

by Tama J. Kieves

FINDING YOUR PASSION

CREATING THE WORK YOU LOVE

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One snowy Valentine's day, I gave a speech at a local high school about self-love and going for your dreams. Greeting my audience—one hundred squirming teenagers—I asked them to identify the most successful person: the doctor, the florist, the auto mechanic or the poet. "The doctor," responded a tall boy in a black Def Leppard T-shirt. "Anyone agree?" I asked. "Put your hands up." The audience roared with hands. Brainwashed already. A Pavlovian response to the meaning of life. One hundred faces, one hundred backgrounds, one hundred exotic hearts and original minds, and only one way to imagine success.

Yet despite cultural definitions, the soul still renders its own evaluation. We can dress in Armani and drive a Ferrari and yack to our cronies on our cellular phones. However, we all answer alone to an arbiter within—not of society, but of the bone. When we close our eyes at night, our contributions in the world will either make us feel hallowed or hollow. The real measure of success is not in our possessions, but mingled in our marrow. Our spirit either feels empty or full, depleted or alive. It doesn't matter which toys we can buy. It matters what we buy inside.

While in the process of writing my book, I visited with the Paxtons, some older, well-to-do acquaintances. They welcomed me into their spacious home embellished with Japanese paintings, hushed privileges and fragile vases filled with fresh orchids. "So, you're writing a book instead of practicing law," Rachel Paxton said, loud enough for her husband, Richard, in the football field-size kitchen to hear. Suddenly, I felt like I'd said I'd abandoned the partnership track to play with Barbie® dolls or toss pink paper airplanes to China or the moon.

Richard joined his wife on the peach-colored loveseat and fingered the gold buttons on his yellow cardigan with concern. "You know, we have someone in the family who sold a book," he said and shook his head. "She's a pauper. Never made a penny." Rachel nodded her head in pained collaboration. In other words, the Paxtons said without saying, this distant kooky relative had dared the unconventional, just like me, and had failed in broad daylight.

In bed that night, I tossed and turned thinking about that penniless author. How did the Paxtons define pauper? Less than a six-figure income? Driving a red Volkswagen? Still renting? Okay, even if Rachel and Richard knew the history of this woman's bank account, could they know her heart's account? Did she sleep better now? Did she write a line in that book that made her jump up and twirl on her hardwood floors singing "for this I came, for this I came" to a cracking ceiling and the diaphanous membranes of the heavens? Did her penniless manifesto pave the way for her next book, or maybe her next career, lover or therapist? I don't know. I had no clue whether she'd say she felt empty or full, bitter or blessed, trashed or transcendent. Neither did the God-

like Paxtons. They simply evaluated everything in terms of money. But I looked for the honey.

For myself, I already knew that in writing a book, I might never pull in the bucks to buy a stucco estate near a vineyard, or a white Mercedes-Benz—maybe not even a blue Honda Accord with air conditioning or air bags. But I also knew that one day I sipped a bowl of barley soup in the sunshine, in the mountains, on a Wednesday—a former burnout, brain-numbing workday—and scribbled a poem in my journal. And it felt better than any raise, promotion, new account or congratulation ever could. And better than a trophy car or chunk of jewelry.

It felt sane and whole. With each word I wrote, I felt a sense of completion, of recognition, as though my feet had found my ground, my unseen track through this dizzying life, a track that glittered in the sun like cobblestones forged from diamonds. And on this found ground, the clocks stopped ticking, and the harried race for godknowswhat finally quit.

I just knew, I'm there now. I'm there now. I don't need anything else. I don't want anything else. I wouldn't choose another door on "Let's Make a Deal." I wouldn't play any more game shows or games. In that moment, I felt as though I'd had an adjustment from the cosmic chiropractor and all the parts of my spine slipped into place and hummed with connection and thanksgiving. I just kept humming inside. After that, no amount of "cheese" could tempt the rat in me to ignore my inner direction again.

What will you live for? What you look like to others or what you feel like to yourself? Appearance or experience?

I'm not saying you shouldn't buy villas and fresh orchids, or soar to fiscal heights with your Web-based business or heart-inspired art. But I am saying that the symbols of success don't mean anything to you unless you mean something to yourself. Otherwise, it's like going through life holding somebody else's prizes or driving the latest BMW further away from your only destination.

Our culture obsesses over image, but our hearts crave reality. You can stand in the limelight and receive the applause, but you can't fake the fullness. The fullness comes from standing in our right lives—not lives decreed by society or family, but lives that express our chemistry, interior hungers and destiny.

Success is as much a singular affair as falling in love. That's why you can't tell by looking at how well someone's done exactly how well he or she has done. Only the soul knows. Only the soul glows. And believe me, when you feel your own "for this I came" moment, the light you touch will be enough. The trappings of success mean nothing to the blessed. ❖

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