

Do You Love What You Do?

This may be the seminal question for our age.

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

Warren Bennis has always been one of my heroes. Dr. Bennis is a distinguished professor and founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California and a visiting professor at Harvard Business School and Harvard Kennedy School. His books on leadership have sold over a million copies. Along with being one of the greatest teachers and writers in our field, he's also a good guy. At various stages in my career, he has taken the time to give me words of recognition, support, and encouragement. His consideration has meant a lot to me. Besides being successful and brilliant, he's thoughtful. These words don't always go together.

The other day, Warren and I were speaking to a group of educators from many of the top MBA programs. As Dr. Bennis was discussing his latest views on leadership, he decided to "take a detour." He began to ponder his own journey through life and the lessons he'd learned. He openly reflected upon his personal struggles -- not as a teacher of leadership but as a practitioner of leadership -- when he was the president of the University of Cincinnati. His voice noticeably quavered as he recalled one of the most important moments in his career. As he was speaking to a university audience in his presidential role, one of his friends in the room unexpectedly asked: "Do you love what you do?"

A long, awkward silence filled the room as he pondered the question. As a president, he searched for the right answer, but as a human, he wanted the real answer. Finally, in a quiet voice, he replied, "I don't know."

That revelation plunged Warren into deep reflection. It dramatically altered his path through life. He had always thought that he wanted to be the president of a university. It had not dawned on him that after he got there he might not actually enjoy the life of a university president.

Do you love what you do? This may be the seminal question of our age. In yesterday's world, where professionals worked 40 hours a week and took four weeks of vacation, this question was important, but not nearly as important as it is today. I remember visiting, in the early 1980s, the corporate headquarters of one of the world's most successful companies at 5 p.m. There was almost no one there. You could fire a cannonball down the hall and not hit anyone. Those days are gone. It was much easier to find meaning and satisfaction in activities outside of work when we were under a lot less pressure and worked far fewer hours. Not only did people have more time, they weren't as tired.

Almost all of the professionals I work with are busier today than they ever have been in their lives, working 60 to 80 hours a week. They feel under more pressure than ever. Cell phones, PDAs, and emails forever tether us to our work, whether we like it or not. Put it all together and - if you don't love what you do -- it can be a kind of new-age professional hell. We can be wasting our lives waiting for a break that never comes.

Life is too short. It's not worth it. In the new world, we don't have to love everything that we do, but we need to find happiness and meaning in most of our professional work. One of my coaching clients, Vicky, has a mind that races at about 1,000 miles an hour. She's extremely creative and entrepreneurial. Vicky was working as a division president in a large, somewhat conservative company. The people who hired her believed that they wanted someone who would "rock the boat" and "make waves." Once they began to experience "waves" and "boat rocking," though, they decided that this might not be such a great idea after all!

Although I was hired to help her fit in with the existing culture, it was just a bad match. She was becoming frustrated with her life and was frustrating many of the executives who were running the firm. Summing it up in one sentence, she groaned, "I feel like a racy sports car that's being asked to act like a Ford pickup truck!"

As her coach, my advice was simple: "Leave." She had beaten me to the punch, replying, "I just did!"

There's nothing wrong with Vicky. There's nothing wrong with her company. She just didn't belong there. When she asked herself, "Do I love what I do?" her answer was a clear no.

Vicky's time off for reflection after leaving her job didn't last long. She's playing a key role in an entrepreneurial startup, she's on two boards of nonprofits doing a lot of good things for her community, and most important, she's having a lot of fun. As for Warren Bennis, he's of course having fun too. It's scary to think what we all would have lost without his moment of reflection.