

Seven Paths to a Meaningful Life by Philip Zimbardo

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The following is adapted from a commencement address Philip G. Zimbardo delivered at the University of Puget Sound earlier this month. Dr. Zimbardo, a giant in the field of social psychology, is now a professor at Palo Alto University, a professor emeritus at Stanford University, and the president of the Heroic Imagination Project. In the text of his talk below, we have embedded links to research supporting his advice to graduates.

As I now complete my 55th year of teaching psychology, I am ever more grateful for the unique opportunity we teachers each have to learn from and share in the youthful exuberance of our students.

Teachers who inspire their students are everyday heroes, who should be more treasured by our society, as should parents and guardians like you here today who have sacrificed much for the well-being and success of your longtime students.

I wish for all of you graduates a happy life and one that contributes to the collective good. To help you on your way, I want to lay out seven paths to personal happiness and collective well-being based on insights from my research on evil, heroism, time, shyness, and the power of the social situation.

So, here are Dr. Z's seven paths to a fulfilling life, both personally and communally.

1. Use time wisely and well.

Time is our most precious asset, never to be wasted, and always to be used mindfully by balancing its three energy sources: Being well-grounded in a positive past that links you to your family, identity and culture; being open to the power of the hedonic present that connects you to the energy flow of the moment; and also in being motivated to succeed to the full extent of your ability in your hope-filled future that in turn, enables you to soar to new destinations.

With that temporal balance comes a new flexibility in adapting to the many situational challenges you will face. Respect and learn from the past, yours and those of others. Selectively immerse yourself in a present-orientation that fosters human connection and compassion, while opening you to appreciate nature and art more fully. Use its pleasures as self-rewards for the hard-earned successes you have won, and will achieve by being future-focused.

Finally, although there is never enough time in our fast paced lives, we each must learn how to make time for family, make time for friends, and make time for personal fun.

2. Love a lifetime of learning.

For several decades, you have been living a rather privileged life—one filled with the entitlement of being free from many societal obligations in order to think, to learn, to reason, to question, and to create. It is now time for you to more fully appreciate that gift by continuing to be a studious student for the rest of your life. As you do so, in Life 2.0, you will add on the commitment of making your community and your nation better in every way that you can.

For me, my continual joy in being a somewhat ever-older student means that I am always filled with curiosity and wonder, asking why, discovering how, challenging ignorance, and demanding evidence for all assertions by the “true believers.”

3. Nurture your passions.

In addition to making your usual, to-do list of tasks for the day, try making a second private list of what it is that you really want in life each day. Discover what you really feel passionate about and make that an essential focus and energy source in your life.

Doing so means that passionate endeavors will become a source of personal pride, which will help guarantee that your life will never be “meaningless” to you when you look back on it in the future, as too many economically successful business people have sadly reported.

4. Transform shyness into social engagement.

Practice becoming the socially engaging host at life’s parties instead of resigning yourself to be its perpetually reluctant shy guest.

Just as we all have a choice of being a leader or a follower, we each choose whether or not to adopt a shy persona, or a more outgoing one. Shyness is a self-imposed social restriction that limits others from having access to your inner strengths and virtues because you have created that social barrier. My metaphor for shyness is that it is a self-imposed psychological prison, in which one gives up freedom of association and freedom of speech—the most prized and hard-won freedoms of any democracy. But it is our own thinking and feeling that makes it so, not any natural law of nature.

One unexpected joy of graduation and moving on to new venues is that no one there yet knows that you are shy, so you can start all over and fool them into being excited to come to your parties, where you will dance with them, like in novelist Nikos Kazantakis’ wonderful *Zorba the Greek*.

5. Remake your image.

It is time to trade in your familiar, comfortable habits for personally challenging, novel adventures that can liberate you from the boredom of predictability. From time to time, consider violating the expectations others have about what you are expected to do, or you have come to do routinely and mindlessly.

To rise above the mundane, it is time to take more calculated risks, to learn from your

mistakes, to try harder and think wiser the next time around. The simple solution for avoiding cognitive dissonance when your decisions do not work as you had hoped is to practice saying, "I made a mistake. I'm sorry, forgive me, Let's move on."

6. Become a positive deviant.

One source of negative group power is the pervasive pressure of social norms over each of us to not take action in emergency situations, to not get involved, to mind our own business, to do nothing when we know we should do something.

Most of us, when we witness examples of bystander apathy, typically say, "I would have gotten involved!" However, when we are actually caught up in the social drama of the social situation, the majority of us cave into the social norm of being helpless, mindless bystanders.

Time to change that. Practice being a social deviant in small ways to experience the power others have over you. Try putting a black dot on your face for a day. When questioned about this out of character marking, simply say, "I just felt like doing it, no big deal." If you can resist the pressures friends and family and strangers will most likely impose on you to get rid of it, you will have gained a new sense of inner power of the one over the many.

Last, and for me most important, is path seven.

7. Train yourself to become an everyday hero.

Finally, it is time to start a new social revolution by becoming a willing social change agent, prepared to change the world for the better, each day in some way, by standing up, speaking out, and taking action, to do the Right Thing when others are doing the Wrong Thing, or the No Thing. You will make a commitment to challenge all evil in whatever forms it takes, doing so with moral courage linked to righteous integrity.

Let the most valued private virtues of compassion and empathy be your guiding light, but let readiness to engage in everyday heroic action be your daily goal and your most respected civic virtue. Develop a personal code of honor that you are willing to share with others.

Heroism can be developed, can be taught, and can be trained, like other vital individual characteristics, such as assertiveness and mindfulness. Heroism is acting on behalf of others in need or in defense of a moral cause despite potential risks and costs. Thus, it requires a socio-centric orientation rather than an egocentric one. Egocentrism, like pessimism and cynicism, is an enemy of heroism.

You will be more likely to notice someone in need if you have developed the daily habit of opening yourself to other people by routinely noticing what others are doing and imagining what they are feeling. One way to do so each day, in some way, is by trying to make other people feel special, respected, and valued—by sharing with them justifiable complements, while acknowledging their unique individuality.

Also remember that when people are organized into action networks, they carry out the most effective heroism, not as solo warriors. So learn to persuade others to share your

vision of what needs fixing, by assembling your buddies into a Hero Squad to challenge collectively the evils of action, such as bullying, gender violence, discrimination, corruption, fraud, slave labor and sex trafficking, while also opposing the more pervasive evils of inaction, such as ignoring the threats of the devastating consequences of global climate change, and the failure to remedy the socio-economic devastation of our Native Americans by decades of non-action or wrong actions of our government agencies.

The challenges before you are many, the opportunities endless, all awaiting your solutions, your youthful energies, and most of all, your glowing idealism ready to be infused into a new kind of smart and wise social activism that can reshape our society in the next decades.

My call to action: Just Do It—But Do It Heroically.

Go forth in peace and joy and love to remake the world for the better, bit by bit, person by person, cause by cause, and heroic action by action.