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Your Goals or Someone Else's?

be the person you wish to be - not what someone else makes of you

A pretty standard scenario might unfold during a meeting of friends, anywhere anytime. One says: "You really should grow your hair long." Had they included: "In my opinion..." or something similar, the words could have been taken as a simple suggestion; but that's not the way they came out. What, in fact, they have done is criticise our appearance and provided a remedy which, supposedly, we ought to be grateful for. How we respond, both at the time and later, is a fair guide to their influence over us and whether we have the fortitude and self-confidence to make our own decisions. This kind of situation occurs frequently, and if we do take notice to the point where we adopt advice, despite feeling uncomfortable with it, we have succumbed to manipulation. We have accepted another person's goal in preference to our own. In the scheme of things, an example such as this is quite petty and is unlikely to have far-reaching consequences; unfortunately, allowing others to make decisions for us can evolve into a habit. Before long, we cease being who we want or need to be, rather becoming instead a product of another's desires.

This kind of indoctrination has been going on for a long time. As a child, personal choices were few. Responsibility for what we did, our appearance and dress, and day-to-day routine were regulated by parents or carers. These adults may have had expectations and aspirations regarding our future, but positive guidance in this regard would come later. For the time being, they accepted that our view of the world was limited, so our wish to be a starfighter or a movie actor when we grew-up was never taken seriously. Even so, while the Olds were happy to simply protect and guide, there were others of lesser years with their own agenda, often sinister and purely selfish. Remember the kid who suggested a course of action which we took in ignorance only to land up to our neck in hot water? We would probably have offered the tired excuse: "She made me do it." Disapproving adults might then have come back with: "If she'd told you to jump off a cliff, would you have done that?" Here there were two forces working on us: a childish, mischievous one urging us to accept a dare which they knew would get us in trouble; the other being a parental warning to think for ourselves and not to trust everything that presents itself to us. Unfortunately, this philanthropic wisdom was fairly hypocritical because their personal need for a greater influence was waiting in the wings to rear its ugly head. On sports days they were there on the side-lines, shouting advice and encouragement; then afterwards launching into a critical appraisal of our performance, how to improve it, and the likely consequences if we didn't. Later came increased pressure as they tried to steer our life in a similar direction to their own, but with better results; or maybe away from it because they wanted us to succeed whereas they had failed. No wonder maturing children seeing their individuality being taken from them want to break free.

Once out in the big wide world, the manipulation goes on, although it may not be recognised as such. Peer pressure is accepted because it just seems like friends offering available choices that could be beneficial – but for whom? It may be discovered later that some mentors are far less interested in our well-being than they are in their own self-confidence. Without the endorsement of the majority, they begin to doubt their decisions, both casual and lifestyle. Vegetarians, non-smokers, teetotallers, wannabe trend-setters, all of them would like to believe that their choice of lifestyle and appearance is universally desirable and will guarantee a healthy, comfortable and enjoyable future; but they aren't 100% sure, so they try to convert as many as possible to the cause. Maybe their suggestions are well-meaning and might work for some, but they could be totally unsuitable for our situation. Then there are the ones who insist we do this or change that

mainly to satisfy their own secret agenda, caring little for the consequences we might have to suffer. Why do they really badger us to go to the party – because they know we will enjoy it, or because we are always a source of amusement, for them in particular? Or could it be that we are the only one with a car and haven't lost our licence like the rest of them? It's pretty naive to think that everyone only wants the best for us and not for themselves.

Losing sight of goals can't always be blamed on the machinations of others. Quite often we are side-tracked by our own weaknesses, envy being a major culprit. Trying to keep up with the Joneses is a classic example. Someone's new car or house, their job and the wealth it brings, the fact that they can afford overseas vacations and a designer wardrobe, these and many more apparent successes can make us believe that we must be doing something wrong not to have them. But were they on our original wish list, or has the assumed glamour of them slithered in later, blinding us to the point of self doubt? If we are fortunate enough to recognise that we may be straying, pausing to re-evaluate can help bring us back on track. Conversely, it might be realised that desires and preferences have changed over time. Either way, rather than imagining ourselves being satisfied with someone else's ideals, we are thinking about the kind of future we know will suit who we are.

The influence of overpowering personalities and the need to feel part of a group can often find us going along for the ride, even though we feel uncomfortable with it. Too much of this and we eventually have to admit that these associations need to be broken if we are to regain control of our lives. Whether we do anything about it will depend on strength of character. Even this may not be enough when the main influence comes from within an intimate relationship. There is a tendency to tolerate for the sake of harmony. Personal goals may be put on hold, perhaps abandoned altogether because they don't suit the partner. These goals may have been a reason for the development of the relationship in the first place, both parties seeming to be stimulated and excited by the same dreams; but neither will know until later if that was truly the case, or one was just pretending for obvious reasons. Time alone will tell, and it may be that both agree to accept the practicalities of life which are demanding a compromise. That's fine if both are thinking along the same lines, but compromise has to be reciprocal. If the same person is constantly backing down to keep the other happy, the disadvantaged one is unlikely to be satisfied with the outcome. When personal goals are being constantly eroded by opposition, the dreams they were leading to eventually fade leaving the dreamer in limbo, seeing little to look forward to. Some long-term marriages would seem to dispute this and I hope that most couples continue to be genuinely happy together; but I suspect that a few unions only survived because one of the partners decided to accept a life that was not what it might have been, but was better than a life alone.

It is all very well to find fault, not so easy to come up with a remedy. With respect to being manipulated, there should never need to be a conflict between what others suggest you should do for yourself and what you believe is likely to be right. Before taking their advice, you first need to think objectively about where you are going and which goals are likely to take you there. Never mind why the suggestion was made and what the adviser might have to gain from it; simply consider if it is going to take you further along your road to the future you desire, or away from it. Just once in your life, be selfish: see your goals, both short- and long-term, then work through them until you find your dream. It will be there.

At the end of the day, the proof of the pudding is undoubtedly in the eating. Nobody knows whether they have chosen the right goals until they are living their dream and enjoying it. Early on in the piece we don't really know where we are going and what will provide ultimate contentment, so these dreams are merely ideas borrowed from the achievements of others as an interim possibility or desire. Not everyone can be King of the world, or Queen of the catwalk, but working towards any dream means we have a desire for a happy future. The goals we select to take us there are important because they are positive and forward-thinking. Should it be realised later on that the dream wasn't truly for us and that another seems better suited, switching goals in mid-stream shouldn't be considered as failure, rather responding positively to a spark of awareness that arrived in time to prevent a mistake we might eventually regret. What prompted

us to arrive at this decision is irrelevant. It may well have been the suggestion of a manipulator, or the fact that they over-did the conditioning which pushed us into a situation we would never have entered on our own, but that turned out to be a source of enlightenment.

Although others try to guide us in a direction that satisfies their own ends and, in fact, their dreams may seem similar, the goals that will take us to our true happiness are ours alone. We need to recognise these guiding lights and follow them.

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