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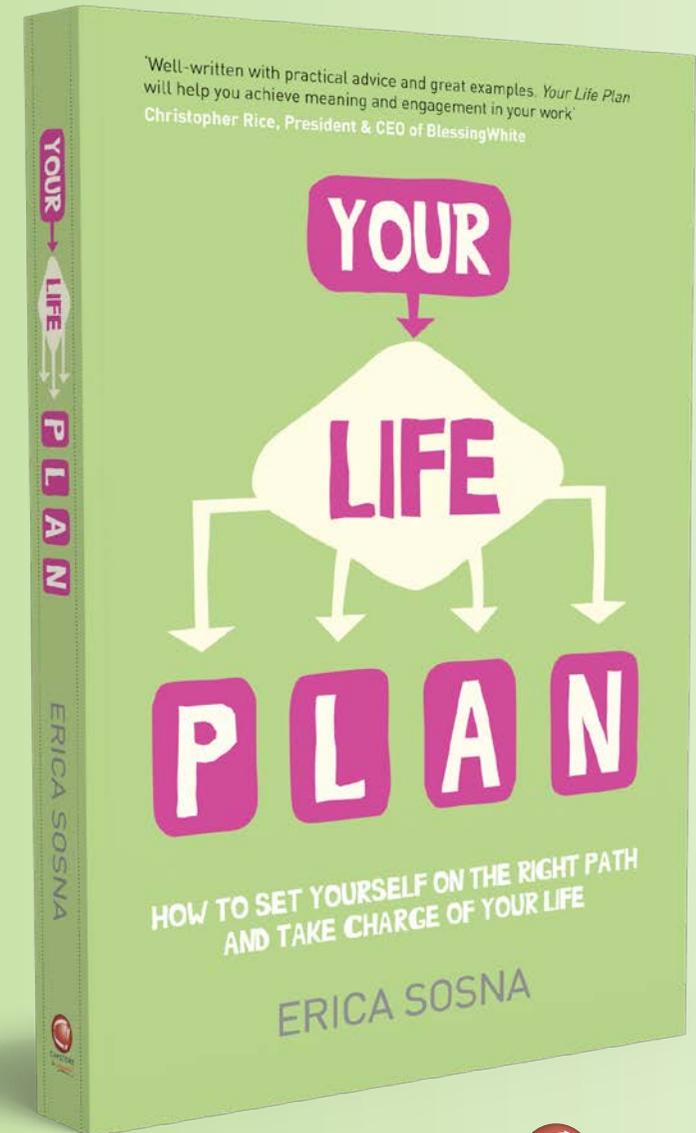
ERICA SOSNA

BE THE HERO OF YOUR OWN LIFE!

In *Your Life Plan*, Erica Sosna shows you how to choose and live a life that is truly meaningful, exciting and adventurous. Having a life project – a dream or goal that feels like a real challenge, can give you focus, energy and purpose.

This book offers practical solutions and guidance for dealing with difficult personal challenges and becoming the victorious hero who achieves happiness and fulfilment.

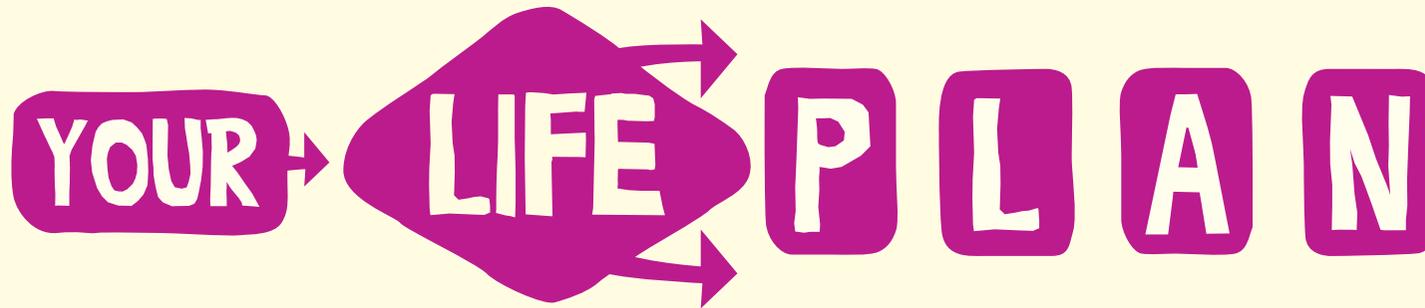
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WHAT KIND OF HERO ARE YOU ANYWAY?

“Intelligence is composed mostly of imagination and insight, things that have nothing to do with reason.”
Vivienne Westwood

The Hero’s Journey gives us a model to understand how change happens in our lives. What we next need to find out about is the central character in the story – you – your history, character and desires. Being your own hero does not mean you need to be perfect. Every hero comes with flaws and challenges. They all need help and support from others with other gifts.

Being a hero is about embodying the best version of yourself. If you can learn how to harness your own talents, you can “play a larger game” and become exceptional in your field. This chapter is about the process of self-discovery. Here we will identify your talents and motivations so that you can find the environments and opportunities that help you grow, and use these abilities to the full.

The exercises set out in this chapter enable you to discover the hero inside of you and we will explore and uncover the unique configuration that makes yourself, well, “selfy.” We will be uncovering your skill set, your intelligences and your personality type. By the end, you will be able to confidently answer the question, “So what do you bring to the party?”

No one is perfect. Not in real life. John McEnroe played great tennis and had an awful temper with it. Oprah Winfrey has lifted and inspired millions of people and championed valuable humanitarian causes, but struggles to maintain her weight and manage her eating. Einstein was a genius but was an utter nightmare to live with. You do not need to be perfect to have a profound influence on the world. You do not need to strive for perfection. You can make a small change or move toward a little dream and achieve it and deserve it because you are you. And you are enough.

To do this we need to have a good understanding of who we are. Human beings do not come with a manual. This means we have to get curious and figure out our operating system, benefits and features. We can go through many years of our lives without knowing what a particular button does on our radio. The same is true for ourselves. Until each of us is born with a manual, or scientists learn to navigate the variations in our brains to tell us all about who we are, we are going to need to do some self-exploration of our own.

If we can get a better grasp of our motivations, skills and “type” then we can make better use of these things to help us achieve our life goals and fulfil our Quests. We can also share what we know of ourselves with others, helping to minimize misunderstanding, build mutual appreciation and tolerance, and make better choices all round.

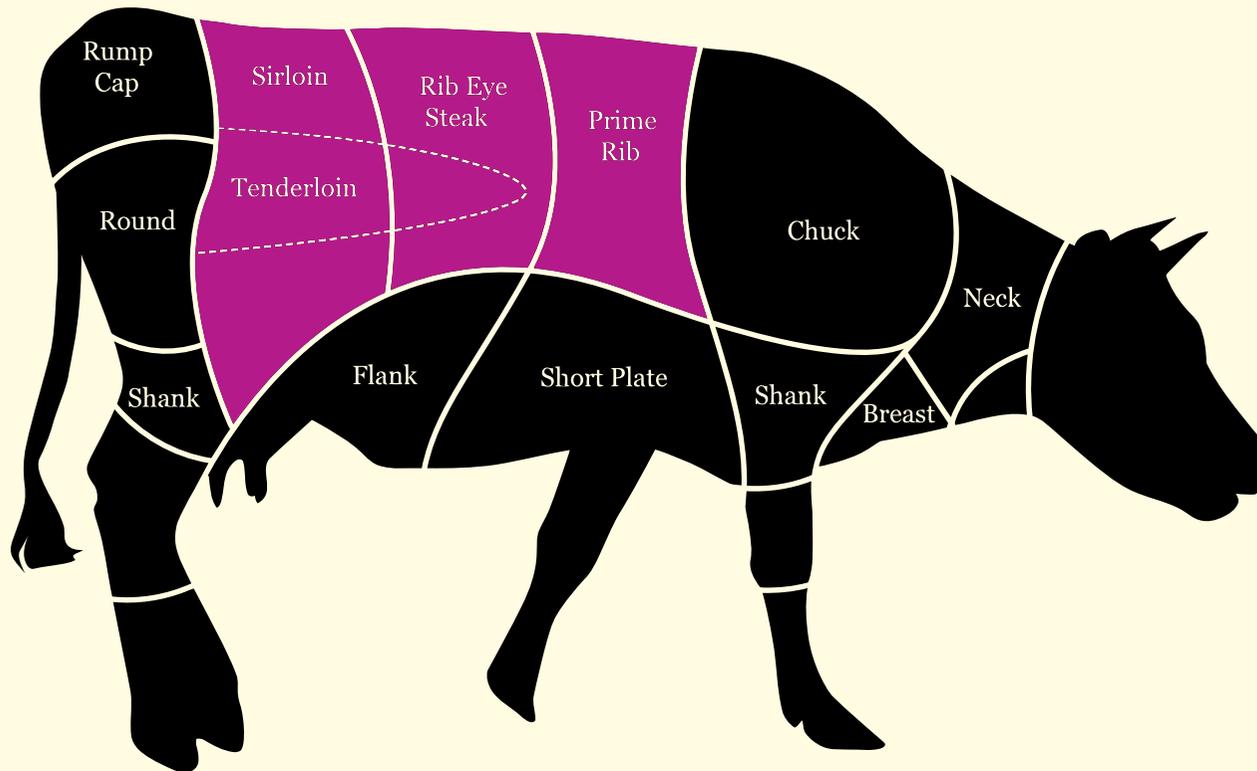
Here are the key aspects of self we will explore:

1. Your Heroes and their Qualities
2. Your Unique Features
3. Your Intelligences
4. Your Values
5. Your Risk Profile
6. Your “Fit”

These ingredients will enable you to build your own self-awareness guide. You will then be ready to explore your Quest and will be in a good place to take the plunge into the Commitment stage of the journey. In life and within the Western education system, we are all too often pushed into decisions concerning our future, our careers, our next steps, without this grounding in who we are. So no skipping this chapter, it's the foundation of your Quest.

The Good News

A dear friend sent me this postcard during the “mad cow disease” epidemic in the 1990s:



“I may not be perfect but parts of me are excellent.”

Today, you get to be the cow!

There are going to be things that you are brilliant at. You may know about them already or they may be lying in wait for you to discover them. I am a great storyteller and I can translate complicated ideas into simple and practical tools for people to use in their lives. This is my zone of “brilliance.” We all have one and although I have a natural aptitude, I have also put the hours in. They say it takes 10,000 hours to become a master at something. That’s five years full-time work. If you want to be great at something, you are going to need to turn up and do the work – and if you have chosen something you have an aptitude for, you are likely to be successful. So the mindset is – be honest with yourself, be kind and be balanced. I want you to focus on discovering your strengths and then mastering them.

The Bad News

“It is the most shattering experience of a young man’s life when one morning he awakes and quite reasonably says to himself ‘I will never play the Dane.’ When that moment comes, one’s ambition ceases.”

Uncle Monty, Withnail and I written by Bruce Robinson

Discovering your heroic profile is about getting real and recognizing your limitations and your capabilities. Of course, I want you to challenge yourself, to stretch beyond what is comfortable, to surprise yourself. But, I also will not allow you to set yourself up to fail. We will look at how to work out whether we have capability in something or whether we are now using this book to skive off or duck out of making our dreams come true.

For example, I will never be a world-class athletics champion. I have left it too late in life. I have rather short legs and I’m mildly allergic to running. I don’t have great motor intelligence. It takes me ages to learn to do anything that involves translating a thought into a physical action – like learning to drive. Eventually I passed my driving test, but it took me three attempts and it doesn’t stop my other half imitating tyre-squealing noises whenever I drive round a corner!

Anyway, the point is, you just simply don't need to be good at everything to have a great life.

Everyone has their own set of gifts. Each and every person is very able in some areas and less so in others. We each have a unique range of skills that our manual, if we had one, would call our "features." These features suit some Quests more than others. So I, Erica, am built for writing, speaking and digesting information, not for science, calculations, auditing or anything that requires decent spatial awareness – what are you built for?

Let's find out.

1. Your Heroes and Their Qualities

Heroes, protagonists, activists – whatever you want to call them, the hero is someone that we are inspired by. Heroic characters show us what is possible in life. They stand for what they believe in. They do things their own way. They think independently. They take risks to achieve their goals. They are resilient. They call in support from other people to help them achieve something that is important to them. Our choice of heroes is very personal. Each of us will have qualities we admire in ourselves, and each of us will be influenced by characters from real life or fiction, whose stories reflect something important for us.



Uncovering the heroic qualities that you most value

- Identify the people who inspire you the most. They can be friends and family, well known or anonymous, alive or dead, from fantasy or from history and from any walk of life.
- As you write their names down, have a go at identifying what qualities they possess that you most admire.

My list as an example; alongside my grandmother, my heroes include:

- Dad – brave, independent
- Tori Amos – quirky, talented, eccentric, independent, unique
- Vivienne Westwood – strong, creative, passionate, her own woman
- Freddie Mercury – charismatic, creative, did what he did excellently, strong drive, entertaining
- Anaïs Nin – unconventional, free, creative, prolific, wise
- Look closely at your list. Are there particular themes, behaviours or character traits in there that you most value?
- Now ask yourself – what would life be like if you expressed these qualities more in your own life? Are you willing to do so?

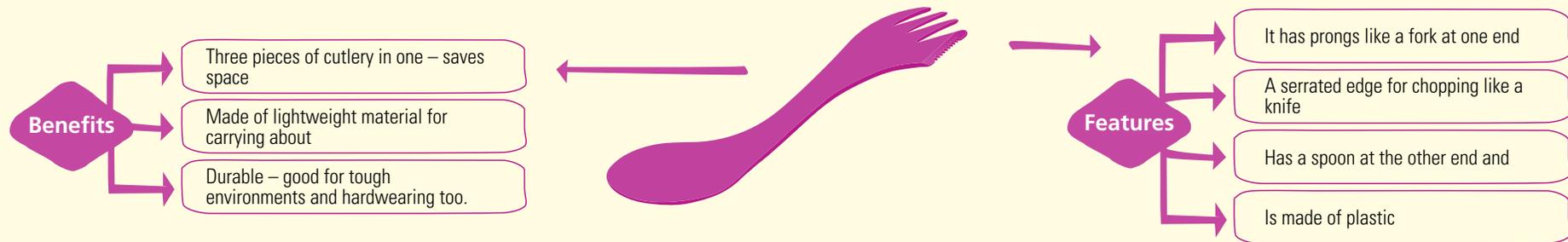
Living a heroic life, expanding into all you can be, means being willing to grow into these qualities. Your Quest will invite you to practice living more of your life with these qualities at the forefront. If these qualities feel like “achey” muscles, they will need some re-training.

What action could you take to build the expression of these qualities?

2. Your Unique Features

In marketing speak, a fact about a product is known as a “feature.” This is something that products possess, for example, every car has wheels. Marketers also talk about the benefits – the advantages that the feature offers. In the case of the car, it would be getting to my grandma’s house in Golders Green much faster than if I walked.

When features and benefits marry nicely, they offer a great solution to a problem. Take a spork – the great camping cutlery invention.



The design of a spork is perfectly matched to accomplish the task it needs to perform (eating) and the environments in which we are going to perform that task (by a fire in the woods). We want to discover your features and benefits so that you can start to identify what you are designed for.



Brainstorm all of the design features you possess that you value. Set your timer for 60 seconds. Don't pause, don't hesitate, anything you value counts. Ready, steady . . . go!

How did you do? Was it easy to describe yourself and your abilities? Was it hard to be generous? Sometimes it can feel very uncomfortable to name and describe our abilities. We often get told that claiming who you are and being confident about being who you are is arrogance, bragging, or in some other way undesirable. To help counteract this shaming, let's look at you from another angle – from the perspective of those who care about you.



Set the timer. Think of someone in your life who really cares about you – a partner, a friend, a parent, a sibling, a teacher who really saw who you are. What would they describe as your unique features? What do they value? Set the timer for 60 seconds. Ready, steady . . . go!

Oh, go on with you . . .

Compliments that mean something are another great shortcut to uncovering your unique features. One of my favourites was given to me by a student on one of my enterprise courses. Lyndsey runs a great little online gardening business called What You Sow (www.whatyousow.co.uk) offering gardening gift ideas to make growing a lovely experience. She told me: “The thing I love about the way you teach Erica, is that everyone gets to learn from one another. You allow space and time for the group to share information and you draw out the learning from our business experiences. So each of us feels like an expert.”

What features about how I teach did Lyndsey capture?

Features

- I put a group of (normally isolated) entrepreneurs together in one place.
- I create space and structure talk and share ideas.
- I ask good questions.

Benefits

- Create a great learning environment.
- Bring people together.
- Help to facilitate good conversations.
- Build confidence.

Now you have a go.



- What's the best compliment anyone has ever paid you?
- Which of your design features did it highlight?
- What are the benefits of those features?
- Now have a think back to what you were doing to generate the compliment. Was that an activity or communication that you were really proud of? How did you feel when you were doing it?
- Where and What contexts can you imagine that someone with those features and benefits might be useful?
- To whom could those design features and benefits be useful?
- How much are you using those abilities and skills at the moment? (give it a percentage)
- How do you feel knowing this?

Being in Your Element

Ken Robinson, an expert in creativity and education, describes the activities that we love to do as “being in our element.” He emphasizes the importance of discovering our sphere of excellence and passion. To embark on a Quest, you will need to know as much as you can about the abilities required to carry it through. You will also need to make sure that your Quest can help you to be more of yourself, express more of who you are or grow your ability to flow in the face of challenge.

Your element may seem to you to be something quite small – yet exercising it can bring great joy to yourself and to those who are touched by it.

Remember, people make a living out of the zaniest things: making people laugh, icing fancy cupcakes, creating surprising shapes with their bodies and tasting fine wine. Whilst you may not want to create a career out of your element, discovering what that is for you can be very valuable when you pull together your tool bag for your Quest.

So, here is an exercise to uncover your element. The thing you cannot stop doing. The thing you would do whether you were paid for it or not. The natural and innate skill set that you possess. When you explore this exercise, I want you to be really specific and detailed. So if you love to do sudoku puzzles, dig down into that. What is it about them that you love? Overcoming a challenge? Making them add up? Solving a problem? Completing something? The more specific you can be, the more useful this exercise will be to you.



- What do you love to do?
- What have you been told you have a real gift for?
- What can you not stop doing, even if it isn't your business or is the wrong time of day?
- What would you describe as your passion? (You know this because if there is an article about it, or an ad, or something on the radio or TV, you will always stop to notice it, amongst the cacophony of images and messages we are exposed to every day.)
- How could you bring your element into more frequent day-to-day use?

A note to the world weary; I will not buy the idea that it is “too late” to discover yourself and your talents. Research from the British Career Advice Service suggests over half of the over fifties would still like to find and try their dream job. Take the lawyer who in his late sixties has recently been accepted at Nottingham to study medicine. Many of my coachees have been surprised to discover “latent talents” later in life. A latent talent is something that you have a natural gift for, but never used, so the talent lay dormant. This is the strongest argument I have to encourage you to keep breaking new ground. Try new things, eat new food, take an unusual class. You might surprise yourself. My other half is 56 and has spent his professional career in software engineering, and his personal life climbing mountains and sailing seas. He recently enrolled on an Art Foundation course with a bunch of teenagers. His appreciation of detail and his patience and determination are combining with his latent talent for drawing. His future is bright. So with him and you in mind, let’s do one more exercise for latent talents – those things you have a hunch you would be great at, but have yet to try.



- What have you always longed to try, but never yet found the time?
- What makes you think you would like it?
- How do you think trying it would make you feel?
- Complete the sentence: if there were no restrictions on me and I could easily afford it I would spend my time . . .



What action are you now willing to take to spend more of your time in your element?

This is the skill set you want to play to. Our passions give us joy and we are often blessed with the skills to do a great job on them. If you work in an area of your passion, or express it in a hobby or free-time activity, you are gifting yourself with a moment of fun and play and who doesn't deserve more of that? Heroes in their element have learned to play to their strengths – they play where they can have an impact, learn more, be useful and have fun. And they also do their best to avoid too much time in the tasks and skill sets that they don't have a real talent for. Instead, they find team members who are exceptional in their area of weakness and collaborate with them. This can take some time. Not everyone has the confidence, clarity or situation that makes it easy to refuse to do anything that does not align with their skill set, design and passions.

Musician Max Fraser, also known as Maxi Jazz, worked at BT for several years before deciding to heed the Call and really focus on his music career. Eight years later, this decision led to the formation of the band Faithless, who went on to sell over 15 million albums worldwide. Here, he talks about the courage it took to leave the security of this job:

“I called my job terminal cancer of the soul. There are many kinds of death but that was the one I feared the most. The one where you stop being yourself because of the environment you are in. What motivated me to leave was the horrifying idea that I could wake up at 65 only having worked at BT. I was smart enough to realize at 29 that I couldn't just up and leave. I didn't expect it to take overnight, but I didn't expect it to take three years either.”

To make space for your element, you will need to stop doing some things that don't give you the feeling of flow. Be honest now. We all have to do things we don't like – cleaning the house, putting things away, paying the bills. But we also waste a lot of our time on pointless, mindless, numbing distractions instead of living a life that helps us discover more about ourselves, brings our childlike curiosity out and expresses something positive. So come on, out with it.



- What do you need to stop doing?
- Is there anything going on in your life that might be eating at you in a “cancer of the soul” fashion?

3. Your Intelligences

“I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it so that they will be positioned to make it a better place . . . An important part of that understanding is knowing who we are and what we can do.”

Howard Gardner

Every superhero has a unique and special power or talent. In the NBC show, *Heroes*, these included: the cheerleader who could repair her injured body, a politician who could fly, a police officer who could read people’s minds and an addict who could paint the future. While our talent list may not extend to the realms of fantasy, we too have variable levels of aptitude in different types of smarts and so another way of getting to know your skill set is to explore the “type” of intelligence you have. The education system doesn’t always value or differentiate between these intelligences. It focuses assessment on a very narrow range of skill sets mostly involving memory, fact retention and some problem solving. So it can be easy for us to go through life believing we are not intelligent in the traditional sense, yet have many other forms of intelligent ability.

Howard Gardner is an American academic. “Multiple intelligences” was a term coined by him. Howard has dedicated much of his life’s work to uncovering and naming the intelligences. I’ve set them out below for you. Take time to scan through them and then identify your top three.

- **Spatial intelligence** – the ability to recognize and gracefully work within space and to use this intelligence to navigate in more compact areas (like parallel parking for instance).
- **Interpersonal intelligence** – the ability to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people. It allows people to work effectively with others and build relationships.

- **Linguistic intelligence** – the ability to understand and use language to accomplish goals or express oneself. We use this skill set when marketing a business, speaking in public or writing an article.
- **Logical/mathematical intelligence** – the ability to analyze, investigate and use logic to solve problems.
- **Musical intelligence** – the ability to spot patterns that create harmony, melody and pitch and to translate these into compositions.
- **Intrapersonal intelligence** – the ability to look inside and understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations.
- **Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence** – the ability to use our bodies or parts of the body to overcome obstacles or tackle a particular physical challenges.
- **Naturalist intelligence** – the ability to recognize, categorize and make use of information relating to the natural environment.
- **Moral intelligence** – the ability to focus upon and prioritize the rules, behaviours and attitudes that govern the sanctity of life and wellbeing of all living creatures and the world they inhabit.



What are your top three natural intelligences?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now review the list again for the one or two that you know you struggle with a little more. When you think about your Quest over the next few chapters, you will want to be on the lookout for tasks that require this kind of intelligence and begin to think about who or what could support you in completing those tasks.

In a way it doesn't matter whether we agree with the categories that Gardner has given us. What his work does is help us to understand our uniqueness – each of us has numerous strengths across these general categories. The more specific we can get about which ones “feel” like us, the more we can use this to guide our sense of our own heroism.

For more information about Howard Gardner and to find out where to take the intelligence test, please check out the resource section at the end of this book.

4. Your Values

Think about a boat bobbing about on the ocean. It might sway left and right with the tide and the waves, but if it has an anchor attached, this will prevent it drifting off and getting lost at sea. Our values are like our anchors – they tie us to who we are in a way that rarely changes throughout our lives. Our values are our guiding principles, the criteria against which we make decisions and the aspects of life that we most prize. In our teens, we tend to rebel against the values of our parents or caregivers, it's a natural part of the self-differentiation stage. However, in the long term, we do tend to align to the values that we grew up with.

Take a moment to look at the values you were taught as a young person. For me, with parents as first-generation immigrants, education was a key value. The ideas of working hard, learning new things, becoming accomplished, these values were drummed into me at almost every key decision point in my life. Rightly or wrongly, my parents wanted me to have the best education they could afford and they expected me to put the effort in to justify the expense. I also watched my parents work very hard to create financial stability for themselves, with my father doing two or three jobs when I was very young. I learned that autonomy and independence were important and these have remained guiding forces in my life. So it is no surprise that I have found myself working in the education field, always learning new things and often working in an independent fashion – either as a freelancer or as a change agent in a business.



- Rightly or wrongly, what did your parents teach you to value?
- What principles guided their lives and decisions?
- Which of these still resonate with you today?
- Are there other values that you have learned to prize – when and how did these become important to you?

We are not our parents. They gave us our lives, but we need to claim our life and live by what matters to us. Our parents did the best they could with the knowledge and skill set they had at the time. Part of our growing up is realizing that we have choices about which of the gifts they gave us we wish to take with us and which we wish to leave behind.

5. Your Risk Profile

If you have ever been involved in a pension or investment discussion, the concept of a risk “profile” will not be foreign to you. For everyone else, any time you decide to take on an activity or responsibility about which you are not supremely confident, you are in the process of managing risk. Risk is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “to expose oneself to danger and harm.”

Risk is relevant in almost every aspect of our lives. Trevor Baylis, inventor of the wind-up radio once described us as “a banana skin away from serious injury.” Luckily, most of us are not conscious of risk all the time; if we were, we would be a very worried bunch indeed. However, anything that you want to try that you haven’t done before will raise your risk antennae. This helps your survival instinct make an assessment of whether your next move will seriously harm your health.

Although many life projects can be started without a serious risk assessment, there are also many where your level of comfort around risk will be important.

If, for example, you are looking to take on a business or go selfemployed, you will need to be comfortable with a certain measure of financial exposure, which if things do not go according to plan, may leave you in a precarious position in relation to money. Or if you are about to begin a significant physical challenge, like breaking a world record for sailing round the world, then you may need to consider the risk of doing damage to yourself when you assess the strain of the challenge.

Here are the three levels of risk that a pension adviser would typically assess you on concerning your finances. We can use these to determine your level of risk in general life.

1. A High risk tolerance means that you are comfortable with narrow odds, don't mind a significant fail, fall or loss, feel yourself to be resilient and would call yourself a bit of a gambler.
2. A Medium risk tolerance means that you can take moderate risks, in a variety of circumstances, but do not like to leave things too much to chance – you are willing to take a calculated risk if you feel it could pay off.
3. A Low risk tolerance means that you are not comfortable with much that is outside your sphere of control and expertise. You would rather take a low guaranteed return than chance your hand at something that you are not confident will deliver.

Which one sounds most like you?

If you are job hunting, you will begin to notice that some jobs – investment trading, commission-only sales, are more risky than others. If you are considering a project that means a lot to you but may not be a success, e.g. restoring an old boat or property, having a child through IVF, then you may wish to consider whether your next step is in line with your risk level. Our later exploration of the support you may need in your life project should be useful fortifying up your risk and resilience muscle. You will learn how to bounce back as well as prepare yourself to respond effectively to unexpected surprises.

6. Your “Fit”

The final factor to consider when reflecting on your Quest is the context in which you are most likely to be successful. Do you need people around you in a team, or do you prefer to work alone? Are you someone who likes a structure set by a mentor or expert, or do you prefer to devise your own programme? Do you want to be a parent to a child regardless of whether you have a partner or not, or do you only fantasize about a family with A.N. Other?

These things are important. Sometimes it is a matter of trial and error. You can only know that an environment does not suit you by trying it out. For me, for example, I love working with ideas and their practical application – especially in relation to people’s lives. My first role was as a policy adviser at the Home Office. I was dealing with interesting topics, such as sex offending and corporate manslaughter and I loved the variety of the job. But the inherent conservatism of the Civil Service and the snail-like pace it moved at used to drive me batty! I got bored, frustrated, fidgety, demanding. I didn’t feel I was really making a difference in people’s lives. So when I was offered an alternative opportunity that was more about individual people’s lives, I grabbed it and was much, much happier in that role. Trying to fit yourself as a square peg into a round hole can cause all kinds of health problems, lead to stress, anxiety and “failure.”

A Fresh Approach

Sometimes you are also in the right sphere but approaching it in the wrong way. Karen worked for a language lessons franchise.

Karen is a single parent and was recently made redundant so it was really important that the next move she made worked financially for her and her daughter. When she told me about the marketing efforts she had put in, Karen seemed really glum. We very quickly established that the sums just didn’t add up. Then she told me the other franchisees weren’t doing so well either. Then we got on to the fact that although she enjoyed teaching the children, working with them maintained her language fluency, but didn’t build on it.

At this point I asked her why language was a passion for her. It turned out she had been bilingual from an early age (skill set) and had watched hundreds of subtitled films where she saw that the translation was just not in line with the original script. As she described her passion for film translation her eyes lit up and she became very animated (spot the Element). So we built a plan for her to sell her skills as a translator with an ultimate Quest to translate feature films. Her original idea was not far off as it did use her talents and skills, but the environment was not quite right.

Sometimes your first idea is not quite the right fit. Sometimes you only learn through doing that the context for your work needs a bit of a refresh. Sometimes you are just a Square Peg in a Round Hole.

Remember though, that your time Square Pegging is always useful and valuable. Whether you are Maxi at BT, me at the Home Office or Karen teaching kids Spanish, the learning you take with you often proves invaluable somewhere and somehow later on.

Academic Mike Oliver is a disability theorist. He coined the term “social model of disability” to suggest that it is not the disability itself – being in a wheelchair or losing a limb say, that disables a person. Instead, social model theorists believe it is the environment, attitudes, stigma and social structures that disable a person. For example, navigating the Tube in London can be hellish if you are a wheelchair user. The issue is that the environment doesn’t support the needs of all the different users. The environment does not provide the support required to enable a person with a different level of mobility to access the service in the same way. Some environments enable us to thrive and some compromise our natural talents and abilities because they do not suit our needs and requirements.

The following exercise is designed to help you take a closer look at the kind of environment that supports you to be your best self.

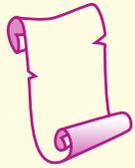


Take a real-life example. It doesn't have to be the world of work – it could be a social occasion, a holiday or trip, an education environment, any situation that just didn't work for you. Then we are going to break it down to better understand what it was that made it such a challenge.

- Describe a situation that did not work for you.
- Consider the environment you were in – in what ways did it disable or disempower you?
- What compromises or stories did you tell yourself to justify being where you were?
- Looking back now on the choice you made at that time – what would you have done differently?
- Write out your new statements on the kinds of “round hole” you wish to find yourself in.

The process of self-discovery is not one with an end point. We are changing all the time. Our cells have a “sell by” date of between 15 days and seven years. So in seven years you will literally not be the same person you are now. As we move through our life stages, our priorities change. Experience and wisdom shape our points of view. The world changes around us and different things come into focus.

Now that you've got to the end of this chapter, I want you to make yourself a promise. Promise yourself that wherever you are and whatever you experience, from now on you will use it for your learning, enrichment and growth. Use the nasties, the goodies, the “ahas,” the dramas – all of it. Because every experience we have is an opportunity to learn more about who we are and what we are here to do.



Summary

- Every one of us has a unique set of abilities, skills intelligence and values.
- The more you focus on what these are, the more confident you can feel and the greater direction you will have.
- There are many methods and tools to uncovering and understanding yourself and your style and these can be really helpful, especially if you have felt or feel misunderstood in your home or work environments.
- Focusing on our strengths makes us masterful; living a heroic life does not mean you have to be good at everything!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Sosna is a coach, consultant and author specialising in transformation and transition in both personal and professional life.

A gifted speaker, she combines her creativity and curiosity with her professional expertise to set up The Life Project in 2006, designing curriculums and programmes that help people of all ages find their career direction, plan for their future and design a career that best suits their personalities and working style. In her own career, Erica has worked as a policy advisor for the Labour government, performed as a stand-up comedian at the Edinburgh Festival and operated as a leadership consultant for some of the world's most successful companies.

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