

## Aligning yourself with a larger cause

Depression can make it difficult to focus on issues beyond yourself – indeed, it can make doing so almost impossible. Depression is, by its nature, inward-looking. You relinquish your interests, your involvement in groups, and your commitment to issues. Everything is sacrificed as your energy shrinks to the point of self-preservation. This is normal.

And yet, ultimately, we cannot build a full life from a focus entirely on ourselves. In the depths of depression you will likely feel unable to look at life on a broader canvas, and certainly you are likely to feel unable to influence things on that scale. What you *can* do, however, is ask yourself what your involvement *might* be like if you had the energy, if you had the interest, and if you had the belief in your abilities. The goal one day to contribute to the larger world can guide you forward and give you an answer to that troubling question “*Why try to get well?*”

The “peak experience” described by psychologists in the 1970’s and by those who have had them throughout history almost invariably involves a perception not of the triumph of the self, but of involvement in a larger world, the immersion of the self in a bigger issue. At times, for example in experiences with the natural world, it is a sense of oneness with the entirety of life. But often it is a sense of deep involvement in, or commitment to, a cause that is greater than oneself. When we talk to people who are truly vital, energetic, and fascinated by their lives, they always seem to be actively involved in such a pursuit.

What kind of cause? It could be anything, but to provide you with a deep sense of commitment and meaning, of *point*, it should be something in accordance with your own highest values. It might be a political or social cause. It might be a religious involvement. Perhaps an environmental cause. Perhaps a community-building exercise, or a national or international cause. Some examples (there are almost as many possibilities as there are people):

- Involvement in the passing of an international landmine treaty.
- Support for international aid work.
- Sponsorship of a disadvantaged child.
- Pushing for the preservation of wetlands.
- Work on behalf of human rights.
- Initiatives to combat hunger.
- Fundraising for literacy programs.
- Building community gardens.

The cause or issue that would suit you is almost certainly not on this list, nor would it be if the list was twice or three times as long. A cause that might use your unique talents, appeal to your interest, and push in the direction of your core values – this is something that can be tricky to define.

Want to try building something like this into your life? Here are some suggestions, if such a quest seems valuable for you:

- **Don't wait for exactly the right cause.** It can take years to find something that suits you perfectly. Find something that approximates your interests first, and get involved. From that vantage point it will become easier to see something that would suit you better.
- **You still have to deal with people.** The people with whom you become involved may share some of your core values, but they are still human beings. They have diverse opinions, strange habits, odd motivations, and unaccountable tastes. They certainly won't all be your soul-mates. Prepare yourself to meet, accept, and welcome their diversity, including those aspects that seem at times to get in the way of the cause.
- **Define your ideals, then let them go.** Know what your ultimate goal might be, then recognize that you will not, on your own, achieve it. Idealists are often the least helpful members of an organization, because they spend more time dealing with their own disappointment and resentment than with the cause. You will not end world hunger, you will not cure AIDS, you will not single-handedly pass any human rights legislation. Any worthwhile cause requires the input of many people. Gandhi said *"Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."* Prepare yourself for frustration, and confront any grandiose ideas you seem to develop about your role.

In your past, has there been a cause that has given you a sense of meaning? What about other causes that appeal to you but which you have never done anything about? Take a moment to brainstorm a bit.

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Now: If you were to become involved with any of these causes, what would you like to do, exactly? (Remember that you won't find the *exact* role for yourself that you envision, but it's good to have an idea of what you might like.)

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Is there a step toward one of these causes that you would like to take in the next while? Alternatively, do you want to save your involvement until you are feeling a bit better?

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