

Goals, Milestones, and Passages

Well, if all goes well, in the next couple of weeks, I'll be hitting 55 years old. Moving to "double nickles" has gotten me thinking about the accomplishments we make in our life, and the artificial passages that we measure those accomplishments by.

For better or for worse, most of us tend to evaluate our place on the road of life by a set of common passages and timeframes that many people go through -- marriage by 30, kids by 35, retirement at 65, red sports car at 50. But those artificial passage dates are just that -- artificial. Some people marry younger, some marry older; some have kids by the time they're 20, while others never get to have children. Some people don't start down the best part of their pathway through life until after 60 or 65. Some retire, some don't -- and some never get started.

That's life.

But it's common for all of us to measure our lives and our successes and failures at points in our journey. The start of a new year is one of those points; a birthday is another one. I look at "55" as the time where I could have paid a senior citizen rate at the "Venice Theatre" in the town where I grew up. But the theater has long since burned down, and by modern standards, the age 55 is just getting going for most people. Many people who are now 40 or 50 or 60 will live beyond 90, and today's kids may see 100 without too much trouble.

But these artificial milestones sometimes make people do really stupid things. Some people (mostly men it seems) near age 40 or 50, and foul up their lives and their marriages by wild flings, expensive sports cars, and new toupees. In fact, an article I read in the Wall Street Journal notes that most sports cars traditionally have been sold to middle-aged men -- in other words, people looking for some kind of prop to use in their midlife crisis.

It's far better for us to establish our own milestones -- goals down the road that

we can use as springboards to help us accomplish more and do better.

As a way of example, each year I tend to drive a 8-9 hour trip from Las Vegas, Nevada to San Jose, California. I set up a small sheet with milestones along the way -- a "269 miles to Barstow, 69 miles from Barstow to Mojave," sort of thing. The silly little sheet doesn't make the trip any shorter, but by setting up milestones along the way, it gives me a set of goals to look forward to -- and check my progress by -- and as a result, the trip seems shorter, even though it's not.

Our lives need these milestones, and we're going to get better results by setting up our own goals and milestones than by going by the artificial milestones provided by society.

Most of us will go throughout life without any clear-cut goals to follow; we may have the occasional nebulous New Year's resolutions, or the occasional goal set for us by a spouse, an employer, or something a friend wrote in a yearbook -- but we really lack clear, concise, challenging, attainable goals.

Twenty years ago, I set out on a drive one day. When I started, I had no idea where I would turn up. I got to the freeway, and turned north instead of south. I kept going on the freeway for 200 miles, then took an exit, thinking I might like to go to the Tetons and photograph the sunset. I took a road through the mountains, perfectly enjoying the day -- but as I got closer to the Tetons, I soon realized that my lack of an overall goal at my trip's beginning brought with it certain problems. As I calculated the time remaining for my trip to the Tetons, I realized I would arrive after dark. I had to be back in town the next day for an appointment -- I couldn't stay overnight, so I turned around. My meanderings, fun though they may have been, never led me to a destination, until it would have been too late -- and after I decided on a goal, I found that I didn't make it to my goal at all. Sure, it was a nice day, and I enjoyed the drive -- and for many people, that would have been enough. but I ended the day without accomplishing a whole lot of anything (other than a good example of what not to do).

Most of the people around you live their life like I lived that day. They set very few goals, if any; they never really set a destination; and though the trip may be nice, they don't achieve their full measure of ability -- because without a target to aim at, they never have anything to shoot for.

It really doesn't matter where you are in your life now; what matters is that you set a goal, set a target, set a milestone, and then actively work toward achieving it, whatever it may be.

We have goals, passages and destinations in life -- but it's much better when they are from our own design, not the expectations of society around us.

Copyright, 2009, by Daryl R. Gibson. All rights reserved. Permission is hereby granted for the non-commercial redistribution of this document as long as it remains intact with this copyright and all other lines. This license does not extend to the use of this material in a compilation, whether for profit or non-profit use. Join us at <http://www.weeklywisdom.com>.