

PASSION SERIES: HOW CORRECTLY DEFINING PASSION WILL ENERGIZE & DEFINE YOU AS A LEADER

THE TERM PASSION IS OFTEN MISUSED AND THUS MISUNDERSTOOD

It is a common misconception that a passion is something we enjoy, or something we are intensely interested in—as in “she is passionate about gardening,” or “he is passionate about baseball.”

This is a misuse of the word. The term passion has its roots in the Greek term pathos, denoting pain and suffering. The Old French and Latin roots of this term mean “suffering, pain or some disorder of body or spirit.” The idea of passion is bound inextricably to that of suffering.

IN THIS SENSE, PASSION CAN BE DEFINED AS

the strength or power to suffer.

Passion is a three-sided configuration of attitudes and behaviors.

FIRST, PASSION IS AN IMPERATIVE GROUNDED IN A NOBLE PURPOSE.

Passion born of noble purpose generates the power to voluntarily suffer on behalf of valued ends. Passion is an inner imperative—it is what we must do in light of our larger purpose, and therefore what we will do—no matter what, even in the face of suffering.

Passion born of noble purpose functions like a “call” that carries with it a sense of necessity, an “inner oughtness.” In the words of Greg Ogden, a sense of call is an “I must do it.”

PASSION IS EXPRESSED

as a compelling inner force that drives us with energy of its own—like an alien force rather than will power.

Three students from Yale at the turn of the last century illustrated the power of passion. In 1890, Sherwood Eddy, Henry Luce and Horace Pitkin each connected in a personal way with the larger purpose of taking the gospel to China. Sherwood Eddy later recalled how the imperative of passion defined their lives, manifesting itself in the hard work of daily preparation for their mission.

Eddy wrote:

"From that moment my life focused upon what seemed to me the greatest work in the world. I too felt I must be a volunteer. I was jarred broad awake: my studies meant more, and even athletics had new meaning. When I would box every afternoon with Pitkin and we would run our daily mile in the gym or open air, we would say, 'This will carry us another mile in China.'

Ten years later in North China, the Boxers executed Pitkin. The Boxers were an indigenous Chinese religious society that had originally rebelled against the imperial government in Shantung in 1898. They practiced an animistic religion of rituals and spells that they believed made them impervious to bullets and pain. They were a violent group, passionate and confident in their cause. The Boxers believed the expulsion of "foreign devils" like Pitkin would magically renew Chinese society and begin a new, golden age.

Knowing his fate, Pitkin sent word to his wife and infant son in America. "Tell little Horace that his father's last wish was that he might, when twenty-five years of age, go out to China as a missionary."
William Butler Yeats, Irish poet, dramatist and prose writer, was one of the greatest English-language poets of the 20th century.

He wrote:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Yeats certainly wasn't thinking of people like Horace Pitkin when he penned these words. Pitkin and tens of thousands of others in his generation known as the Student Volunteer Movement manifested a passionate intensity in the service of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, often in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

How do we explain this kind of sacrificial commitment? Herein resides an irony. The man or woman connected to a larger noble purpose finds it more difficult not to serve that purpose, even sacrificially, than to serve it.

COUNTER-INTUITIVELY, IT TAKES MORE ENERGY TO HOLD PASSION AT BAY THAN TO EXPRESS IT. PASSION SEEKS RELEASE. IT MUST BE EXPRESSED.

As Greg Ogden notes,

"The inverse of the 'this I must do' is 'this I cannot not do.' If we are called, it takes more energy to suppress the call than to release it and be carried by the inner energy that comes with it."

PASSION, THEN, IS THE POWER TO VOLUNTARILY DO WHAT ONE MUST, EVEN AND ESPECIALLY IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING IN ITS MANY FORMS, RANGING FROM EMOTIONAL DISCOMFORT TO PHYSICAL PAIN.

Passion is the power of engagement.

When we say that someone is passionate, we mean that they are an energetic, vigorous and vital person who takes on the challenges and opportunities of life brimming with enthusiasm and positive energy. Passion ignites our “telic orientation,” setting us on a course of energetic striving after valued ends.

Passion, vitality and vigor are closely related. The word vitality is derived from the Latin vita, meaning life. The dictionary definition of vitality is “mental and physical vigor.”

Vigor is defined as:

an active strength or energy of body or mind.

PASSION, THEN, IS LIFE-ENERGY, OR BETTER, ENERGY AND STRENGTH FOR FULLY AND ENTHUSIASTICALLY ENGAGING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF LIFE. PASSIONATE PEOPLE ARE ACTION-ORIENTED, WHOLEHEARTED PEOPLE, VITALLY ENGAGED WITH THE FULL SPECTRUM OF LIFE’S UPS AND DOWNS, OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES.

Passion draws us out of ourselves and into the world. As C. S. Lewis reflected on his conversion to Christ,

“To believe in God and to pray was the beginning of my extroversion. I was taken out of myself...”

To a friend, Wilberforce wrote that his life purpose had given him

a higher sense of the duties of my station, and a firmer resolution to discharge them with fidelity and zeal. He went on to explain his passion for public service. Not that I would shut myself up from mankind (or confine) myself in a cloister. My walk, I am sensible, is a public one; my business is in the world; and I must mix in assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.

PASSION, THEN, IS THE ENERGY TO ENGAGE AND SHAPE THE WORLD IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR PURPOSE.

Passion is the power of desire. Passion is the expression of our deepest desires. Passion born of noble purpose transforms us. It changes everything it touches, and it touches everything right down to the core of our being, right down to the particulars of our thoughts and behaviors, and the investment of our hours and days.

Passion is the unquenchable thirst, the driving hunger that defines us at the core of our being. American theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards called these deep desires “religious affections” or “holy desires” which reflected a deep longing after God. Jesus spoke of this deep, burning intensity as

hungering and thirsting after righteousness (Matthew 5:6).

Passion, then, is what matters to us deeply and continually. Passion won't let us go. It is that which I must do now, not something I might do when it is more convenient. It is the focused energy of a starving person seeking food or a thirsty person seeking water. If we are thirsty we drink. If we are hungry we eat. It's that simple. The Sprite slogan was right. Ultimately, we "obey our thirst."

THERE IS A VAST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OUR PERSONAL PREFERENCES OR INTERESTS, AND OUR PASSION.

We define our preferences.

OUR PASSIONS DEFINE US.

Interests are what we might do because we enjoy it.

PASSION IS WHAT WE MUST DO BECAUSE OF OUR PURPOSE.

Passion is the smile on our face, the fire in our belly and the steel in our backbone. Passion ignites us. It connects us. It energizes us to accomplish extra-ordinary things. Passion sets us in motion and sustains us along the extra mile of sacrificial service.

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