developing the individual as a person. It is a combination of psychological, intellectual, and emotional development. Activities such as personal exploration through psychotherapy, self-reflection, educational activities, self-help groups, etc. would be included in this sector.

*Spirituality* includes, but is not limited to, religion. In fact, religious beliefs may or may not be included. Spirituality refers to activities that enhance one's experience of being part of something that his larger than oneself. It is a heightened state of consciousness that can be achieved through meditation, prayer, experiencing nature, pondering the imponderable questions as to the meaning of life, increasing one's

understanding of the nature of the universe and even through metaphysics. Spirituality is the indefinable experience that often occurs when we view a sunset or majestic mountain, or when we connect with another human being. It is sense of renewal that comes from inside, from what might be called, our soul. Recent reports have indicated that there is a positive correlation between spirituality and recovery from illness, rapidity of healing, and longevity. Spirituality can be an attitude that one brings to an event. For example, many surfers and hikers have said that they have a spiritual experience when on the waves or in the hills, communing with nature and experiencing the vastness of the universe.

*Recreational* activities are those in which we participate on a regular basis, but not necessarily daily or weekly. These activities could be sports or hobbies that enhance our sense of well being, give us respite from the everyday activities, and a chance to renew ourselves in a relaxed way without pressure. The activities may be physical and outdoors or sedentary and indoors. Such activities as golf, photography, collecting, climbing, hiking, biking, and sailing all fall into the recreational category. To be recreational, the activity would have to be regularly enjoyed rather than only once in a while.

*Health and fitness* concerns itself with how we eat, how we take care of our body and mind, and how we exercise. Food is the fuel that runs the machine that creates the life we want. People often take better care of their cars than they do of themselves. They would not think of putting cheap gas and oil in their Porsche Carrera, but they eat fast foods with high fat content. Exercise is an important component of a balanced life. Exercise stimulates the heart, brain, muscles, and lungs. All of these are essential for a balanced life. It is difficult to achieve harmony and balance when one is feeling poorly. There is abundant evidence indicating the positive affects of diet and exercise on emotional and physical well-being.

*Community involvement* is positively correlated with happiness and even with physical health. People who participate in some form of community activity, such as volunteering with nonprofit agencies, being active on a city council, becoming involved in a political campaign, or other political or community involvement, live happier, fuller, more rewarding lives with fewer illnesses.

*Career* satisfaction plays an important part in one's overall feeling about oneself. We identify with our work and our profession. When we enjoy what we do for a living, and derive satisfaction from doing a job well, we feel better about ourselves. For most people, money is not the most important reason they work. Researchers asking the question as to why people work, have found that job satisfaction, feeling appreciated and valued, feeling competent, all rank higher than money. However, when these issues are not addressed, we often seek more money to make up for it. Of course, money is important. If we are not adequately compensated for our labors, we feel distressed and even angry. It permeates our life. If we feel trapped in a job that we do not like, despite the money, we feel distressed and discontent. People

need to feel connected to what they do for a living. Hence, one's fulfillment with their work can affect their entire life.

*Family and social life* are major contributors our sense of fulfillment, happiness and satisfaction with our life. If one is lonely, unhappily married, isolated from family and friends, it affects one's entire emotional state. Unhappy relationships affect our physical health, our productivity, our ability to concentrate, our feelings about ourselves, and even our very sense of self. The more content one feels in one's relationships and family, the more content and meaningful one's life will be experienced.

*Financial security* is another important factor contributing to one's sense of well-being. Finances are separate from one's career. You can love your career, but if you are not able to pay your bills, you will be very distraught. Similarly, one can feel very financially secure, but if you hate your job you will be likewise distraught. Keeping one's financial house in order is extremely important for a sense of well-being, contentment, and happiness with one's life. Too many people live from day to day, paycheck to paycheck, living with a constant state of dread realizing that they are one step away from homelessness. Any tragedy, serious illness, or change in the economy can send them into a serious depression and perilous circumstance. More than one person ended his or her life because of financial ruin.

## DESIGNING YOUR LIFE

These are the eight sectors (rooms, if you will) in a person's psychological house. All homes have the same basic rooms, e.g., bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bathroom, etc.. However, the rooms are of varying sizes depending on the lifestyle of the owner and locations. In other words, not all living rooms are the same size nor are they all located in the same place relative to the rest of the rooms in the house. Similarly, in designing a life, while all well-balanced lives should have the same sectors they may be of varying sizes depending on the lifestyle of the individual. Furthermore, some sectors may be more closely related to others. A minister may have his/her spiritual sector and career sector adjacent to one another. In addition to deciding on how large each sector should be when designing our life, we must consider how closely related some areas will be to other areas. Once we have designed the structure of our life, we then have to furnish it, i.e., find activities that fill each sector.

Many people spend far too much time developing one sector at the expense of the others. They live in a one-room apartment rather than an eight-room house. Or worse, they live in one room while the others decay from neglect. Men are notorious for doing this. They spend a great deal of time developing their careers, professional life, or business, often to the neglect of their families, their health, or any other area of their life.

There are inherent dangers to this approach. First, they may lose their families because their spouse may become dissatisfied and decide to dissolve the marriage. Second, if their health suffers, they are not able to continue their careers. Third, if they lose their jobs due to layoffs or economic changes, they have nothing to fall back upon. A person with a balanced life has seven other sectors to fall back upon in a time of crisis in any one sector. The same could be said for any of the other sectors. A woman builds her life around her family. This is the only sector in which she spends her time. A tragedy strikes. Her husband dies, loses his job, or runs off with another woman. Or her children simply grow up; she is no longer needed as "supermom." What does she have left?

While everyone's life will have the same eight sectors, the sizes of the sectors will vary (Just as all houses have similar rooms that vary in size). Some people will spend more time and energy in their health and fitness room or community sector, while others will spend more time in their career and finance sectors. The important thing is that all sectors must be furnished, however sparsely. Some basic activities (furniture) is required in each sector. For example, there should be at least daily exercise and healthy eating in the health and fitness sector.

What kind of life do you want for yourself? What is the overall purpose of your life? What does it represent? Lives, like houses, come in all sizes, shapes and styles. If we fail to design the life we want, we run the risk of ending up with a life that we don't find satisfying, rewarding, or meaningful. Hence, it is important that you think about what do you want your life to represent. If you were designing a restaurant, you would not simply say that you want to serve food nor would you say that you merely wanted to open an Italian restaurant. Rather, you would have a concept, such as a place where people can feel as though they were in an Italian home, as guests, eating with the family. This is a very different mission than saying a place where people can dine in an elegant, intimate atmosphere resembling what would find in Northern Italy where people dine in quiet sophistication. These two restaurants have very different missions. Their respective missions would guide them as the underlying philosophy for pursuing their vision.

#### A CLEAR VISION

Now that you have an idea of what goes into a vision for your life, it is time to construct one for yourself. Begin with a series of statements that clearly represent the life that you want. Include in it statements about how you see yourself living that life. Your vision should allow you to actually "see" yourself, as you want to be, living the life you want to live. This vision serves as the blueprint for future action. You will have to ask yourself, "am I doing all that I can do to make my vision a reality?" If you are not, then ask why not? Ask yourself what you are doing that moves you away from your vision and why are you doing it?

The following are examples of a vision statement:

- 1) *I picture myself well-groomed, muscular, healthy, vibrant, and vital. My high energy, articulate speech and self-confidence naturally attract people to me. I care about people and desire to enhance the lives of those with whom I come into contact. I can see myself as a good listener who is empathic with the feelings of others. I am focused and committed to making a difference in the lives of others, in my community, and in the world. I can see myself being comfortable in a corporate boardroom working with leaders, in an office working with individuals, and groups. I visualize myself serving on boards of directors developing policy that can help others achieve their potential. I envision myself as possessing a spiritual side that recognizes that all people are connected to one another and to the world around them. I see myself living in a beautiful home, tastefully furnished, where people feel comfortable and welcome. I visualize myself being financially secure, affluent, enjoying the good things in life enjoying the fruits of my efforts. I see my family, wife, children, grandchildren, nephews as well as my sister, brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws around me, appreciating each other close and friendly. I have a picture of my life as fulfilling, exciting, loving, caring, and joyful participating fully in my community achieving recognition, respect, and acknowledgement from those around me.*
- 2) *I see myself connected to nature. I imagine living in a home near or in the mountains or ocean, where the air is clean. I can see myself involved in environmental issues in my community. My home is rustic, utilizing natural elements as much as possible. I visualize myself focusing more on my family and community than on earning money. I imagine that I will am working for an agency that concerns itself with protecting the environment or improving the quality of our environment. I can see myself teaching my children about the wonders of nature and the responsibility that we all have for protecting our natural gifts. I see myself married to a woman/man who shares my interest in the environment and who is a life partner. I see myself hiking and biking along the beach and through the hills, or even kayaking in early morning hours appreciating the serenity and wonder of our planet. I can feel a spiritual sense of being part of a larger whole. All of my activities are directed toward a similar end of being connected to the world around me.*

Once you have developed a vision of the life you want, then it is time to articulate a mission statement. Your mission statement should be derived from your vision.

#### MISSION STATEMENT

A mission statement for your life serves as an overarching principle that gives your life coherence and integrity. When you have a mission statement, you are able to ask yourself whether the decision you are about to make or the direction you are heading, honors your mission statement. Your mission statement

becomes the acid test for all decisions and actions. If what you are about to do, how you are behaving, or the decision you are about to make, does not honor your mission statement, then you must ask yourself why you are doing it. Everything you do, every decision you make, should honor your personal mission statement.

A mission statement gives purpose and direction to your life. It is based on principals and values that represent you. It is a declaration of your highest ideals, letting the world what you stand for. A mission statement may be short or long. It does not have to be complex. However, it should be substantive enough to be meaningful and give direction to your life. Having a clearly stated mission statement can serve as a guide directing your life. The following are two examples of mission statements:

1. To live life with integrity, respect for the rights and dignity of others, with empathy and compassion for all human beings; make a contribution to society, my community, my country; earn the respect of my wife, children, and grandchildren; participate in the lives of my family members with love and generosity; be open to criticism, learn from my own mistakes, and to continuously strive to be a better person, husband and father; earn sufficient income and achieve sufficient wealth such that I can enjoy the "good life" while working and in retirement sufficient to enable me to travel and care for the needs of my wife and myself.

2. To live an energetic life, focusing on accumulating and creating wealth through innovative ideas that benefit others, while being ethical and responsible; to make a difference in the world through political involvement and influence; to approach the world as filled with opportunity.

## MAKING THE PLAN

Now that you have a clear vision, a mission, and an idea of what sectors are needed for a balanced life, it is time to "furnish" your life. For each of the eight areas previously discussed, make a list of activities that you would include in each area. Think not only about the activities in which you are already engaged, but also of those activities in which you might wish to become engaged. Let your mind wander outside of the box. Do not think of practical constraints such as time, money, or skill. Look at the following examples:

*Personal growth:* joining a self-help group; psychotherapy; taking classes at a local college; participating in a study group; learning meditation; reading non-fiction

*Spirituality:* meditation; prayer; exploring nature; quiet contemplation; going to church or temple

*Recreation:* hiking; biking; playing chess; collecting; tennis or golf; antique hunting; attending movies or plays; hobbies of any kind

*Health and fitness:* going to the gym; jogging; biking; planning one's diet; avoiding toxins; yoga; participating in a regular fitness program

*Community involvement:* local, state or national politics; volunteering at a non-profit facility; participating on a committee to advance some social cause

*Career:* working at a job that creates value; doing the job with integrity; gaining satisfaction from doing a job well; finding right livelihood that enhances one's self-esteem; working with others cooperatively

*Family and social life:* participating in regular family activities; dinner with the family; recreation and vacations; participating in daily family life; family conversations

*Financial security:* planning one's finances carefully; keeping a budget; regular savings and investments; planning for retirement; living trust; having a will; having a living will; planning for your eventual death

Once you have listed some ideas for filling your life, you should go through the list again. This time, think about your vision; think about your mission. Each item listed in each of the eight categories should be tweaked so that it comports with both your vision and your mission. Each item should further your vision while honoring your mission. To the extent possible, try to have some items work in more than one category. For example, similar items may work in both recreation and family insofar as the recreational activities are done with your family.

You do not have to fill each area of your plan immediately. Quite the contrary. You should take your time. Spend time thinking about how you would like to furnish your life. Do some reading. Collect information. Try a few things on, similar to bringing home a piece of furniture or a painting, you want to see how it looks in your home before purchasing it. Just as designing your life takes time, furnishing it takes time as well. It is a work in progress. The important thing is to maintain a consciousness about your life. Reflect upon yourself and the life your building. Think about what you are doing and ask whether the action moves you in the direction of honoring your vision and respecting your mission. In time, with discipline, dedication, patience, and consciousness you will have designed the life you want.

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<sup>i</sup> Throughout this chapter I will be comparing building or remodeling a house to the process of designing and creating a life for yourself. This is a convenient analogy. I recognize that a while there are many similarities between home building or re-modeling to building and planning a life, there are many significant differences as well. A home is static, while a life is dynamic. There are many forces influencing the development of a life that are not present in building a house. Just as there are many contingencies that may come up while re-modeling or building a home that have to be dealt with as they come up, there are even more that come up when designing and creating a life. However, the concept of planning, designing, building a life is analogous to building a home. In both instances one must plan; one must be conscious. All of the parts must work together in order to have a well-constructed life or home.