**Starting-Over Guidesheet #11**

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**What’s Your Purpose?**

***Judith Couchman***

Recently some readers found me on Facebook and told me they’ve read my 1996 book, *Designing a Woman’s Life.* It’s a book about finding and pursuing your purpose and passion in life. We’ve begun back-and-forth messages, discussing the definition of purpose and its role in our lives. Two fundamental, recurring questions have been 1) How can I know my purpose? and 2) How can I pursue my purpose?

Purpose definitely affects the starting-over process, so let’s devote the next two guidesheets to identifying your purpose and how to pursue it. Thinking about it now, I should have written about purpose much earlier than this. But what’s the saying? Better late than never.

**What Is Purpose?**

Read five different authors and you’ll probably gain five different definitions of a life purpose. So wisdom means mulling over the input and ultimately deciding on your own definition. My favorite definition of individual purpose originates with Richard Bolles, the author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Purpose is “to exercise our greatest talent for God’s work in the world.”

Pinpointing a life purpose isn’t so ethereal that only the mystical and monastic can do it. Much of your purpose already resides within. To define this purpose, you can ask questions. The key is truthfulness. No holding back. No answers that reflect who you think you *should* be rather than *who you really are.* No worrying about what others think. Briefly, these are the questions to consider:

*What are my talents and gifts?* God created you as a unique individual and molded you in his image of giftedness. Everyone possesses natural talents and spiritual gifts. If you have trouble thinking of yourself as talented or spiritually gifted, you can ask, “What am I good at doing?” These are physical, relational, or spiritual things you do well and the work satisfies you. They include what you do now and what you stopped doing somewhere along the path to today.

*What are my dreams?* Disregarding real or imaginary constraints, how would you like to use your talents? What desires are tucked in your heart? What would you love to spend a lifetime—or at least a season—doing? What would produce joy and meaning and contentment? What accomplishment stays buried for fear you’re incapable of achieving it or someone might laugh at the idea? Risk pulling it out and mulling it over. Scripture says God gives us the desires of our hearts. Could it be you repressed a dream that is actually his purpose for you?

*What is my calling?* To answer this question, consider not only what you do, but whom you’re to serve with these talents and dreams. The novelist Frederick Buechner wrote my favorite explanation of calling: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” God doesn’t give you talents and spiritual gifts just to lavish them on yourself. He wants you to use them for his redemptive kingdom. Frequently a calling falls in step with the natural course of your life; other times, it radically uproots you from familiar surroundings. A calling can last a lifetime; it can last for only a specified time period. The direction and duration depend on God’s desire for each individual, so it’s vital to ask him periodically to reaffirm your calling and amend it with his fresh direction.

**Defining Your Purpose**

When you’ve answered the questions, staying true to yourself, you can prayerfully define your purpose. Many ways exist to structure a purpose statement, but I recommend describing it in terms general enough to span a lifetime but specific enough to guide our goals and decisions. It can also state the people we want to reach and the desired outcome of serving them. Here are some examples:

* To compose music that nourishes the soul.
* To participate in healing children’s wounded hearts so they can grow into whole and spiritually alive adults.
* To manage finances so families and companies align with sound principles about money.
* To represent downtrodden people so their physical and spiritual needs are met.

If at this juncture you’re still uncertain about your inner self, it’s better to experiment with a stated purpose than to continue an ineffectual, meandering lifestyle. God honors faith and you can ask him to “establish the work of your hands” (Ps. 90:17) when it feels as though you’re bumbling along. You can remember that “the steps of a [person] are directed and established by the Lord . . . Though he falls, he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord grasps his hand in support and upholds him” (Ps. 37:23-24).

**Writing a Purpose Statement**

If you haven’t defined your purpose, these questions can help.

1. What has kept you from defining your purpose?
2. How would knowing your purpose affect your life?
3. What are your natural talents and spiritual gifts?
4. What are your dreams?
5. What is your calling?
6. What could be a possible purpose statement for you?
7. Who could help affirm/refine your purpose statement?

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