

FORUM

'My big five for life'



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

"Why are you here?" I asked a diverse group of college students from all over the country. Their responses were as interesting and varied as responses are to another question I like and ask often as well - "What are your Big Five for Life?"

"Do you mean, 'Why am I here?'" more than one student asked, trying to narrow the question down to make it less ambiguous. I repeated the question, as I looked around the room at the faces looking back at me, without additional information - "Why are you here?" That's a simple question, isn't it?

The responses ranged from the specific, "I am enrolled in this summer program to gain knowledge about business", to something much larger, a major purpose or calling in life. One student, for example, from Nepal, had a specific

reason for being in the class and it was related to her major purpose in life, that of helping students in Nepal get a quality education. And that is the heart of the matter, the essence of the question "Why are you here?" What is your purpose in life? And, what are the things you want to do, see and experience in life, that at the end of it, you - by your definition - would say it was a success?

I had the same response as the students when I first read the question in a thought-provoking book by John Strelecky, the "Why Café" (www.whycafe.com). In it, the main character is seeking to determine what he wants to do with his life. He realizes there is more to his life than what he is doing, yet, he can't seem to figure it out. He can't put his finger on the pulse of what motivates him. So, he starts out on a journey to seek the answer, and stumbles upon The Why Are You Here Café in the middle of nowhere. He notices three unusual questions printed on the back of the menu that help him find his way: Why are you here? Do you fear death? Are you fulfilled?

Strelecky writes inspiring, motivating books with big questions that stimulate you to act. After his first book, he and his wife visited Africa and experienced a Safari,

which led to his second book, "Life Safari," and another intriguing question: "What are your big five for life?"

"What do you mean my big five for life?" you are probably saying. Well, Strelecky learned about the African Big Five on an African Safari. The big five are the rhinoceros, leopard, elephant, water buffalo and the lion. The measure of a successful safari is based on the number of the big five you see on your trip; the more, the better. That experience led Strelecky to focus on the "big five in life" in addition to helping people discover their purpose in life.

"Imagine if everything you did was focused on helping you do, see, or experience five things," says Strelecky. "Five things so powerful, that if you did, saw, or experienced them, then you could say your life was a success - as you defined success for yourself. Those things are called your Big Five for Life." It is a gauge for success, as you define it.

My Big Five for Life, today, include a national syndicated radio talk show, Conversations with Nigel Alston. Others include this column being syndicated, traveling the world, spiritual depth and understanding and publishing another book. I don't know all the answers,

which is why Strelecky asks a follow up question - "What can I do to help you?" Part of the reason for identifying your Big Five is to share them with others and find help along the way to facilitate your success. That's why he has created a new community - "My Big Five For Life" (www.mybigfive.com).

I think I have identified and understand my purpose, mission for life. I have spent some time thinking about why I am here and what I want to do, see and experience in life to feel that it has been a success. What about you?

Why are you here? No, I don't mean wherever you are reading this column. Really, why are you here? I believe that the most important thing any of us can do is determine our purpose in life and plant ourselves in the environment where we can grow and flourish. I didn't forget the second question either: "What are your Big Five for Life?" The two questions are connected.

PS: Read these books by John Strelecky: The Why Café and Life Safari.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. He is the chairman of the Winston-Salem State University Board of Trustees. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

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Young, black and locked up



Marian Wright Edelman
Guest Columnist

If you were asked where the United States ranks among industrialized countries on low birth weight, infant mortality or child poverty, a guess much higher than the bottom on any of these social indicators would be wrong. But if you were asked where America stands on imprisoning its citizens, you would be correct to answer that we surpass everyone else. Our nation incarcerates more people - over 2.3 million in 2006 - than any other country. Because justice is not equally administered in the United States, Black males are disproportionately represented among America's imprisoned population, currently numbering 837,000 in state and federal prisons. Our ranking as the world's number one jailer represents a monumental national failure.

More and more of those who enter the Prison Pipeline start with arrest records as young children. Earlier this year, a police officer arrested seven-year-old Gerard Mungo, Jr., in East Baltimore, Maryland, claiming that the child was riding a dirt bike on the sidewalk. Gerard was handcuffed and taken to a police station where officers took his fingerprints and mug shot.

Incarceration is extremely costly. In California, state detention centers for young people cost \$216,000 a year per child; county facilities cost about



\$117,000. States spend on average nearly three times as much per prisoner as they do per public school pupil. In some states, the growth in prison costs also exceeds the growth in higher education spending. When it costs more to detain a child than to provide him a Head Start, we need to seriously reassess our nation's values and priorities. While there seems to be no cap on prison spending, Head Start funding serves only half of those eligible.

We need to refocus what we do with the children we detain. Too much cruelty permeates our youth detention culture where the focus is often on control and punishment instead of rehabilitation. A 2003 U.S. Department of Justice investigation into conditions at Oakley and Columbia Juvenile Training Schools in Mississippi found that juveniles there were being hog-tied with chains, physically assaulted by guards, sprayed with chemicals during military exercises, forced to eat their own vomit and put in dark, solitary confinement cells after being stripped naked. Mississippi's juvenile justice system is now under a federal judicial decree because of these and other violations found by

the Department of Justice.

For some young people, being sent to a youth detention facility can be a death sentence. In January 2006, 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson died of suffocation at a state-run boot camp in Florida after seven guards beat and restrained him. His death occurred the day after he arrived at the camp after violating parole for taking his grandmother's car for a joy ride.

One state that has gotten it right on juvenile justice is Missouri. Under the caring youth-focused leadership of Mark Steward, its former Youth Services Director, in 1983 Missouri closed all of its youth prisons and divided the state into five regions so that confined youths would be within driving distance of their homes. Each region has two facilities housing no more than 40 young people. This Department of Youth Services focuses on intensive individual counseling, academic and vocational education, and positive behavior modification. Key features of the Missouri model are its integration of mental health into all of its rehabilitation components and its comprehensive approach to treatment, which includes


family therapy and counseling.

Each confined youth is brought together with nine other teens who eat, study and live together as a team. Each team of ten is under the supervision of two trained youth specialists. When a young person has a problem, s/he can call a meeting of the team to work out a solution. Academic success is emphasized and a high percentage of young people in Missouri's Department of Youth Services facilities earn their GEDs. Missouri has dramatically reduced youth recidivism to seven percent, at a cost of nearly one-third less per youth than the cost of systems in Louisiana and Florida, which have much higher recidivism rates.

Sadly, Missouri is an exception to the bumper-sticker thinking of too many state leaders who pursue "Tough on crime," "Zero tolerance," "Lock 'em up" approaches to punish rather than address the problems of troubled youths. Increasing investments in health care, quality early childhood education, better schools and positive youth development in out-of-school time would not only increase the number of children reaching successful adulthood but increase public safety. The last thing a young person needs is lessons in how to become a hardened criminal by exposure to adult criminal mentors in adult prisons or callous adults in juvenile "justice" systems. It's time for a change for our children and our nation's sake.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council.
www.childrensdefense.org

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