

Three Striking Signs of a Person's True Passion

Evaluate these signs for a meaningful life.

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I sat across from my mom. The hot desert sun beat down on us despite the shade of the overhead umbrella. A slight buzz danced over me. Piña coladas had been flowing for some time. It was a classic California poolside vacation. Yet I didn't feel as relaxed as passersby might assume. Rather, I felt knotted up inside. *Lost*, more specifically. I had felt this way for a while now. Unsure of my place in life, uncertain about the direction I was heading.

I was currently reading the book, *Grit*, by Angela Duckworth. The book spoke of adults who knew what they wanted to do as children. How they stuck with that passion as they matured. How they thrived because of it. I turned to my mom. "Hey... was I *really* into anything as a kid?" Hoping her answer would reveal some grand insight, she replied, "Hmm... you liked to draw." That's great. I have zero interest in drawing as an adult. Thanks, Mom. Or rather, thanks younger me for not being into something more promising. Like microbiology.

Our conversation wasn't much use. However, had I turned to history, I would've noticed a pattern. Notably, three striking signs that could have helped me. Three signs that show what someone's true passion is. Use them to uncover the answer for yourself and others.

The empress and the artist

Before she became Empress Dowager Cixi of China¹, she was a mere concubine. Chosen to sire a royal child, Cixi was illiterate, picked solely for her looks and manners. Her husband, the emperor, sought no opinion from her. In fact, laws strictly forbade him from doing so. But she loved her country and had many ideas for it.

Cixi was determined to find a way to help. Whenever the present ruler was incapacitated (often because they died), Cixi's cunning and drive placed her upon the throne. Under her leadership, the country opened its doors to trade. China flourished. When a new heir was chosen for emperor, Cixi was sent back to the harem. That is, until another opportunity came for her to lead. An opportunity she took up time and again. Where Cixi cared about China, her late husband, the former emperor, loved the arts. His focus was on opera and plays over legislation. Their priorities were obvious.

A striking sign of a person's true passion is that they keep returning to something. Even after many repeated failures, setbacks, or oustings. Like Cixi returning to her leadership role. Or Steve Jobs² resuming his work at Apple. Consider then: what do you keep finding yourself going back to? It might just be the passion you seek.

A poor shoe empire

Phil Knight³ showed up each day. Through the good times and bad. And, surprisingly, there were many bad times. While building Nike, the company was constantly in financial straits. Often they would "play the float," a nerve-wracking practice: a bill would be due. They would write a check for it and mail it off, knowing full well they didn't have that money in the account. They had hope though. They were expecting payments on their shoes to be coming in soon. If they could fund their account before their check was received, everything would be fine.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. When it didn't, the FBI got involved.

Even when it seemed to be succeeding to the outside world, Nike continued to struggle. In fact, a decade into Nike's existence, the company scrounged to pay legal fees. Yet Knight persisted. He showed up day after day. A striking sign of a person's true passion is that they persist, especially through hard times. They do it because they are passionate about what they do. Not because a boss demands it of them but because they find the work meaningful. Consider then: what do you *willingly* show up for each day?

From here to oblivion

Leonardo da Vinci⁴ struggled for most of his life. He was poor, unknown, and generally unhappy. Into his thirties, he lamented in his notebooks of despair and misery. Yet, he continued to pursue his interests. To observe, paint, dissect, create, and invent. Though we know him well today, da Vinci constantly had to fight for recognition. Why, then, did he continue? Why not pursue a different path? Could it have been that he kept being drawn back to it — as in the case of Cixi? Or maybe he simply chose to persist through hard times — like Knight.

Another example may help clear things up. Benjamin Franklin⁵ worked well into his final years. At an age where most are either retired or dead, Franklin continued to hold meetings and advocate change. He found *meaning* in the work he did. It wasn't wealth that drove him, it was purpose. And that is what drove da Vinci as well. Fulfillment of what he did. If da Vinci didn't derive meaning from his work, no amount of persistence would have allowed him to continue. No amount of revisiting would have satisfied him. Franklin and da Vinci were fulfilled by what they did.

A striking sign of a person's true passion is that they are fulfilled by what they do. Money isn't the main driver, meaning is. Consider then: what pursuit fills you with purpose? What activity gives you hope for a better tomorrow and the *oomph* to get out of bed in the morning?

Moving forward with passion

Drawing isn't my thing. But what is drawing if not a creative act? An act synonymous with writing, thinking, designing, and building. Though my mom's words didn't inspire me at the time, I can see the hidden value in what she said. And when measured against the three signs mentioned in this article, my passion becomes obvious. Use the signs to provide insight into your life as well. Again, for your reference, they are:

1. That you keep returning to something, despite shortcomings;
2. Willingly persist, especially through hard times;
3. And are fulfilled by the pursuit.

More importantly, based on those signs, consider: what do you keep finding yourself going back to? What do you willingly show up for each day? What pursuit fills you with purpose? Let your answers guide you forward to a better tomorrow.