

Discovering What Matters

A simple plan with monumental results.

by
Rod Zeeb

Roger Anderson had a problem, bigger by far than the six foot tall, twelve hundred pound bull moose that was banging his antlers against the side of the small tent in which Roger was trying to sleep.

It had all started the evening before, just a few yards from where Roger and the moose were now making one another's acquaintance. His family had dined on dandelion salad, fresh trout, and warm berry cobbler with homemade ice cream, in the refurbished trapper's cabin that was their vacation home.

As they sat around the rough-hewn table, Roger's ten-year-old daughter, Alexa, described an assignment her class had been given. It sounded simple enough. Each student was to create a list called: What Matters Most in My Life. "The problem is," Alexa said, "we can't include any *things*, like toys or computers or ponies. We're supposed to just list the kind of stuff we feel in our hearts. You know, like love, or helping other people, or being good. It's hard."

And then, as only an innocent child can do, Alexa dropped a question that would send her dad outside for some serious personal thinking time.

"Daddy," she asked, "what matters to you?"

To Roger's surprise, once he had given the obvious answers—the kids, family health and security— he

found himself stumped. Alexa was right—it was a hard assignment. When you got right down to it, what did matter?

He hauled some seasoned oak and fir into the cabin, and built a fire in the woodstove. His wife and girls settled in under down comforters with a board game, and mugs of honey-chamomile tea. Roger unboxed the new high-tech tent he'd bought in town that day, and set it up on the grassy bank of the stream that meandered close by the cabin.



Later he helped put the girls to bed, and then he grabbed a yellow pad, an old kerosene lantern, and a cup of coffee, and settled into a camp chair next to the tent. To the east, just up the mountain slope, was the boundary of a wilderness area that stretched for hundreds of miles. To the north stood a thick spruce forest, and to the south and west the stream flowed through deep green meadows that were darkening to purple shadows in the last light of day. At the moment, though, the spectacular vista was lost on Roger.

This should be a simple question, he thought. Just two words: what matters. But by the time he had wrestled Alexa's question into some kind of manageable form, the moon was high and bright in the sky, the last wisps of smoke were curling from the cabin chimney, and a cool mist was forming on the surface of the creek.

Much later, Roger zipped the tent door shut and crawled into his sleeping bag. High above, a carpet of stars blanketed the sky. Next to him was the notepad, filled with his thoughts about what mattered most in his life. He was excited to share it with his family at breakfast.

However, about the time first morning light was spilling over the mountain, and the curious moose was enjoying his first taste of ripstop nylon, Roger woke to realize that while he had cobbled together an important list, he had no idea what to do with it once he had shared it with his family. This was some of the most important thinking he had ever done. It didn't make sense to go through this exercise and then not put the list to some higher purpose on behalf of his family.

He sat up, shouted a few times, and waved the yellow pad of paper back and forth outside the tent door. The moose, who wasn't much enjoying the flavor of the tent anyway, grudgingly obliged and splashed back across the



creek. Roger went up to the cabin, made a fresh pot of coffee, and sat on the porch as the sun topped the mountain and spread across the meadow. Now that he knew what mattered, what was he going to do about it? The girls would be up soon. He wanted to have his homework ready.

From a simple beginning

Most of us have had an experience like Roger's (minus the moose, perhaps): A moment when we find ourselves confronted—and confounded—by a seemingly innocuous question that quickly takes us to the core of who we are. Questions like, 'do you love me,' and 'why did you make that choice,' 'what do you really want,' and 'what would

you do if you were in my place,' can set us back on our heels, make us scratch our head, and even lead us to experience some sleepless nights as our own twelve hundred pound moose crashes around in our thoughts.

Simple questions stir us the most because the things that matter most in our lives tend to be simple in nature. Honesty and love, patience and faith, responsibility and family unity, for example, are straightforward, uncomplicated values. Most of us make the intuitive connection between the presence of those values in our world and the quality of life that we lead. But, do you give deliberate and thoughtful consideration to those values, and others, in the ordinary course of day-to-day life?

Perhaps you should. Because when you set out to intentionally discover and then share what matters most to you as an individual, you begin a journey that will challenge you, strengthen you, and bring your family closer together in common purpose than ever before.

What would such an outcome look like? Well, think about it this way: do you know the first name of your mother's grandfather? Do you know what he believed in? What he stood for? Would you like your great-grandchildren to know your first name, and what it was that mattered most to you? Do you think those who come after you could benefit from the lessons you have learned, from the truths you have lived by, even from the mistakes you made along the way?

If your answer is yes, how do you plan to make that happen? (For starters, make sure that all of the photos of yourself that are floating around in family albums and computer image files have your name on them! Your descendants a century from now will at least know your name.) When you begin to think about, and write about, what has mattered in your own life, you launch a powerful process that will grow into a statement to your family and to generations who will follow: who you were, what you believed in, and what you stood for. It is not a will or a contract. It is far more than those documents, important as they are. This is something from which generations of your family can draw strength, meaning, and guidance. It is a legacy.

How do you get started?

For all of its outward simplicity, this personal assessment and discovery is no small task. In fact, as you get deeper into it, you may encounter a rogue moose or two of your own.

Begin by ‘sweeping the decks clear.’ As you think about your life, and the life you wish for your children and generations of their children, drill down to the unvarnished basics of life, things like character, values, ideals and aspirations.

Stay with your objective. Don’t be concerned about creating a literary masterpiece—you are creating a list with some supporting detail, not a novel. When your list is complete (the first draft of several, no doubt) and you have identified and articulated what it is that matters most in your life, it is time to ask: what can I do with that information? How can I put it to use to help my family, now and in the future, and even to assist the organizations or causes that I support?

These are important and practical questions. Our own Heritage Process™ provides one way you can accomplish this in an organized, professional setting. It begins with Guided Discovery activities through which you are guided by a professional advisor to identify, reflect upon, and communicate the things that matter most to you. Eventually, the work you begin here becomes the foundation for all of your planning.

You can also begin this process by yourself, without the assistance of outside advisors. There’s a lot to be said for the simplicity of a comfortable chair under the stars with a pencil, a pad of paper, and a cup of coffee (the moose is optional). Either way, with professional guidance or on your own, the goal is the same: to achieve your desired results, based upon your vision, for your reasons.

Look first to the past

However you choose to begin thinking and writing about what matters most in your life, it’s a good idea to set a few guidelines for your work. When our friend, Roger, sat down by the river to begin his list, he started with three guiding principles: first, he would limit himself to no more than one or two words to describe each of the things that mattered most in his own life. So, his list began to take shape like this:

*Honor
Family Unity
Love
Responsibility
Faith
Leadership
Philanthropy*

*Forgiveness
Compassion*

..and so on.

Next, he decided that for each idea or value that he placed on his list, he would also add a sentence or two about where or how that value became important in his life. Who taught it to him? What was it about that person— parent, grandparent, teacher, coach, religious leader, etc.— that had such an impact on him?

Finally, Roger added a ‘how-am-I-doing’ category to his list. For each of the things he identified as mattering most in his own life, he jotted down a few lines about



the kind of job he had done communicating that particular value to his family and friends.

The first category, the list of things that mattered most in his life, was tough. Separating the merely important things in his life—like a nice home and a good health insurance plan—from things that truly mattered—like love for his family and giving to his community— was hard work. It took time. The second part, thinking back on the people in his life who taught him or modeled those values, was not just easy, he found, but fun and rewarding.

Connect the dots

In most cases, Roger had never consciously connected the dots between a particular value he held dear and the person from whom he had learned that value, or seen it modeled. Time and again as he thought back on his life, and on the people who had been so important to him, Roger’s face broke into a wide grin.

And more than once, a memory brought a lump to his throat, especially when he recalled how some of the 'ordinary' people in his life had triumphed over extraordinary circumstances by virtue of the values by which they had lived.

When his list was complete, columns one and two were filled with notes. It was at part three of the exercise where Roger's pencil came to a grinding halt. What kind of job had he done communicating to others about the things that mattered most in his life? In fact, he realized, he hadn't even scratched the surface of the myriad ways he could have—and should have—taken the time to deliberately and intentionally share those values with those for whom he cared the most.

If the proverbial eighteen-wheeler barreled down the highway and swatted him out of the game tomorrow, Roger realized, all of the lessons he had learned, all of the great stories he had in his head, in fact, most of the truly important history of his life, would be flattened and lost forever along with him.

Keeping what matters alive

It is amazing to think about the impact that simple words (the right words!) on just one piece of paper can have upon history. Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, the Ten Commandments, and the Bill of Rights are proof positive that the length and complexity of a document have no bearing upon its significance. In fact, the opposite is true. (Consider what your home loan documents would look like piled high on your desk. How does the significance of that skyscraper of paper compare to these two little words: "I do.") When you take upon yourself the wonderful task of creating your own 'What Matters' document, keep that in mind.

A great way to greet a new year

Each January, many of us set goals for things we'd like to achieve in the year ahead. We're going to lose weight, shape up our finances, spend more time with our families, maybe even finally get around to putting up some shelves in the garage. A new year means a new start, and for some reason, no matter how briefly it may flicker, there seems to be an extra spark of enthusiasm and commitment in our step in the first weeks of a new year.

If the list of Resolutions you made for the year looks a bit lean, consider adding one more. (Of course, it doesn't really matter if today's date is January 2nd, or August 27th or November 14th.)

Find your own quiet place, away from the distractions of work and home. Take pen and pad in hand, and write two simple words in large bold letters on the top of the page:

What Matters

The rest is up to you.



"Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering."

St. Augustine



Rod Zeeb is President and Co-Founder of The Heritage Institute, and Co-Author of the book, *Beating the Midas Curse*. He can be contacted at: 1-877-447-1659, or www.theheritageinstitute.com