

## **Reflections During a European Vacation**

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This is my last website article until September. As I have expressed each year in my June article, I am very appreciative of the many thoughtful comments I have received in response to my monthly columns. The feedback, questions, and insights from my readers are always welcome and very meaningful to me. One of my primary goals in writing these articles is not only to share information and ideas but to have the information and ideas serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

This article is being sent out later in the month than previous articles. One reason is that my wife Marilyn and I were on vacation in Italy during the first two weeks of June and except for my writing a few e-mails, especially to family, I made an effort to forego engaging in work-related activities. I thought it wise to practice what I preach about balancing one's personal and professional lives. Consequently, I wanted to focus my time and attention on visiting the many historic sites in Rome, Venice, and Florence, walking around and taking in the beauty of these lovely cities, enjoying delicious meals, and spending uninterrupted time with Marilyn. Professional writing and related activities would wait until I returned to Boston.

### **Self-Reflection on the Streets of Italy**

Little did I know that while not involved in specific work-related activities during my vacation I would engage in some noticeable self-reflection. Some might contend that it was the psychologist in me that prompted this reflection, but I would argue that even if I were not a psychologist, these same thoughts would have emerged, especially since Marilyn independently voiced similar observations. Of course, being married to a psychologist for so many years might have influenced her perspective or perhaps it was the other way around, namely, her perspective influenced mine.

As we toured the famous sites of Italy, including the Colosseum, the Forum, the Sistine Chapel, the Accademia Gallery in Florence that houses the awe-inspiring sculpture of David by Michelangelo, the canals of Venice, or vineyards in the Tuscany countryside, we were surrounded by thousands of other tourists. We heard many

different languages being spoken and witnessed countless tours being conducted and photos being taken at a rapid rate.

We found ourselves constantly maneuvering so as not to bump into the multitude of people walking in the streets. At one point, standing in a square in Rome, Marilyn shared a thought that interestingly I had at the same time, that in seeing in this one small area of Italy thousands of visitors from all over the globe you begin to appreciate how many people from such diverse backgrounds there are in the world. You also realize how small each one of us really is given the billions of others with whom we share the planet. And if you want to take this image a step further, who knows how many other planets with living beings exist in the universe.

### **Significance in Our Own Small Worlds**

These thoughts could serve as the basis of a script for a Woody Allen movie, capturing an existential crisis that questions the significance of any one person in the grand scheme of things. Or we can move away from a script of personal angst to a more positive perspective that appreciates and considers the ways in which each one of us can be influential within the confines of our own small, personal world.

Marilyn and I saw instances of this more positive view during our travels in Italy. For instance, we visited a vineyard that was owned by a man who had given up a corporate position 20 years earlier to purchase what seemed to be a run-down piece of land. It is now thriving as a vineyard. It not only sells wine but offers particular services, including cooking classes. I had an opportunity to chat briefly with the owner who expressed much satisfaction and gratefulness about the decision he had made to change careers. His pleasure in hosting the visitors as they engaged in wine and food tasting was very evident. He enjoyed seeing our enjoyment.

A young woman who worked there explained the history and process of wine making. She accompanied us to a dining room in which we sampled different foods with different wines. She displayed a warm sense of humor, a noticeable pride in the success of the vineyard, and a contagious smile as she met and interacted with people from all over the world. She seemed aware that in her own small way she was adding some happiness to the lives of others, even for just a brief time.

I also thought about the staff at the hotels at which we stayed in each of the three cities. Marilyn selected the hotels based primarily on comments offered on TripAdvisor. I realize that if you are in a service industry such as hotels, it is important to make your guests feel comfortable and welcome. However, I felt that not only did the hotel staff desire to make Marilyn and me feel welcome, but they experienced genuine pleasure and a sense of purpose in witnessing our satisfaction. For example, when we checked into the hotel in Venice, we were not really satisfied with the room especially in terms of the size. The manager immediately offered a larger, more expensive room at the same rate as our original room. While we felt fortunate that this larger room was available, what most impressed me was how happy the manager was that we were satisfied. It wasn't just that we would provide an excellent review on TripAdvisor, which Marilyn did, but I felt that it validated and brought meaning to the manager's work.

I realize that some people may believe that I am inferring more positivity to the intentions of the vineyard owner, the woman who worked for him, or the hotel manager than is warranted. Perhaps I am, but I don't think so. Some might contend that the woman explaining the different foods and wine had as her main goal people purchasing the wine. Perhaps the hotel staff was simply adhering to a policy of meeting the needs of their guests, especially if they feared that if they did not do so a negative review would be posted on-line. Yet, I believe more was involved in their actions than seeking to avoid the negative; I could not help but think that they felt fortunate that they were in a position to enrich the lives of others. I felt that the manager of the hotel in Venice was sincere when we were checking out and he said to us that he was happy to see that we were satisfied with the second room that we were shown.

### **Providing Meaning to Our Lives**

In thinking about the trip to Italy, it was apparent that the psychologist in me never truly disappeared, especially as I thought of all of the people we spoke with and saw. They all had their own stories to tell, their own joys and sorrows, their own actions that brought meaning or purpose to their lives. I thought of my many writings about how contributing to the lives of others adds meaning to our own lives and reinforces our own resilience.

I also thought of individuals who have heard me speak or have read some of my articles and sadly concluded that they were not in a position to enrich anyone else's life. But I believe we are all in a position to do so even if only within our small communities. I recall a man who approached me at the end of one of my presentations. He said, "I agree with what you said about making a difference to others. I own a convenience store in town. Some people come in late at night when the bigger supermarkets are closed. Although I work long hours, I take satisfaction in knowing that because my store was open it made it easier for people to purchase what they needed. It's not just that I made a sale but that I was helpful."

A middle-age woman told me that she volunteered teaching an art class at a senior center. She commented, "What you said about finding purpose in one's life really resonated with me. I always look forward going to the senior center and helping people discover some artistic ability. The gratitude of the seniors is worth a million dollars to me." She added with obvious emotion, "Recently, one of the women who had been in the class passed away and I received a lovely note from her son, telling me how much taking the class had meant to his mother. He framed one of her paintings."

### **"What's It All About, Alfie?"**

Most of us know or are known by an incredibly small percentage of individuals in this world, which is not surprising since it is estimated that there are now more than seven billion people on earth. While we may not think about this small percentage on a regular basis or rarely at all, many of us do consider what brings meaning to our lives. A middle age man I was seeing in therapy reported he was having a "mid-life crisis," which included a brief extramarital affair. He quoted the first line from the well-known song "Alfie" composed by Burt Bacharach, "What's it all about, Alfie?" He observed that he did not know what it was all about, that he did the same thing and saw the same people each day and he felt "empty." He wondered what brings meaning and satisfaction to a person's life.

In the song he quoted we are told, "Without true love we just exist, Alfie." Although there may be various definitions of true love, I would include within the activities that bring purpose to our lives those actions that serve to enrich the lives of others. As I sat in the square in Rome, observing hundreds upon hundreds of people

constantly walking by, I knew that similar to myself, most people have relatively small, circumscribed worlds. However, rather than feeling inconsequential, we should instead ask, “What is the positive impact I can have on even one person with whom I interact?”

When I consider “what’s it all about?” I often think of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s attempt to answer the question, “What is success?” On several occasions I have quoted what Emerson wrote:

To laugh often and much;

To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;

To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;

To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;

To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition;

To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.

This is to have succeeded.

We may be only one among seven billion, but each of us in our own small way in our own small community can achieve Emerson’s criteria for success. If each of us engaged in just one of his criteria on a regular basis, the seven billion number would seem less formidable and less impersonal as each person touched the life of at least one other person.

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