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Personal Excellence

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SERVICE/RECOVERY

Make Life Worth Living

by Rabbi Harold Kushner

In studying the Torah, I heard the voice of Hagar, Abraham's concubine and the mother of his first child, Ishmael. Hagar is rejected by her husband and thrown out of her home. Her child is desperately ill. She feels alone, abandoned, friendless, and she's ready to give up on life, because after all, hasn't life given up on her?

Then I read the story of Hannah, driven to tears and despair because she longs to have children and she can't. Her husband tries to comfort her, but that only deepens her despair. She realizes that even people who genuinely love her can't understand what she is feeling and going through.

When I put the book aside and read the morning newspaper, I continued to hear voices of despair. And when I went out into the streets, the voices were less urgent but the stories were distressingly similar: the sick, the afflicted, people growing older and not looking forward to it; people disappointed in the way their lives, careers, or children have turned out.

I realized that, although the sources of their pain were different, these people were all saying: "How can you gather and pray for life? Life is no bargain. Life is pain, life is rejection. The longer you live, the more life becomes a story of things being taken away from you. Who wants to live another year if it's going to be more of the same?"

So many people are hurting, crying inwardly if not aloud, that they are on the verge of giving up on life. They are living in despair, fear, or anguish.

Once a student goes up to his rabbi and says, "Rabbi, you've got to help me. Tell me, what makes life worth living?" The rabbi looks at him and says, "That's such a wonderful question. Why would you want to exchange it for an answer?" Today, you may be asking that same question: "What's the point of living?" You ask this question in the desperate hope that somebody can give you an answer.

Let's again look at the story of Hagar. When Abraham and Sarah confront the fact that, after many years of marriage, they haven't had children, Sarah suggests that Abraham take the servant girl Hagar as a second wife and have a child with her. It works, they have a son, but then Sarah resents Hagar, and prevails on Abraham to get rid of the maid and her child. They are sent out into the desert. After a few days, they are out of food and water. The child is at the point of death, and Hagar is so depressed that she doesn't even have the energy to comfort him. She just puts him down and goes off by herself and cries because her life has become a story of loss, pain, and misery.

And then God sends an angel who says to Hagar, "Go to the child and take him by the hand." That's the answer. The magic cure for that sense of futility, that sense that there is no point in getting up in the morning, is not pills or years of therapy. The cure can be summed up in four words: *Find somebody to help.*

For those people whose depression results from what happens to them, the cure is Hagar's cure: find somebody to help. When Hagar stops feeling sorry for herself and reaches out to someone who is worse off than she is, her eyes are opened and the world looks different to her. Now she can see all sorts of life-enhancing resources.

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CHARACTER/CREATIVITY

Spiritual Roots of Creativity

by William C. Miller

We've come full circle in our understanding of creativity. Centuries ago, creativity was the domain of divinity. By the 1800's, we began seeing people as creative—but only the few geniuses. Then, in the 1950's, we learned that creativity isn't correlated with intelligence—everyone has the potential of being creative.

Today, we've reawakened to our intimate relationship with divinity. Through spirituality, we know that creativity is the domain of the divine and man. We share the Creator's nature, so we share in creative powers.

Creativity is the natural consequence of spiritual growth. How does spiritual growth naturally create the conditions where creativity emerges? I see four ways that our spirituality can be the basis for our creativity at work.

1. Inspiration. Spiritual practices such as meditation, visualization, and volunteer service open us up to a consciousness beyond our own thoughts and self-focused attention. With this openness, we perceive the world freshly. We hear the subtle voice of guidance from within. This same openness and receptivity allows the free flow of creative inspiration to expand within us. Creative ideas actually emerge from the open space between thoughts. This openness to inner guidance gives us access to a rich variety of ideas as well as discernment for selecting the best.

2. Motivation. Creativity is most enhanced by intrinsic motivation—not by the need for external rewards. Western notions of motivation hold that we are "moved" by needs (a lack of fulfillment) as in the marketing adage, "Find a need and fill it." However, since we are born from an intimate relationship with the Godhead, we are always full and complete. Therefore, motivation is the natural, intrinsic expression of our full nature. The corporate need for "intrapreneurs" and "passionate product champions"—who act to fulfill their own inner calling—relies on this quality of deep, self-fulfilled motivation. When we express the fullness of who we already are, as spiritual beings first, our creativity is most fully released.

3. Intention. The goal of most spiritual paths is to fully experience our intimacy with divinity and to serve others from that experience of oneness. So, the purpose of work is twofold: 1) to grow spiritually through our jobs, and 2) to serve others through this work. When we expand our goals for creative work to serving others, we expand our access to inner ideas and energy. I once led a group of salespeople in a creative process. When they gave their goal as "Making more money," I asked them, "Can you express your goal in terms of a customer benefit?" The goal of serving others opens up new vistas, fresh ideas and infinite possibilities.

4. Collaboration. Values such as love, truth, inner peace, right conduct, and respect can be found in all spiritual paths. These values also enhance collaboration, which is essential since creativity is rarely a solitary venture. These spiritual values create the climate that generates a spirit of oneness while allowing for diversity and individuality. Innovative teams are characterized by authenticity, truthfulness, and caring. Spiritual values are the foundation of creativity. PE

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ACTION: Nurture the character roots of creativity.

CHARACTER/BELIEF

Create Your Future

by Gary P. McCartney

We would be remiss if we didn't look back and offer our thanks for those who recognized the incredible challenges of their time, and then created a vision and a plan for providing a positive resolution.

When some folks were told of the need to fly, they responded: "That's impossible." "It can't be done." "I'll *believe* it when I *see* it."

Thankfully, some individuals took a different angle. They responded: "I know it can be done." "It will be difficult, but we can do it." "I'll *see* it when I *believe* it."

What's the difference? Well, for those who need to "see it before they believe it", the lessons of the Wright brothers obviously had no impact. The Wright brothers subscribed to the theory that "beliefs drive behavior." Their belief was so strong that their behavior became a manifestation of the thought that people could fly. After much ridicule and even more hard work, the Wright brothers successfully flew the first airplane. But long before that first flight, Orville and Wilbur could see that plane flying in their minds. They believed it in order to achieve it.

Those folks who need to "see it, first, before believing" have also forgotten the lessons of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had a vision for America long before he became president. He lost eight elections for various offices before being elected president. But he had such strong convictions that he persisted. Lincoln envisioned our country united around the principle of "freedom and equality for all people." He endured a civil war that split our nation. But his persistence and hard work allowed his beliefs to lead to great achievement. Lincoln is revered as one of our greatest leaders because he was willing to believe it first, before he saw it.

I hope you will build on the accomplishments of people like Lincoln and the Wright brothers. To do so, you'll need to commit to the same philosophy. They understood the need for a strong belief system; they knew that beliefs are essential to behavior; they knew that beliefs drive behavior; they knew that, collectively, we are what we think and believe; and they knew that what we believe, coupled with a lot of hard work, is what we will see.

So the lesson for you is to develop the incredible capacity to "believe." By doing so, you will build on the wonderful work started by others. And our world will be better for it. Establish a belief system that will make your desired future happen. The future is not a place you're going to; it's a place you're going to make! Believe that you can make a difference and you will. PE

Gary P. McCartney is Superintendent of Schools, Parkland School District, Allentown, PA. This article is adapted from his speech to the Graduating Class 2002 and used with permission of Vital Speeches of the Day.

ACTION:Pursue what you believe you can achieve.