

Falling in Love with Love Itself

The Future of Life Coaching

by Tony Stoltzfus

Life purpose is a rising movement that has been shaping the church over the last ten years and will be a major influence for the next generation. Just as the “visionary leadership” concept has been at the forefront of the way churches are led for the last season, the coming wave seems to be helping people to discover and fulfill their personal destiny. I believe God is continuing a move that began with the charismatic renewal two generations ago—unleashing and fully activating lay people, so that everyone in his body is a vital contributor to the Kingdom.

Life coaching, as a major disseminator of life purpose tools and thinking, is a key part of this new destiny movement. So let’s all pat ourselves on the back—it sure is fun and fulfilling to be on the front of the wave as a Christian life coach, isn’t it?

However, this trend also means that we as coaches face a sobering challenge: as God shapes and refines this movement to fulfill *his* own purposes, he will be shaping and refining us as carriers of it. What kind of personal refining will we need to embrace as coaches to make this a true Kingdom movement?

“We are moving beyond the age of visionary leadership—a major force in the church for the last couple decades—and into the age of life purpose.”

Visionary Leadership and Life Purpose

To get a picture of what the future may hold for life purpose, it can be instructive to look at the visionary leadership arena. Over the last generation, we’ve seen some well-known leaders undertake huge visions and get a lot of extraordinary things done for the Kingdom. But we’ve also seen some big-name visionaries crash and burn. And many everyday Christians have experienced the pain of serving under visionary leaders who have made loyalty to the vision (the leader’s vision, that is) more important than doing the right thing, loving the people the vision serves, or even loving the King we are supposed to be doing this all for. A few months ago I was reflecting on this with a friend, and he mentioned a famous saying about the founder of one of the world religions:

“He loved people in general; he just didn’t love any people in particular.”

Doesn’t sound very good, does it? In other words, to this religious leader the *visionary ideal* of loving or serving people became more important than the people the leader was supposed to be loving or serving in the first place.

Back when my wife and I ran a mentoring program for dating couples, we would occasionally run into someone who wanted a relationship so desperately that it didn’t seem to matter a whole lot who the other person in the relationship was. We called that “falling in love with love itself.” The star-struck individual wasn’t really in love with their partner: they were in love with the idea of being in love. To put it more crassly, what was driving their behavior was

not a desire to lay down their life in true love for another person, but to get their own emotional needs met. And that in a nutshell has been the Achilles heel of visionary leadership: leaders too often begin seeking to accomplish a vision in order to gain personal fulfillment and fulfill their own destiny instead of as a way to serve. The vision itself becomes a god.

Life Coaching's Greatest Challenge

And that is what I believe is the greatest challenge we face in the life purpose movement: not falling in love with love itself. Life coaching lays out a very compelling picture of the future you can have: fulfilling your destiny, living out of your passions, maximizing your potential, practicing self-care, standing up for yourself. It has a great vision for us as coaches, too: do fulfilling work at home, be your own boss, make great money, and make a difference in the world. And yes, God often does want those things for us. But are we getting people to fall in love with the right thing?

The challenge is not to confuse the *means* and the *end*. A vision is not an end: it is a means to love God, love people and bring in the Kingdom. When a vision is made into an end in itself, and you begin ordering all of your life around the accomplishing of that dream, it becomes your god. A *means* inappropriately pursued as an *end* is an idol.

Life purpose is the same way. Living your life purpose can be a great life: if it is a *means* of radically serving and sacrificially loving your Creator. In laying down your life for someone greater than you, you find true life. In losing your life, you save it. In devoting yourself to something other than self, you learn that it really is much more blessed to give than to receive. Fulfillment comes as a byproduct of seeking something else much greater.

However, life purpose can also be a vehicle for creating a self-centered, narcissistic, dead-end life if the *end* you are seeking is living your own passions. Donald Trump is certainly living in the center of his passion, and says as much. If Christian life coaching just ends up creating more Donald Trumps, we won't have made much of a contribution to the Kingdom of God!

Calling Versus Passion

I think a some of the problem comes back to the simple step of biblically defining the terms we are using. Let's start with passion. The sense of living passionately in the center of what you were made to be comes from functioning in ways that fit your identity. When you are in a role that fits your abilities, your personality type, your values, your priorities, and that seemingly all your life has prepared you to do, you'll have that wonderful sense of destiny. So living your passion is doing something that fits us, that we were made to do, that brings fulfillment, joy and productivity. Living your passion is working in a way that calls our full identity into action.

"Your passion (or life purpose) is defined as 'your full identity in action.'"

But I think as Christian coaches we need to also define the word *calling*. I define your calling as "the life of sacrificial service God has uniquely commissioned you to live that brings your full identity into action." When you see children starving on the news and your heart aches to go and feed them, or you go on a short-term mission and the idea of helping others find Jesus captures your heart, that's a call. A call is from outside of you, from God, not something you manufacture internally (although it fits who you are). And it is always about someone else, not about you. God has commissioned you to a unique task out of sacrificial, agape love for him; and

the task he calls you to is uniquely fitted to your abilities in a way that brings all of your being into action. Fulfillment and a sense of destiny is not the goal: it is the byproduct of living the call.

Here's why I believe this is important. When we think about functioning in our life purpose, or putting our own identity fully into action, we think of words like joy, fulfillment, effectiveness, productivity, satisfaction, or meaning. That's a compelling picture. So let's apply that to Jesus. His ultimate life purpose, his full identity in action, is to reign in heaven at God's right hand. So far so good. Joy, fulfillment and satisfaction fit right in with that. But Jesus' *calling*, his act of sacrificial service, was to lay down his life for the ransom of many. *The moment when Jesus was fulfilling his call was the day when he was being tortured to death.* It was not a happy moment. And scripture is very clear that the sitting down at God's right hand (the life purpose) came *only* by going through with dying on the cross (the calling).

That's probably not the picture of destiny fulfillment you had in mind when you set out to discover your life purpose! But if our understanding of destiny is not adequate to fit the life of our master and example, it's not very good theology. In the Christian walk, the end you pursue is the call, the life of sacrificial service you offer to God. Your own sense of destiny and personal fulfillment are a byproduct of pursuing that call. To pursue a sense of passion or purpose or destiny as the primary end in itself is an unbiblical dead end.

Coaching the Call

So what do you do with all this as a coach? Two things. First, align your own life with a call, not just with your passions. What is the sacrificial service your King has uniquely commissioned you for? How are you living a life today that is not all about you? A good way to check is to look at your current goals and action steps. Do they serve anyone but you?

A second step is to look at how you coach others. How are you calling the people you coach to a life of sacrificial service that results in a sense of destiny as a byproduct, instead of calling them to pursue their own passions and accomplishments? A good way to check is to look at the goals and action steps of those you coach: do they serve anyone except that individual?

In a dating relationship, falling in love with love itself means being so caught up in pursuing the byproducts of relationship (joy, fulfillment, a sense of belonging) that we are totally undiscerning about the object of our affections. In life coaching, we face that same temptation. So let's not go falling in love with love itself.

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” / Phil. 3:7-9

If this article gets you thinking, I'd enjoy hearing back from you. E-mail me at tony@coach22.com

