

## 5 Tips To Finding Meaning And Purpose Later In Life

By *Ed Merck*

Featured in *Next Avenue* | August 13, 2014

Reprinted in *Huff Post: The Third Metric* | August 24, 2014 | Titled: "5 Tips To Finding Purpose And Meaning Later In Life"

Throughout my middle years, I never questioned what held meaning in my life. The scaffolding of my identity as a successful college Chief Financial Officer and owner of a thriving software company was built into the job. What I did was who I was, and that was the end of it.

Then, once I moved over to the other side of full-time work, the picture became less clear. Take the job away and who was I?

Stepping aside, I was more than ready to bequeath my left-brained razzle-dazzle to the young Turks whose beta-wave-oriented brains were just reaching full-flourish mode.

I could also sense that new personal capacities were opening up for me, which could change my sudden sense of loss to a sense of gain.

I felt something stir within me: The potential of moving forward with vitality and purpose. Yet I had only the slightest awareness of how to construct such a new reality.

Six years later, life is again a happy adventure and my mission is clear. (I captured that journey towards wholeness in my recent memoir, "[Sailing the Mystery](#).")

Here are five tips that will hopefully ease your passage into a purpose-filled later life:

**1. Identify the activities that provide you with a sense of purpose.** There is no objective reality when it comes to defining what we find personally meaningful — we're all wired differently. Some of us feel purposeful when we experience a sense of direction, others when we're engaged in nurturing and still others when we are immersed in nature. The key is to know what works for you.

My favorite process of gaining discernment is to keep a notebook over a month (or more) and record the activities or feelings that promote a sense of wellbeing within me.

**2. Create a brief statement that ties together the interests that provide you with a sense of purpose.** Synthesizing your list of meaningful activities down to one core phrase will be your guiding light, like a mantra you can repeat over and over. Keep the phrase simple but comprehensive enough to answer the question: How do I want to invest my precious and limited life energy?

Here are a few examples:

- "Do everything for the benefit of others."
- "Love and appreciate what I already am."
- "Make my life an offering to (spirit, God...)."
- "Exercise no judgment, just unconditional love."
- "Envision my life as a ministry."

I've used each of these phrases at one time or another as a continual reminder of why I am here. To me they seem like variations on a theme: How to operate outside the confines of my ego and dedicate my life to something larger than "me." What works for you?

**3. Strengthen your inner landscape.** Learning to live your purpose is essentially a spiritual exercise, and thus an "inside" job. For many of us, our work years required conforming to external guideposts and demands. Now we have the opportunity to develop new skills that are typically more reflective, such as attentive listening and trusting in the rightness of it all.

Contemplative activities such as meditation are a real winner in fostering this often-dormant skill set of inner reflection. For support, join a community of meditators. Or if movement is more your thing, try yoga, Tai Chi or Qigong.

**4. Learn to be still.** I often think the key to fulfillment in one's later years is not about finding purpose; rather, we need to let it find us. Sounds easy, but it's not, since implicit in that notion is learning a whole new way of embracing life.

We must (at least partially) go from moving to standing still; from managing to accepting; from doing to being. And that's just the beginning.

Experimenting with turning your guidance system 180 degrees (from an outward gaze to an inward one) can be disorienting at first. It's a little like being stuck in the middle of the Atlantic on a small sailboat without GPS, just a note at the navigation station that says: be still. I know — I've been there, and the feeling is scary until you get used to it.

**5. Explore what it means to create.** The act of creating is the unfolding of who we are in the world, and thus a kissing cousin to living out our deeper purpose. It can take the form of art, music, writing, cooking, conversation, making love or even just sitting quietly.

Explore how and what gives you that feeling of deep connection to yourself and, by extension, to everything else. Further, recognize that sense of internal fullness when it occurs and seek it out in all that you do.

I love picking up one of my antique wooden musical instruments and "riffing" as though the year is 1600. It brings me so alive to myself, and to others.

Finding meaning and purpose in our lives is both the most important and the most difficult endeavor we pursue. Enjoy the journey, and have fun doing it!

*Ed Merck*, author of [Sailing the Mystery](#), is a former software entrepreneur and chief financial officer who retired at 63, set sail and began his journey into life's remaining chapters. He can be reached at [www.sailingthemystery.com](http://www.sailingthemystery.com).