



Georg Christoph Lichtenberg

Navigating Life With Purpose

my winning speeches series

The speedometer needle was dancing around 100 miles per hour. The car was my first. The red light behind me was a sure sign of another first. I know the speed because Monty Cotter, a Texas Highway Patrol officer and member of Kingsmill Community Church where my family worshipped, recorded 95 on the speeding “warning.” I was 16, the car was 8. It was a Pontiac Catalina four door hard top. I was stylin’!!

Monty wasn’t impressed with my new wheels. He was concerned for my life. He asked a simple question: “Teddy, what is your purpose today?” I had no idea what he was asking, but I had driven the dirt roads six miles one way to where Mama and Grandma lived. My purpose was to retrieve and deliver two special women to our house. That purpose I knew well and successfully met the objective over six years driving before Monty’s question. It helps to live in the country. Farmer’s sons earn the right to drive early out of necessity. I was no exception to the rule.

Regrettably, I didn’t have a purpose for being on Highway 60 trying to reach 100 MPH. Saying it was my purpose would not have been what Monty wanted to hear. He said, “If you don’t know where you are going or why, don’t risk your life.” Each Sunday morning following the speeding thing, he would call me over and say, “What is your purpose?” Sadly, I usually repeated the same message, “I don’t know.”

One day in desperation, I answered his question with “My purpose is to teach.” I remember he told me to “Drive like you want to live into your objective.” He said, “I’m sure there will be children who will learn and set firm objectives because of your chosen purpose. Now is the time to live like the leader you are destined to be.” That same year, I competed in my first public speaking contest sponsored by the Pampa Lions Club. I finished second to Doc Cornutt and was disappointed, but admittedly, that day I set a new determination to win.

Purpose filled life is what determines where you go. I believe those words with all my heart and soul. Reinforcement comes from two writers I have read often to supplement my desire to be one of the best. The first is Henry David Thoreau. Reading his book

“Walden” led me to words I now know have been repeated thousands of times in inspirational speeches. I remember discovering them somewhere near the end:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

I copied them to a journal and retrieved them during times I questioned my purpose. It was the last eleven words that stayed with me and led to a successful career in Academic, Corporate and Religious public speaking. Thoreau was important for my ultimate goal, but there is another I have adored as an inspiration.

Her name is Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Ella was a journalist and a popular American poet in the late 19th and early 20th century. While few today recognize her name, some of her lines are still very familiar. Perhaps these will ring a bell.

*“Laugh and the world laughs with you;
Weep, and you weep alone.”*
(from "Solitude")

If you studied her work in school, you are likely to be one of a select minority. She can't be dismissed as a minor poet. She was too good for that. However many poetry scholars would probably count her as a bad major poet. To me, she writes to direct purpose in my life and soon perhaps in yours.

I truly hope these words influence your purpose for a lifetime. Ella Wheeler Wilcox describes “purpose” in this excerpt from her poem written in 1916.

'Tis the Set of the Sail -- or -- One Ship Sails East
Ella Wheeler Wilcox 1916

*One ship sails East,
And another West,
By the self-same winds that blow,
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales,
That tells the way we go.*

*Like the winds of the sea
Are the waves of time,
As we journey along through life,
'Tis the set of the soul,
That determines the goal,
And not the calm or the strife.*

So a sailor can find any port using winds that blow against him or her. That's the easy part. Knowing where to go can be most difficult.

Peace always,

Ted

This is to a speech I wrote for a newly chartered Toastmasters International Club in 1988. I later used it in competition. It won in club and area competitions.