

A Place For Everything, And Everything In Its Place

Life is like a big jigsaw puzzle. I know this is an over-used metaphor. In fact, I'll probably use it again myself later in this book. It's a metaphor that's kind of done to death; but that's because it has so much truth.

I was reminded of it again one fall when my local paper ran a picture of work being done at the jetty in my town. The caption read, "A 100,000 ton jigsaw puzzle."ⁱ

For weeks during the summer and fall of that year, I often saw boulders strapped to the back of flatbeds trundling through the county on their way out to the ocean. The boulders were being used to reconstruct the North Jetty, a wall of rocks that holds back the sea from the shore. The jetty had been badly damaged in storms during the previous winter. To repair this rock wall, over 100,000 tons of rock were transported and set in place.

The boulders used to rebuild the jetty were huge and impressive. Still, when you think about it, you wonder how those rocks, big as they are, could hold back the relentless onslaught of the ocean. The how lies in the way the rocks are positioned. They aren't just tossed off the truck into a willy-nilly pile. As the superintendent of the project said, "There's a real art to this—to key the rocks together so they don't move ... a place for every rock and a rock for every place."ⁱⁱ

Just as when a sculptor working with a new material looks to that material to determine what shape the sculpture will take, the rocks being used to rebuild the jetty have a character that will determine their place in the whole. The workers had to evaluate the rocks and find their places. This couldn't be forced. A rock couldn't be put in a place that wasn't meant for that rock.

These rocks aren't the only things with a place. I have a place, and you have a place. When we were born, we arrived in this world with characteristics, traits, and preferences that would lead us to finding our place.

I, for instance, am not fond of crowds or too much activity. I like peace and quiet. I can think pretty clearly. I read a lot. I can write. This has created a place for me as a writer living in a small town.

For some time, I questioned my place. I thought I should be out in the world in some useful service job where I'm with people. I thought I should be more involved in my community, and I should be volunteering my time. But though service jobs, community involvement and volunteering are wonderful things, I've accepted that they aren't the place for me.

I often say a prayer that includes these lines: "My task is easy. My burden is light. If it is not, I am not in my place." I'm sure you experience situations when what you're doing might be a burden to someone else, but not to you. Like caring for your children, for instance. Some of the

things I went through taking care of my old dog, Muggins, before she passed away would have driven other people crazy. But not me. My burden was light because it was buoyed by love.

In “Are You Listening To Your Life,” an article in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Parker J. Palmer wrote, “Before I tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen for what my life wants to do with me.”ⁱⁱⁱ Palmer was a professor who wasn’t happy in his job, and he knew he wasn’t in his place. But he was afraid to risk leaving a secure academic job. “Clinging fearfully” to his job “even though it was a bad fit,” his work became “a grim act of will.”^{iv}

That’s not how it’s supposed to be. Palmer knew that. Eventually, he did get the courage to leave and has now found a good life as a writer, traveling teacher, and activist. In other words, he found his place.

You need to listen to what your life wants from you. That’s how you find the place that fits so perfectly your burden is light.

The world works because everything has its place. You need to remember that truth when you start telling yourself you aren’t giving enough or don’t have a good enough job or you’re upset because you’re not a parent or civic leader or President of the United States.

I have my place. You have your place. When we all are aware enough to look for that place if we haven’t found it and embrace it when we do find it, together we can build something even more powerful than a jetty that can hold back the sea.

Protect Yourself Against Identity Theft Of The Worst Kind

As if it weren't enough that you have to protect yourself from those who want to break into your home, rip off your car or mug you on the street, now you have to protect yourself from something called personal identity theft. A new breed of thieves steals more than your financial resources or material possessions. They steal your good name.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing areas of crime. The government estimates that over 500,000 people a year fall victim to criminals who take social security numbers, bank account or credit information and make a mess of financial lives.^v

Computers and the Internet are helping with this new career opportunity in the criminal world. Hackers have been able to penetrate corporate databases to obtain credit card numbers and other data. On the internet, you can take courses on "pretext methods," pretending to be an authority figure to get information, and you can purchase authentic looking fake ID's online.

The folks using these methods can run up charges on your accounts, get loans in your name and ultimately destroy your credit rating. It's a pretty bleak picture if you want to look at it. I choose to look in a different direction. And you can take practical steps to protect yourself. For example, you can keep tabs on your credit by checking once a year with one of the credit bureaus to make sure everything is in order.

But this kind of identity theft, though unpleasant, is nothing compared to another kind of identity theft that is rampant in society—the theft of your authentic self.

When you came into this world, you were as purely a reflection of your soul as you'll ever be. As you grew, your family, friends, and society began to mold you. If who you really are, at your core, is something other than what you're molded into, over time you slowly become a victim of identity theft.

You know it, at least on some level, when your identity's been stolen. You know it because you feel like a fish out of water. You feel misplaced or stuck.

I knew it. As I've said, I had a successful legal career, and I was miserable in it. I lived in a big beautiful home in a lovely city suburb, and I longed to live in a cottage in the woods. Somewhere between the time I was an eager, genuine child and the time I entered adulthood, my identity was stolen, stolen by expectations and obligations.

Society is full of identity theft victims like this. A woman who wanted to be an actress gives up her dream to raise the child she hadn't planned on having. A man who'd always wanted to be a long haul truck driver, gives up the road for the woman who resents the time he spends away from home. Farmers longing for a city life are stuck in their fields. People who desire the peace of the rural life spend their days fighting traffic in big cities. Every one of these people have had their identities stolen.

This is not to say that you'll get exactly what you want all the time. Life requires sacrifices and compromises, and in order to have some of the things you want, you may need to give up something else. But when you feel like you've died inside and you're just going through the motions, you may be an identity theft victim.

Cheryl Richardson, author of *Life Makeovers* says that when you feel like you've lost yourself, underlying that sense of loss is a lack of integrity—you're living your life pretending you're something you're not. When you get stuck playing a role, just doing what is expected of you, you lose your integrity in the most basic way.^{vi}

To reclaim your identity, you must move back toward your truth. One place to start is to check and see if you're doing things you enjoy each day. If you're not, you need to do what Richardson calls rekindling your joy.

Look into the past and find the things you loved, the things that brought you joy. Remember songs, places, smells and tastes. These things, these preferences, are the crumbs that can lead you back to your true identity.

So go ahead and check your credit report. But while you're at it, take a look at the rest of your life too. Make sure your identity didn't slip away when you weren't looking.

Give Yourself Some Credit

I love the Olympics, so much so that I'm willing to patiently slog through the network's fluffy coverage of the events. I root for the underdogs and cheer for the favorites. I soak up the stories of triumph over adversity, and I listen with awe to athletes talk about the discipline and hard work it took for them to reach the top. I enjoy it all. However, though I always find much to inspire me in the Olympics, I also find much to discourage me. My problem is I tend to compare my own efforts toward my goals with the powerful drive these athletes display, and my efforts often come up short.

But when I feel myself becoming discouraged, I quickly realize what has happened—I've let the athletes' stories narrow my definition of discipline. Where before I'd given myself credit for the discipline I had in my life in various areas, when I compare that discipline to theirs, I no longer see anything for which to give myself praise.

To determine whether you're successful at something in your life, you first, whether consciously or not, define it. For example, many of the athletes in the Olympics go to "win gold." A good Olympics experience for them requires a first place win. Others, however, go to compete. For them, a good experience is just being there.

You do this defining, too. The way you define things determines how you see the success or failure of your actions. If you define things in a narrow way, you often don't give yourself credit for what you've accomplished.

Take exercise for instance. I used to define exercise as working out. This meant time in the gym or using my own exercise equipment, doing aerobics or lifting weights. Anything else, no matter how much exertion was required, was not exercise.

In the comic strip, "Cathy," one of my favorite comic strip character's, Cathy's dog, Electra, laments, "Dogs have had it. We've had it with your stationary bikes...your treadmills...your climbing gyms...your incessant yapping about exercise while we sit here desperate to play."^{vii}

Electra has a point. Before I changed my definition of exercise, walking or playing with my dog didn't count for exercise. But then I got my Springer spaniel, Muggins. She insisted I take her on long daily walks, and her favorite game was "keep away", which required me to chase her around the house.

Muggins showed me that a dog can be an amazing personal trainer. Because of her, I broadened my definition of exercise. My new Springer, Ducky, reaps the benefit of Muggins' lesson. The daily walks are still my favorite form of exercise.

I used to exclude housecleaning and yard work from my definition of exercise as well. My ex-husband would laugh at me for getting up early to lift weights on a day we were going to be cleaning gutters, washing windows, etc. Isn't that exercise, he'd ask me. Doesn't count, I'd tell him.

I'm not the only one who thinks that way. I once heard a woman tell someone she didn't exercise because she was too busy. Doing what, she was asked. Oh, running after the kids, cleaning the house, etc. Sure, no exercise there.

Exercise isn't the only thing you may define narrowly. You probably do the same thing with "work." "I don't work," says the stay-at-home mom. Excuse me? I bet she "works" harder than many of the people who go off each day to a "real" job.

I realized not long ago that I'd applied a narrow definition to my idea of "meditation" as well. It seems like every other book these days applauds the importance of meditation. It's supposed to help relieve stress and keep you healthy.

So I tried meditation. I tried many different types—listening to meditation tapes, counting my breath, focusing on a repeated phrase or staring at a candle. But struggle as I might, I never could quite get the hang of it. Forget stress relief. Trying to meditate was *adding* stress to my life.

The idea of meditation is to get your mind cleared or focused on just one thing so as to quiet all the incessant chatter in your head. Well, one day, I realized that I "meditate" every day.

At some point each day, I watch my dog sleep. There's something about focusing on the rise and fall of her ribs and the little muscle twitches of her whiskers and feet that calms me. I also often watch the rain or watch the breeze tickle tree branches outside my house. In these moments, I'm stilling my mind. What is this, if not meditation?

I just needed to define it differently.

When you define things too narrowly, you make things harder on yourself. Author and motivational speaker, Anthony Robbins, says the way you define success, failure, and whether something is good or bad will determine how you feel about yourself. He suggests you take a hint from a friend of his who declared that a "good day" is a day spent above ground.^{viii}

I'm a big fan of goal-setting, and I believe in setting my sights high. But I've learned that if I'm rigid about how I define a good accomplishment, I don't give myself credit for what I've done and I'm less motivated to continue to go all out toward my ultimate goal.

Learn to give yourself credit for the things you do, even if it doesn't fit some structured idea of discipline, exercise, work, meditation, a good day, etc. You need to broaden the definitions in your life and pat yourself on the back for what you've done. The next time you begin to berate yourself for not working, exercising or whatever, look closer. You're probably doing more of it than you thought you were.

ⁱ Zappala, Jenny Lynn, "Piece by piece, North Jetty repairs continue," *The Daily World* (November 18, 2000).

ii Id.

iii Palmer, Parker J., “Are you listening to your life?”, *O, The Oprah Magazine* (January 2001).

iv Id.

v “Personal identity theft on the rise,” *USA Today* (September 14, 2000).

vi Richardson, Cheryl, *Life Makeovers* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000).

vii Guisewire, Cathy, “Cathy,” *The Daily World* (August 14, 2000).

viii Robbins, Anthony, *Introduction to Anthony Robbins’ Person Power II (Cassettes)* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).