

Personal development: A voyage of discovery

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Abstract

This paper begins with you being asked a question: “What is the purpose of your life?” It then tells the story of Allan’s personal voyage of discovery. On his voyage he found his answer to this question, and answers to many other difficult questions. This led him to the firm belief that people should consciously develop themselves and be able to answer difficult questions about and for themselves. Looking at his journey through the lens of care, he realised his voyage started with his personal development. As his career developed, and he became a business leader, he realised his role was to work with others to make work a life enriching experience for all involved. He is now working to help change the way we use the planet’s resources. His journey follows the model of care through self, others and the planet. He uses examples from his journey to demonstrate how he has come to his firm belief that “If more people took personal responsibility and consciously developed themselves, maybe they too would come to the conclusion that working with and for others we could live in harmony once again with our wonderful planet.” Finally, he shares his personal answer to the question: “What is the purpose of your life?”

Keywords

Why; Purpose; Personal Development; Enriching; Wonderful; Shine Wisely

Introduction

Dear Reader

This may well be a very unusual way of starting a paper, but I want you to do something for me before you start reading. Set your timer for 3 minutes, sit comfortably, close your eyes and just focus on your breathing. As thoughts drift in just let them go and focus on your breathing. When the timer goes off, stop it, and focus on the question: “What is the purpose of your life?” It may be worth making a note of your answer. Thank you for taking the time to do this exercise.

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What follows is the story of my voyage of discovery towards answering this question. In this paper I make statements I will not support in the typical scholarly fashion. What I say I say from experience and the belief that my experience and the story of my voyage of discovery, are worth telling in the context of moving towards an Ecology of Care.
Allan

We all develop over time. Some people develop without much conscious thought; others develop with conscious thought. What separates human beings from the animals we share our amazing planet with is our ability for conscious thought.

It is my belief that people should understand and consciously develop themselves, to the point where they ask and answer meaningful questions, such as:

- Why am I here?
- What is the purpose of my life?
- How much wealth do I really need?
- What part do I play in this world?

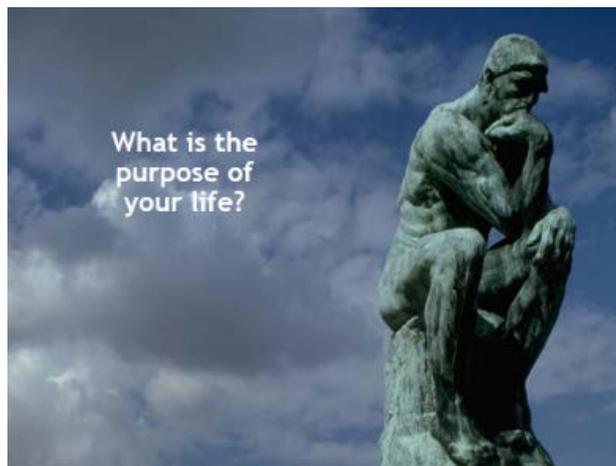


Figure 1.

I also believe that if people did consciously develop themselves and answer such difficult questions, they would care for themselves and realise that by working with and for others, great things can be achieved and we can live in harmony with our planet.

Self

What follows in my personal voyage of self-development that leads me to these beliefs. My voyage starts with the big bang as the atoms that form me were there at that moment. Through millions of years my ancestors developed and lived in harmony with the planet, by hunting and gathering. Then, around 8,000 years ago they started

farming and living in communities. Around 250 years ago they joined the Industrial Revolution and started to use their ingenuity and innovation to transform the planet's resources into goods.

My genes passed down through my grandparents and my parents and finally to me. Events in my grandparent's lives helped to shape my parents, and events in my parent's lives helped shape me as they cared for and nurtured me in my early years.



Figure 2.

My time at school and everyday experiences helped shape the foundation of who I am today. One area of particular influence was my involvement in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme where over five years I learned the importance of being physically fit, having interests, working for society and doing adventurous and demanding activities.

Education complete, my first job was in the nationalised electricity supply industry where we were passionate about keeping the power and lights on for others. When the lights went off we worked tirelessly to get them on again. We worked hard and played as hard. We had tremendous fun socially as a group.



Figure 3.

Serendipity played its part and I was encouraged by an ex-colleague to join him in a petro-chemical company. The lure of a higher salary, to help fund a reasonable lifestyle for my wife and our two children, was too great. There I quickly realised that to progress to a higher level I needed to become a “Chartered Engineer” (the United Kingdom’s highest engineering qualification). So I embarked upon five years of part-time study. Balancing family, work, education and a social life was challenging but progressively I became more knowledgeable and enjoyed the process of learning tremendously.

In my final year, one subject involved the topic of management in which I learned about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the Volvo experience, Herzberg’s motivation theories and other management approaches. However, when I asked the question “What is the most modern approach to management?”, the answers from my lecturers were not satisfactory and I embarked on a voyage to find out for myself. Over time, as my understanding grew, the question changed to “Why be a leader?”

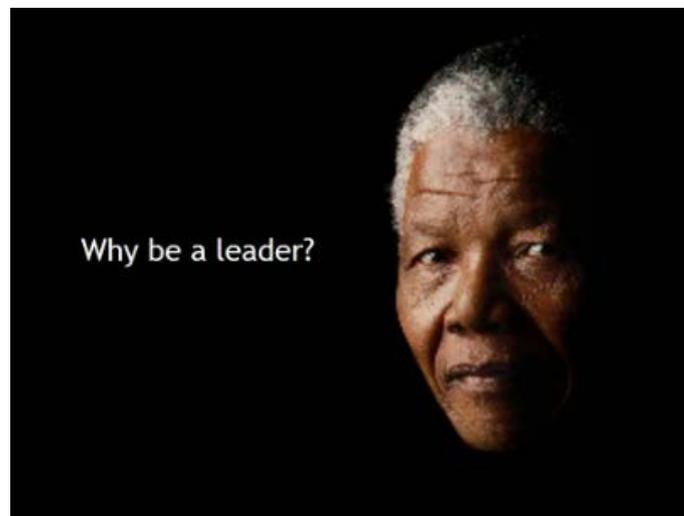


Figure 4.

This was the start of what has turned out to be an incredible voyage of discovery. A voyage requiring much thought and self-reflection. A voyage that has developed me significantly along the way. One that I now realise was the start of me consciously caring for myself.

Self and others

Serendipity played its part again and I was encouraged to join a waste management company to build hazardous waste incineration plants around the world. I was appointed to be a project manager and was very successful. The management style I adopted was the “honey badger approach”. The honey badger is recognised as one of the most ferocious animals in the world. It doesn’t take prisoners whilst getting the job done. I got the job done even if it meant “attacking a lion”.



Figure 5.

The approach worked, as I was asked to become a “Director” of the company. I felt that I had made it: large salary, big car, great pension and attending the Board Meetings. Life was going to be good from here.

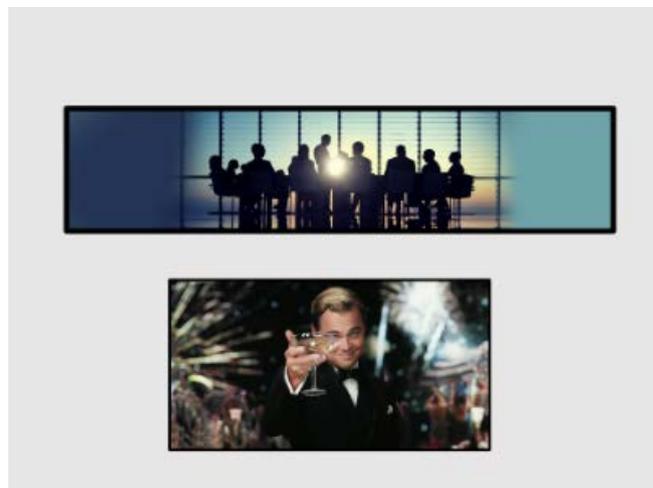


Figure 6.

I joined another new division of the Group, the Board was new, and we experimented with all sorts of business strategies and tactics, personal development activities, management approaches and leadership theories. One technique included 360-degree feedback (feedback from your boss, peers and subordinates) into our personal appraisal process. I read my feedback and was devastated. My reports and some colleagues obviously hated me. I was too task focused, didn't understand their needs and put them under incredible pressure.

My initial reaction was ‘sack them all’. On further reflection I began to realise that it was really my problem. I started to consider that maybe I should try another leadership style after realising that a ‘command and control’ approach was acceptable for a brief time but not in the long term. I became aware of John Adair’s action centred leadership approach where tasks, individuals and teams are as important as each other – I decided to give it a try.

During this period, I continued my quest to understand why I wanted to be a leader. I read excellent books about leadership and high-performance teams such as the Red Arrows (the UK Royal Air Force’s display team). I attended many lectures on leadership, self-understanding and personal development, applying what I had learned to the way I led my team. My team became more successful and they were certainly happier. After two years I was encouraged to move into another division of the Group and my team were sad to see me go.

More and more I realised that I enjoyed leading a business. This enjoyment came from using my logical intelligence: to achieve tasks and business processes; and using my emotional intelligence: to build teams and develop individuals.

These all working together as a whole, with me being at the centre, was fun and very rewarding. These six reasons were my initial answer to the question of “why I wanted to be a leader”.

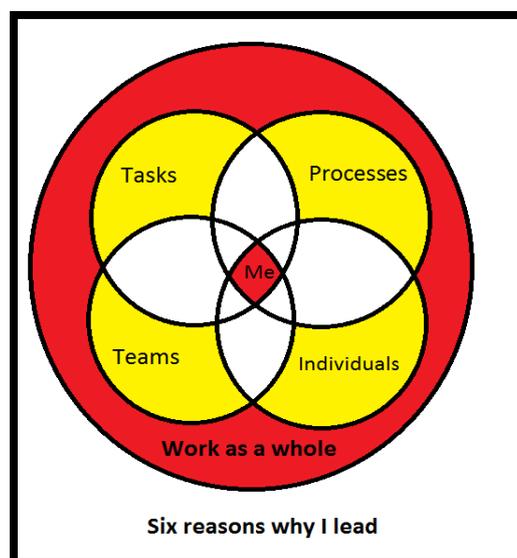


Figure 7.

More and more I realised that I could only succeed if my team was successful and we needed to be high performing over an extended period of time. Around this time, I read Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. This book had a significant impact on me; prompting me to ask myself many deep questions. It is probably the most important personal development book I have ever read. My reading continued and I learned more about neuro-linguistic programming and started to understand the concept of coaching others.

Once more serendipity struck and I met someone who became my mentor: a magnificent fellow by the name of Ray Noyes. Ray would ask me really difficult questions, like: “Was my leadership style like the Grand Old Duke of York”? (Why did his men follow him up and down the hill?)

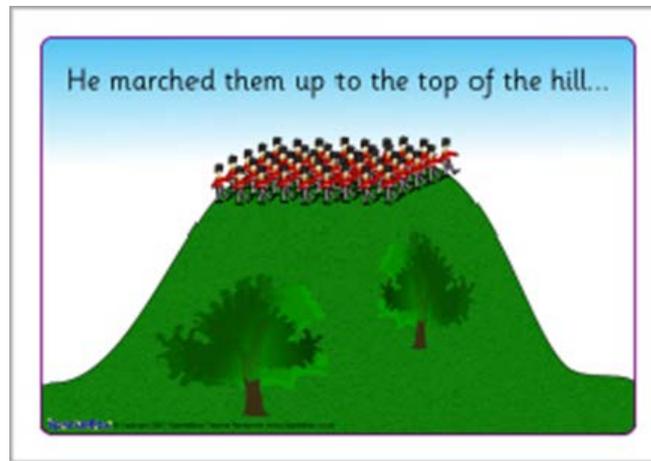


Figure 8.

These questions would normally take a while to understand and even longer to answer. He would not let me off till I had truly understood them and given him a satisfactory answer. His questions also strayed into deeper topics like “Why are you doing this, Allan?” and “What is really important to you?” He would often say “If you are not working on yourself, you are not working”.

Once every six months, I used to visit Ray at his place on a mountainside in the middle of Wales. I would go there to review all we had achieved in business, how my team was performing, what we needed to do and to refresh myself for the tasks ahead. On one of these occasions, in the afternoon, I sat and thought to myself: business was good and we were being successful. I was quite pleased with myself and what we had achieved. Then I thought “there is no point ringing my wife as she isn’t speaking to me” as “yet again” I was away from home on another business trip.

I then started thinking about my life overall.

This developed into a long afternoon and an even longer dark night of the soul. If I wasn’t careful my marriage would suffer even more, I didn’t really know my children, I had little social life, drank heavily and had little exercise. Yes, business was good, but the rest of my life was not as wonderful. I will always remember Ray coming into the room all enthusiastic to hear how I was doing. His face dropped when I told him what was happening and that this was something I had to sort out for myself.

Fortunately, I rejected the whisky bottle and remembered Steven Covey’s metaphor about going to a funeral and walking up to see who was in the coffin. Then, to your horror, you see it is you. You are aware that three people are going to talk about the person in the coffin. The question to ask yourself is: “What would you like them to say?”



Figure 9.

The night turned into a mammoth task of understanding the roles I had in my life, deciding what was really important in each of them. I thought about what I should do in each role, prioritising them, and then ensuring I would spend the right amount of time on each one. To this day I refresh the list I produced that night and try (not always successfully) to find the right balance.

The list of roles in my life that I produced that night and have updated since are as follows:

Husband	Friends	Self development
Father	Self food and drink	Self enjoyment
Grandfather	Self exercise	Worthy tasks
Relatives	Self spirit/soul	Business and career

Figure 10.

Just after this event, Ray gave me a book titled *The Heart Aroused* by David Whyte – a book of poetry and the preservation of the soul and work. My voyage started down a different path, one of understanding the more spiritual side of what we do and who we are; realising that our supreme form of intelligence is our spiritual intelligence. The intelligence that sets us aside from the animals. The intelligence that makes us ask deep questions, like “What is the purpose of my life?”



Figure 11.

I read about acting with integrity within the corporation, the inner path to leadership and about spiritual capital, the wealth we can live by. I realised that my goal was to understand and be able to answer the questions posed by my spiritual intelligence.

Then Ray, bless him, said, “I think you should be a team advisor at Runge”. He explained this was the Work Foundation’s² premier leadership programme run at Balliol College in Oxford. Delegates were put into teams where they experienced a week of the most inspirational leadership speakers. They were pushed to achieve incredible tasks and encouraged to ask themselves deep questions; whilst all the time being challenged by a team advisory who sat in the corner and asked them difficult questions, to ensure they really did challenge themselves individually and as a team.

One example of the quality of the speakers was Richard Olivier (director and author of *Inspirational Leadership: Henry V and the Muse of Fire*). Richard presented Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, a play about leadership. He acted out Henry’s speech to his troops the night before the battle, to demonstrate inspirational leadership. He received a standing ovation at the end of his presentation, the first time I have ever witnessed a standing ovation for a business speaker.

All the people I have talked to find this week at Balliol to be a life changing event. I wrote the following note a few days after returning home to record my thoughts at the time:

At Balliol I was privileged to help facilitate a group of people coming together and forming an entity. An entity with its own being, purpose and meaning.

One where people worked for themselves and for the others. One where processes were developed, implemented and refined; and exceptional tasks were achieved for the good of all.

² The Work Foundation is a UK foundation originally set up improve working life.

One where people shared their experiences, fears and dreams, in an open and honest way. One where there were no ulterior motives, no striving for personal greed. One where everybody trusted each other and all became better from the experience.

One where people pledged themselves to each other and offered their support to each other for the remainder of their lifetimes.

One where everybody worked hard to make things exciting and better for everyone.

At Balliol I had the extreme privilege of impacting on the true essence of individuals, watching their light shine, and the light shine from the group as a whole.

One of the Balliol programme leaders, Ann Paul, was there solely to help and support the team advisors. Ann and I would walk around Balliol's quadrangle most evenings to discuss the events of the day. We started off left or right depending on the difficulty of the day. At the end of the programme I said we needed to walk around in the difficult direction. I shared with her what was happening in my business life. Our division of the Group was going through a very difficult period. We were striving to achieve profits for our shareholders and due to a significant downturn in the market we were actually making a loss.

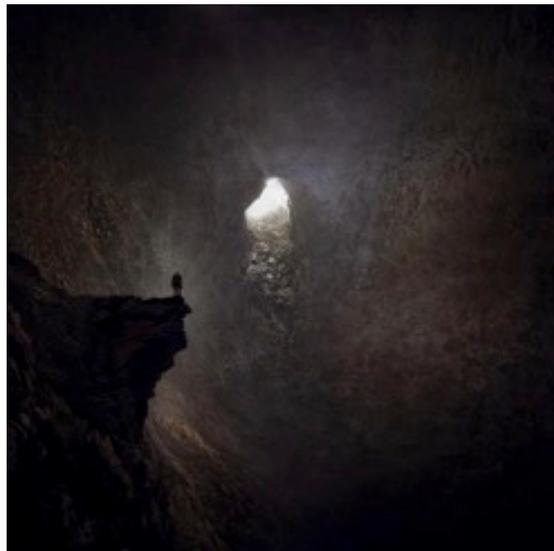


Figure 12.

We were making very difficult decisions, including driving our people very hard and finally having to close one of our operational sites and make a large number of people redundant. Much as I thought there was a light at the end of the tunnel, the light was fading and things were progressing in a way I found very hard. I was in a very dark place, wondering what I should do.

I told Ann that what I had witnessed at Balliol was truly wonderful and that it had changed my life. Also, that after years on a voyage of discovery, I had finally found the answer to my question "Why be a leader?"

I told her that:

*I wanted to be a leader.
Leader of a business whose prime purpose was to provide a life enriching
experience for its people.
A business that CARES.*

Fortunately serendipity played its part again and whilst at Balliol it was confirmed that I would become the Managing Director of a new business in the Group. We had won a large contract to look after the north-east corner of London's waste and help them turn their rubbish into a resource.



Figure 13.

“Great”, I thought, I would be left alone to put in place what I had learned at Balliol. Having selected my senior management team, I took them away and we identified what was important to us and how we would behave. We generated a vision of a “Flagship Service for 25 years” and a mission statement that encapsulated everything I had seen at Balliol. We also set about building cutting-edge technology for our sector and running our business with the ethos of providing a life enriching experience for the people involved.

On starting we transferred the existing council employees, who were obviously concerned for their future, into our company. We involved them very quickly in our decision-making processes and treated them as people, showing them they were important and that we cared.

Three months into the business we took everyone to dinner and watched the dog racing at Walhamstow Dogs Track. The purpose was to celebrate how successful we had been thus far. One 6'8" operator who was twice my width came up to me and said, “I want a word with you”. With trepidation I asked him to go on. He said, “I wanted to say thank you. I have worked for the council for 15 years and this is the first time anyone has ever said thank you”. I replied, “It is I who should thank you”.

Six months into the business, I received a letter from a member of the public praising our team of people at the site he visited, and saying how he wished his team were as good as ours. Twelve months into the business, one of the transferred managers came up to me and said “Thank you”. I asked him why he wanted to thank me, and he replied, “Before the takeover I came to work exactly at 0900 and left exactly at 1700, not enjoying a moment of the time in between. We were achieving great things and everybody was enjoying themselves. I now arrive at 0730 and leave after 1800 because I am enjoying myself so much”. I left the conversation with a smile on my face.

Yes, we met and even exceeded our business profit targets, and yes, we made hard decisions about people who did not want to work to our ethos, but we placed a higher importance on people finding work a life enriching experience, even those who had to perform quite manual and unpopular tasks. We were fortunate that our work was helping the area turn its waste into a resource – a worthy goal to work towards.

My voyage had brought me a greater understanding of myself and my role in working with and for others. I realised that my needs and the needs of others – such as food, safety, somewhere to live and meaningful work – had to be satisfied. Also, I realised that my and other’s wants had to be tempered, as they had the potential to cause great harm to myself or others.

I had realised lasting contentment and happiness did not come from wanting the Western dream of boundless wealth and unlimited possessions. A dream with little care for others. A dream that can cause great unhappiness, as it can never be fully satisfied.

Self, others and world

The Group of companies I worked for had been focused on profit for their shareholders and business growth. Returns and growth had fallen and decisions were made to sell off the “family silver” to fund growth in other areas. This approach failed and the business was in decline.

I left the company and was fortunate to join an engineering consultancy called Arup. Ove Arup, the founder of the company, obviously developed himself and he was also an insightful philosopher. He cared about others, as he gifted his partnership to the employees for no reward. He was passionate about the world and established a vision: “We shape a better world”. He believed that doing interesting things and doing them well was more important than profit. So growth and profit were not the key targets at Arup. Ove also said that if you ever find someone good, employ them and then find them something interesting to do.



Figure 14.

We now have amazingly clever people working in a wonderful ethos and doing remarkable things. Yes, we have made a profit every year and we have grown into what is now a global company of 14,000 people without an acquisition, but what is more important is the values and ethos Ove established.

In 1970, Ove wrote a key speech, setting down his beliefs. (See the Arup web site and “Key Speech” if you want to read more: <https://www.arup.com/publications>)

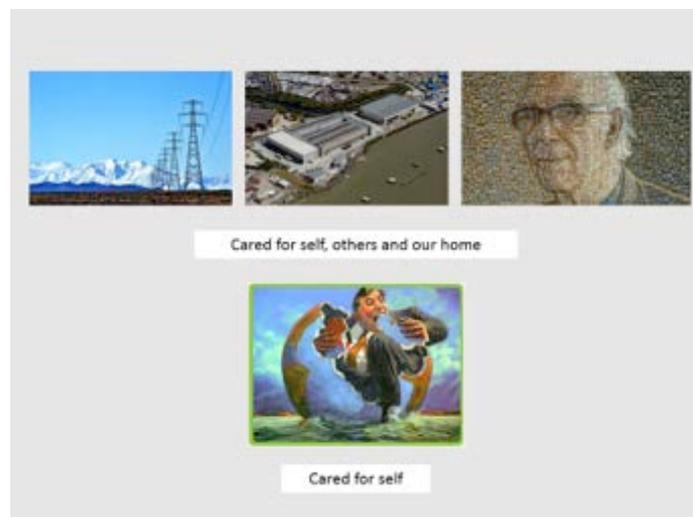


Figure 15.

What strikes me about the three businesses I have described above is that they all care for the individuals, others and the world in which they work. They have also been very successful in whatever way you choose to look at them because they cared. The businesses I have been in that have been focused primarily on profit for the shareholders have struggled in the long term. Yes, profit is important as without it the business and the work would disappear. Also, businesses' part in providing wealth for society to fund its needs is vitally important. However, profit should not be the prime

goal, especially when it is at the expense of individuals, others and our world. When I look back at those businesses which focused on care, they have been the ones I enjoyed the most.



Figure 16.

My current role in Arup is to lead their resource and waste business globally, which means I have experienced the joy of travelling the world helping people understand how we can treat the resources of the planet in a better way.

Using resources in harmony with our planet is a global and incredibly complex challenge. I often wonder how this challenge can be solved. I conclude that if more people consciously developed themselves, then maybe those that gain positions of power and influence would ask themselves difficult questions like:

- What is the real purpose of my organisation?
- What are the main issues facing our society?
- What are the main issues facing our planet?
- What can I do to make things better?

Then maybe we could start moving towards using our planet's resources more wisely.

Ecology of Care

Serendipity plays its final part in my voyage to date. I was on a plane (flying to see my 92-year-old uncle, a man who was still learning and developing himself till his death) and started talking with the man next to me. Our conversation moved to what we did at work. I told him about my work and about a thought leadership vision I had just presented, on "The future of waste and what it should look like in 50 years' time". He suggested I meet his colleagues from Copenhagen, who had a new concept that may have an impact on the world.

This led to me discovering the concept of an Ecology of Care. What instantly struck me was that my voyage of discovery, and hence my personal development, had very closely followed its concept of self, others and the world. (Figure 17 shows the Model of Care developed for the 2015 Ecology of Care symposium.)

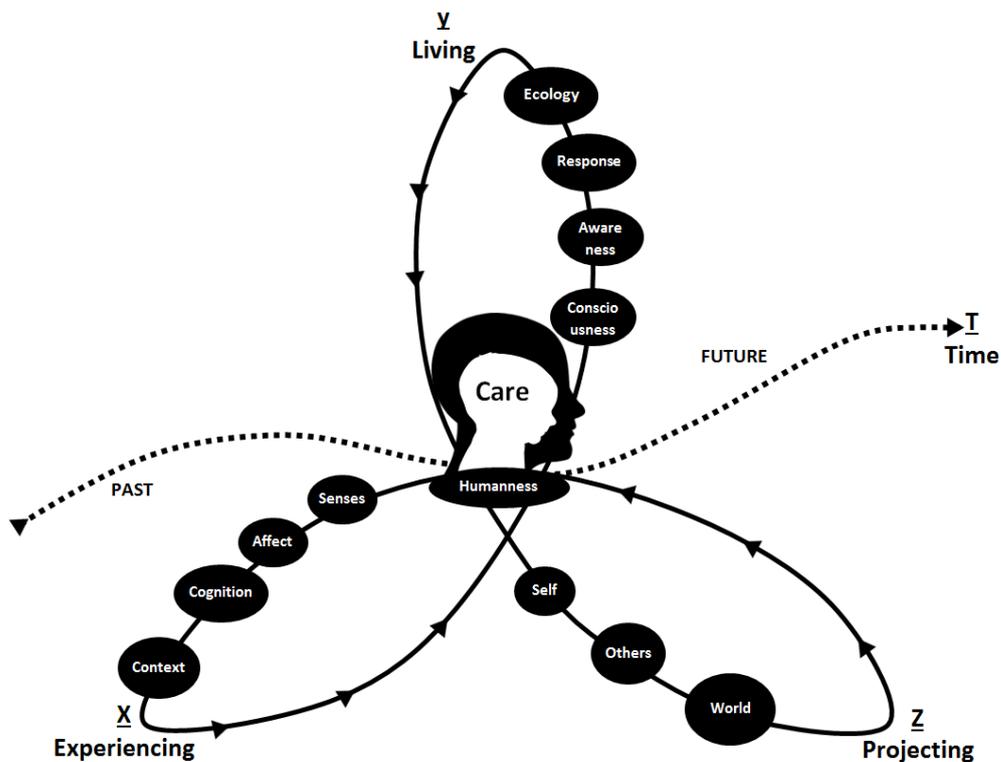


Figure 17.

Finally

Mankind lives on a wonderful planet with the most amazing diversity of people, animals and plants. We are right to focus on providing the needs of people, such as food, water, security and a home. Wanting reasonable prosperity and a comfortable life based on having enough is fundamental.

However, wanting everything and more, and the Western dream of boundless wealth and unlimited possessions, is proving harmful to the planet, to others and definitely to ourselves. It is a dream that is unsustainable as wants can never be fully satisfied and will finally result in great pain for all living things on our wonderful planet.

My view is by consciously developing one's self, and truly answering difficult questions like:

- What is the purpose of my life?
- What is really important to me?

- Am I really happy?
- What do I really need?
- If I died tomorrow would it be too soon?
- What can I do to make society and the world a better place?
- What would I like three people to say at my funeral?

In answering these questions, I believe we would all realise the importance of caring for self, caring for others and caring for our world. Then hopefully more people would contribute towards making our world a better place.

It is my firm belief that if more people took personal responsibility and consciously developed themselves, maybe they too would come to the conclusion that working with and for others we could live in harmony once again with our wonderful planet.



Figure 18.

Hopefully you will have seen how I have grown on my voyage of discovery. You may have noticed that I focused on difficult questions and found that via conscious personal development I have managed to answer them for myself, the benefit of others and hopefully the world.

At the start of this paper I asked you to think about the question: “What is the purpose of your life?” It is only right that I now share with you my current view of my answer to this question, in the form of a vision and mission (see Figure 19).

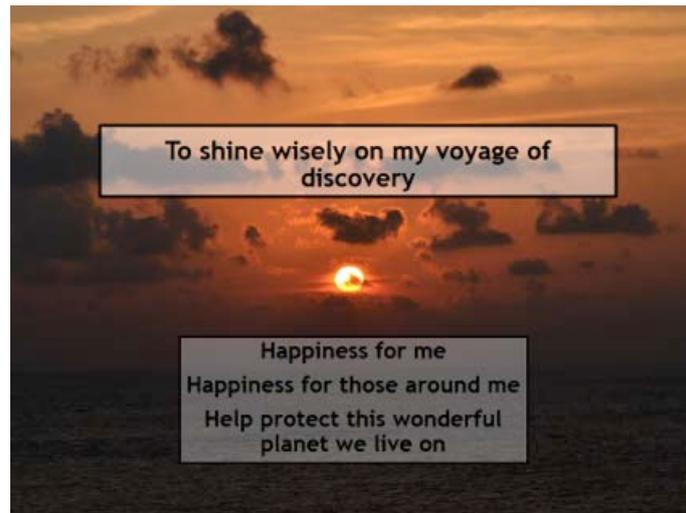


Figure 19.

Hopefully, three people will say I have achieved this when my atoms are returned to our amazing universe.

Thank you for reading my words.
Take care
Allan

About the author

Allan is passionate about individual personal development, the role of business being to provide reasonable prosperity and a life enriching experience for the people involved, and protecting our wonderful planet. He has been a company director for over 22 years. He is now Arup's global business leader for resource and waste. He has held a number of non-executive director roles, and is on a number of advisory boards including chairing the Sustainability and Resource Efficiency Knowledge Transfer Network, and the UK Government's AgriFood Technology Council.