

Staying on Purpose

Hurdle the obstacles that thwart your personal mission.

- Discipleship Journal Feature Article
- Published in the January | February 2001 issue
- Written by Judith Couchman

Evelyn Harris enjoyed ribbon-and-lace comfort as the daughter of a prosperous, turn-of-the-century London merchant. Then at age 30, she heard about the great physical and spiritual needs in India and committed herself to serve there. In that country she married Jesse Brand, a handsome visionary who shared her passion for the poor mountain people. The couple set up housekeeping in "the mountains of death" and pursued their vision.

Nothing about their chosen work came easily. The monstrous terrain fought back as they traveled and cultivated it. Bound in a tight caste system, the people worshiped devils and feared a witch doctor who blocked medically trained Jesse from tending the sick. But he and Evelyn applied their resourcefulness and determination to the challenge. They built homes, schools, and dispensaries; taught trades and hygiene; introduced agricultural products and techniques; and preached to surrounding communities. Yet it was years before anyone responded to their life-changing claims about Christ.

Then after a trip to South India, Jesse grew ill. Four days later, at age 44, he died from blackwater fever. While the mission board assumed Evelyn would leave the hills, she insisted on continuing the work she and Jesse loved.

At retirement age, Evelyn quit the mission board and moved to yet another mountain, supported by a family inheritance. "It's terribly marvelous to be used by God," she wrote. "Granny Brand" served in the hills another 30 years before she died there at age 95.

What enabled Granny Brand to endure? Obviously, a secure walk with God and an unflinching pursuit of His purpose for her. But within that context, she also learned to hurdle the difficulties that could have demolished her spirit and her mission.

As I've helped people pinpoint their purpose in life, I've noticed three major "purpose busters" we allow to sabotage our God-given missions. Despite all our creative explanations, the inability to follow God's call usually traces back to these underlying causes: giving in to fear, failing to focus, or growing overwhelmed by frustration. To discover the joy and meaning inherent in fulfilling

our purpose, we need to wrestle and win over each one of these possible deterrents.

Facing Our Fears

Over the last four years I've sponsored Write the Vision Retreats for women who believe (or at least suspect) they're called by God to write for publication. These potential authors often bury this calling deep within—sometimes for many years—despite their increasing desire, apparent talent, and personal writings stuffed in drawers and file cabinets around homes and offices. They need encouragement to define their unique purposes as writers. So over a three-day weekend, that's one of the goals I seek to accomplish with them.

The description "a deer caught in headlights" fits how most of the women feel and look when they embark on their first Vision weekend. If it weren't for their shreds of dignity and my no-refund policy, at every retreat several members would probably stampede for the nearest exit.

Because scared writers can morph into paralyzed, unproductive, unpublished writers, we tackle their misgivings head on. Together the group members list their fears about writing and publishing on the sheets of an easel pad. As the list snakes through page after page, growing longer and wilder, I marvel at the many ways authors frighten themselves. Certain fears emerge from every group: rejection, inadequate talent, sounding stupid in print, failing to think of anything to write about. I assure the women that at the beginning of a writing journey, an author usually feels afraid. In fact, just when she banishes one fear, another one might introduce itself and perch next to her computer.

But then I offer the retreat participants an unsettling spiritual truth. Most of our fears about following any purpose are self-absorbed. We're afraid we'll fail; we're scared of the possible sacrifice; we fear what others will think. We obsess about what might happen to *us*, when effective purpose fulfillment centers on *God*. A believer's purpose flows from the Creator. He's already built into us the abilities we need, though when He initially calls us some talents may lie dormant. He initiates the vision. He supplies the power, resources, and perseverance to accomplish the tasks. He measures our progress with mercy and grace and holds the responsibility for end results. We just need to step forward and follow Him, focusing on what we'll gain spiritually rather than what we might lose materially.

In God's kingdom, prosperous living is pursuing what He's asked us to do. It doesn't matter if we "fail" or "succeed" in the eyes of the world or even of other Christians. We serve under God's pleasure: He'll satisfy our souls on earth and reward us in heaven. We needn't feel afraid of the privilege called purpose.

Be strong and courageous, God told Joshua before leading the Israelites into the Promised Land (Josh. 1:6). Fear not, the angel reassured Mary when announcing her mission to deliver and raise the Messiah (Lk. 1:30). Don't be afraid, the Lord instructed while telling John to record the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:17). Think of the consequences if just one of these people had caved in to fear and refused the Lord's call. Now consider what might happen if you don't pursue your purpose. You could miss out on blessing thousands; you might lose the honor of ministering to just one. Either role, or any amount of influence, represents a worthy mission if it's issued from God's hand.

At the same time, the Lord understands that humans scare easily when asked to step out in faith—and that fear ranks high on the devil's list of tactics against those who want to obey their Maker. I think that's why Scripture frequently tells us not to fear. In a letter to Timothy, Paul explains: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity [fear], but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (**2 Tim. 1:7**). The Lord doesn't want fear to block our receiving and accomplishing all He intends for us. Consequently, we can lean on Him, fear not, and fulfill our purpose.

Keeping Our Focus

Clare Boothe Luce, born in the tenements, vowed at an early age to abandon obscurity and become memorable.

That she did. In the 1930s she became managing editor of *Vanity Fair*. Through her later marriage to Henry Luce, she influenced the man who created the Time Inc. publishing empire. Together they grew powerfully rich. But for Clare that wasn't enough. After stints in magazine publishing, she wrote much-acclaimed plays, served two terms in Congress, and became the U.S. ambassador to Italy.

To the public there was nothing Clare couldn't do, nothing she didn't own. In private her friends and family observed that she relentlessly sought what she never achieved: inner peace and satisfaction. Clare competed against Henry for fame and resented his control over the business. She ignored her daughter and collected enemies almost as fast as she engaged in love affairs with intelligent men.

"One achieves so much less than one's expectations," she said toward the end of her life. "I was thinking at one time of writing my memoirs and calling it 'Confessions of an Unsuccessful Woman.' I've done too many things, and it all doesn't add up."

Unfortunately, Clare never learned to focus. She jumped from one accomplishment to another, never gathering her efforts under the umbrella of a

lifetime mission. She produced lots of activity, even projects that admirers lauded and applauded, but she found little meaning.

Focus is "to fix or settle on one thing, [to] concentrate" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*) on it to the exclusion of other interests, no matter how worthy, intriguing, and rewarding they might be. Focus requires that we funnel our energy into one overarching purpose, one compelling vision—if not one a lifetime, at least one at a time.

The Apostle Paul exhibited the qualities and actions of a person who understood and stuck to his purpose. He wrote to the Philippians,

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

—*Phil. 3:13–14*

Paul's unwavering focus sustained him through beatings, shipwrecks, and imprisonment. He persevered through public ridicule, misunderstanding from believers, and the terrible loneliness of pioneering. And he instructed these early Christians to follow his example:

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

—*v. 15*

Paul's words, "one thing I do," echo the determination of any person focused on a purpose. Nothing matters as much as fulfilling God's call and reaching the final destination. Of course, this doesn't suggest we neglect key responsibilities such as family, relationships, and spiritual formation. Rather, we learn what matters most and what really doesn't matter much or at all. Getting to what really matters—to accomplishing God's priorities for us—requires cutting back our lives. But as any gardener will attest, it's the painful pruning that produces the much-desired fruit.

Dissolving Our Frustration

I opened my eyes and stared at the wall, my nose smashed against its yellow paint. Sometime in the night my cat Wolfie had commandeered the bed and sprawled across the sheets, mercilessly relegating me to a corner where I supposedly belonged. *Kind of like my life*, I thought. *Pushed up against the wall.*

In the last year my body had metamorphosed into an unpredictable network of raw nerve endings and stiff muscles, and nothing I tried naturally or medically spelled relief except pain medication. Medical tests failed to yield a diagnosis. To meet me outside of the house, it was difficult to tell I didn't feel well, but I could only keep up the charade a few hours before I needed pain pills and a long nap.

It plagued me that the pain thwarted my purpose of "publishing the glad tidings for women." For a couple of decades I'd fashioned myself as a professional Superwoman, capable of large amounts of work if I just persisted. Now it required unclaimable energy to read my e-mail. For fear of losing projects, I mostly kept the pain to myself, but that only exacerbated the situation. People waiting for my work didn't understand the slowdown and understandably grew frustrated with me. When I finally admitted the problem, I could only describe it nebulously because I didn't have a name for it. I was tired of feeling horrible, tired of trying to explain myself, tired of wondering if I'd steered emotionally off course.

Then one day I decided to stop fighting it. Maybe the prayers of friends and family finally penetrated me. I accepted that I couldn't plow through the week like other people, that for now I needed more sleep than most of them, and that I might never regain the energy I once thoughtlessly enjoyed. So I started redefining myself. I could still work; I just had to quit second guessing what people thought and manage my days differently. I struggled with constant pain, but I could still cherish life. And I could cut out the self-pity.

By mentally surrendering, I cooperated with what my physical self needed, and I improved emotionally. Friends adjusted to my unorthodox sleeping schedule, and when I wrote I didn't berate myself for not lasting longer than a few hours.

It's easy to succumb to frustration when we're focused on accomplishing something significant. All kinds of obstacles land in our paths, including the devil, his minions, and their schemes. Or it could be people and their opinions, insecurities, jealousies, and attacks. Or unexpected local, world, and organizational circumstances. Then there's personal loss and illness, inadequate provision and resources, and the death of loved ones, plus our own weaknesses, woundedness, addictions, and lack of knowledge or experience.

Frustration can evolve into discouragement, disillusionment, bitterness, resignation, and quitting altogether. We can blame God and lose our intimacy with Him. Consequently, we need to develop a perseverance that leans on faith and looks at the long-range view. We accomplish this by thoroughly casting our cares and ambitions on God, the author and "finisher" of our purpose (Heb. 12:2, *NKJV*). He can motivate, sustain, and usher us into completion. He can miraculously remove the obstacles or deliberately strengthen us as we plod through them. Our responsibility is to work with Him to creatively manage or resolve the frustrations—not just to give up.

The Greatest Pleasure

As a society we're not anchored to a value system that respects endurance or the satisfaction of delayed rewards. Instant gratification propels us to settle for what's quick and easy, yet that approach doesn't reflect God's character. The Bible says God's name, love, word, mercy, faithfulness, and righteousness endure forever. If His Spirit resides within, shouldn't we reflect His enduring character? Like a mother with her child, wouldn't we persevere for love's sake?

True and resilient perseverance springs from within, propelling us forward through peaks and valleys, joy and despair. When our purpose explodes with fulfillment, perseverance shouts, "Isn't this grand!" When we're faced with discouragement, it whispers, "Keep going. This is what you are meant to do." Either way, we win, for accomplishing God's purpose is the greatest pleasure of all.

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